

MMF BISEXUAL ROMANCE

THREE WAY TIE



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NICOLE STEWART

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EXCERPT

Sarah had never seen two men together before, and she watched, fascinated as David's lips encircled the tip of Nathaniel's cock, Nathaniel's head falling back as he groaned, his fingers tangling in David's hair and pulling his mouth closer. She'd expected to be jealous, but instead she was more turned on than she could possibly have imagined.

She'd gone down on Nathaniel more times than she could count, and she knew what every indrawn breath and gasp meant, every twitch of his hips and moan, and as she watched David slide down, taking every inch of it into his mouth, she realized she liked it. She liked watching, liked seeing the familiar movements of Nathaniel's body, hearing the sounds she knew so well, and she liked watching David, seeing him do all of the things that she'd done so many times.

"Come up here," she whispered hoarsely, and she saw Nathaniel glance over at her quickly, his eyes darkened with lust as he took in the sight of her spread out across the bed, watching David go down on him.

The two men did as she asked, and she gently pressed David back onto the bed, Nathaniel kneeling by his head as David turned to take him into his mouth once more, his head moving in a slow, careful rhythm, keeping Nathaniel impossibly aroused while never quite pushing him over the edge.

Sarah moved down David's body, her blonde hair falling over his chest as she kissed his neck gently, remembering that there was a spot just behind his ear that made him shiver—and

it still did—that his back would arch when she trailed the tips of her fingers over his nipple, that his hips bucked up, his moan muffled around Nathaniel’s cock, when she gripped his hips and trailed her tongue down the line of hair below his navel. He groaned when her hand encircled his shaft, thick and pulsing, aching to finally be touched, and she felt his whole body convulse when she slid her lips over the tip of it, licking just below it in the spot that she knew he liked, one hand sliding between his legs to stroke the soft flesh there.

She rolled her eyes up and saw Nathaniel grip the headboard as he thrust into David’s mouth, and then he pulled himself free, his eyes fixed on Sarah. “I want to come inside of you,” he groaned, sliding off of the bed to stand behind her as David looked down, his head immediately falling back in a long, deep groan as Sarah’s lips slid down to the base of his cock, enveloping him as Nathaniel gripped her hips and began to slide inside of her.

He was rock hard, his cock filling her as she arched her back, her moans vibrating around David as she kept up her rhythm. She was on the verge of orgasm already just from watching, and it only took a few of Nathaniel’s deep, hard strokes to send her over the edge. She came up gasping for air, the tip of David’s cock brushing against her lips as his hips bucked up, wanting more as she cried out, her back arching, grinding against Nathaniel as she came.

“I’m so close,” he groaned, his fingers digging into her hips as he moved faster, and she took David in her mouth again, gripping his shaft with her hand as she moved her lips and tongue exactly the way she knew he liked, and she saw his head fall back, his back arching, heard the desperate moan as he tried to keep from thrusting up too hard, and then she felt Nathaniel’s hand between her legs, pushing her towards another orgasm as he plunged into her, his own only moments away.

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CHAPTER ONE

When David Brooks said he'd never go back home, he'd meant it. He truly never thought that he would. But three years almost to the day that he'd left Oakland for San Diego, he got a call that changed his life forever.

He'd never been someone to get close to people easily. For most of his life—teenage through early adult years, at least—he'd only been close to two people: Sarah Price and Nathaniel Newman. One of those two, Sarah, had been his girlfriend for five years. And the other, Nathaniel, had been his best friend—and secretly his crush.

He'd known he liked men, or at least had some idea, since he was twelve or thirteen. He remembered reading comic books and wishing that one of the musclebound, spandex-clad men would come and rescue *him* instead of whichever wide-eyed damsel was in trouble. Watching movies, he'd always been jealous of the heroine rather than wanting to be with her—he'd wanted the leading man for himself. He pictured being whisked away, romanced, setting up a home and having a family. The mechanics of it all remained a mystery, as well as why there were so few examples of that in real life, but as a teenager it became more and more clear that his desires weren't limited to women, no matter how urgently that was pushed on him as the ideal.

At sixteen, he'd started dating Sarah, after her best friend had pushed them together one night at a school dance. Contrary to pop culture, being bi—a word he didn't even

know applied to him then—didn't necessarily mean he knew how to dance. Sarah, sweet and secretly harboring a crush on him for the full year prior, helped get him through the motions until the music switched to something slow enough that they could simply sway back and forth. And that night, behind the old brick gym with the moon high above them, he'd had his very first kiss.

It had been sweet, gentle, and had stirred enough desire in him that he'd pushed away his thoughts of wanting guys. Instead, he'd focused on Sarah, who had happily agreed to be his girlfriend. They were inseparable—going to movies together, hiding out in the dens of each other's houses where they played board games and video games...and making out when their parents had gone to bed.

It had been easy enough for David to tell himself that Sarah was enough. After all, he'd never fit the stereotype of a gay man that had been fed to him. He loved cars of all types—old classic muscle cars, newer speedy cars, and old junky cars that needed more work than he could ever afford to put into them. He loved whiskey, the smell of oil grease, the sound of a good folk guitar some of the time, or hip-hop blaring through a good set of speakers the rest of the time—all things that he'd been taught were quintessentially masculine. And Sarah had been the final piece of that—tall, curvy, beautiful and blonde, a girlfriend that had made him the envy of every other boy in the school, and every man who saw her after they'd graduated. They'd been the perfect picture together. In his circle, there had only been gay or straight, no in between. And so, since he was with Sarah, and happy, he assumed that anything else must just be hormones, or fantasies, or something else he didn't understand.

The one wrench—no pun intended—in that was Nathaniel, David's best friend. He'd met Nathaniel halfway through junior year of high school, when Nathaniel had moved to Oakland with his mother after his parents' divorce. The two of them had immediately clicked—they had everything in common, particularly a love of cars, motorcycles, and everything to do with working on them. By that time, David had a small group of friends who got together, worked on their

cars, and raced them on the weekends, pretending to be older than they were so that the other gangs wouldn't kick them out, or worse. Nathaniel had jumped right in, and a few weeks after they met, he and David had been as inseparable as David and Sarah.

What David had never been able to admit—not to Nathaniel, or Sarah, and hardly even to himself—was the crush that he had on his best friend. Nathaniel was tall, with a mop of curly blonde hair and the brightest green eyes that David had ever seen, a permanent tan and the kind of muscles that came from working out outdoors—running, swimming, surfing, pushups. From the moment David had set eyes on him, he'd had the kind of feelings that he'd only ever experienced with one other person: Sarah.

But he'd kept those feelings to himself.

Nathaniel was his buddy, his best friend, the guy who talked him through the occasional fights that he and Sarah had, helped him pick out birthday, anniversary, Christmas, and Valentine's gifts, spent countless hours working on their cars and David's old bike, and the one person other than Sarah that David could talk to about—almost—anything. So he wasn't willing to risk ruining it by telling Nathaniel how he felt—that sometimes he wondered what it would be like to kiss him, how different Nathaniel's lips might feel, or what it would be like to run his hands over Nathaniel's muscled chest, if touching another man was different from touching himself. He told himself that it didn't matter if he never found out the answers—that the life he had was all he needed.

And it was a good life, not one that he wanted to risk on something that he wasn't sure about, that he had no litmus test for how important it might be. His family was in Oakland, all of them, from two generations back. They had big Sunday dinners and huge Christmases, weddings that every family member, in town or out of town, came to. He'd always had a tightly knit concept of family, and although sometimes he wondered what it would be like to break free of that, to be on his own, he couldn't imagine actually attempting it. At sixteen, he'd gotten a good job at a mechanic shop in town, which later

turned full-time after graduation. He had a Toyota Supra stashed in the garage that he'd worked on with Nathaniel, an old motorcycle from his dad that he'd ridden to work every day—at least until it broke down and nearly killed him one day on the way home. At eighteen, his grandfather had deeded his house to David just before he'd passed away, saying that he'd die happily with the thought of David living there, bringing Sarah home there after their wedding, and raising their children.

Testing a relationship with a man, or worse, finding out that he was gay and coming out would have been like throwing a live grenade into the middle of his life, and hoping that he somehow survived. It simply was, he believed, too big of a risk. So, whenever he saw Nathaniel shirtless, or coming out of the showers in the locker room, or grinning in that wild way of his when he'd figured out some problem on his car, running grease-stained hands through that mop of curly hair, he shoved those feelings down as deeply as he could bury them.

They weren't worth it, he told himself, over and over and over again.

Without Sarah, he likely never would have acted on them in any capacity. He didn't know how she'd known. For two people who'd been each other's firsts, they had a great sex life—exciting and daring as teenagers when they snuck around, figuring it all out and trying to learn what they liked, and later on, better than ever when they moved into the house David had been given, and had a space all their own. He'd always thought there was a certain romanticism about the fact that they'd never been with anyone else—and that helped to quell any urges he might have had. He couldn't imagine his life without Sarah, and he couldn't imagine hurting her by being with anyone else.

Despite their inexperience, neither he nor Sarah had ever thought that what they had together could be improved on—at least, he'd never felt that way about any other woman. And not being sure how he really felt about men...how could he have

risked it? Asking for more would have been like asking for the moon, he thought, when he already had all of the stars.

So five years to the day after they had started dating—the day after that kiss behind the high school gym—he'd asked Sarah to marry him. He'd taken her out in his father's old Camaro, hastily borrowed for the day with a promise to do some body work his father had been putting off—and down to the beach where they'd had their first official date together at sixteen, a picnic. He'd packed exactly the same thing they'd had that day—down to the ham and cheese sandwiches and ridiculously sweet, cheap wine that she'd bribed her older sister to buy for her. The ring had been in his pocket, and he'd felt entirely secure in his decision. He might always wonder about that other part of him, the part that was attracted to men—and Nathaniel in particular—but what he had with Sarah was good, and solid, and secure. She'd been there with him every step of the way. Wanting anything more seemed selfish, and greedy.

He'd been shocked when he'd gotten down on one knee, holding out a small diamond on a thin gold band that he'd saved for months to get, and Sarah had shaken her head sadly.

Somehow she'd known. He'd wished, for a long time after that, that she'd gotten up the nerve to tell him before that afternoon on the beach, when his entire future had come crashing down around him. She'd asked him quietly to sit down, and she'd told him that she couldn't marry him, knowing that he'd only experienced such a small part of life.

“Maybe, if you go out there and find out what there is, you'll decide I'm really what you want, and come back,” Sarah had said, tears welling up in her eyes. “But if you marry me now, and stay here in Oakland your whole life, you'll have only ever been with one person, known one kind of way of being, and only ever been with a woman. You'll wonder all your life what the other options might have been like, if I was *really* what you wanted. And I love you—so I can't let you do that. I can't deny you the chance to find out who you really are.”

“What if this is who I really am? Me, who I am now, the things I love—loving you, what if that’s who I’m meant to be?” Thinking back on it, David could remember the feeling of the sharp prongs of the ring biting into his palm as he closed his fist around it, the hard thump of his heart in his chest as he’d looked into Sarah’s blue eyes.

“Then you’ll come back,” she’d said softly. “But you need to be sure. Because if I marry you, David, I want it to be forever.”

He’d wanted it to be forever, too. It was as if he’d heard his heart breaking—not a clean, sharp break, but a cracking that webbed through his body and sent a kind of aching pain through him that he didn’t think he’d ever recover from.

She’d gone to her mother’s house that night to stay until she could find her own place. Not the romantic evening he’d dreamed of, making love in their bed and sleepily planning their future wedding afterwards. Instead, they’d had a brief and tearful conversation about their shared possessions, with Sarah telling him to take the savings they’d had so he could start fresh, wherever he wanted to go. “If that’s here in Oakland, then that’s up to you,” she’d said softly, touching his face. “But I hope you go somewhere else, David, and try something new. I think it’ll be good for you.”

She didn’t kiss him goodbye. In the end, he supposed that had been for the best, although the feeling of her slim, soft fingers on his cheek had haunted him for a long time after, and the look in her eyes when she’d told him goodbye.

After that, it had seemed impossible to stay in Oakland. Nathaniel had left a year prior for college in LA, after doing two years at the local community college. Facing his family seemed impossible to David—how would he explain the breakup? How could he tell them that Sarah had left him so he could find out who he was on his own, and then he’d just stayed in place? So he’d taken the money, and left, going straight to San Diego, where he had a friend who ran a mechanic shop.

He didn't speak to Sarah for three years. He tried—he'd called and left voicemails, looked for her on social media, even wrote a letter or two. He'd missed her desperately, and as his life had devolved into something that he wasn't sure how to get out of, he'd wished more than anything for the support of—at the very least—the friendship they'd had. Nathaniel wasn't enough any longer—he couldn't tell his other best friend what he'd fallen into since the move. And strangely, six months after the breakup, Nathaniel had stopped talking to him altogether. His family, confused by his sudden flight, dropped off one by one.

In time, he stopped thinking about her quite so much—and Nathaniel, too. If she needed that radio silence to heal, David supposed that it was the right thing to do to give it to her. But at night, when he was alone in his bed—a mattress on a concrete floor in a small room off of the back of the garage—he thought about her, about how she'd told him that if she was really what he wanted, maybe he'd come back. And he'd thought about Nathaniel too, and how he'd once felt about him.

And then, almost three years exactly since the day he'd asked Sarah to marry him, David got a phone call that changed everything. Her voice was the last thing he'd expected to hear that day.

CHAPTER TWO

He was underneath a 350Z, hurriedly disassembling the front end, when the call came. The phone went off, a shrill noise cutting through the air, and he ignored it, up to his elbows in parts and grease.

It was silent for a few minutes, and then it went off again.

“For fuck’s sake man, get that, will you?” His boss, Marcus, growled it angrily across the room. David pulled himself out from under the car, grumbling at the interruption from his work, and grabbed the phone despite his grimy fingers.

If there was one thing he’d learned in the last two years, when Marcus spoke, you jumped. Didn’t matter how high.

“Hello?” He was almost breathless when he answered. The call would mean valuable minutes lost taking apart the Z, but he didn’t dare argue.

“David?”

He froze in place when he heard the voice on the other end. For a moment he was too stunned to speak, the world shrinking down to that sweet, musical voice. The last time he’d ever heard it, it had been saying goodbye.

He’d thought, after the first year of silence, that she’d never come back into his life. If he was being entirely honest with himself—something he often tried to avoid those days—that assumption had been the beginning of his downward spiral. It had contributed to the missed days at work, the benders, the lashing out at the few friends he had. When the

difficult choice about who to keep and who to let go at the shop when it hit difficult times well, David had been an obvious choice to let go.

After the second year, he'd stopped hoping that every unknown number might be her. And after the third, he'd reconciled himself to the idea that his old life, and everyone in it, was lost to him.

But now here she was, on the other end of the phone, saying his name for the first time in three years.

"S...Sarah?" David managed. "It's me. Is that...is that you?"

"I thought you might still recognize my voice." She sounded faintly sad, and in the background he could hear the sounds of a toddler chattering away.

She must have moved on quickly, he thought a touch bitterly, and then immediately felt a stab of guilt. *For all I know, she's babysitting*, David told himself firmly. She had an older sister. Maybe the baby in the background was her niece, or nephew...or even a neighbor's kid.

"It's good to hear from you," he said quietly, not wanting Marcus to prick up his ears and overhear. He felt that after such a long silence, she probably wouldn't call unless something huge had happened. Was it his family? Hers? Was *she* sick? "Is everything alright?" David asked, after a moment's silence.

"Um...yes," she answered hesitantly. "Well yes, I mean, everyone is alright. But I have something I need to tell you."

He resisted the urge to slink further back into the shadows of the garage, his brow furrowing. He could practically feel Marcus' eyes boring into him, wondering why he was still on the phone, and wasting time. He cleared his throat, trying to sound casual—both for Marcus' benefit and for his own. He didn't want Sarah to think he'd been pining after her all that time, even if it was mostly true.

"Well, what's going on, Sarah?" he asked, lowering his voice another notch. "It must be something big, to call after so

long.” He knew the comment was slightly below the belt, but he couldn’t think of what else to say. Did she really think that he wouldn’t think anything was out of the ordinary, when he hadn’t heard from her in three years?

He heard her take a deep breath, and he could feel the tension in her, even from so far away. Even after so long, he could still remember all of her tells. Five years with a person was a longer time than people realized, and three years living with someone would teach you their every quirk, every small unique thing about their moods, if you paid enough attention. *Whatever else you could say about me*, David thought, *I was always attentive. I tried, so hard.*

“I guess I just need to come out and say it.” Her voice was shaky, and David found himself gritting his teeth, running through every possible outcome in his head.

What came next wasn’t anywhere on his list.

He’d never even considered it.

“David, you...*we*...” she paused. “We have a daughter.”

—

It could have come at a worse time—maybe. In another life, he might have had a serious relationship, might have been married, might have started a family of his own with whoever he’d ended up with post Sarah. If things had gone slightly differently—if he’d gone to college, if he hadn’t been so depressed after the breakup, if he hadn’t burned his bridges at the Quik-Fix...the list went on and on.

But he hadn’t gone to college.

He hadn’t started a family.

And he certainly wasn’t married.

He’d thought the easy way to figure out his new path in life had been to hunker down at the Quik-Fix—his friend’s mechanic shop—and lay low until Sarah came to her senses and decided he’d had enough time, and wanted him back. And then, when that hadn’t happened—he *had* done all of those other things. He’d fallen into a deep hole, burned his bridges,

and gotten in with a bad crowd. Since then, his life had turned into something he didn't recognize. The David who had carefully packed the exact picnic that he'd had with his girlfriend at sixteen to propose to that same girlfriend wasn't the same man who spent his nights now at Marcus' chop shop, hurriedly disassembling stolen cars, and drinking himself into oblivion afterwards, wondering which night would be the one that someone from the gang would get caught and squeal, and he'd be headed to prison.

Racing had been the only thing that had kept him partially sane, but in the past months, even that had fallen by the wayside. He was one of the fastest guys in the shop when it came to taking the cars apart, so Marcus wanted him working longer and longer hours, and had taken him off of boosting the cars themselves altogether. He hadn't had any time to work on his own car, or go out and race. And the more he drank, the less and less likely it was that he'd win, anyway. He couldn't face being a loser out on the street, and in the eyes of everyone else around him. He already felt enough like one when he was alone.

A daughter.

He couldn't fathom it.

"I'm at work," he said quickly. "I have to call you back, Sarah."

"David"

He hung up the phone. He felt guilty for the abruptness, for a moment, but it was washed away by the flood of confused emotions that followed.

"David!" Marcus' voice cut across the room, sharp and angry.

Don't think about it right now. Do the job.

He didn't let himself feel anything, or think about any of it, until he was done for the night and standing in the small box of a shower in his room. He slept in a makeshift room off of the garage—just a bed on the floor, a toilet, and a stand-up shower, along with a nightstand by the mattress. His clothes

were in a plastic tote against the wall, his few possessions crammed into the drawers of the nightstand. His television and game console were on a milk crate at the foot of the bed.

It was a long way from the three-bedroom bungalow that he'd left behind in Oakland, now rented out to some family of tenants that he'd never met.

Standing in the hot spray of the water, he finally let it roll over him. The emotions that followed threatened to overwhelm him. Confusion...fear...and not a little bit of anger. *She must not have known until I was already gone*, he thought, but why wouldn't she have told him? Why wouldn't she have called, at the very least? Given him the choice between coming back or not? It had been *three years*. If it was true—and he couldn't think of any reason Sarah would lie about it—he'd missed so much already. So many moments he'd never get back. And they'd been so careful. They'd talked so many times about how they didn't want kids until Sarah was out of college, about when they'd have them after that, and how many. Two, spaced three years apart, unless they were both boys or girls, and then they'd discuss a third. He had figured it was a pretty similar conversation to the one most couples had, and that their decision was pretty standard. They'd both been happy with it, and Sarah had been on birth control.

So what had happened? When? And *why hadn't she told him?* The questions rattled around and around in his head, and he eyed the bottle of whiskey next to the bed thirstily. He hadn't wanted a drink so bad in weeks.

No, you need to think this through. Be clear headed.

If he went back, he had the house still. He was pretty sure the tenants were month-to-month, he could give them notice and stay with his parents until the house was cleared out. His expenses wouldn't change much. He could find some kind of job, hopefully still something involving cars. He could patch things up with Sarah—not romantically of course, but they could be friends. They could raise their daughter together. If he went back.

If. If. If.

The word rolled around in his mind, over and over, for hours after he got out of the shower and lay in bed in his sweatpants, his gaze occasionally darting to that bottle next to the bed. In the deepest part of himself, he knew there wasn't really any "if." He'd left Oakland without really wanting to, and he hadn't found out anything better about himself since he'd been gone. He'd tried out dating men, the way he'd figured he was supposed to, but it hadn't made him stop missing Sarah. He'd discovered that yes, he desired them, maybe even a little more than women that weren't Sarah, he'd discovered that he liked having sex with them, he'd even met a couple of guys that he wouldn't have minded having a relationship with. And in bed with some of the more casual ones, he'd imagined that they were Nathaniel, and thought back to the days when he'd had a crush on his best friend in the world—a friend that he hadn't heard from in years.

And then once he'd gotten in with the gang, there'd been no more chance of fooling around with men. He'd discovered quickly that even in the big city, there were still many people who were small minded. And the men he worked with now were exactly those sort of people.

He'd suspected all along that dating around and casual sex wouldn't be worth losing what he'd had, and he'd been right. His life had taken a very dark turn, and there hadn't been a single night that he hadn't gone to bed wishing that he could go back, and never leave.

Now he had something of a chance to do just that, he realized. Not undo what had happened with Sarah—he expected that any chance there was long since gone. If she hadn't wanted to marry the man he'd been three years ago, he didn't think she'd want to marry the man he'd become. But he could go home. He could pick up some of the pieces, and he could try to make a new life. A better life. He could try to be a father—and that would be a different kind of love...a love that he could try to be worthy of.

So he called Sarah back, early the next morning.

“I hope you know I’m not telling you this to try to win you back, or anything like that,” she said quickly, without preamble. “I know I’m not what you need. I debated for a long time even telling you.”

“That’s something I definitely want to talk to you about.” David tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice, but it was hard.

What would I have done, if I’d known about this when it happened? he thought. *Even two years ago?*

He would have gone home immediately, and he knew it. So many of the things that had happened would never have happened, and he would have been better for it. But deep down, he knew that the fact that he would have gone back was exactly why Sarah hadn’t told him. She hadn’t wanted to be responsible for him losing out, the reason he stayed shackled to the place he’d grown up. Especially not after breaking up with him so that he could leave. “Why didn’t you call me as soon as you knew? Why did you keep it a secret for such a long time? Goddamn it, Sarah, how could you not tell me?”

She said exactly what he’d expected. “I know you, David. I know what kind of a person you are.”

No you don’t, he thought. *Not anymore.*

“If I’d called you up a month after you left,” she continued, “and told you that I was pregnant, you would have hightailed it back here and insisted I marry you. You would’ve moved me right back in, dragged me to the courthouse, and made us into a family.”

“Would that have been so terrible?” The bitterness was creeping into his voice; he couldn’t stop it. “Was our relationship so bad?”

“No, David,” Sarah said gently. “I would’ve let you do all of that, because I loved you. It was partially selfishness. I couldn’t have stood giving you up twice. Once was hard enough.”

Loved. I heard the past tense, and it cut me to the bone. “And now you can?” I could feel my jaw clenching. “Just

friends, co-parenting, easy as that?”

“I’ve had time to reconcile myself to it, David. And I have someone now—someone else in my life. I’ve moved on. But a month after you left? I wouldn’t have been strong enough to tell you no. And we couldn’t have been happily married, not as naïve as we were then. We didn’t even know who we were yet.”

“And you do now? Why did you decide to tell me now?” I felt a sharp dart of fear, wondering if something was wrong with my daughter—our child. Some disease or mishap that made Sarah believe I needed to meet her before it was too late.

“I realized that no matter how hard it might be for me to see you, Coraline needs her father. She needs to know who you are, to meet you, even if it’s just part of the time. I see things in her now, now that she’s a little older...things that are like you...” David heard Sarah’s voice crack slightly, and some of the anger receded. He couldn’t stand to hear her hurt, even after so long.

“It wasn’t right of me to keep it from you,” she continued. “You deserved to know that you had a child. But this isn’t me saying we need to get back together. In fact, it’s me saying the exact opposite. If you’re coming home—do what you need to do, but it won’t be moving in here. Like I said...I have someone now. But you deserve to have Cora in your life...and she deserves to have you.” She hesitated. “I’m sorry, David, if that means anything. I really am.” She hesitated. “You deserve to find someone who can be your everything, too.”

If you’re coming home. If. If. If. I heard the word again, and I knew with fresh certainty that there was no ‘if.’

“I don’t think I’m going to be finding someone who’s anything,” I said shortly. “Not in Oakland. But San Diego hasn’t been too kind to me either, not in life or in relationships. Maybe being someone’s partner isn’t in the cards for me, but it’s possible I can be a good father, I think. So if you’re willing to give me a chance, I’m willing to do that. I’ll come home, Sarah, and we’ll give this a shot.”

Sarah let out a long sigh. “That’s why I called David. Of course. We were good friends, once. I think we can be good co-parents, too.”

CHAPTER THREE

Sarah was washing up the dishes from dinner when she heard the front door click open. In the high chair just behind her, Coraline thumped her fists on the tray and sent Cheerios and strawberry slices spraying everywhere. “Dada, dada, dada!” she yelled excitedly, and Sarah smiled despite the knowledge of what she was about to have to clean up, wiping her hands on the dish towel as she turned around.

Nathaniel Newman’s tall, lean frame filled the doorway of the kitchen as he walked in, and he took in the sight of cereal and berries on the floor as he walked towards the high chair. He scooped Cora out with one swift motion, cradling her against him as he bent to give Sarah a kiss. “Don’t worry, I’ll clean it up,” he said quickly. “You’ve done enough tonight.”

“There’s dinner in the oven for you,” Sarah said, giving him a second peck. Coraline smashed one berry-covered hand against her mother’s face, small fingers tangling in Sarah’s blonde hair, and Sarah sighed. “It’s been a night, so far. She’s got energy to burn still, and she was supposed to be asleep thirty minutes ago.”

“Go take a bath,” Nathaniel said, swinging Cora up in the air and making her giggle wildly. “Customer left a bottle of wine for the service girl at the shop, too, but she doesn’t like red, so I brought it home. It’s on the coffee table. Pour yourself a glass of that while I eat and put the baby down, and then maybe we can have a little time to ourselves.” He winked, and Sarah felt some of the tension drain out of her. She kissed him again, quickly, and then grabbed a wine glass, corkscrew, and

the bottle, and walked directly to the master suite, shedding her clothes as she turned on the taps for the tub.

She poured a glass of the wine, added some fruit-scented bubbles to the water, and let out a blissful sigh as she sank into it. The garden tub had been the main selling point of the house for her—so what if the master bedroom was a bit oddly shaped, or she didn't have as much counter space as she might have liked in the kitchen? Being able to submerge every part of her body in a pool of hot, sudsy water at the end of the day made up for it all. And thanks to Nathaniel, she'd been able to use it more than any other single mother she knew.

She'd been seven months pregnant when he'd come home. They'd been close in high school—not as close as she and David, of course, or as close as he'd been with David, but close, nonetheless. It would have been impossible not to be, as much time as they'd all spent together. She and Nathaniel had even kept in touch, after he'd gone away to college. She hadn't told him, though, when she and David had broken up. In fact, she'd made up excuses not to text or call him, thinking that he'd of course take David's side, and be angry with her for breaking David's heart.

But then he'd come home right after his college graduation, and run into her in the pasta aisle at the grocery store. His eyes had nearly bugged out of his head when he'd seen her belly, at that point overtaking the rest of her, and the expression on his face had told her that he knew that she and David had broken up. It also told her that he could count, and he knew the baby had to have been David's. He'd invited himself over that night, and over poorly made spaghetti and beer for him, the half glass of wine her OB allowed for Sarah, she'd caught him up on everything that had happened.

For some reason that she didn't fully understand, he'd stayed. In Oakland, that is—they hadn't become an item until much later, when Cora was almost eight months old. But she knew he'd had job prospects elsewhere—he had a computer science degree. He'd never told her exactly what job he'd given up, but she suspected it was something big, something in San Francisco or the Silicon Valley. He'd had a future outside

of fixing cars at Bill's, the same shop he and David had worked at in high school. But he'd taken one look at her, and given it all up to stay and help her, no matter how much she'd protested. And though she'd argued against it for a long time, she couldn't say that she wasn't glad.

Her family had been furious with her for keeping the baby. But she'd loved David, with every part of her being, and she couldn't imagine not having his child—especially since she believed with all of her heart that she'd never see or speak to him again. It was the last part of him that she could keep for herself, even though the future that she'd dreamed of for them would never come about.

Nathaniel had been there every step of the way—at the birth, afterwards, when she'd been too in pain and exhausted to do much more than feed and manage the newborn that she had no earthly idea how to mother. Her own mother had died a month after Sarah had found out that she was pregnant, succumbing to cancer. Her father had turned into a recluse afterwards, and both of her sisters were long since off to college and busy with their own lives. She would have been alone, except for him. And somehow, without them ever talking about it or meaning to, he'd become a fixture in their lives. And then, one starry evening when Cora was down for the night and Sarah was sitting on the porch with a cup of tea, feeling for the first time since she'd found out that she was pregnant that maybe, maybe she wouldn't fail horribly at the whole thing, Nathaniel had come to sit outside on the porch with her. She could remember it as clearly as if it had happened hours before.

“I know you were David's girl,” he'd said quietly, hands resting on his knees. “And I know you probably think I'm here because I was his best friend, and that I think I have some responsibility to take care of you, since he's not here.”

Sarah had pressed her lips together tightly, not looking at him. “I've wondered if it might be something like that,” she'd said finally. “Is it not?”

“No. I don't know why you didn't tell him, but that's your business. I haven't spoken to him either, not in about six

months. I've tried to get in touch with him...but he just doesn't respond. So I guess he's gone for good."

"Yes," Sarah had whispered. "I expect that he is."

He'd turned towards her then, taking one of her slim, delicate hands in his. "I won't ask you questions that you don't want to answer," he'd said, his voice sure and deliberate. "But I will tell you this, Sarah, I haven't been here because of David. I liked you when we were teenagers, but you were his girl, and I was his best friend, and there's some lines that shouldn't be crossed. As long as the two of you were together, and happy, I wasn't going to interfere. I left for school, and I expected I'd come back to find the two of you married, and maybe even starting a family together, and I was happy for you both. Because it's right to be happy when the people you love are happy."

Sarah had stared at him, dumbfounded. "Nathaniel, are you saying—"

"That I love you? Yes," he'd said, and the words had been so sure, so casual, as if he'd thought them a hundred times already, that she'd believed him without question. "I love you, Sarah, and when I came back and saw you, I knew I couldn't leave again. We've got a chance at something good. I didn't want to ask, not when you were so tired and overwhelmed with Cora, and everything was so new for you. I just wanted to be there for you. But now I think maybe you're on the other side of that, and I want to ask you for real now: can we do this together? Can we be together, you and I? You and me and Cora, a family. I want that, Sarah, if that's what you want."

There'd been a wind, sweet and warm, blowing through the summer night and ruffling her hair, and she'd been able to smell the scent of him—warm skin and motor oil and grease, the faint hint of laundry detergent and harsh green soap under that. It was a smell that took her back years earlier, to high school and lazy summer afternoons watching him and David work on their cars, to them teaching her to change a tire, to change her oil, to change a battery. All things she should be able to do herself, they'd said, and she'd been happy to learn.

She'd never thought of Nathaniel romantically before that moment. Even in the ten months since they'd run into each other in the grocery, it hadn't occurred to her. But she hadn't thought about anyone that way, not since David. She hadn't been able to—first heartbroken, then pregnant, and then a mother. But that night, for the first time, she remembered what it felt like to just be a person—a person who wanted to be loved. And she looked at Nathaniel, familiar and new all at once—at his shaggy blonde hair and bright green eyes, his surfer-boy tan and broad, genuine smile, and she thought that maybe he was both her past and her future in one, and that it was a future she liked the thought of.

“Yes,” she'd whispered, and he'd kissed her then, broad hand cupping her face, slow and sweet. They'd stayed like that on the porch for a long time, just kissing, until kissing wasn't enough, and she'd left her cold mug of tea on the porch as they'd stumbled inside, giggling and shushing each other, trying not to wake the baby, and they'd fallen into her bed at last. He'd taken off her clothes, one piece at a time, and she remembered what it was like for her body to belong to herself, to get pleasure from it, to feel as if she inhabited it. He'd traced her with lips and tongue and fingers, each line and curve, and she'd done the same to him. The hours blurred into each other as they learned each other, and when he'd finally slid inside of her with the moonlight pouring through the curtains and over her bed, she'd sighed and pressed her forehead against his, and at long last she'd felt the last yearnings for David slip away.

Sarah sighed, taking a sip of her wine and sinking deeper into the fragrant bubbles. She was lucky, and she knew it. None of her friends at work had husbands or boyfriends who changed diapers, who got up in the middle of the night to warm up milk and feed the baby, who put the baby to bed and cleaned up while the mother's took baths and some time to unwind. Nathaniel had always done all of those things. He'd always been as hands on as if he were Cora's father, and for all intents and purposes, he *was*. He was the one she thought of as her father, the one she yelled “dada” at when he came through the door after a long day at the shop.

Was she just confusing Cora by bringing David into her life? Sarah chewed on her lower lip anxiously as she thought about it. She hadn't told Nathaniel yet that she'd called David, hadn't even told him that she'd been thinking about it. She'd wanted to make the decision on her own, but now that it was done, she knew that she should have talked to him about it first. It was going to affect him as much as it would Coraline. He'd done everything for Cora since before her birth—was it going to hurt him, that she'd asked David to come home? It very well might, she realized. And it might do more harm to Cora than good.

But she couldn't deny that David *was* her daughter's father. And no matter how well Nathaniel filled that role, how good of a job he did, how thoroughly he'd thrown himself into raising Cora with her, there would come a day when she would have had to tell Cora the truth, no matter what. And just as surely as she might have hurt Cora by telling David, she might have hurt her by never saying anything at all. By never giving her the chance to have her other father—her biological one.

Sarah took a last, long gulp of her wine, and drained the bath. She towed her hair dry and shrugged on a nightgown and her robe, belting it around the waist. As she stepped out of the bathroom, she saw Nathaniel sitting on the edge of their bed, in just his blue jeans. Her eyes skimmed over his hairy blonde chest, muscles flexing as he bent to untie his boots and kick them off, and she felt her pulse speed up a little. She thought of not telling him yet, of falling onto the bed with him and losing herself in him for a little while.

But she had to.

Putting it off would only make it harder.

“Nathaniel,” she said softly. “I need to tell you something.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Nathaniel hadn't known he wanted a family until he'd seen Sarah standing in the grocery store, heavily pregnant and looking as if she were too exhausted to choose between linguine and fettuccine noodles. He'd been headed for a big tech job in Silicon Valley—long hours, fancy offices, parties with lots of booze, and all the hookups he could handle. Money, no commitments, and the freedom that came with all of that—a world far removed from the one he'd grown up in in Oakland.

He couldn't explain what had happened when he'd seen her. It had been as if a switch had flipped in his mind, and there'd suddenly been no option other than to stay. He'd had a crush on her when they were younger, before he'd gone away to college, and he'd always cared about her. He'd kept in touch with her, all through those years after, and sometimes thought wistfully of what might have been—if she hadn't been with David. If she hadn't always loved David.

He'd fully expected to come home after graduation to find the two of them married, Sarah pregnant, maybe even with a kid already. And then the first thing he'd heard over beers with one of his other high school friends, when he'd said that he hadn't heard from David and wondered if he and Sarah were living in the same place, was that they'd broken up, and David was gone.

It had come as a shock. David hadn't said anything to him, carefully avoiding all of his questions, and Sarah had always somehow sidestepped any questions about David, too. He'd

wondered from time to time if something was up—but he'd been too deep in his own schedule and worries and life to think too deeply about it. And coming home to find that not only had they been broken up, but that Sarah was pregnant nonetheless—his first, unbidden thought when he'd seen her had been: *it should have been me. I wouldn't have left her.*

But he'd known that she would be in no place to open up to someone romantically, that he was once David's best friend, and that if he wanted her, he would have to be satisfied with being her friend, and nothing more—unless she decided otherwise. And when he realized that he would have stayed and helped her forever, only as a friend, loving her whether she returned it or not—that was when he had known it was real.

The night she'd kissed him on the porch had been the happiest night of his life. He remembered the rest of that night in clear, exacting detail—every touch, every kiss, every inch of newly revealed skin, more beautiful to him than any he'd ever seen before. And he'd never looked back. None of the sleepless nights or diaper changes or exhausting days when Cora cried and screamed and couldn't be soothed, not Sarah's worst days or most emotional moments could have driven him away. He hadn't known he'd wanted a family, but he had one, and he was blissfully happy with it.

He'd wondered, from time to time, why she hadn't told David. But it wasn't any of his business, he'd reasoned. She'd never told him why they'd broken up, either, and he had always assumed it had something to do with that. And deep in the back of his mind, as time passed, he was secretly glad. Wherever David was, whatever he was doing, Nathaniel thought of Sarah and Cora as his. He'd been there for everything important. So he was glad, in his heart of hearts, that Sarah had never said anything.

But now she sat across from him, her pale face worried, and he felt anxiety swirl in the pit of his stomach. "Nathaniel, I need to tell you something," she said, and he knew before she said it that it had something to do with David. That the happiness he'd found couldn't go on, unspoiled, forever. After

all, what he had wasn't truly his, he thought. He'd just pretended that it could be.

"I called David," she continued, her voice small and nervous. "I told him about Cora."

Even knowing what she was going to say before she said it, the words still struck him hard, like a punch to the gut. "What did he say?" he asked, keeping his voice low. No point in waking the baby. No point in getting upset. What was done was done, and now he only had to find out how they would go forward.

"He's coming home." Sarah's eyes were wide, pleading with Nathaniel to understand. "I know I should have talked to you about it first, but..."

"No, it was your decision. She's your daughter."

"She's *our* daughter," Sarah said, her voice insistent. "And I should have talked to you about it first. I'm sorry. It's just that I thought, if he wasn't going to come back, then it would have upset you for nothing. And I didn't know if he would."

"Our daughter," Nathaniel repeated. "You really feel that way, Sarah?"

"Yes!" She moved closer to him as he leaned back against the pile of pillows, facing her. "I told David that no matter what, this isn't about him and I getting back together. I told him I have someone, that I've moved on with my life. This isn't going to change anything about us, Nathaniel, or your relationship with Cora. I'm not going to forget everything you've done for her...for us. I'm not going to forget how much we love each other, just because David has come home."

He hadn't realized, until he felt the tension drain out of his body, how afraid he'd been of exactly that. He could remember vividly how Sarah and David had been with each other, how they'd looked at each other, how once they'd started sleeping together it had been impossible not to know, because they couldn't keep their hands off of each other. So if David came back, what would that mean? Would seeing him again remind Sarah of what she'd lost, reignite that spark? But

looking at her then, seeing the pleading sincerity in her face, he felt the fear start to fade. What they had was solid, what they'd built was real. No one, not even David, could break that.

“I love you,” Sarah whispered, and she slid close to him then, laying her head on his shoulder. “Nothing will change that. I promise.”

He wanted to ask more questions: why hadn't she told David years ago, why had they broken up, what had made her decide to tell him now? But it was so peaceful, her laying like that, the “I love you” still hovering in the air between them sweetly, the soft fall breeze coming through the open windows, reminding him of the first night he'd kissed her. He didn't want to disturb that, didn't want a long conversation opening up the past, worrying about the future. He wanted his lips on hers, her body pressed against him, a reminder to them both of what they had and what they wanted to keep.

“I love you too,” he murmured, and turned his head, bending to kiss her as his hand slid against her face and through her long blonde hair. He heard her sigh, felt her body relax against him as she turned into his arms, her robe falling apart to reveal the silky nightgown underneath. He shuddered at the touch of it against his bare skin, and he dragged one finger across her collarbone, down to the edge of lace that lay against her chest.

She moaned softly against his mouth, and he breathed in, smelling the sweet scent of her—all raspberry bubble bath and sweet wine, with the faint hint of the spices that she'd cooked with at dinner. He moved his hand down, cupping her breast under the satin, feeling her nipple harden between his fingers while he pinched it and kissed her, his tongue sliding into her mouth and tasting the wine.

He felt her hand slide down the flat expanse of his abdomen, running over the ridges of muscle, down to the fly of his jeans, and felt her palm skate over the thick hardness of his desire, her fingers fumbling for the zipper so that she could slide it inside.

He wanted her then, wanted her desperately, in a rush of lust that made his cock lurch against the fabric of his jeans, rock hard and aching, and with one swift motion he rolled her onto her back, looking down at her bright blue eyes shining up at him.

He kissed her again, hungrily, his mouth moving from her lips to her throat, down to the sharp edge of her collarbone, and then lower, over the satin of her nightgown. His hands went to her hips as he pressed his lips against her nipple, sucking both it and the soft fabric into his mouth, and he felt her writhe under him, felt her hands bury themselves in his hair. He suddenly wanted—needed—her to be naked, to feel her soft skin against his.

He pushed up her nightgown, tossing it and her robe aside.

Without missing a beat, his lips were on her again, kissing and licking down her body as he undid his jeans, the relief of his cock springing free enough to make him moan all on its own. He wanted to be inside of her, desperately, but first he wanted to taste her, to make her come before he had his own pleasure.

He spread her thighs apart, ran his hands up the soft inside of them, pressed his mouth between her legs as he heard her sigh and felt her arch her hips. He ran his tongue over her in long, slow licks, swirling it around her clit and then sucking, using lips and tongue in all the ways he knew she liked until he could feel her thighs tighten around his shoulders, heard her moaning his name: “Nate, Nate...” and then felt her quiver and shudder, her hips bucking up against his mouth as she cried out.

He felt as if he might explode as soon as he touched her, the wet heat of her against the tip of his cock almost too much as he slid up her body, her legs wrapping around his waist without a thought as she buried her hands in his hair, looking up at him.

“I want you inside of me,” she whispered, and that alone was almost enough to push him over the edge, the only thing holding him back the need to feel her around him, to savor it

for just a moment. He slid into her, inch by inch, groaning as he did so.

“Oh god, Sarah,” he moaned, and when he was buried inside of her as far as he could go, he held still for a moment, letting the pleasure wash over and through him.

“I love you,” he whispered as he began to move, each stroke a shot of pleasure, every nerve in his body alight.

“I love you too.” She ran her fingers through his hair, pulling him down to kiss her, her lips pressed hard against his. He felt her tongue slide against his, felt his breath come faster and faster as the pleasure overwhelmed him. He wanted her to come again, wanted to feel her fall apart around him as he came. So, he held off for those last seconds until he heard that familiar gasp, felt the arch of her back that he knew so well, felt her hips go rigid and press against him, and then he let go, thrusting into her once more, hard, so that the sweet sensation of it raced through his body and down his spine.

For a moment he forgot everything except for how it felt, how good it was, and how it felt to hold her quivering body against him as she moaned his name into his ear, their sweat-slicked flesh pressed tightly against each other.

She nestled into him as he rolled onto his back, her lips pressed to his shoulder, her naked body curved against his. He knew she didn't usually like to sleep naked, always worried that something would happen or she would be needed in the middle of the night, but he felt her relax against him as she fell almost immediately asleep, and he didn't wake her. He pulled the covers up over them both, and let himself enjoy it—the sensation of her pressed against him, the closeness of their bodies in the bed, the last calm before everything would change.

CHAPTER FIVE

David left for Oakland the morning of the move feeling uneasy. He'd told Marcus the night before that he was leaving, a rare night when there were no cars to take apart, no one out boosting. One of their guys had been picked up by the cops a few nights before, and they were laying low until he was cleared, or until they were sure he wouldn't rat. If he did rat, David expected, he wouldn't last long enough to get out of jail.

It was a sobering reminder of the kind of life he'd gotten himself into, and why it was time to go. Sarah's news had reminded him that he had something to live for, some reason to be better than just a guy who helped sell stolen car parts and socked away the money, with nothing really to spend it on except his dirt cheap rent and booze. It was as if a fog had cleared, and he walked into the garage that night, ready to tell Marcus he was done.

Marcus had stared at him, chewing on a toothpick as he considered what David had said: that he had to leave, that he'd pay out the rest of the next month's rent so Marcus wasn't left in the lurch, that he appreciated the job and the place to live and everything Marcus had done for him.

Marcus had just spit on the concrete floor, and looked up at David from the milk crate he was sitting on. "So your girl said she was knocked up, and now you're running home, is that it?"

"She's not my girl anymore," David had explained, careful to hide any frustration he might have felt. "But the baby *is* my

daughter...and I need to go home, now that I know. I gotta do the right thing.”

Marcus had snorted at that. “You’re sure it’s yours?”

“The math checks out,” David had said flatly. “I’m sure.”

Marcus had narrowed his eyes then, considering. “What if I tell you no?” he said finally. “What if I say you gotta stay here, do your job? What if I say I can’t do without you?”

David had stared at him, dumbfounded. “It’s a job, Marcus,” he’d stuttered, a cold feeling starting to spread through his belly. “Anybody can quit a job. I told you, I’ll make sure to pay next month’s rent on the room, since I can’t give you thirty days’ notice. I’m sorry to leave you a man short, but this is my family—”

Marcus had burst out laughing then, clutching his gut and snorting. “I’m just kidding, man,” he’d managed at last. “You should’ve seen the look on your face!”

But there had been a look on Marcus’ face, even as he laughed and waved David off, telling him it was fine and good luck, that had given David pause and left that cold feeling lingering in his gut long after the conversation was over.

He tried to shrug it off as he threw his bags that contained what little he owned in the back of the Supra, climbed in and revved it up. It was time to make the drive back to Oakland, and put everything else behind him.

He’d called his parents the night before, gotten permission to move in until the tenants in his own house were ready to clear out. His mother had hemmed and hawed a little, made noises about wanting to keep a guest room, but in the end she’d given in, as he’d known she would. It made him feel guilty, to ask a favor after having been out of touch for so long, but there was time to make things right again, he told himself firmly. Time to show his family, and Sarah, that he meant to do the right thing, to straighten himself out.

He mulled over ideas as he made the trek back, thought about Coraline—what she would look like, what sorts of things she might enjoy. He had images of princesses and dolls,

buying her a small fluffy puppy to play with in the backyard, or maybe a kitten to cuddle with while she watched movies in the living room. He'd failed at every relationship he'd ever tried to have, but maybe that one would be the one he would do right, he thought. It was a new chance, a fresh start.

He made it into town at ten in the evening. The streets were silent, the lamps flickering as he turned down the winding roads towards the neighborhood he knew so well. He'd lived there for a good portion of his life—longer than he'd been away. He waited for it to feel like coming home, but it didn't. If anything, it felt like returning with his tail between his legs. Everyone in town had to know that Coraline was his daughter, that he'd been gone for the last three years. He wondered what else they knew, if they knew that Sarah hadn't told him, or if they assumed that he just hadn't cared. He wondered what explanation everyone had come up with for the breakup with Sarah and his disappearance from town, or if she'd told them the truth.

He wearily parked in the driveway, trudging up the wooden steps and fishing a key out of a potted plant near the door. He, and his father, had told his mother a million times that it wasn't a safe place to leave a key in a city like Oakland, but she never listened. The only way it could've been more obvious was if she'd left it under the mat.

The house was cool and silent, smelling of cleaning products and old carpet. His parents were asleep, he was sure, and he took the moment to set his bag down and take in his surroundings.

It was the way he remembered it, still. There was the sofa that had been there since before he was a teenager, a floral reclining sectional that his mother loved and his father despised with a passion. The same knitted pink afghan that his grandmother had made was thrown across the back of it, the same stack of magazines that his mother had always read were on the coffee table, the morning's newspaper was folded on the side table by his father's seat at the end of the couch. There were the old rings on the coffee table wood from him and his brother and sister, who could never be bothered to remember

to use coasters, and the rough patches on the carpet from when they'd had a cat who scratched everything but the post. It was his home, just as it had always been, but he felt strange and out of place nonetheless.

He carried his bag down the hall to the room that he'd shared with his brother and was now the guest room, his sister's room down the hall having been turned into an office after she left for college. It, too, smelled of cleaning products and mothly wool blankets, the quilt on the double bed freshly laundered and the throw blanket tossed across the foot of it. It looked nothing like it had when he and his brother had lived there—the walls covered in Star Wars posters and comic book drawings and pinups had been stripped and painted a cool, neutral blue, the stain resistant jersey bedding in dark colors had been replaced by white sheets, a quilt that his grandmother had made, and that blanket that his mother had probably brought down from the box of them in the attic—thus the moth smell. The beat up nightstands had been replaced with one new one and a tasteful lamp, and there was a dresser in the corner. He set his bag down next to it and shucked off the clothes he'd spent all day driving in, wishing for a shower, but settling for clean basketball shorts.

The window was open, letting a cool fall breeze into the room, and he thought that he would fall asleep immediately, exhausted from the long drive. He lay awake for some time, though, staring at the swirls and patterns of the popcorn ceiling above him, trying to picture what his new reality would look like. It was hard for him to do. Just the week before, he'd been alone in the big city, working for an illegal shop, living in the garage, having the occasional hookup and not thinking past the next day, the next hour.

Now he was a father, sleeping in a bed in his childhood home, his parents just down the hall, back to the place where he'd grown up. No matter how he tried, he couldn't quite envision the days and weeks to come.

By the time he finally slept, he could hear the birds chirping outside, welcoming him back home.

He didn't really know what he had expected the next morning. He was used to sleeping in late, not getting up until after eleven, but despite not falling asleep until the early morning he was irrevocably awakened by the sounds of his mother, Diana, in the kitchen, and the not unpleasant smell of coffee and frying bacon making its way down the hall. He got up blearily and stumbled towards the kitchen, and saw the familiar sight of his mother in her old blue robe, her hair piled atop her head, busily making breakfast.

She turned long enough to give him a kiss on the cheek, and then back to the stove. "Your father left already this morning," she said briefly. "He had an early meeting. But I wanted to make you a decent breakfast, especially after how long you were driving yesterday. I'm sure it was nothing but fast food the whole way."

It's been nothing but ramen and fast food for the last couple of years, he wanted to say, but he didn't. The last thing David wanted was for his mother to know exactly how poorly he'd been taking care of himself for the past few years, or anything else about that time really.

He poured himself a cup of coffee and mixed hazelnut creamer into it, breathing in the scent of real, good coffee. Not the instant ground mess that he'd been drinking when he had had coffee—although he usually just chugged an energy drink first thing. He sat back down and looked at his phone, his pulse speeding up a little when he saw that there was a text from Sarah.

Dropping Coraline off at daycare. You're welcome to come over for dinner as soon as you'd like, but there's some things we need to talk about first. I don't want to rush you, so take your time.

As much as he appreciated her concern for his mental state, it still rankled with him. He felt as if he were being permitted to come into their established family, and that he could be kicked out just as quickly if he didn't behave,

He shook the thought away. He knew Sarah better than that. Besides, it *was* an unusual situation. But he didn't know

what to do with himself for the rest of the day. There was hardly anything to unpack, and he needed to go down to Bill's and talk to him about a job, but he didn't expect that that would take very long. Spending hours in the house with only his own thoughts sounded like a recipe for disaster.

"Your old bike is still in the garage," Diana said as she set a plate down for him and one for herself, as if reading his mind. "Your father hasn't touched it, and it's likely covered over in cobwebs, but it's there, if you want to do anything with it. I expect you'll be taking that, and the rest of your old things in storage, back to the house when the tenants are out?"

He nodded, swallowing a forkful of eggs. "Yeah," he said, feeling awkward. "I'll get everything out and back to the house, don't worry."

"I'm not," she assured him, patting his hand. "I'm glad you're back, David. Your father and I both are. If we were abrupt before, it's just that it was a shock hearing from you, after—"

"After so long, I know." David pressed his lips together. "I'm sorry, mom. It's been a rough time, since I left. But I'm going to make things right. With you, with Sarah...with everyone."

At Sarah's name, Diana dropped her eyes to her plate.

"What?" David asked, setting down his fork. "Is something going on with Sarah? Something I should know?"

His mother hesitated, toying with a piece of bacon. "It's something she should tell you," she said finally. "It's not my place, really..."

David's eyes narrowed. "She said she needed to talk to me, before I saw Coraline. Is this what that's about?"

"Probably," she admitted. "But like I said—"

"She needs to be the one to tell me. Got it." David pushed at the edge of a pancake, his appetite quickly fading. "I'm not going to like whatever it is, am I?"

“No,” Diana said softly. “I don’t think you will.” She chewed on her lower lip briefly. “Sarah never really told me, you know, why the two of you broke up. I knew you were planning to propose to her. It came as such a shock, and you left so quickly—”

“Sarah didn’t think I had enough experience of the world,” I said flatly. “She thought I’d regret marrying her, regret not going out and,” I searched for the right words, “exploring. So she said no, and told me I should leave. And without her, I couldn’t stay.” I looked down at my plate, stemming the flow of words. It was the most emotional I’d let myself be about the situation in a long time. “I just had to get out. You understand that, right? And she never told me about...about...”

“About Cora,” his mother finished for him. “We see her sometimes, but not often. I think Sarah is afraid I’m angry with her.”

“Are you?”

“A little,” Diana admitted. “I think she should have married *you*, but what mother doesn’t think that? Even...” she hesitated, stopping herself.

“Mom, are you really going to make me wait to find out from Sarah?” David pushed his plate away, his appetite totally gone. “It’s got to be something bad.”

Diana sighed heavily. “I’m going to tell you, because I’m your mother, and you’re more important to me than anyone else. Have you heard from Nathaniel, recently?”

David shook his head. “Not since about six months after I left. He kind of dropped off of the face of the earth. To be fair, I didn’t really respond to his calls or texts either, though. I was in a bad place then.”

“Well, he came home after college,” Diana said hesitantly. “And he ran into Sarah in the grocery store. I guess she was pretty close to having the baby by then, but she didn’t have a lot of help. Her mother had passed away, and her father was —”

“Wait,” David interrupted. “Anna died?”

Diana nodded sadly. “Breast cancer. It was quick, they didn’t catch it until it was too late. She passed away maybe a couple months after you left. Sarah was heartbroken, and had just found out she was pregnant on top of that. It broke her father—he hardly ever left the house after that, still doesn’t. And her siblings are off to college. They don’t want to come back to visit. So she was pretty much on her own. I tried to help some, but she politely told me no until I finally backed off. I think it was too awkward, me being your mother and all.”

The wheels in David’s head were spinning, and he was more and more certain of where the conversation was going. Nathaniel, back from college. Sarah, pregnant and alone. It was a story that didn’t take much thought to finish.

“So Nathaniel got with Sarah,” he heard himself saying, his voice toneless, before his mother could continue.

Diana pressed her lips together, silent for a moment. It was all the confirmation David needed.

“Well, I see why she wanted to talk to me before I came over,” he said, putting his hands flat on the table and standing up. “Would’ve been a bit of a shock, me walking in the house and seeing Nathaniel there.”

“It took them a long time to get together,” Diana said gently, trying to reassure her son. “Months after Cora was born. I think she was almost a year old. But you know, Sarah didn’t think you were coming back—”

“No,” David cut her off. “She *knew* I wasn’t coming back, because she didn’t tell me about the baby. And now I wonder if there were other reasons, besides her not wanting to feel like she’d dragged me back.”

“I think you need to talk to her about that.” Diana looked at her son, her face compassionate. “Take things slowly, David. This is new to you. But you can both navigate it, I’m sure.”

“Yeah, of course,” David said, but it came out hollow to his ears. He was no longer so sure.

CHAPTER SIX

He traipsed out to the garage, hoping to get his mind off of Nathaniel and Sarah.

I've got someone, he remembered her saying, and he also remembered the dart of pain, of jealousy, that he'd felt when she'd said it. He'd expected to have to get used to seeing her with another guy, but he'd never in a million years expected that it would be Nathaniel. The knowledge ate at him in more ways than one—jealousy that his best friend was with the girl he'd once wanted to marry, the love of his life and jealousy that that same girl was with the guy he'd crushed on endlessly in high school, the guy he'd thought about more than any other as he tried to navigate whether he was gay, straight, or something in between.

He'd settled on in between. And now he was going to have to see both of the people he'd loved, both of the people he'd desired more than any other, be with each other...in love with each other...being a family with him on the outside looking in.

He resisted the urge to punch the garage door as he fiddled for the key and put it in the lock. He needed something to take his mind off of it, something to occupy his time. Something like the old motorcycle, stashed away in the garage and likely in need of work.

As expected, it was stashed in a corner, exceedingly dusty, with cobwebs strung between the handlebars. David rolled it out onto the gravel driveway, grabbed a pack of cleaning wipes out of the Supra, and set to work dusting it off. The leather of the seat looked pretty rough, but he was sure he

could get it supple and new-looking again. All he needed to do was get it to the shop, and put in some hours of work. The thought made some of the tension drain from him, and he felt his shoulders relax. That was something he knew, something he understood. And it was a good segue to talk to Bill about a job.

He grabbed the keys to his father's work truck that hung in the garage, knowing neither of his parents would care if he used it to transport the bike to the shop. He got the bike into the bed, tying it down, and despite the cool fall breeze he was sweating by the time he got it all done. He wiped his forehead, running his fingers through his dark hair.

He climbed into the truck, and let out a long, relieved breath as he put it into gear and slowly made his way towards the shop. He had something to take his mind off of Sarah and Nathaniel for a while, at least. He needed some peace before he met his daughter for the first time.

—

The shop looked almost deserted when David pulled in, and he winced. A Wednesday afternoon was never the busiest time, but it was exceptionally dead. It made him worry for the chances of getting a job from Bill, and also worried that if he was hired, it would just be as a favor, for old time's sake. He wanted to be hired on merit, and not just because Bill was poker buddies with his father, and wouldn't want to tell David no.

You put in years of work for him during high school and after, right up until the day you left, David reminded himself. Bill knew his work. If he hired him, it might be because he knew David—and his father—but it wouldn't be entirely charity. David knew his way around machinery, and Bill knew it.

He surveyed the cars that had been left for work as he untied the motorcycle and rolled it into the shop. There wasn't much—an old truck, a sedan, a couple of bikes and a minivan, all awaiting care. There were no muscle cars, no imports waiting for mods, nothing in need of restoration—just a lot of

everyday drivers that needed an oil change or some new tires or a fresh transmission. He realized then that no matter how bad of a life it had been, he was going to miss the rush of the work at the chop shop, the countdown of the clock to get the parts disassembled, the adrenaline that had come with boosting the cars. It was what David missed from his racing days, too. Once upon a time, he'd thought working at Bill's would be the zenith of what he could hope for in life. Now it felt like sliding backwards.

The sound of clattering tools startled David, and he jumped backwards, nearly letting go of his motorcycle. He quickly flipped the kickstand down and turned towards the source of the noise.

The first thing he noticed was the finest ass he'd ever seen on a man, packed into a tight pair of worn blue jeans, stained with grease and oil, ripped at various spots in the legs from scraping across concrete and catching on tools. He had to look away quickly as the man stood up from where he'd been collecting what had dropped, not wanting to get caught staring. When David glanced back, he froze in place.

The man he'd been checking out was none other than Nathaniel and the years since David had seen him last had been more than kind to him. He'd been handsome when they'd been friends—both of them had been pretty damn good looking—but whether it was deprivation or just plain attraction, David thought he'd grown into one of the most gorgeous men that he'd ever seen. His thick, blond hair flopped over one side of his forehead, still in that casual surfer boy way, accentuating his bright green eyes. He was lean, but more muscular than he'd been in high school, made obvious by the tight jeans and the snug shirt that he wore with the blueprint of a classic car on it, stained with motor oil around the hem.

That thought was immediately followed by the reminder that Nathaniel was sleeping with—no, actually in a relationship with—David's ex-girlfriend, and he felt himself flush red, his pulse pounding in his throat. Whether it was

from jealousy, or the sudden image in his head of Nathaniel and Sarah naked in bed, he couldn't be quite sure.

It had been more than a year, at least, since he'd been with a man. He'd had one serious relationship with a guy, a few months after moving to San Diego, before his life had imploded. It had ended, of course, and he'd followed that up with a spree of sex and alcohol, sleeping with every attractive guy who'd crossed his path. And then, of course, he'd ended up at the chop shop with the gang, and had gone back to women. None of those had been serious—and there'd only been a few of them. It had been months since he'd been with anyone at all, and he could feel the absence of it suddenly, his skin alive with the aching need to be touched. He could feel his libido rocket into high gear, and he had a sudden, vivid image of bending Nathaniel over the hood of the rusty silver sedan he was standing next to, and...

“David?”

Nathaniel's voice cut through David's fantasy, and David cleared his throat, hoping the flush on his neck and face could be attributed to dragging the motorcycle out of the truck, and not his sudden onslaught of lust. He stepped strategically towards one of the cars, hoping he could adjust his sudden erection before Nathaniel caught sight of *that*.

“Nathaniel,” he returned, keeping his voice cool, and the realization that he was standing across the garage from his former best friend, the place where they'd once worked together for countless hours—laughed, joked, teased Sarah and each other, made a thousand memories—looking at him as if he were a stranger, both of them unsure of what to do, was enough to throw ice water over his rush of desire. He felt it drain out of him entirely, and he was left looking at the other man across the shop, wondering what on earth to say.

“Sarah...she uh...called me,” David said awkwardly, shoving his hands into the front pockets of his jeans.

“I know,” Nathaniel replied. He leaned back against the hood of the sedan, scuffing the heel of one shoe against the concrete. “She didn't tell me that she was going to.”

“I should thank you,” David said suddenly. “For being there. When I wasn’t.”

“But you don’t want to.” It wasn’t a question; Nathaniel knew that he didn’t. “I don’t blame you. I wouldn’t either.”

“I want to be a part of my daughter’s life.” The muscles in David’s jaw clenched and worked as he looked at Nathaniel. “I came back as soon as I knew. If she had told me sooner—”

“Yes, but she didn’t,” Nathaniel said flatly. “And she had her reasons for that.”

“Do you agree with them?”

“It doesn’t matter if I do or not. But for more than two years, I’ve been Cora’s father. I respect you coming back, David, I really do. But I don’t know what kind of man you are anymore. I haven’t heard from you in years, even though I tried. And if you think you’re just going to push me out of Cora’s life, and take my spot—”

“I don’t,” David said quickly, holding up a hand. “I...I was angry, when I first heard about you and Sarah. I still am, if I’m being honest. She was my girl, Nathaniel, for as long as we were all friends. That’s a line you’re not ever supposed to cross, in my book. But you did cross it, and here we are. And for the sake of my daughter, well,” David pressed his lips together. “I’m not going to react the way I might, otherwise.”

“Meaning you’re not going to smear my face all over this concrete floor, for dating *your girl*?” Nathaniel took a few steps forwards, looking at David carefully. “Is that what you’d do, otherwise? Because if there’s any beef between us, we need to get it out, now. Before you go over to our house, before you and Sarah see each other, before you see your daughter again. Now.”

David gritted his teeth. “You can’t possibly think I’m wrong for being angry. I didn’t break up with Sarah. I loved her.”

“Do you still love her?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, here’s the thing.” Nathaniel stopped a few inches from David, looking directly at him. “I *do* love her. And I love Cora. We’re a family. Whatever happened between you and Sarah—and she’s never told me—it ended, and you left. I was the one who was here. And that counts for something.”

“I didn’t *know!*”

“Maybe you should have!”

David’s eyes opened wide. “What the hell, man? How could I have known?”

Nathaniel took a deep breath. He held up his hands. “Alright, you’re right. That was low.” He shook his head. “We have to get past this, David, for this to work. This won’t be good for Cora, otherwise.”

“You’re sleeping with the girl I was going to marry. You were my best friend. It’s not easy to get past that.”

Nathaniel shrugged. “Alright then. Hit me.”

David’s eyes bugged out. “What?”

“You’re right. Whatever my reasoning was, however right I think I am, I crossed a line. I got together with my former best friend’s girl. And I don’t regret it. But I owe you one. So hit me. And we’ll call it square.”

David knew he was supposed to say no. He was supposed to shake Nathaniel’s hand and give him a one-armed hug and tell him that all was forgiven, that he understood, that he hadn’t been there. And the worst of it was that he *did* understand. They’d believed he was gone. Sarah had been pregnant and all but alone, and she would have trusted Nathaniel. He had been her friend, too. It wasn’t a huge leap to understand how that would translate into love.

But looking at Nathaniel’s face, all he could think of was Sarah touching it, kissing him, of them lying in bed together with their foreheads pressed against each other, of Nathaniel inside of her, of her moaning his name the way she used to moan David’s...

He took the offer. He swung hard, his right hand connecting squarely with Nathaniel's jaw. A small part of him had wanted to aim for the nose, but he had enough self-restraint to not want to break his former best friend's nose. The sound that it made was satisfying, as well as the way Nathaniel fell on his ass on the concrete, a shocked grunt coming from him as he pressed his hand against his face.

"Shit, man," he said, looking up at David. "You didn't punch like that in high school."

"Like you said," David said dryly. "You don't know the kind of man I am now."

He held out a hand to help Nathaniel up. "Square?" Nathaniel asked, looking hesitantly at David. It was clear he wasn't entirely sure if one punch was going to be the end of it.

"I'm not going to say forgiven," David replied, stepping back. "Not yet. But square."

CHAPTER SEVEN

By the time David made it home, showered, and changed, he'd done his best to put Nathaniel out of his head. There'd be another conversation about it later, with Sarah, but that was best worried about when the time came. Not now.

When he'd made the decision to move back, he'd resigned himself to life as a perpetual bachelor. He wanted to focus on his daughter, on changing the person he'd been, not chasing women...and trying to be with a man was a complication too difficult to even comprehend. He didn't intend to change any of that just because Nathaniel still looked as if he'd walked off of the cover of *Gears Weekly*, and after all, if there'd been no chance of him and Nathaniel years ago, there was definitely not the slightest possibility of it now. He was going to have to deal with his desires on his own. In fact, he felt more than a little embarrassed that he'd been so easily turned on.

Nathaniel's eyes really had been gorgeous though, that same bright green color they'd always been, and that ass...

You're going right back into the shower, cold this time, if you don't cut it out, he told himself sternly, slipping his boots on and taking one last look in the mirror. He looked, for all intents and purposes, like he was as straight an arrow as Sarah might wish him to be. Dark jeans, dark plaid shirt rolled up to the elbows, hair combed and lightly styled. He looked as if he were going to church on Sunday with his grandmother—the only time he'd ever gone was when she'd guilted him into it—

and that was exactly how he'd intended to look. Grown up, polished, respectable.

Trustworthy.

He took a deep breath. Time to go.

Sarah was on the porch when he arrived. She was every bit as beautiful as she'd been three years ago, and he felt a small, unexpected stab of jealousy. Once, she'd been his. Now she was making a family with Nathaniel and his daughter, and he was on the outside.

But he was there, at least, and that was all he could do.

She intercepted him in the driveway, her smile warm, but he could see the apprehension underneath it. As many years as he'd spent with her, he could still read her like a book. It was somewhat comforting to know that that hadn't changed.

"Cora is inside," she said. "I tried to explain to her what's going on, but she's not quite three, David. You're going to have to be patient, David. It's going to take some time."

"I expected that it would." David shifted nervously. She hadn't said anything about Nathaniel yet, and he didn't want to be the one to bring it up. "I want to do a good job at this, Sarah. I talked to Bill about a job earlier, and he's going to start me off a few days a week, work up to more. I'm going to help take care of you and my daughter."

"David, before you go in...there's something we need to talk about."

"I know you're with Nathaniel." He cut her off. "My mother told me this morning. And then I saw him at the shop, earlier."

Her face went slightly pale. "He didn't mention that when he called, earlier."

"He probably wouldn't, since I decked him a good one across the chin. In my defense, he offered. A sort of payback, for him taking up with you."

David saw a hint of anger cross Sarah's face, saw her shoulders tense as she controlled her reaction. "You *hit* him?"

He shrugged. “He offered. Look, Sarah, if you’re worried that there’s going to be bad blood between us, that’s exactly why we worked things out earlier. Talked.”

“*Talked*,” she said, holding her fingers up in air quotes. “David, I’m not comfortable with being fought over. You never used to be the kind of guy who—”

“I’m a different man than I used to be,” David said, a touch sharply. “But there won’t be any of that around you or Cora.”

“You never were the kind who interrupted, either,” she returned crisply. “Nathaniel will be around too, David. He’s not here today because we agreed it would be best if it were just the three of us, for your first time meeting her. But we’re together, David. This is real. And he’s been the only father Cora has known for all of her life so far. So you’re going to have to deal with it, and you’re going to have to be civil.” Her face softened then, and he saw sadness in her eyes. “What happened to you, David?”

“That’s not a story I want to tell, just now.” He looked down at her, and he felt his heart flutter, briefly, in his chest. “Can I see my daughter now, please?”

Sarah hesitated only for a second. “Come on in,” she said finally. “Dinner is ready, and Cora’s inside.”

When he saw Coraline playing on the floor in the living room, his heart stopped. She turned towards him, bright eyed and laughing, and David could see without a doubt that she was his child. She had Sarah’s gorgeous eyes and straight, perfect nose, but his chin, and the slight widow’s peak that he had at his hairline. Her hair color was his, too, dark brunette instead of the perfect champagne blonde that Sarah was, even without a touch of dye.

Cora appraised him for a moment with those big blue eyes, clutching a stuffed giraffe tightly in one hand.

“Cora?” Sarah said, and he could hear the nervous tremor in her voice. “Cora, this is David. Remember me telling you about David? This is your daddy.” She bit her lower lip. “Your other daddy.”

“Dada?” Cora asked, and David felt his heart turn over again, and unexpected tears prick at the edges of his eyes. She pushed herself up to her feet, her giraffe forgotten on the floor, and she toddled over to him and Sarah, looking between the two of them with a plump, slightly confused face. “Nate dada,” she corrected, looking at her mother.

David felt his heart plummet, and saw a sad expression cross Sarah’s face. “Well,” she said gently, reaching for her daughter, “you are very special. You have *two* daddies. One of them just took longer to come home, that’s all, because he didn’t know about you. But now he’s home, and you have more love than before.”

Cora pressed her tiny lips together, peering up at David. She gathered up her blue flowered shirt in her small fists, looking at him quizzically. “You home?”

The tears welled up in his eyes then. “I am, sweetheart.”

—

By the time he made it back to his parents’ house that night, David felt emotionally wrung out. The rest of the evening had gone as well as could possibly be expected. Sarah had made his favorite meal—barbecued pork sandwiches, coleslaw and fries, and he had watched in fascination as Coraline had pulled apart the fries and methodically deconstructed the rest of her dinner while her mother looked on in exasperation. It was exactly the sort of thing he had imagined, years before when he had never expected to leave. Except back then, the image hadn’t ended with him going back to his parents’ house, leaving his daughter and Sarah with another man.

He hoped the tenants in his old home, the one given to him by his grandfather, would want to move out at the end of the month. It would be nice to be in a place of his own, even if it were full of memories both good and bad. He felt like an intruder in his parents’ home, a stranger who couldn’t quite settle.

He put the leftovers that Sarah had sent home into the fridge, and went upstairs to the double bed, flopping down

onto it and staring up at the ceiling. He'd really done very little that night other than just be present—which he supposed was really all that was called for at the moment. He still wanted to be *more*, to do all the things that he imagined he was supposed to do as a co-parent. He wanted to drop her off at daycare, help with dinner, get her ready to go out somewhere. “Be patient,” Sarah had cautioned again on the porch as he'd prepared to leave, knowing Nathaniel would be home before long. “This is new for Cora, but it's also new for me. It's just been me and Nathaniel for the last two and a half years, David. It's going to take some time to learn to share...for us both.”

That was the hardest part, sharing her with Nathaniel, who she from the outset clearly considered her father. And it was no surprise that she did...but it still stung. He knew he couldn't expect to just jump into their daily routine as if he'd been there all along—he hadn't, and nothing could change that. What he needed was a routine of his own, something to keep him from feeling as if he were rattling aimlessly around, waiting for Sarah to call and tell him that he was welcome. At least the next day, his new job would start.

He got up early the next morning, heated up some oatmeal and packed the leftovers from dinner for lunch, and threw on an old pair of ratty jeans and a t-shirt that already had so many oil stains on it that he wasn't entirely sure what the original color had been.

The shop was empty when he got there, and he let out a sigh of relief. He didn't want to talk to anyone, and he especially didn't want to be faced with Nate first thing in the morning. He grabbed his tools out of the back of the Supra, and settled in, throwing down an old blanket to work on as he tackled the minivan that was next on the list.

He stayed that way for a while, his mind mercifully blank except for the mechanics of the parts and which tools he needed. It was a welcome distraction, and he didn't even hear the growling sound of another car as it pulled into the lot out front. He didn't notice anything until he pushed himself out from under the van and looked up to see Nathaniel standing a foot away, sorting through the mail.

His mouth went dry as he let himself stare for just a minute without thinking about it, just long enough to take in the sight of his legs and ass in the black jeans he had on, the old chambray shirt with the sleeves rolled up. There was a tattoo on his forearm, a watercolor fox running up the sinewy, muscular line of it, and David wanted to reach out and touch it.

Nathaniel glanced over, his face expressionless. There was a purple and red bruise on his jaw where David had hit him the day before, slightly swollen. “Afternoon, David,” he said, and David cleared his throat, sitting up and looking away quickly, hoping that Nathaniel hadn’t caught him looking. *You’ve got to stop this*, David told himself sternly as he rearranged his wrenches. *This is ridiculous*.

“Got an early start today, hmm?” Nathaniel tossed the mail onto the tool cabinet. “It’s not even ten yet.”

I shrugged. “I’m an early riser. Wanted to get in some work before people started flooding in.”

“Early riser, hmm? You have changed.” Nathaniel glanced at him, and David thought he saw the hint of a grin. “There haven’t been a whole lot of floods, lately. The Honda is the last thing that came in, and that was a week ago. Needs a hell of a lot of work, though.”

“Ought to keep us busy.” David tossed his tools into the box and stood up, feeling slightly dizzy. For a moment it felt like old times, talking to Nathaniel about cars, surrounded by the smell of oil and engine grease and hot metal.

Nathaniel was silent for a minute, and David tried to think of something, anything to say to break the sudden, awkward silence between them. He spied a gleaming blue Mazda RX-8 in the parking lot, with white racing stripes and chrome wheels, and he pointed towards it. “Is that yours?”

“It is,” Nathaniel said, glancing towards the car. “My pride and joy. I’ve put a lot of work into it, all my racing winnings. She’s ready to go out next weekend.”

David raised his eyebrows. “Still racing?”

“Sure thing.” Nathaniel shrugged. “It’s dangerous, I know, but Sarah’s never asked me to stop. And it scratches that itch, you know? The need for some adrenaline. Those few seconds...”

“I know,” David said, and he did. He missed it, down to his bones. The thought of getting back together with the group, of racing down the streets like he had in high school and his late teens, of running from the cops when they busted them...it sent a thrill down to his toes. “Mind if I take a look at it?”

“Go ahead,” Nathaniel said.

He walked over towards the car, and Nathaniel popped the hood. For a moment David was lost in the familiarity of it. They’d done something similar so many times before, looked over the inside of a new car, busted each other’s balls about how their cars looked, made vague threats about beating each other and placed lighthearted bets. He missed it all suddenly, with a wave of nostalgia that made him wish, desperately, that he’d never left.

David cleared his throat, stepping back. “I should be getting back to work,” he said. “Bill’s not going to want to see me slacking off on my first day here.”

Nathaniel nodded, dropping the hood and shoving his keys into his pocket. He hesitated, and then glanced at David. “Let’s go for a drink tonight, when we get off work. It would be good for us, I think. Find some common ground, so we can get along.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.” David looked away. “We can’t be buddies again, Nathaniel. I don’t think that’s how this works.”

“You know it isn’t, or you don’t think?” Nathaniel didn’t look away. “We’ve got to get along, at the very least. And if there’s a chance we could be friends again,” he paused before flashing a weak but winning smile, “then what’s the harm in trying? One drink.”

The wheezing rattle of Bill’s pickup truck interrupted them as it made its way into the parking lot, and it gave David an

excuse to step back, glancing at Nathaniel. “Let’s get back to work,” he said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

He was halfway across the parking lot when he heard Bill yell: “David!”

David turned, hoping that he wasn’t about to be told he wasn’t needed any longer. The job had seemed tentative, at best, and he couldn’t imagine trying to find work anywhere else. He *needed* something familiar. Something he knew. And he didn’t want to have to face Sarah and tell her he was out of a job already, especially not in an area that had been economically depressed since the nineties.

“How’s the first day, David?”

“Good,” he said quickly. “Got an early start this morning.”

“I’m glad you’re back, son,” Bill said. “We need a mechanic with your chops around the place. I don’t know what you’ve been up to these past years, but I’m happy to have your hands in my shop again. Not anything glamorous, but it’s bread on the table.”

“It’ll be good to get my hands greasy again,” David agreed, relief washing over him. “I’m happy to be back, Bill.”

He peered at David knowingly. “Meet up with Sarah, yet? The two of you getting back together? I know you and Nathaniel might have some trouble working together, but I don’t need any trouble, hear me?”

“I hear you.” David shook his head. “I came here to do right by my daughter, sir, and that’s all. Sarah and I are old history. She’s with Nathaniel now, and I respect that.”

“You’re gonna be partners until that girl of yours is eighteen, and long after,” Bill said shortly. “So best make friends now, and get it over with.”

“I agree,” David said, and he did. “I didn’t come here expecting Sarah to take me back. Just wanted to be in my daughter’s life, that’s all.”

Bill snorted a little at that. “Well, the way you left, you got some work to do, son.”

“I intend to do it,” David said firmly. No sense in insisting that it was Sarah who had broken up with him, who had told him he needed to leave, that she’d waited years to tell him about Cora. He was going to take the blame for going, and he supposed he understood it. It was a long path back to redemption.

—

By Saturday night, David was going stir crazy. He was used to endless hours at the chop shop, late nights that bled into sleeping in late in the morning, and alcohol to blur all the space in between. Now, even with the job at the shop, helping his parents get their unkempt lawn into shape, even cleaning out the old garage and putting some hours in on the motorcycle, he still felt as if he had more time than he knew what to do with. He’d had dinner over at Sarah’s twice more, and when he’d gone over earlier that night, Coraline had run right up to him. She wasn’t calling him “dada” yet, but she’d waved a completely illegible drawing at him, and the small smile on Sarah’s face that had accompanied it had undone him a little, his heart turning over in his chest. He was bringing Cora some happiness, at least, and that made him feel as if he’d done the right thing.

He’d left once Cora was in bed, able to tell by Sarah’s expression on her face that she wanted some time to herself. Nathaniel was out late, racing, and he saw the pinched edges around her mouth, the nervousness in her eyes. When they were teenagers, she’d come out to the races with them. She’d been one of the girls in the short skirts and heels, thick blonde hair flying, David the envy of every other man to have her

there cheering him on. But now she had a child, and she had to sit at home while Nathaniel was out in the streets. It had to be harder, David thought, to worry about him at home instead of being out there with him.

Looking at her, he'd had the urge to stay and comfort her, to be at the very least her friend again. But he knew she was reticent to get too comfortable—and he couldn't blame her, exactly. So he'd headed home, the image of Sarah on the porch lingering in his mind. She was probably in the bath, he thought as he got out of the car and headed into the house, drinking wine and trying not to worry. The thought of Sarah in the bath made his mouth go dry, and he quickly pushed away the image. That was the last thing he needed to be thinking about.

He hadn't gone out since he'd come home, not for a meal, or a drink, or anything else. He hadn't been ready to run into anyone he'd known from before, to field questions or face judgements. He was sure there was more than one old friend or acquaintance who were still holding grudges over his disappearing without much word to anyone. But he wanted a beer badly, and the idea of sitting on his parents' couch and drinking one alone seemed monumentally depressing.

He changed out his button-down for an old Trans-Am shirt, scooped up his wallet and keys, and headed back out to the car. There was a bar nearby, a semi-dive with pool tables and good drink specials. He'd frequented it plenty in the brief period of time between turning twenty-one and leaving town, and slipped in under the radar more than a few times when he was still underage and friends with one of the bartenders.

It was already packed by the time he got there. Bad karaoke was going on towards the back, a clearly drunk woman singing loudly and off key to "You Give Love a Bad Name." David sidled up to the bar and ordered a draft lager, eyeing the bartender surreptitiously as he did so. He was a tall, rugged looking guy in plaid with a full beard, no one that David recognized. He knew better than to hit on a man in a place like that, and the chances that the guy would be interested were slim, but it didn't hurt to look. If only he could

scratch the itch that seeing Nathaniel again had fired up, it might make things easier.

David took a deep swallow of his beer, trying to think of anything else. It had been a long time since anyone had ignited that kind of desire in him, made his thoughts run away from him and led him into fantasies that were more trouble than good. Normally he was the one in charge, running the show and deciding how the course of the relationship went—and when it was done. Since Sarah, and the one brief relationship after that, he'd kept his defenses up and secure.

Speaking of...

Only seconds later, the door swung open, and a flood of people made their way into the already crammed bar. The races were over for the night, it seemed, and the losers were ready to drown their sorrows and the winners were ready to celebrate. Nathaniel was in the crowd, wearing the same black jeans David had seen him in earlier and an 80s style arcade t-shirt, a baggy denim jacket thrown on against the California evening chill. “Nobody got busted tonight!” David heard someone yell, and there was a loud cheer.

He tried to keep an eye on Nathaniel, and was so focused on trying to pick him out of the crowd that he didn't even notice the tall redhead who had slipped onto the stool next to him, her chin propped on one manicured hand.

“Can I buy you a drink, handsome?” she asked, smiling at him.

Objectively, she was gorgeous. David didn't recognize her either, which was a bonus. On the flip side, he'd spied several people in the bar who he *did* recognize, and he knew that if he went home with anyone, it was likely that word would get back to Nathaniel and Sarah. Not that he wasn't free and able to hook up with anyone that he wanted but, he wondered what Sarah would think if she heard that he was already trolling for women, a few days after he'd come back into town.

On the other hand, the prospect of making her jealous made him feel strangely cheerful, after discovering that she was with Nathaniel.

“Thanks,” David replied, trying to sound gracious. “I’m not really looking for company, though. Just having a quick beer to get out of the house is all.”

She grinned. “Not even in the mood for a chat?” She sat back, reaching for the glass of ale that the bartender passed to her. “I haven’t been in town long. I’m dying for someone to talk to, that isn’t my dog.”

David relaxed a little. She didn’t seem to be seriously on the prowl, at least. “I’ve just moved back myself,” he said. “I’m sorry if I seemed rude, it’s been a rough week. What brings you here?”

“I got an offer I couldn’t refuse from the hospital,” she said. “I’m a trauma surgeon. They needed someone good, and offered me excellent pay. I’ve got a sick parent to take care of too, and this was the closest hospital to where they live.” She chuckled, and David could hear the nervousness in it. “I’m sorry, that’s probably a bit more than you wanted to know. What brought you back?”

“Family,” David said briefly. However nice she seemed, he was cautious to divulge much. If she worked at the hospital, too—Sarah was a radiologist there. He needed to be careful. “I’m David,” he said, extending a hand.

“Brienne.” She took it and shook it firmly, confidently. “It’s nice to know at least one person here. I spend so much time at the hospital it’s hard to make friends that aren’t also doctors—and it gets a little old talking shop.” She cocked her head sideways. “Are you sure I can’t buy you a drink? Or better yet, I could make you one.” She bit her lip. “Nothing too serious, of course.”

David tried to think of how to turn her down gently. She seemed like a nice person, and in any other situation, he would have been tempted to take her up on her offer. Even as it was...he let his gaze drift down her body, taking in her full breasts in the dark blue slip dress she was wearing, the curve of her waist. It might be Nathaniel who had gotten him into the state he was in, but he had no doubt Brienne could take the

edge off. “I’m not...really looking for that right now,” he said, catching sight of Nathaniel in the crowd.

Brienne was more perceptive than he’d given her credit for. She followed his gaze, and when he quickly turned back, she had a knowing expression on her face. “Ah,” she said quietly. “I got it.”

David flinched. “Oh...no,” he said quickly. “I don’t...”

Brienne waved her hand. “Don’t worry,” she said in a low tone. “I’ve already picked up on the attitude around this place. I won’t say anything.” She waved at the bartender. “Two more beers please, one for David here.” She pushed the glass towards him when it came.

David dropped his voice, too. “I’m into both, if you must know,” he admitted. “But I have a lot on my plate right now. I don’t need any distractions.”

“Not even for a night?” She raised an eyebrow. “So what’s going on here? Why the sudden influx of people?”

“Street racing,” David said. “There’s a few different gangs that get together, race, collect the winnings, run from the cops if the races get busted.”

“It’s illegal?”

“Very,” David said.

“Do you do it?”

“I used to.” He felt the wave of nostalgia again, the aching need to feel that rush of adrenaline, those moments when the world narrowed down to his foot on the gas and his hand on the stick, the world whipping past him in a blur. “Not in a long time.”

“You should get back into it.” She nudged his boot with one high-heeled foot. “You look like you know your way around the machinery.” She winked at him.

“Maybe,” David said, starting to feel the effects of the beer. He didn’t pretend not to know what she actually meant. “Maybe not. It’s been a while.”

“Time to get back on the road then, I’d say.” She took a long sip of her beer. “So where have you been, before you came back?”

“San Diego,” he said briefly. “I was away for a few years.”

“Why’d you leave?”

What the hell, David thought. What would it hurt to talk to her? She was new, too, she didn’t know anyone to gossip to. “My high school sweetheart dumped me. She figured out I was into guys, too, and thought I needed to go explore. Find out more about the world, before I settled down with the only woman—hell, the only person—I’d ever been with. So I took off, like she told me to.”

Brienne nodded, pursing her lips. “Wow. And what brought you back?”

“I found out we have a daughter.”

Brienne whistled. “Holy hell. Well, I can see why you don’t want to complicate things, then. That sounds like a lot all on its own.”

“It is,” David admitted. “Not to mention it’s...awkward, between her and I. We’re trying to co-parent, but I think it’s going to be a while before we find a rhythm that works for us.”

Brienne tapped her glass against his. “Here’s to being in our mid-twenties and still figuring shit out.”

David laughed. “How’d you know my age? I thought I could still pass for twenty-one, easily.” He could hear himself beginning to flirt with her, but he didn’t stop himself. It felt good to slide into that natural banter. Relaxing.

“I don’t know who’d been lying to you.”

David took another long swallow of his beer, and let himself really look at her one more time. It had been a while since he’d had such a gorgeous woman flirting with him, and that combined with the beer was starting to go to his head.

“We should get drinks again,” Brienne said. “It’s really nice to hang out with someone who hasn’t been elbow deep in

blood and dying people all day.”

“Just elbow deep in engines,” David countered. “But you’re right, I was just thinking something similar.”

Just then Nathaniel pushed through the crowd towards the bar, heading directly towards them. He spied David, and raised an eyebrow. “Hey, man,” he said, keeping his tone neutral. “You should have told me you were coming out tonight.”

“Sarah said you were out racing.” David regretted bringing her up the moment he said her name. “I didn’t know if you’d be going home straight after or not.”

Nathaniel reached for the beer the bartender pushed towards him and shook his head. “Nah, these nights are my nights to stay out late. Sarah will be asleep by the time I get home. I already texted her and let her know I was safe.”

David shrugged. “None of my business, man.”

Nathaniel eyed him, but said nothing else about it. Instead, he glanced towards Brienne. “So, are you going to introduce me to your friend, here?”

David felt some of the buzz slide away. “This is Brienne,” he said quickly. “We just met a little bit ago.”

She flashed Nathaniel a brilliant smile and held out her hand. “I hear you’re a street racer. I’ve patched up a few of those before, in the ER. Dangerous hobby.”

David glanced at her. *Hadn’t she just asked him if it were illegal, as if she didn’t know anything about it? Wouldn’t she know if...* his train of thought was quickly derailed as Nathaniel accidentally bumped against his leg, jostled by someone else, and a jolt of lust washed over him. *What is wrong with me?*

“It is dangerous,” he heard Nathaniel agree. “But we’ve all got to have something that gets us going, yeah?”

David saw Brienne’s eyes drift over him. “We sure do,” she agreed.

He felt the flash of jealousy again, without warning. *First Nathaniel takes Sarah while I’m gone, and now the girl who*

was hitting on me is into him. How much attention does he need?

“Hey, isn’t it my turn to buy you a drink?” David touched Brienne’s hand, letting his fingers linger just a moment longer than necessary. He watched her eyes immediately turn from Nathaniel to him, and a sense of smug gratification washed over him. *I’ve still got it*, he thought.

CHAPTER NINE

“S ure,” she said, scooting a little closer. “Maybe something a little stronger than beer, this time?”

Nathaniel glanced between the two of them, smirking. “Well, good to see you’re over Sarah, man. I have to say, I was a little worried when I heard you were coming back, but looks like you’re moving right along.”

David shrugged. “Sure thing. I mean, Sarah was a long time ago.” As he spoke, he realized he hated hearing the words even coming out of his mouth, but what was he going to do? Sarah had picked Nathaniel. They were raising *his* daughter together. *You came here planning to stay out of any entanglements with anyone else, women or men*, he thought to himself. He could feel the beer blurring the edges of his judgement, making him feel reckless, angry. He waved to the bartender. “Two shots of whiskey, man. The good stuff.” Why should he be a saint, when Sarah and Nathaniel were together? Why should he go to bed aching, thinking about Sarah relaxing in the bathtub, about her rolling over sleepily when Nathaniel got home, making love to him at two in the morning to celebrate his victory, the way she’d once done with David? He’d done nothing wrong. She’d sent him away; she hadn’t told him about Cora. So why did he have to keep suffering?

Brienne peered at him. “Are you alright, David?”

“Never better,” he said, tossing back the shot of whiskey. “Another one?”

She smiled, wrapping her long fingers around the shot glass and downing it smoothly. “I can keep up with you, if that’s what you’re wondering.” She set the shot glass down, letting one fingertip trail down the edge of it. She fixed her green eyes on David’s darker ones, and her lips curled up in a knowing smile. They were glossy and red, and he had a sudden picture of them wrapped around his dick, a jolting memory of what that would feel like, how hot and wet her mouth would be, of the relief that would come with it. The way it would make him forget, just for a little while, how he felt.

He waved to the bartender for another shot, and caught Nathaniel’s eye. “Be careful driving back,” was all Nathaniel said. “The cops missed us, so they’ll be looking for blood.” He glanced at Brienne and then back to David. “Good luck.”

There was a dismissal in his voice, something approaching mockery that made David’s temper flare up, and made his sudden urge to try and go home with Brienne into something solid and real. He reached for the shot of whiskey on the bar, downed it, and then glanced at Brienne. “Want to get out of here? It’s getting crowded.”

He saw her eyes light up, saw them drift over him with the promise of what was coming next. “I certainly do. Your place or mine?”

“Let’s do yours. I’m staying with my parents until my house is ready for me to move back in.”

“And I’m in a hotel until I find a good apartment. So we can be as loud as we like.” She winked at him, reaching out and threading her fingers through his. “Let’s go.”

David thought he felt Nathaniel’s eyes on him as he tossed some cash on the bar and got up, heading towards the door with Brienne’s fingers still interlaced with his. He glanced once over his shoulder, and saw that Nathaniel wasn’t looking at him at all, but instead laughing loudly with two of his racing buddies, then tossing his head back as he took a shot of whiskey.

“David? You coming?” Brienne’s voice cut through the noise, and David turned quickly back to her.

“Yeah, of course.”

They took an Uber back to her hotel—neither of them wanted to risk driving in their current state, and besides, it meant they had no distraction but each other on the ride there. David knew somewhere in the back of his head, as he slid into the car, that he was doing this for all of the wrong reasons. But in that particular moment, he didn’t care. He hadn’t had sex in months, and as Brienne slid closer the scent of her overwhelmed him, blurring the smell of cleaning spray and air freshener that pervaded the car, and replacing it with the scent of warm skin and a sweet, almost cloying perfume. Something about the perfume gave him pause for a second, but then she was in the middle seat, her shoulder pressed against his, and she turned towards him, those glossy red lips a breath away from his.

“I hope you’re not shy,” she whispered, and her breath smelled like mint chewing gum and whiskey, and in that moment it wasn’t altogether unpleasant. David leaned forward, feeling her hand slide around the back of his head, and then her lips were on his, warm and sticky from the gloss, and her tongue was brushing over his lower lip. She tasted sweet, and he groaned softly, reaching up to tangle his fingers in her long red hair as he felt himself start to get hard, that familiar warmth spreading through his body, the sweet ache that he knew would build and build until finally...

“Hey! You guys need to put on your seatbelts,” the driver said from the front, glancing in the rearview mirror. “Save it for when you get to your room.”

“Well he’s getting a one star rating,” Brienne mumbled as she pulled away, scooting over to her side of the car and fastening her seatbelt. She glanced at David and started to giggle, and before he knew what was happening they were both laughing, the kind of laugh that starts deep in your belly and works its way up through your body until you can’t breathe. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed like

that. Had it been with Sarah, before he'd left? It must have been, and the thought of Sarah momentarily sobered him.

But then the car stopped, and they were at the hotel. Brienne reached for his hand, pulling him after her out of the car, and she fumbled in her purse as they walked through the parking lot.

It wasn't what David had expected. It was a mid-range roadside motel, the kind with two levels and all of the doors accessible from the outside. It gave him a momentary flash of some feeling that unsettled him, like the perfume, and he glanced at her. "I would've thought a surgeon would've been staying somewhere a little swankier."

Brienne's eyes briefly narrowed, but she shrugged. "I prefer saving money over a cushy hotel room." She fished the key card out of her purse. "It's a life philosophy that's worked out very well for me so far."

"Your work doesn't pay to put you up until you find a permanent place?"

Brienne slid the card into the door. "They give me a per diem. But I'd rather stash most of it away and spend as little as possible." She pushed the door open and looked at David squarely, her green eyes glittering in the dim light of the parking lot. "Are you coming in, or are you going to keep asking me questions about my finances?"

David flushed a little. "Sorry. I was just a little thrown, that's all. Of course I'm coming in." He was no longer as sure about what he was doing there. The mood that had been there before—the sparks that had flared between them in the bar and on the ride over—had died down. He was on the verge of telling Brienne that he'd changed his mind and that he really should be getting home, when she tossed her purse on the desk and turned towards him, capturing his face in both of her hands.

The kiss this time was harder, more insistent. Her lips were tacky against his, but warm and needy, and the thought of being desired by someone was enough to send a fresh wave of lust through David, from the tips of his fingers down to his

cock, which was rapidly stiffening again. *Don't fuck this up*, the arousal flooding his body seemed to say, and in that moment he couldn't think of any reason he shouldn't do it. Who had he been planning to stay celibate for, anyway? Sarah? She had moved on. She'd made her own life without him—with his *best friend*, for chrissake. He was a fool not to do the same.

He grabbed Brienne's waist, pulling her slim body against his, and he heard her soft gasp as she felt him press against her thigh. "You're so hard," she whispered, scratching the tips of her nails down his cheek as she pulled back slightly from the kiss, looking up at him.

"It's because I'm imagining what you're going to look like naked." David reached up with one hand, running his fingers through her hair.

"Want to see?" She smiled wickedly as she took a step back, and reached up to slide one strap of her slip dress off of her shoulder. It hung tantalizingly on the curve of it for a moment, then slipped down and she reached for the other one. "What do you think, handsome? Am I wearing a bra?"

David swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly dry as he looked down at her breasts. They were full and perky for someone of her slender build, and he suddenly wanted nothing more than to slide his hands around the curves of them. "I...I don't know," he managed, watching as the second strap slipped off of her shoulder, leaving the slinky material clinging to the tops of her breasts.

She licked her lips, her green eyes fixed on him. "Guess."

"Um..." He could almost *feel* the lack of blood in his brain. His thoughts felt jumbled and muddy, and he took a shaky breath. "You're wearing one."

She grinned, letting the dress slip off of her breasts to puddle around her waist. She was wearing a strapless bra, smooth black satin, and her pale breasts curved over the top of it in a way that made David take a step forward, his eyes fixed on them.

Brienne pushed the dress off of her hips, letting it fall to the floor and revealing a tiny black thong that matched the dress. She turned and walked towards the bed, her perfect ass swaying from side to side, the slight curve of her slender waist begging for David to reach out and grab it. She climbed onto the bed, lying on her side, and shook her head as he started to walk towards her. “Now you,” she purred, tossing her red hair back over her shoulder.

He was less confident about his own appearance. Long hours at the chop shop and long nights of drinking hadn’t left him much time or energy to work out the way he once had. But he still had defined abs, still had the broad and muscular chest that Sarah had once run her fingers over lovingly as he’d stretched out above her...

No, stop. Don’t think of Sarah. Not here. He stripped his shirt off, tossing it on the floor, and watched Brienne lick her glossy lips, her eyes traveling down his chest to the small strip of dark hair just above the waistband of his jeans. He reached for his belt slowly, making a little show of it, unbuckling it and hesitating after he undid the top button, waiting for her to narrow her eyes a little at him before he unzipped and slid them over his hips.

He was plenty hard, his cock springing free with a sensation that sent a wave of relief through his body. He felt a fresh jolt of arousal as he looked at the naked woman on the bed, the woman who would soon be touching him, kissing him, letting him slide into her and quell the ache that was spreading through him at an increasingly desperate pace.

“Come here,” she whispered, and he went.

She moved towards the edge of the bed as he approached, her long slender fingers reaching out to encircle him, stroking, squeezing, and then those glossy lips—now slightly smeared—brushed over the tip of it, her tongue flicking out to trace a pattern on the underside. David twitched, the sensation of it running down his spine like an electric shock, and then she was drawing him forward, those red red lips sliding down the length of his shaft, and he was enveloped, all of that warm

heat sending his mind into a blur of pleasure that pushed everything else out.

That was what he had wanted, what he had craved. He gave himself up to it, to the rhythm of her mouth on his cock, her hand expertly sliding up and down with every slick stroke of her lips, and the primal lust took over as he looked down at her, at her eager green eyes, the curving valley of her waist, the swell of her breasts, the slope of her hip. He pulled himself free of her mouth, climbed onto the bed and grasped those hips, pulling her ass up roughly, and he heard her gasp, saw her look seductively over her shoulder as she braced herself against the headboard, and with one delicious stroke he was inside of her.

She moaned, her hips arching, ass grinding against him as he buried himself, and *god* it was good. She met every thrust, arching her back and twisting her hips until he thought he might die from the sheer bliss of it, the sensation of her wrapped around him, and he felt her fingers brush against the base of his shaft as she reached between her legs, her fingers expertly guiding herself to her own climax as he approached his. It occurred to him to think that he hadn't kissed her since she'd undressed, had hardly touched her other than to find his way inside of her, but he was past caring, past wanting anything but to fuck, to reach the pinnacle of the lust that was flooding his senses.

He heard her come, heard the small whimpers turn into a lengthy moan and then a cry, and he felt her squeeze around him, and that was all he needed. He grabbed onto her hips hard, his fingers digging into the pale flesh, and as she tossed her head back and ground herself against him, wringing every last drop of pleasure out of his furious thrusts, he buried himself as deeply inside of her as he could, and let himself go.

For one blissful moment, he forgot everything and everyone—where he was, who he was with, what he was doing there. Nothing mattered except for the sensation surging through his body...and then it was gone, and he felt suddenly hollow and exhausted. He pulled away from her, rolling onto his back on the paisley bedspread, and glanced towards her.

With the need for release gone, she was just a pretty woman, with hair that was a bit too orange to be naturally red, lip gloss smeared around her mouth, and a decent figure without much muscle tone or real curves to speak of. The full breasts were fake, her hips narrow, her eyes a little too big for her face.

She wasn't Sarah, or Nathaniel, and that was the real problem. But he didn't want to admit that to himself.

"I should probably get going," David said, turning away from her and sliding his legs over the edge of the bed. He stood and walked towards the pile of his clothes on the floor, and he felt her eyes follow him the entire time.

"You could stay," she murmured, but he could hear the hollow protest in her tone. She knew he wasn't staying, and she probably didn't really want him to.

"Long day tomorrow," he said apologetically, pulling on his jeans. "And I'm sure you have an early morning?"

"What?" She rolled onto her side, still watching him. "We could go for another round, if you like."

There was a time when that would have been very appealing to him, David thought. But the regret was following quickly on the heels of his slaked desire, and he couldn't imagine getting himself back to the point he'd been at before. "Maybe another time," he said. "Besides, don't you have work tomorrow? The hospital?"

Brienne blinked. "Oh, yeah, of course. I'm used to not getting much sleep, though. Life of a medical resident and all of that...and it didn't change much once I became a full-fledged surgeon."

David shrugged. "Well, I need more sleep these days than I used to. So I'll be seeing you around."

Brienne shrugged, trailing one lazy hand down her side and over her hip. "I hope so."

CHAPTER TEN

Even when Nathaniel slipped into bed, Sarah was still mostly asleep. When they'd first started dating, she'd tried to stay awake until Nathaniel came home, but it was impossible with a child that woke up before eight o'clock every morning. Now, on the nights that he raced, she waited for the moment sometime in the early morning hours when he would slide into their bed, the motion and warmth of his body rousing her partway from sleep, and she could snuggle back against the curve of him, reassured that he had made it home safe and sound.

She felt him gently push her hair away from her neck, lightly kiss the soft spot just below her earlobe that he loved, and felt him curl against her, his warm breath comforting against the nape of her neck. She breathed out, feeling the last of the tension drain away.

When she woke in the morning, Nathaniel was gone already, but he had left a note on his pillow. It was something that he'd started doing when he'd first begun sleeping over occasionally when he had to leave early, and he'd just never stopped. She picked up the small piece of paper, and smiled as she read it.

I'LL MISS you all day today. Can't wait to have dinner tonight and tell you about the race. That kiss was good luck.

Love,

Nate

SARAH SET the note on her nightstand and swung her legs over the edge of the bed, stifling a yawn. It was a few minutes before eight, and she knew it had to have been after two when Nathaniel had gotten home. It wasn't altogether strange for him to be working on a Sunday—there were weeks where he worked ten days straight, if they had an influx of work at the shop. For a while, it had just been Bill and Nathaniel, and Sarah hoped that David being there too would mean she'd have Nathaniel home more often. She appreciated everything he did, but it got lonely sometimes. And she knew that Cora missed him, too. Now more than ever, with David back in the picture, she wanted the solidity of Nathaniel there with her and her daughter. They both needed the comfort of something familiar.

The problem there was that *David* was something familiar, too—or at least her memory of him was. He seemed different since he'd come back. Some of that could be attributed simply to growing up, she thought—getting older. She'd certainly changed, and not only because she'd become a mother. But somewhere in the back of her mind, when he'd said he was coming home, she'd expected him to be the same as he'd always been, as if no time had passed. It had been part of why she'd been so nervous. She loved Nathaniel with all of her heart, but David had been her first love, her first kiss, her first everything. She'd never stop loving him, not entirely. And seeing him again, having him so close, seeing him with their daughter—it had brought up all of those old feelings, as hard as she tried to shove them down and lock them away.

It was simple, she thought as she got Cora up and dressed, and put her in her high chair while Sarah started breakfast. She loved Nathaniel. He had been there for her through some of the hardest weeks of her pregnancy, and for just about every day after that. Every time she had needed him—or anything at all—he had been there. Maybe David would have been, too, if she'd given him the chance. But there would always have been the knowledge hovering in the air that she'd told him to go once, and that he'd only come back because of the baby. What

she had with Nathaniel was right, and good. So she would ignore the feelings that David had stirred up, because they were from a different time. They had belonged to different people.

Cora whined, banging her hands on the tray, and Sarah sighed. “Here you go, sweetie,” she said, giving her a handful of Cheerios to play with while the bacon in the pan sizzled. “There’ll be eggs in a few minutes.”

Shit, she thought as she flipped the bacon in the pan. She and Nathaniel had been supposed to go out on a date that night, but with everything that had been happening, she’d forgotten to line up a sitter. She supposed she could ask Meredith, the girl who often watched Cora on Friday or Saturday nights, but Meredith was a senior in high school, and it was a Sunday night. Sarah didn’t think that Jenny, her mother, would be too pleased with it.

You could ask David, a small voice in her head whispered.

Sarah pressed her lips together. It was a possibility, she supposed. It was what they should be working towards—David being an active father, someone who could take Cora on weekends, keep her overnight even if need be...or if he wanted to. But the idea made her stomach knot with anxiety. Would he come over to her and Nathaniel’s house, or would she take Cora to his? He was staying with his parents, so it would be an opportunity for Cora to see her grandparents, something that didn’t happen often. David’s parents weren’t exactly comfortable with the fact that she’d never told David, or that she and Nathaniel were together.

She sighed, spooning soft scrambled eggs into a small, hot pink plastic bowl and setting it in front of Cora with a yogurt. She scooped up a forkful, waving them towards Cora’s mouth as she thought it over. Nate would be disappointed if she canceled the date, she knew that. He’d say he wasn’t, that he was fine sitting in the living room with her after Cora went to bed and snuggling on the couch while catching up on a tv show, but she knew he looked forward to their rare evenings out.

She'd text him, she decided, as she spooned some yogurt into Cora's mouth. She'd see what he thought, and that would help her make a decision.

—

Nathaniel was tossing a handful of greasy rags into the shop laundry basket when his phone buzzed in his pocket. He fished it out quickly, and glanced at the screen. It was from Sarah.

I forgot to get a sitter. Don't want to cancel date night. 😞
What do you think of asking David???

I mean, I'll ask him, but do you think it's a good idea?

HE PAUSED for a second before he responded. If he were being honest, he wasn't altogether sure. David had only been around Cora for a little over a week, and he had no idea how much experience David had had with kids before that. But then again, David *was* her father. And at some point, he and Sarah were going to have to start trusting David to act in that capacity, no matter how Nathaniel might feel about it.

"I don't know," he muttered out loud, used to being mostly alone in the shop.

"What don't you know?" David tossed a wrench into the community tool box, and leaned against the table. "What's going on?"

Nathaniel frowned. "Nothing, just talking to Sarah."

"Trouble in paradise?"

Nathaniel bristled. There was just a bit too cheery of a note in David's voice when he asked that. "No," he said tersely. "If you must know, she forgot to get a sitter for our date tonight, and was asking me if I thought you might be up for it."

Nate could've sworn that David's face paled a little. "Watch Cora alone?" he asked. "I've never taken care of a kid one on one before, but..."

“Hey, if you don’t think you can handle it, man,” Nate shrugged. “Sarah and I can stay in and catch up on our show.”

“That’s not what—”

“Say,” Nathaniel cut him off, suddenly very pleased with the idea of David telling Sarah he wasn’t ready to watch Cora. “What happened with you and that girl the other night? What was her name...Bianca? She seemed pretty into you.”

“Brienne,” David said shortly. “And yeah, she was. But I don’t think that’s any of your business.”

They heard footsteps just outside, and both men turned towards the garage entrance. A tall redhead in tight jeans and a black tank top stood just outside, and Nathaniel glanced at David, smirking. “Well, you’re not wrong. She does seem pretty into you.”

David frowned. “Jesus, what is she doing here?”

He strode towards the entrance, his jaw tense. He hadn’t expected her to contact him again, honestly, after his quick exit the other night. And he’d been fine with that. He didn’t want entanglements, or complications. His life was complex enough as it was.

“Hey there, handsome,” Brienne said as he approached, shading her eyes with one hand. “I realized I never actually got your number the other night. So I figured I’d stop by and see if you wanted me to have it.” She grinned. “I had a real good time the other night.”

David forced a smile. “So did I,” he said. And it wasn’t entirely a lie. He could still feel the reverberation of the relief that had washed through his body as he’d fucked her, if he thought about it. Just being able to forget about everything that was worrying him, every feeling that had come flooding back since he’d come home, had been almost better than the orgasm itself. But he was starting to get the vibe that Brienne wanted more than just a few more fast and dirty nights in her hotel room.

“So?” she grinned. “What about that number?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be at work?”

“I work evenings,” she said dryly. “At least for now. And I’ll have you know I’m off work tonight. In fact, I was going to see if you wanted to get a bite once you’re off work. You pick the place, I’ll treat.”

David’s thoughts whirled. He couldn’t altogether say he didn’t want to end up back in bed with her, but he was pretty sure he didn’t want to go on a date. Casual sex was one thing, accidentally ending up in a relationship because he hadn’t been clear enough was another. “Um...I actually have to watch my daughter tonight. Her mom has plans.”

Brienne raised an eyebrow. “Wow, a dedicated father. That’s a nice thing to see. I’m impressed.”

“You probably wouldn’t be if you saw me trying to take care of a kid.”

Brienne snorted, and David laughed. For a moment, the tension between the two of them eased a little. “Look,” David said. “I’ll give you my number. But I meant what I said the other night, Brienne. I’m not looking to complicate my life right now, and getting serious with someone would do exactly that. I don’t mind hanging out from time to time, if you get my meaning, or getting a casual drink before that, but no dates, alright? No relationship stuff. I mean it.”

Brienne shrugged. “Did I say I wanted something serious?” She plucked her phone out of her pocket and handed it to him. “Put your number in there, then. And we’re on the same page. Just fun, just friends. Alright?”

David nodded, letting out a long slow breath as he typed his number into her phone and handed it back. “There you go. Sorry, I didn’t mean to imply you were trying to trap me into something, or anything like that. It’s just...I don’t want to lead you on.”

Brienne stuffed her phone back into the pocket of her jeans. “What a gentleman,” she said teasingly. “Look, I get it. And it’s nice of you to want to be clear. Most men aren’t, these days.”

“I try to be a good guy.”

Brienne surveyed him for a moment, considering. “You know, David, I think you are. I really do.” She grinned then, and waved. “Well, I got what I came for. Looks like I’ll be heading out.” She winked at him. “Good luck tonight.”

“I’ll need it,” David muttered as he turned and walked back into the shop. Nathaniel was surveying him curiously.

“What was that all about?” Nathaniel asked.

David smiled tightly. “Better text Sarah back. Looks like I’m watching Cora tonight.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Are you *sure* that was a good idea?” Sarah slid into her chair at ‘their’ booth in their favorite Italian restaurant, looking worriedly at Nathaniel. “He seemed okay, but...”

“It’s fine,” Nathaniel reassured her. “You left a list, he has both of our phone numbers, what could possibly go wrong? Cora won’t even be awake much longer.”

Sarah bit her lower lip. “Unless she can’t sleep because we’re gone and someone who is basically a stranger is putting her to bed—”

“Sarah.” Nate covered her hand with his. “That ‘stranger’ is her father. I know she’s still little, but she’s going to have to get comfortable with him. As comfortable as she is with us. This is a good start. We’re not far from home, everything is low key...it’s going to be alright.”

“Okay,” Sarah relented. “I’ll try to stop worrying.”

“Let’s try and enjoy our date.” Nathaniel squeezed her hand and then picked up the smaller of the two menus. “A glass of wine should be alright, yeah? And a beer for me? Let’s go crazy and get calamari.” He wiggled his eyebrows at her. “Isn’t squid supposed to be an aphrodisiac?”

Sarah rolled her eyes teasingly. “That’s oysters, Nate. And like you need one! Didn’t we just do it a couple of nights ago?”

“That was far too long ago.” He grinned at her. “You know, I’m just as into you as I was the first night we kissed.”

Since before that. You're still just as beautiful."

"If you keep taking me out for wine and calamari and pasta, I might not be."

"You'll always be that beautiful to me. Even when you're ninety and all wrinkly."

"When we're ninety, you won't be able to see well enough to tell the difference."

Sarah could feel herself relaxing as the waitress brought their drinks and appetizers. Nathaniel was right, she thought to herself as she plucked a ring of calamari off of the plate and dipped it in aioli. David was Cora's father. She *should* be asking him to watch her as the first option. This was going to become their new normal.

"How are you feeling about this?" Sarah asked quietly after they'd ordered their entrees—spaghetti Bolognese for him, eggplant parmesan for her.

"About David?" Nathaniel glanced at her, snagging the last piece of calamari off of the plate between them.

"Yeah." Sarah took a sip of her wine. "Him coming back, being a part of Cora's life...our lives...all of it."

Nathaniel considered for a moment. "It's hard," he said finally. "I really didn't think you were ever going to tell him. And I guess...I guess I figured if you did, that he wouldn't come back. He'd have a girlfriend, or a wife, or a family of his own. If he did come back it would be on holidays or something. But I guess he didn't have anything. And it's just been a shock. It's always felt like Cora was my daughter. And I knew she wasn't, not really, but I put it in the back of my mind."

"She *is*." Sarah shook her head. "She thinks of you as her father. I told her that she's just lucky, she has two, and twice as much love. And it's true."

Nathaniel smiled crookedly. "I guess I never was great at sharing."

“It’s hard for me, too,” Sarah admitted. “I was so used to the way things were. I *liked* the way they were. But then I thought how she might feel if she grew up and realized I’d been keeping David from her all those years, that I hadn’t even given them a chance,” she sighed. “I don’t think I had any other choice, honey.”

“I don’t think you did either. And I mean that.” Nate took another sip of his beer as the waitress slid their plates in front of them and hurried off. “I think you did the right thing. It’s just something new to get used to, that’s all. And we will.”

“Tonight was a good start, I think,” Sarah said, stabbing a piece of eggplant. “Although I could’ve asked David myself.”

“It just kind of slipped out.” Nathaniel shrugged. “Honestly, he was spooked at first. I thought he was going to say no, but then...”

Sarah glanced up. “Then what?”

“Well, then this girl stopped by the garage. They were talking at the Deep Dive the other night, when the guys and I went there after the race. I think he might’ve gone home with her.”

Sarah paused, her fork halfway to her lips. She felt a sudden chill in the pit of her stomach, and she tried to brush it away as nothing. It didn’t matter to her if David had a girlfriend, or a friend with benefits, even. There was nothing like that between her and David anymore. It was just...

“I hope he doesn’t bring her around the house when it’s just him and Cora,” she said, a bit more sharply than she intended. “He’s supposed to be watching her, not hanging out with strangers.”

Nathaniel raised an eyebrow. “Actually, it seemed like he wasn’t all that excited to see her. He kind of hurried her off, used babysitting as an excuse not to go out for dinner with her tonight. So I don’t think you have anything to be worried about there.”

“I’m not worried,” Sarah said quickly. “I just want to be careful about who’s around our daughter.”

She saw the question on Nathaniel's face—did “our daughter” mean hers and his, or hers and David's? She wasn't sure exactly what she'd meant in that moment. It felt as if Cora was all of theirs, somehow shared between the three of them, as biologically impossible as that was. They'd broken apart after high school, but shared responsibility was the glue knitting them back together. Suddenly, fifteen more years of that kind of closeness with David felt overwhelming to her. Even if he wasn't interested in this girl, he'd find another—someone more serious. Maybe a handful of them, until he found the right one. And then he'd get engaged, and then married, and then maybe add some half siblings for Cora to the family. And all the while she'd have to be happy for him, and not let on that sometimes she wondered if she'd been right to ask him to leave, and that then she felt guilty, because if she hadn't she would never have had Nathaniel. And her life with Nathaniel was better than anything she could have ever dreamed of, after David had left.

“Sarah, are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” she said, smiling as she scooped up another forkful of pasta. “Let's not talk about David so much on our date, alright? Who knows when we'll have another night free when you don't have to work the next day.”

“Maybe there'll be more of those, now that D...” Nathaniel hesitated. “Now that there's more help around the shop. It'll take some of the pressure off of Bill and I.”

“That's what I'm hoping, too.”

The waitress brought a plate of tiramisu for them to share, and Nathaniel reached over and squeezed Sarah's hand before taking a bite. “Let's not go straight home. Maybe for a walk?”

Sarah pursed her lips. “You think it's a good idea to go out walking? After dark?”

“It'll be fine,” Nathaniel assured her. “I promise. David hasn't texted, everything is okay. Let's stay out for a bit.”

The streetlamps were all lit as they headed down the street, leaving their car at the restaurant, and Sarah relaxed a little as

Nathaniel linked his fingers with hers. After a long moment of silence, he glanced sideways at her. “Have you ever thought about moving away from here?”

Sarah stared at him. “What? But you have all your friends here, the shop, the racing...would you really want to start fresh somewhere else?”

“They need mechanics everywhere. And your job is needed everywhere. As far as the racing,” Nathaniel shrugged. “Maybe it’s time I think about backing off on that. It’s dangerous. And I want to see Cora grow up. I want to be there for both of you.”

Sarah hesitated. “It sounds really good in some ways... moving away, starting over together. But now that David’s come back,” she shook her head. “We can’t ask him to move again. Especially with his family here, and I can’t take Cora away...” She sighed. “I’m sorry. I know we said we wouldn’t talk about him tonight. But it’s hard, now. He’s a part of our family. And I know that’s maybe not what you want, Nathaniel, and if that changes anything for you...”

They had reached a small park, not much more than a large square of grass fenced in, but Sarah recognized it immediately. It was the first place he’d taken her on a date, not long after they’d kissed for the first time. She’d been hesitant to leave Cora for long, but he’d found a sitter and gotten her to come to the park with him during the afternoon, complete with takeout from her favorite Mexican food truck downtown.

He pushed the gate open and led her into the park. It was dimly lit from the streetlights, and Sarah looked around a little nervously. Parks anywhere in Oakland could be sketchy at night.

When she turned back towards Nathaniel, to her shock, he was on one knee. He had a small black velvet box in one hand, and Sarah stared down at him, her mouth falling open slightly.

“Sarah, these last few years have been the best ones of my life. I never thought this would be what I would be doing...but you and Cora have given me so much joy, and I can’t think of

anything that could be better than spending the rest of my life with you. I love you, Sarah. Say you'll be my wife."

For a brief second, she was transported back to that moment six years before, when David had asked her to marry him. It was similar in many ways—the first date spot, a person she'd known since she was very young. But it also felt right in a way that the proposal from David hadn't.

It didn't feel right then, she thought suddenly. You were too young. But what about now?

What about it? She loved Nathaniel, deeply. He was her rock, the man who had been there for her when no one else had. What other kind of man would she want to have by her side for the rest of her life? What could she possibly be missing?

"Yes," she breathed. "Yes! Of course I'll marry you."

The smile on Nathaniel's face was everything she could have hoped for. He took the ring out of the box, a small round diamond on a thin gold band, and slid it onto her finger. She felt the cool metal warm against her skin, saw it glimmer dimly in the faint light, and felt suddenly as if something had clicked into place. As if something had settled.

"I thought maybe...with everything going on..." Sarah hesitated.

"What, that I'd have second thoughts?" Nathaniel shook his head. "Never. You and Cora are everything to me. We can handle anything, if we're together."

—

The next morning at the shop, David approached Nathaniel as soon as he walked in the door. Nathaniel eyed him, wondering if Sarah had said something to him about the engagement. They'd agreed to keep it quiet until they had settled on a wedding date and plans, although at some point David was likely to notice the ring and ask. And she might have slipped and mentioned it.

"Hey, Nathaniel, I wanted to ask you something," David said, leaning back against the shop table and shoving his hands

into the front pockets of his jeans.

“Sure thing,” Nathaniel said. “What’s up?”

“I was wondering if there’s any room in the group for me still. Racing, you know. It’s been a long time since I’ve been out on the street, but my car just needs a few tune ups and I’d be good to go. And...I really want to get back out there. I’m missing it.”

Nathaniel hesitated. His first instinct was to immediately say no. David had already infiltrated almost every aspect of his life—his job, his house, his family. He was there constantly, always in Nathaniel’s purview, always being mentioned, always popping up. The races were the last refuge Nathaniel had, the last place where he could forget everything for a little while and let the world narrow itself down to gears and asphalt, speed and the high of winning.

And then he looked at David, his dark hair starting to grow out a little, wearing a Metroid shirt that Nathaniel clearly remembered from high school, his jeans smeared with engine grease. David had been his *friend*. His best friend, during all the years when that really mattered.

And there’d been a hint of something more, too, a curiosity that Nathaniel had had that he’d never been brave enough to broach, or even let himself think about too hard. He’d let himself think about it in college, once he was far away from his hometown and the people that would judge him. In college, he’d let himself get drunk and hit on the handsome Asian guy with the long hair that sat behind him in his chemistry class, the one who rode a high-end motorcycle to class every day and wore a leather jacket, no matter the weather. He’d let that guy maneuver him into a dark corner of the bar and press himself up against Nathaniel, the sweet scent of alcohol and leather and sweat pervading the air, and he’d let him touch his cheek, let him kiss him for the first time, the first time Nathaniel had ever been kissed by a man, the first time he’d ever kissed back. He’d felt the unfamiliar sensation of the other man’s erection against his thigh, felt his own cock harden immediately in response, and he’d known that those feelings

he'd once had as a teenager hadn't been something he'd made up.

So he'd gone back to the guy's dorm room, and then again, and again, and for weeks they'd fucked like rabbits, and Nathaniel had learned every single way a man could enjoy another man.

That hadn't been the last guy, either. College had suddenly become a whole other world of possibilities, both guys and girls, and he'd spent as much time working his way around the campus as he had studying. Amazingly, he'd pulled both off. He'd envisioned a future of continuing to do the same thing when he went to Silicon Valley.

And then he'd come home, and he'd seen Sarah, and it was as if the four years before that had been wiped from his memory entirely. He'd never wanted anyone else from that moment on.

But in that second, looking at David and considering his request, Nathaniel felt that flicker again—the same curiosity he'd once felt while tinkering around in the garage with David or hanging out in the basement playing video games, the strange knot in his stomach that he'd felt when David had come back from a summer away before junior year, and had changed over those three months—with muscles in places he hadn't had them before, a haircut that suited him, and much better fitting jeans.

What in the hell are you thinking? Nathaniel shut the memory down as soon as it flashed into his head. Sexual thoughts about David should have been the absolute *last* thing on his mind. And if those feelings were coming back, it was even more of a reason for him to tell David there was no room for him in the gang.

But looking at David's eager face, he couldn't find it in himself to turn down the man who'd once been his closest friend. And he felt a spark of hope, somewhere faintly, that they could be friends again.

“We've got one other new guy,” Nathaniel said slowly. “He's still got a lot of work to do on his car. But yeah, I think

there's room. If I say I want you in, the other guys will go along with it."

"Are Nick and Carlos still in?"

Nathaniel nodded. "Yeah, they kept it going even after we moved away. But once I came back," he shrugged. "I've kind of become the unofficial second-in-command to Carlos, I guess. And they all listen to me."

David let out a long breath. "I really appreciate it, man. I need this."

"Don't mention it." Nathaniel clapped him on the shoulder. "And just don't fuck it up."

CHAPTER TWELVE

D*on't fuck it up.* That refrain rang in David's ears for the rest of the night after he went home, and over the next two days as he moved his things from his parents' house back into his own. The tenants, come to find out, had been happy to break the lease early in exchange for forgiving the rest of the month's rent—they had been an older couple whose children had just graduated and who were ready to move on. And David was more than ready to move back in. He loved his parents, but a few weeks of living with them was more than enough. He hadn't been crazy about it when he was a teenager, and becoming an adult hadn't improved that measurably.

He looked at his house with fresh eyes as he began the process of moving back into it. He hadn't ever planned on coming back, so he hadn't put all of his furniture and things that he couldn't take with him into storage, he'd just sold or thrown them out. The result was that he had his clothes and a few boxes of possessions—and an otherwise empty house.

He had a small amount of savings and so he spent the first day, after he got the keys back and moved his clothes and boxes, over scouring furniture stores and thrift shops for the primary things he needed—a bed (or at least a mattress), a couch, and furniture for the second bedroom. The house itself had three and a den, and he'd decided to turn one of the unused bedrooms into a room for Cora. He thought about texting Sarah to ask her opinion on the things he might need, but he ultimately decided against it. He wanted to surprise her with it fully furnished, as a way of showing her how

committed he was. He was going to do this right, from the very start.

By the second day that he'd taken off to get the house in order, he was exhausted, and mostly finished. He had a mattress on the floor in the bedroom with a nightstand, good enough for him, and he could always get a bed frame later. He'd found a couch on sale at one of the big box stores, a forest-green microfiber number that wasn't the prettiest thing he'd ever seen, but it would do. A couple of charcoal grey throw pillows and a woven blanket to go over the back, and it looked homey enough. He snagged a table and four chairs from the thrift store, and spent the rest of his budget on a bed frame, mattress, small dresser, rug and bookshelf for Cora's room, along with a few brightly colored baskets for storing toys and stuffed animals.

His phone buzzed just as he finished tightening the last screw on the bed frame and he reached for it, his heart leaping slightly as he saw Nathaniel's name on the screen.

Race Saturday night. You in?

The leap of his heartbeat turned into full-fledged pounding. It had been far too long since he'd been in a race. He wanted to call Nathaniel and yell: "Yes, I'm in, of course!"

Instead, he calmly typed back: *Sure thing. What time?*

10 p.m. Hatch St and Tumbleweed.

I'll be there.

He felt shivery with excitement as he put the phone down. There was some nervousness there, too—after all, it had been over a year since he'd raced last. But the nervousness was overwhelmed by the eager desire to get back out there. He didn't know if he'd win, but even just getting back in the game was enough to make him want to shout with joy.

Sarah took it less well. He'd invited *her* over for dinner that night, wanting to show her the house again now that he was back in it, and see how comfortable Cora was there. It was an awkward start from the beginning. He'd been too full of nervous, excited energy about the race and showing Sarah

what he'd done with the extra bedroom to think about how she'd feel coming back to the house for the first time in over three years, but the look on her face when he opened the front door to her standing on the porch was enough to clue him in.

She licked her lips nervously, Cora perched on her hip, as she peered inside. "Can I come in?"

"Of course!" David pushed the door open wider and stood to one side. "I just finished getting everything put away today. Nice of Bill to let me take a couple of days off, it would've taken me a lot longer otherwise. And I tried to child proof everything, you'll see, there's nothing here that could hurt Cora or that she could get into..." He realized he was beginning to babble, and trailed off. "Anyway, come on in."

He noticed that Sarah seemed hesitant to set Cora down, and it took a good bit of the wind out of his sails. "I promise, I've been very sure that nothing could hurt her here," he said quietly.

"It's not that." Sarah adjusted Cora on her hip, and then finally, hesitantly, set her down on the floor. Cora immediately crawled towards the couch, and Sarah kept one wary eye on her as she spoke. "It's just the last time that I was here..."

"We were together. I know." David shifted uncomfortably. "It was hard for me, too, when I first came in here yesterday. The last time I lived here, things were very different."

"That's just the thing though," Sarah said, tearing her eyes away from Cora for a moment to look at him directly. "It shouldn't be difficult. We haven't been together in a very long time. I have a child now. I have Nathaniel." She pressed her lips together tightly. "I have a lot of good memories here. And a few very bad ones."

"We spent years together, Sarah," David said softly. "That doesn't just go away."

She looked away from him. "And if I say that I want it to? That I don't want to think about it anymore? That I want to move forward, and keep moving forward, the way I tried to do three years ago?"

“Then we won’t talk about it.” David had the sudden urge to cross the distance between them and comfort her, to touch her shoulder or arm or gather her into his arms and hold her for a moment. “You don’t even have to come over, if it’s too difficult. You can drop Cora off, or Nathaniel can do it.”

“I’m still not quite ready for her to be here alone,” Sarah said, her voice tightening. “And definitely not overnight yet. It’s going to take time for me to be comfortable being away from her for that long. I’ve never...”

“I know,” David said, trying to soothe her. “I’m not trying to rush things, Sarah. But I do want to show you something.” He waited for Sarah to collect Cora again, and then guided her down the hallway towards the bedrooms. He opened the door to the one he had set up for Cora, and showed her inside. “Look at this.”

The moment she saw it, Sarah’s face immediately softened, and some of the tension left David’s shoulders. That was the reaction that he had hoped that she would have.

She gently set Cora down, and looked at him. “You really put a lot of effort into this, didn’t you?”

“I know it’s going to take time for you to be comfortable leaving her here, for you to feel like I’m really capable of being a father, even part-time. But when you are comfortable, I want it to be ready. This is her home, too, as far as I’m concerned.”

Sarah shook her head, and David thought he saw a faint glimmer of tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry, David,” she murmured. “I shouldn’t have waited so long.”

“Hey.” David did touch her arm then, gently, just a brief brush of his fingertips over her elbow. “You did what you thought was right at the time. There’s no going back. Let’s just go forward.”

Sarah smiled weakly. “I’d like that.”

“I’ve got dinner started. It’s nothing like your cooking, but it won’t kill you.”

Sarah laughed faintly. “I’m sure it’ll be just fine. You’ve cooked for me before, remember?”

The heaviness settled in the air between them again as they walked to the kitchen. David did remember, of course. He remembered their first dinner together in the house after Sarah had moved in, burned spaghetti sauce and smoke filling the kitchen, noodles boiling dry because they’d wound up laughing so hard they’d cried, which had turned into making out against the kitchen counter. He remembered Sarah teaching him how to make scrambled eggs, and burned bacon, and finally figuring out exactly how long to cook French toast. Eventually he’d become almost as good at cooking breakfast as she was.

If he’d been trying to win her back, he would have made spaghetti for dinner. He’d stopped in that aisle at the grocery store for just a minute, pretending to himself that the idea had nothing to do with their first dinner in the house and everything to do with the fact that kids liked spaghetti, right?

But for just a minute, looking at dark blue boxes of angel hair and linguine, at vodka sauces and Bolognese sauces and ragu, he’d pictured Sarah at eighteen, her blonde hair falling around his face as she leaned against him, her body molding to his as the sauce in the pan hissed and sizzled and the smoke alarm began shrieking.

And then he’d thought about what would happen if he tried and failed, of how awkward it would be, of how angry Nathaniel would be, about how it could shatter the fragile pathway he’d found back to his daughter, and he’d gotten the things to make meatloaf instead, a meal he’d never cooked for Sarah before.

“It smells good,” she said as they walked into the kitchen, clearly trying to diffuse some of the tension. She glanced at the thrift-store table, and saw a high chair sitting next to it. “Wow, you really did remember everything.”

“I tried to buy more of Cora’s stuff new, or new-ish.” David shrugged. “The couch doesn’t matter much to me, but her having a decent bed and high chair definitely does.”

“Who would’ve known you would be such an attentive parent?” Sarah laughed. “We never really talked about having kids, did we, back in the day?”

“We might have mentioned it once or twice.” David turned away from her to open the oven and check on the food, a lump settling solidly in his throat. He remembered that conversation, too. They’d had it once, on a night not long after they’d moved in, on New Year’s Eve. Sarah had been drunk on champagne, and they’d stumbled into the house after their friend’s party—or at least she’d stumbled, David had kept himself to a couple of whiskey and ginger ales and half a glass of champagne for all of the night so that he could drive them home. He’d helped Sarah into the bedroom, and unzipped the sparkly flapper-style dress that she’d worn. He could remember perfectly how she’d looked stepping out of it, turning to face him with a wobbly flourish so that he could see the sparkly pink thong that she was wearing, and no bra.

He’d felt drunk then. Desire washed over him in a heady wave, and they’d fallen into bed, his hands and mouth everywhere as he worked his way down her body, kissing every small spot that he knew she liked, until he’d gotten down to that glittery scrap of pink satin. He remembered clearly the sound of her moans, the way she’d said his name, soft and slightly slurred, and the look on her face after he’d finished going down on her, and made his way up her body, pushing the scrap of fabric aside so that he could slide into her.

Afterwards, she’d lain with her head on his chest, her warm body curled against him. “What if we made a baby?” she’d whispered, her voice soft and thick, the puff of air from each word warm against his neck.

“You’re still on birth control,” David had said reasonably, and then with a touch of fear: “Right?”

Sarah had giggled tipsily, snuggling tighter against him. “Of course, silly. But *what if?*”

“Well then, I guess we’d figure it out.”

“Do you want babies? With me, I mean?”

David had laughed. “You’re drunk, Sarah.”

“Well yes, but when I’m not. Do you want babies?”

He’d thought about it then, seriously, for the first time ever perhaps. Did he? “Well,” he’d said finally. “I don’t think I’d want them with just anyone. But with you, yeah, I can see it.”

“How many?”

“One,” he’d said firmly. “Two, *maximum*.”

“Got it,” Sarah had said sleepily, her mouth pressed to his chest. “Three.”

Her soft snores had begun punctuating the darkness before he’d even had a chance to respond.

The ache that suffused David’s chest at the memory made him catch his breath for a moment, as if it were a physical pain. For a brief second, he wanted to close the oven door, walk out to his car, and drive away as fast and as far as he could. How was he going to do this, every day for the next fifteen years? How was he going to stay in close proximity to Sarah, the memories of their life together flooding back one by one, reminding him of the life he had wanted?

But he couldn’t run. He couldn’t leave. He had one shot at this, and it would be ruined if he complicated things. So he closed his eyes, briefly, pushing the feeling down, and stood up, forcing a smile onto his face.

“Meatloaf has about twenty minutes left.” He glanced at Cora, who was pulling herself up by the edge of the kitchen chair. “Cartoons?”

He glanced at Sarah then as she set Cora down, and noticed the flash of a diamond on her ring finger. He didn’t know how he’d missed it before. He supposed maybe he hadn’t wanted to see it.

He waited until Cora had toddled into the living room and was firmly settled in front of the television watching a cartoon about a pig before he turned to Sarah. “Nathaniel popped the question?”

Sarah reflexively covered the ring with her right hand, flushing slightly. “The other night when we went out.”

“And you said yes, I see.”

Sarah lifted her chin. “Of course. Why would I say no, David?”

David shrugged. “The two of you haven’t been together all that long. And I remember a time when it seemed like you didn’t want to get married, *Sarah*.”

He saw her jaw tense. “You know why I said no, David. We don’t need to rehash it. This is different. And Nathaniel and I have been together for two and half years. I’ve seen everything I need to see to know that he’ll be a good husband.”

“And he’s what you want? For the rest of your life?”

Sarah pressed her lips together. “He is,” she said firmly. “I’ve made my decision, David. It’s what I want.”

He couldn’t think of anything to say. *Congratulations? Don’t, I still love you? How could you marry him and not me?*

The feelings welled up in him, heavy and confusing, weighing him down until he felt as if he were drowning in them.

In the distance, he heard the timer going off.

“Dinner’s going to burn,” was all he could manage as he turned to go back into the kitchen, no longer able to look at her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

David could hear the growl of the engines being revved as he followed Nathaniel to the parking lot where everyone was gathering before the race. *Hatch and Tumbleweed*. They switched up the place from time to time, to throw the cops off, but he'd been here before, years ago. It was wedged between a Korean noodle shop and a defunct record store, the door and windows of the latter boarded up. A poster with "Arson, \$5,000 Reward" was stuck to the slab of wood covering the front door, but it had clearly been a long time since the crime in question had taken place. The paper was water stained and tattered around the edges, the *r* and *o* in the word "arson" faded so as to be almost illegible, and the trees near the edge of it, while far from healthy, had recovered from the fire.

David felt his phone buzz in his pocket, but he ignored it. The only people he would have cared to talk to were Sarah or Nathaniel, and Sarah knew where they were, and Nathaniel was just ahead of him. If there was an emergency, Sarah would try Nathaniel first, anyway. He didn't want to think about anything or anyone except the race ahead of him. He could feel the excitement building, nervous energy flooding him to the tips of his fingers, his skull practically buzzing with it.

He pulled into the lot next to Nathaniel's electric blue RX-7, his own glossy, cherry red car making a satisfying sound as he shifted it into neutral and revved the engine once.

He saw Nick and Carlos coming around the corner to meet them as soon as he got out of the car. They looked pretty much

exactly as he remembered—Nick still dressing in the same old plain t-shirts and ratty jeans that he always had, Carlos in loose cargo pants and a sleeveless basketball jersey. “Heyyy, man!” Carlos shouted, extending his fist towards David. “Long time no see, brother.”

David bumped his fist up against Carlos’, grinning. “I’m back in the game, man. What’re you driving these days?”

“An Eclipse, son. Won it in a race, did all the body work myself, added some new parts. Baby runs like a dream. Not a loss in her yet.”

“Better not race me then.” David winked.

“Shit man, not for pink slips anyway. I wouldn’t risk it. I remember the cars you built back in the day.” He reached out, pulling David into a one-armed hug and clapping him on the back. “Good to have you back, man. Hope you stick around this time.”

“Oh, I intend to,” David assured him.

“So this is the new guy,” Carlos said, waving to a tall, skinny man wearing jeans and a Mopar t-shirt, his brown hair escaping from underneath a backwards ball cap. “Blake, say hello to David. We came up together when we were kids. David and I go way back.”

Blake extended his hand. “Good to meet you, man.”

David took it. The man’s palm was faintly sweaty, and he felt oddly uncomfortable as he shook it. “Where are you from?” he asked casually.

Blake shrugged. “Here and there. Was in Malibu for a while, but things didn’t work out there. Found a job here, figured I’d lay low for a while.”

“It’s not a bad place for it.” David glanced at the row of cars. “What’re you driving?”

“Nothing yet,” Blake admitted. “The guys are helping me shop around for a project car, something I can fix up and maybe get to racing in a few months. I’m not exactly the most liquid right now, ya know?”

David chuckled. “I hear that.” He clapped Blake on the shoulder as he walked around him. “Hang in there. The guys here are good people, they’ll get you hooked up.”

The energy in the parking lot was electric. Guys walked from car to car, looking under the popped hoods, eyeing the girls that clustered near each one, swinging their slim hips to the pounding beat of the music, all impossibly short skirts and flat, exposed bellies, perky breasts in pushup bras under fishnet shirts or barely contained by flimsy crop tops. David could remember coming out to these in his late teens, back when Sarah accompanied them to the races. She’d played the part with the best of them, wearing tiny, tight denim miniskirts or schoolgirl style ones in plaid, pastel crop tops or sleeveless button downs tied up just below her breasts, unbuttoned far enough to show a hint of cleavage. David’s favorite had always been a pale yellow one a few shades darker than her hair, with flat brown buttons that had a tendency to slip free and expose a little more of the lacy bras that she always wore underneath them. She’d always curl her hair and put on just enough makeup, the girl next door gone a little bad.

Win or lose, the rest of the night after the race was always a win in his book. The best sex he’d ever had was tumbling into bed with Sarah afterwards, usually still half dressed, her hair still smelling of the exhaust from the cars and her face flushed with the adrenaline and excitement. Nothing had ever stopped her from being there. She’d even started working on her own car for a while, after seeing one of the girls who frequently raced.

Speak of the devil.

David saw the girl he’d just thought of, perched against the edge of her hot pink RX-8, painted with aqua flames down the sides. She was wearing tight, high-waisted denim shorts—so short that David could see the curve of her ass just below the bottom of them—a cut off white and grey crop top with an anime graphic on it, and thigh high pink latex boots with high heels. Her pale blonde hair streaked with various shades of blue highlights was pulled up into a ponytail atop her head, long enough that it still fell to the middle of her back.

She spied David and pushed herself off of the edge of the car, walking towards him with her hips swaying. “Hey there, David,” she purred. “I heard you were back.”

“How do you drive in those heels anyway, Lexie?” David kept his distance from her. “Seems like that might be the reason you don’t win more races.”

“Clearly it’s been a while since you’ve been out,” she said, her expression hardening. She might have been dressed like any of the other girls hanging around the cars, but it only took one look at her hands to see the difference. Instead of brightly painted acrylic nails, hers were short and broken, the edges stained with grease. “I’ve won my last three. Just had to get some better parts is all.”

David raised an eyebrow. “I beat you in every race that we ever went up against each other in, Lexie. No way things have changed that much.”

She grinned. “I would’ve been happy to go home with the winner, too. But you always had that little blonde girl hanging off of your arm. I hear the two of you are broken up and she’s shacking up with your best friend now. So does that mean that if I lose tonight, we can finally screw?”

“God, you really do know how to proposition a man, don’t you, Lexie?” David shook his head. “Since it’s a guarantee that I’d win, I’m not betting any such thing.”

Lexie pouted. “I’ve been dying to see what’s under your hood for years.” She came a few steps closer, and he could smell the sweet candy scent of her perfume under the familiar engine smell. “I’d give you the ride of your life, and you know it.”

“I’ve already had that,” David said wryly. “But if you want to race, put up some money. I’ll bet whatever you’re willing to.”

Lexie raised an eyebrow. “Five grand?”

David felt his stomach knot. He didn’t have five grand available to him; not even close. He’d had a couple thousand stashed away, and it had all gone into refurnishing the house.

But he couldn't back down. He'd never hear the end of it if he was too chicken to take Lexie on in a race. Besides, she'd never beaten him back in the day, not even once. There was no way she was going to do it now.

"You're on," he said confidently, holding his hand out for her to shake on it. She only gave her head a small toss, wrinkling her nose, and walked away back towards her car.

"Let's all stop standing around with our dicks in our hands, yeah?" A tall man with buzzed hair and a tight Affliction t-shirt paired with loose black jeans stalked over to them. "I'm on first, Nathaniel. Which one of your guys are you putting up?"

"Well, since David here seems to have made his own bet, Carlos will race you."

The man sneered. "I can beat him in my sleep."

"Well, we'll see now, won't we?"

David watched as Carlos lined up with the other man at the start, his Eclipse revving in place as they waited for the signal. There were two girls standing there, a blonde and brunette with their hair in pigtails, wearing plaid miniskirts and crop tops with suspenders. They swayed in their high heels, waiting as they tried to catch the attention of the drivers. Carlos wasn't even looking, all of his attention fixed on the screen in front of him, but the man with the buzzed haircut was whistling at the blonde, making an obscene gesture with his fingers in a 'v' shape. David wondered if he actually thought that was going to work for him later, or if he just wanted to get a rise out of her. Whichever it was, the girl pouted at him prettily, and then just as she knew she had his attention, both girls dropped their flags at once.

It was enough to give Carlos the advantage, and from the satisfied smile on the blonde's face as the cars roared past, she had absolutely done it on purpose.

David watched as the cars fought back and forth, neck and neck, first Carlos drawing ahead, and then the other guy. He

crossed his fingers, his jaw clenched as he waited for Carlos to make that last big push, to really give it the juice.

He saw the instant Carlos hit the button, as the Eclipse rocketed ahead. He'd picked the perfect moment, and the bright green car lurched forwards, leaving the Nissan that the man with the buzz cut was driving in the dust.

The guys were shouting as Carlos pulled back around to them, cheering and crowding around his car. The other man got out of his car and sneered at Carlos, his jaw working angrily as he approached. "I guess I owe you some money. You got lucky."

"I won fair and square," Carlos said firmly. "So hand over the three grand."

"Wanna try and take it from me?"

"Hey," Nathaniel said, pushing past David. He wasn't a bodybuilder by any means, but he *was* two inches taller than the other man, and had the confidence that went along with knowing you had some authority in the situation. "The race was fair. No need to bring violence into it."

"That bitch distracted me!"

"if you can't focus on the race instead of your dick, that sounds like a personal problem, Ray. So stand down, alright? Carlos won that shit."

David could see the fury crossing Ray's face, the tight clench of the muscles in his jaw working. Finally, he turned away, shaking his head, and came back with three rolls of bills. "There," he said, slamming them into Carlos' hand. "Get fucked."

There were three more pairs up before David and Lexie were due to race. "I don't know about this," Nathaniel said to him as they watched Lexie and her girlfriends gathering around the car. One of them, a petite brunette wearing not much more than a neon green bodysuit and matching Lucite heels, was draped over Lexie's shoulder, whispering something in her ear as Lexie wrapped her arm around the brunette's waist. "Lexie's gotten a lot better with cars since

you raced last, David. I wish you would've talked to me before you decided to do this."

"C'mon, man, you remember how it used to be. I smoked her every time. Not even a competition."

"I'm telling you, things have changed."

There was a pause, and David looked at Nathaniel. The sentence hung between them, and for a moment their eyes locked. "Yeah, they have," David said quietly. "Look, I'm gonna beat Lexie and get that five grand."

"Do you have five grand to give her if you lose?"

"Doesn't matter. I'm not going to lose."

Just then, David heard footsteps behind him. He turned, and to his shock, saw Brienne walking towards him. She was wearing tiny black spandex bike shorts, a stretchy black sports bra, and black platform vans. Her thick red hair was up on her head in a 90s style ponytail, and she was wearing big hoop earrings, her makeup done dark around the eyes, nude on the lips. It gave David a flash back to the red lipstick she'd been wearing the night he'd gone home with her, and he pushed the image away with a start. The last thing that he needed was to get turned on, and distracted.

"Brienne? What are you doing here?"

"I was curious about the races. Wanted to see." She came closer to him, ran her fingernails up the inside of his arm. "I was off work tonight, so I asked around to see where they might be going on. Are you racing tonight?"

"Um, yeah," David said, pulling his arm away. "I'm up next, actually. Brienne, we really need to talk about this, though—"

"Talk about what?" She smiled at him, and then bit her lower lip when he didn't smile back. "Jesus, David, I'm not trying to rope you into anything. I just had a good time the other night, that's all. I wanted to see the street races. And maybe afterwards..."

David hesitated. His immediate instinct was to say no. He could feel Nathaniel's eyes on him—this was the third time Brienne had turned up with Nathaniel around. It was going to become a thing before long, no matter how much he wanted to keep Sarah from knowing if he was seeing anyone—in any capacity.

And that's the problem, he thought to himself. As long as you're worried about Sarah knowing, it means you aren't over her. And you need to get over her.

“Hey David!” he heard Lexie yell. “Are you ready for my tread marks on your face?”

“You're racing her?” Brienne looked at Lexie, and then back at David. “You'll win, for sure.”

“I'm counting on it,” David said grimly. “Look, Brienne, we'll talk later. I've got a race to win.” He could see from the look on her face that she was hoping he'd kiss her, but he wasn't about to do that in front of everyone assembled there. There would be no stopping the gossip after that. “Wish me luck.”

“Good luck!” he heard her shout as he walked towards the Supra, his heart thudding in his chest.

It was time to go.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

David dropped into neutral and rolled up to the line. The Supra purred quietly, idling perfectly. The throttle response was good, the timing sounded great.

This is going to be a breeze.

Easiest five grand I'll have made in a real long time, David thought. Although, there was a small part of him that wondered if perhaps Lexie had some sort of ace up her sleeve. Maybe she'd gotten that awful pink RX-8 from someone like Sergei or out of town at one of Loc's shops, somewhere that really knew how to build a car. Even if she had, though, he didn't think she would know how to handle something that well built. *Hell,* he thought. *She never knew how to handle that old piece of shit she used to parade around back in the day.* Why would things be any different now? She just had something that looked better, that was all, he reassured himself.

It better be the case. You don't have five thousand dollars.

He squashed the uneasy feeling in his stomach and eased on the throttle, giving Lexie a little taste of what a turbo sounded like as she rolled onto the line. He looked over at her and winked. He knew well enough that a big part of every race was the mind games as much as the cars themselves, and he planned on getting in her head enough to make this race go from easy to an absolute drive in the park.

She raised her eyebrows at the wink, running her tongue suggestively over her lower lip, and David considered that

perhaps that hadn't been the best course of action. All he needed was for Lexie to think he was actually interested in her propositions.

In front of them, the scantily clad blonde and brunette girls approached again and held a hand each in the air, the universal sign of 'on your marks'. David rested one foot ever so gently on the clutch, and wrapped his hand around his shifter. He took one more sideways glance at Lexie, but she was all business now, her eyes locked on the blonde girl's hand.

With her opposite hand, the brunette pointed at David.

"Ready?" she asked. David gave a curt nod. The blonde did the same for Lexie, and he guessed that she'd respond in much the same way. He didn't dare take his eyes off of the starter now. He had to be ready.

The blonde dropped her hand and shouted "GO!" but no one heard her.

Her voice was instantly drowned out by the revving of engines and squealing tires. David slammed his clutch in and shifted into second. His tires stopped spinning and found traction and the Supra shot forward. For a quarter mile, he built up speed, short shifting from third to fourth. He risked a glance to see how far Lexie was behind him, fully prepared to gloat at how much of a headstart he had—but to his shock, she was right next to him, almost pulling ahead. She wasn't giving him so much as the slightest glance. She was focused, determined, and when she downshifted for the oncoming turn, David realized that he was out of place for his own shift. He clutched and slammed the shifter back into second, pulling his emergency brake at the same time to throw the Supra into a drift. It lost him a precious second, but with the late shift it was his only choice. It also allowed Lexie to overtake him. He cursed under his breath. It was a bad start.

Surely it's just a bit of luck on her part, he thought. There's no way she's gotten this much better.

But the uneasy feeling in his gut was growing by the second.

He was looking at the back of the RX-8 now, the occasional blue-white flame shooting out of the tailpipe as Lexie accelerated. *The race is just getting started*, David reminded himself. No race was lost until the end, no matter how bad things looked. He'd pulled it together in the last seconds before...but he'd also always made a point of never underestimating his opponent.

He put the Supra in fourth gear and redlined it to close the gap. He had another half mile before the next turn, and he'd be more prepared for this one, he told himself. There was still time.

He approached on Lexie's passenger side, getting ready to take the next turn on the inside, but she shut him out. He flinched in surprise, his knuckles whitening on the steering wheel as he gripped it harder. This wasn't the hesitant, fearful Lexie he remembered. She would never have been brave enough to try a stunt like that in the past. It meant reevaluating how she was going to drive the rest of the race—and that wasn't something he wanted to have to do this far into the game. He backed off slightly, his mood darkening, and then downshifted, going for an approach on the driver's side. She shut him out again.

This time when he risked a glance at Lexie, she was looking right back.

She was smiling at him.

A big part of a race was the mind games. He knew that—and he'd thought he'd be the one playing them, that she was so focused on hoping to “get under his hood,” as she'd joked, that she wouldn't really be paying attention to the race. He'd even thought for a second that she might lose on purpose, in hopes that the high of winning might get him into her bed. He realized now, far too late, that he'd been too cocky by far. Lexie had learned how to race, and she was schooling him in a way that he couldn't possibly have expected. It made him see red for a moment, fueled by the knowledge that he had no way of paying up if he really did lose.

No way in hell, he thought, gritting his teeth. He was not going to be beaten by a girl two years younger than him in a Barbie-pink car. He'd run these roads once upon a time, and he didn't see any reason why it should change now.

Unfortunately, during his silent rage he found himself out of position for the turn again. He dropped into another drift, and came out of the turn to see Lexie a full two seconds ahead of him. He was livid.

They were a third of the way through the race. If this kept happening, he was going to lose, and lose big.

Focus, David. Just calm down, and focus on the driving. Not Lexie.

He took a deep breath. He could catch her still, if he played his cards right. He had an ace in the hole—two tanks of nitrous—and he could use that if the race kept getting out of hand, although he still had some hope that this was just a streak of bad luck for him, and good luck for her—not actual improvement on her part.

I'll get her in the straightaway and leave her in the dust.

He stomped the accelerator to the floor and shot forward. They weaved in and out of traffic, dodged pedestrians and narrowly missed a number of collisions, sending his pulse skyrocketing. But this was what he loved—the adrenaline, the danger, the competition. He just hadn't expected her to be quite this *much* competition.

Lexie nearly slammed into the back of a box truck, and that allowed David to close the gap. They were side by side again going into the third turn. David took the inside, ready to finally put some space between them.

Then Lexie surprised him a third time. She let off the gas and dropped back, then fell in behind David. She then downshifted and *accelerated* into the turn, by then on David's passenger side. Rather than overtake him immediately, though, she used the momentum to throw her front end into David's rear quarter. The move spun the back end of his car around, causing him to completely lose control. It was a dirty trick,

and David knew it. It was clear she was going to do whatever she had to in order to win...any idea he might have had about her wanting to lose was dashed entirely.

David spun out and came to a halt, smashing his hands into the steering wheel, cursing aloud. He was almost out of chances to turn the race to his favor, and he knew now what kind of game she was playing. He'd been wrong to underestimate her.

He threw the Supra into first and gave chase. Lexie was far in front of him, almost into the next turn, and the only chance he had to catch her was the nitrous. He'd always avoided using it before the final quarter—in fact, he didn't know anyone who'd used it before then and still won the race. But if he didn't, he was certainly going to lose.

David took the fourth turn, and as he was coming out of it, he punched the nitrous.

He gritted his teeth as the Supra shot forward, throwing him backwards. The force pinned him in his seat, and he gripped the steering wheel with both hands, zigging and zagging madly through traffic. He felt something shaking in the rear, undoubtedly from Lexie slamming into him, and he winced. He knew something was wrong—he just had to hope that it held together until the end. He'd once again closed the gap, and he was in the perfect position to overtake Lexie at last.

David passed Lexie like she was at a standstill, and the shot of glee that washed over him at the look on her face was enough to counteract the rage from her dirty maneuver. With the nitrous spent, he eased off the gas in preparation for the fifth turn. A quick glance in his rearview showed Lexie a number of seconds behind him—there would be no tricks from her this time. He took the turn easily, and shot out of it, grinning widely as he did. *It's in the bag now*, he thought gleefully. One more turn, an easy straightaway, and he'd take the five grand from her instead of being in the hole—exactly as he'd expected he would. She'd certainly changed since he'd raced her last—the shutouts and slamming into his car were things that the old Lexie would never have been brave enough

to try. She'd learned a few things, that was for sure. But she hadn't learned enough—and now he was going to school her on exactly how much there was left.

David approached the final turn, noting that Lexie was still at least two seconds behind him. *Might as well be two minutes for all the good it's going to do her*, he thought, smiling to himself. Five thousand would replenish the savings he'd depleted furnishing the new house. Maybe he could even give a little of it to Sarah, or buy something fun for Cora...

He rolled all the possibilities over in his head as he swept into the turn, the picture of what Lexie's face would look like as she paid up hovering over all of them.

Then, as he came out of the last turn, two things happened very suddenly. First, the slight shimmy in his right rear end turned into an outright shake. Something had come loose...or worse, come off. Second, a pink blur shot past him on his passenger side, on the inside of the turn. Lexie had used her nitrous.

David began to panic. His acceleration was lacking. Coming out of the turn, his throttle response was suddenly garbage—he was flooring the accelerator, but nothing was happening. Something was dragging—a shock, or a caliper seizing up from Lexie smashing into his car. Whatever it was, he had less than a quarter of a mile to figure it out and catch up. Lexie had done exactly what he would have told her to do, if he'd been teaching her—what he'd always cautioned himself and anyone on his crew to do—save the nitrous for the last quarter. Now he had no tricks left up his sleeve, and she was pulling far ahead.

He shifted into second and gave the Supra all of the gas it could take. Something came loose and his acceleration came back. He used every trick he knew to get as much speed as fast as he could—red lining, short shifting...anything he could think of, but he was still a second behind Lexie when he had a sudden stroke of good luck going into the last intersection. She swerved, narrowly avoiding colliding with a minivan. She corrected quickly, but it gave David that brief second that he needed to catch up.

They were neck and neck, with an eighth of a mile to go. David floored his accelerator, ignoring the engine light that had come on, glaring orange at him from the dash, and the temperature gauge that was steadily rising. He was in it for all he had now, there was no time to think about what damage might be done. He was certain that Lexie was flooring her car as well. He was inches in front when he saw the headlight dangling from the front of Lexie's car, broken in the impact when she'd struck him. It bounced and flailed against the corner, the other one still intact.

Then, the last wire holding the headlight housing came loose. The chunk of shattered plastic and bent metal bounced off the ground once, and then underneath David's tire and up into the wheel well before being shot out the side. Whatever had been damaged earlier, was finished now. His tire locked up, and he lost all control as Lexie accelerated forward, shooting past him decisively.

Lexie shot across the finish line and slammed on the brakes, sliding to a stop near a crowd of excited onlookers. David's Supra skidded to a halt just past the finish line, smoke billowing from both the rear end and the hood.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“**S**hit!” David leapt out of the car the minute he killed the engine, his heart thudding, his head spinning. How had he underestimated her so thoroughly? She’d taken him like he was nothing at the end, speeding ahead of him for a finish so decisive he couldn’t even begin to argue with it. She was going to want her five grand, and he had nothing for her. He couldn’t even begin to think of how he would come up with it. If she wanted his car instead, then that would be it for his racing days for a long time. Finished before he even really got started again.

Lexie stalked towards him, graceful as a gazelle on her heeled boots, and held out her hand, palm up. “Money please,” she crooned, her face a study in glee. “You’ve been away too long, David. You’re getting soft.”

“Shit, Lexie.” David rubbed his hand over his face. “I don’t have five grand.”

Her expression turned from smug to incensed in a flash. “You *what*? You’re the one who told me to make the bet. So if you don’t have the cash, I’ll take your keys.”

“Lexie, come on. You can’t say that I didn’t have good reason to think I’d win. Back in the day—”

She shrugged. “That was then, this is now. Pony up, handsome. Cash or keys.”

“Lexie, you can’t take my car. This is all I’ve got.”

She smirked. “Honestly, I’m glad you don’t have the five grand. Where else would I get a ride like that for five g’s?”

That's the real win."

"Lexie..."

Her expression hardened. "Don't make me get someone to beat it out of you, David. I won, fair and square. So pay up, however you can manage it."

David could feel the blood draining from his face. He could see the crowd starting to gather up, itching for the fight that was soon to follow if he didn't comply, and he couldn't see a way out of it. And in the end, no matter how much he hated it, Lexie was right. He'd made the bet. He owed the money. Cash or keys.

"I'll spot you, man."

David spun to see Blake standing behind him, lanky and bored, his hands stuffed in his pockets. "Wait...what? You're just going to spot me five k?"

"Sure." Blake shrugged. "I got some money left from the Malibu days, stashed. Brought some of it with me tonight to do some betting. I'll give you the five grand, you pay me back when you can. Or you do some work for me to make it up."

David frowned. "I thought you said you weren't exactly liquid. Five grand could get you a starter car, man."

He saw a moment's hesitation before Blake spoke. "I counted that money gone as soon as I brought it here tonight, that's all." His voice was cool. "Look, I'll help you out, that's all I'm saying. We can figure out how you pay me back later. We're all part of the same crew, right?"

It was a lot of money to be in someone's pocket for, David thought. But if he didn't take it, Lexie would get his car, and he'd be worse off than if he just took the loan. Blake's offer of work to pay it off didn't sound so bad. It'd be like doing the guy a favor, he reasoned. He'd give him well more than five grand worth of good work.

Lexie tapped her foot. "Well?"

"Yeah," David said quickly. "I'll take the loan, Blake. Thanks, man."

“No problem,” Blake said casually. “Hang on a second, Lex, I’ll go get the money for you.”

Lexie looked pissed, but she shrugged. “Sure thing.”

—

Somehow, once the races were over, they wound up back at David’s house. They’d been lucky enough to not attract any police attention, and except for David, everyone in the crew had won their race. Caught up in the excitement, David volunteered his house for the afterparty, and everyone was immediately on board. “We’ll stop at the liquor store,” Carlos and Nathaniel volunteered. “See the rest of you there.”

Brienne had caught up with David at his car, and he’d stifled a groan at the sight of her. It wasn’t that he didn’t like her—he did, even if it was mostly sexual—but he didn’t know what to do about her. And there was something that he couldn’t quite put his finger on, something *off* that he didn’t know how to explain.

“Want company?” she’d asked, leaning up against the side of his car.

“I’ve got the whole crew coming over,” David said. “I just lost five grand and I’m in a buddy’s pocket for it, Brienne. I’m not in the best mood.”

“I can cheer you up.” She licked her lips, and David felt a flicker of desire in the pit of his stomach. She leaned towards him, and he could see the swell of her cleavage in the tight black bra, the crease in her flat, bare stomach. “C’mon, it’ll be fun. Let me come over.” She grinned. “Besides, I know you need a ride home, your car is going to be in the shop. I’ll give you one.”

David sighed. “Sure. But you can’t be all over me in front of the guys. They’ll talk, and I’m not ready for that to get around. You know why.”

Brienne nodded. “The baby mama. I got it.”

David narrowed his eyes at her. “Her name’s Sarah.”

Brienne tossed her hands up. "Alright, alright. I'm sorry. Look, I like you, David. I get that you want to take things slow, and that's fine. I'll be cool in front of the guys. I just want to get to know you better, that's all."

David nodded. "Alright then. Which one's yours?"

Brienne's face brightened. She pointed towards a gleaming red Miata sitting parked a good distance from the rest of the cars. "Don't worry about not speeding on my account."

"Oh, I'm driving?" David couldn't help but tease her a little. "After what you saw?"

Brienne shrugged as they walked towards her car. "I'd like to see what it's like when a real driver handles it." She fished the keys out of her pocket and tossed them to him as she slid into the passenger's seat. "Let's go, cowboy."

David obligingly revved the engine as they pulled out of the parking lot, taking a hard right turn. He saw Brienne's face flush as he glanced at her, and before long her hand was on his leg, sliding up his thigh.

He knew he should tell her to quit, to back off. If he kept fooling around with her, it was only going to be encouragement that she didn't need. But the adrenaline from the racing was still flowing, and he was still tense from the loss. The touch of her fingers trailing up his inner thigh was enough to send a shock of lust straight to his groin, his cock hardening in response as her hand worked its way up.

Fuck it. Have some fun.

"Want me to go faster?" He glanced sideways at her and grinned.

"Want me to?"

"You can do whatever you want," he told her, and pressed down on the gas pedal.

He felt her hand make its way to his groin, her fingers rubbing over the ridge there, sending a jolt of pleasure through his body. He felt her reach for his zipper, dragging it down, her long smooth fingers reached into his jeans and boxers,

stroking the hot, velvety flesh. He groaned in response, arching his hips up, pressing himself into her hand.

“Faster,” Brienne murmured, and he heard the click of her seatbelt.

He'd stopped thinking the moment her hand had touched him. Desire had overtaken good sense, and all he could think about was the combined rush of speed and her hand wrapped around his cock, pulling it out of his jeans, and the sudden weight of her leaning against his leg, her warm lips pressed against the tip of him.

It'd been years since anyone had done that in a car. It was a hell of a turn on for him, and Sarah had always known it. She'd blown him more than once on the way home from races, her blonde hair spilling over his lap, her short skirt rucking up around her hips and exposing the curve of her ass as he'd try to focus on the road, and not the tight suction of her lips around him, bringing him higher and higher until he had no choice but to let go and come in her mouth, helplessly thrusting upwards as he tried to focus on the road.

He was rock hard and throbbing in Brienne's mouth, but when he glanced down, it was red hair spilling over his legs, not blonde, and a sharp reminder that Sarah wasn't the one going home with him anymore. And he wasn't going home to her.

He shifted uncomfortably. “Fuck, that feels good, but you should probably stop.”

She pulled her mouth off of him, her warm breath puffing against his damp skin as she spoke. “What? Why?”

“Because I can't focus, and I might get us both killed.”

“What a way to go,” she teased.

“Really, Brienne, it's not a good time.”

She pulled back at that, and one quick glance at her face told him that she was more than a little miffed. He awkwardly tried to stuff his dick back into his jeans, no easy effort when he was solid as a steel rod, and so horny that it was all he

could do the moment he touched it not to grip it for dear life and stroke it until he came.

That certainly wasn't a good idea, though.

He somehow managed to make himself decent again, and there was silence in the car until they pulled into the driveway of his house. "I can call an Uber and leave if you want," Brienne said, her voice a little sullen.

"No," David said. "That's not what I want."

"Then what do you want?" She looked at him. "What kind of guy doesn't want his dick sucked in the car?"

"The kind of guy who's old enough to know it might mean getting into a wreck. Or pulled over. I'm not a teenager anymore, Brienne. I've got responsibilities."

She sighed. "Alright, I get it. I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize. I was into it at first." Headlights gleamed in the rear view mirror as the other cars began to pull up in front of the house. "Rest of the crew is here. Let's just have a good time, okay? You don't need to leave."

Carlos and Nathaniel had gotten plenty of beer, as well as a handle of dark rum, and some soda. They piled it all on David's kitchen island, and started mixing drinks, as Nick turned on the television. "Mind if I DJ?" he asked, and when David shook his head, Nick immediately started picking out music.

Within about fifteen minutes, David had started to relax a little. The rum was good, the drink strong, and everyone was having a good time. There was no animosity from Blake about the loan, his only comment was that he'd love David's help in picking out a car to start work on. Maybe there was the possibility for a new friendship there, David thought. After all, close friends were something he was in short supply of these days. He wasn't sure that he and Nathaniel could ever be close again, or even anything near what they had once been to each other. Not as long as he was with Sarah. And David didn't expect that to change.

He wrestled constantly with whether or not he *wanted* it to change. Of course he hated the idea of his once best friend sleeping with, living with, and now engaged to his ex-girlfriend. He'd been stunned into shocked anger when he'd figured out the last. But regardless of the fact that he *would* have come back in an instant if he'd known about Cora—hell, he'd never wanted to leave in the first place—he hadn't known. And Nathaniel had been there, for every step of the way. It was a hard thing to do, to raise someone else's child, and he had a grudging respect for him on account of it.

But he still loved Sarah. He still wanted her. And the fledgling feelings that had once existed for Nathaniel were still there, too. It was a knot of a situation that he couldn't unravel, and as usual, he wanted nothing more than to forget about it.

“Good race tonight,” Nathaniel said as he came to find David in the living room.

David glanced at him, taking a swig of his rum and Coke. “I lost, man.”

Nathaniel shrugged. “You got back on the road. That's the important thing, really. You couldn't have known how much better Lexie's gotten. And hell, maybe it'll take a little of the cockiness out of you. Teach you not to underestimate people.” He grinned. “You always were a little overconfident.”

David raised his glass in Nathaniel's direction. “Well look at you. Running the crew now, basically. You and Carlos.” He took another deep swig of his drink. “Thanks for letting me back in, man. I know all this isn't easy. You, and me...and Sarah.”

Nathaniel pressed his lips together. “You know, we don't have to talk about it every time we're in the same room.”

“I know you're engaged,” David blurted out. “I saw the ring. When she brought Cora over.”

Nathaniel was quiet for a minute. “Well, we weren't hiding it. Just didn't think we needed to take out an announcement in the papers or anything like that.”

“They used to do that, you know,” David mused. “Take out announcements. Or the bride’s parents would. Or way before that, they’d have to post a notice on the church, three times before they could get married. Imagine that, if you had to announce it three times?”

Nathaniel eyed him. “Is there a point to this?”

David shrugged. “Just...congrats, I guess. On getting married. And not having to take out an ad.”

Nathaniel took a deep breath. “I don’t want this to be a problem between us, David. It’s been a long time since the two of you were a thing. Lots of water under the bridge.”

“Yes,” David agreed. “A lot of water.” He tried to breathe in, but the room suddenly felt stuffy and hot. “I, um...I’ll be back in a minute.”

He strode out of the living room and down the hall to his bedroom, sitting heavily on the edge of the bed. He breathed slowly, in and out, trying to recover his bearings. He’d almost started to breathe normally again when he looked up, and saw Brienne walking into the room.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Jesus, woman,” David gasped. “Don’t you knock?”

Brienne shrugged. “The door was open.” She approached him cautiously, her eyebrows raised. “Are you alright?”

David pursed his lips, looking down at the floor. “I’ll be fine,” he said finally. “I just found out the other day that my ex—my daughter’s mother—is marrying my former best friend. A lot to take in, you know?” He glanced up at her.

Brienne stood in front of him, and then put her hands on his knees, sinking onto the floor. “It is,” she agreed. “But you know what the best revenge is?”

David eyed her. “You’re going to say moving on, or fucking someone else.”

“Moving on,” she affirmed. “She did, so why don’t you? Why are you clinging to trying to push away anyone who isn’t her?”

“You know why.”

Brienne lifted one shoulder and let it fall. “Well,” she said slowly, running her hands up the inside of his thighs. “I can make you stop thinking about it for a minute. Finish what we started earlier.”

She’d pushed the door mostly closed when she’d come in, David realized. She’d planned it, come to find him for exactly that reason. But he was running out of reasons to deny her

what she wanted. She was right, after all, Sarah had moved on. He told himself that every day, every time he thought of her.

“You can tell me to stop,” Brienne breathed, moving between his legs as she pushed them apart. “But I don’t think you want me to.”

He didn’t. He let her unzip him again, let her reach for him, already stiff and throbbing by the time she’d freed him. He groaned as her lips encircled him again, bringing him back to the point that he’d been at in the car almost immediately, and he rocked against her lips as she slid them all the way down, her moans vibrating against him as she slid up and down, her red hair falling over his knees as her head bobbed.

He didn’t hear the knock, didn’t hear the door creaking open. He could feel the muscles tightening in his thighs, the knot in his stomach that told him he would come soon. He might regret it after, but first he’d have the release, the sweet relief of forgetting everything for a minute...

“Christ, David, I’m sorry...”

He heard Nathaniel’s voice, and looked up to see him standing in the doorway, his eyes fixed on the back of Brienne’s head. David stood up reflexively, unceremoniously dislodging Brienne, and for one brief, embarrassing second, he saw Nathaniel’s eyes fix on his rock-hard cock, jutting out from his jeans, aching to be finished.

Brienne stood up quickly, looking between the two of them, and hurried out of the room, pushing past Nathaniel as she went.

Nathaniel glanced in her direction and then pushed the door shut, walking towards David as he hurriedly stuffed himself back into his jeans for the second time that night, his face flushed tomato red and burning.

“I’m sorry,” Nathaniel repeated. “I really am. I just wanted to make sure you were okay—”

“I’m fine,” David said, more sharply than he intended.

“You don’t look fine,” Nathaniel said, with a pointed glance down at David’s bulging groin. He started to chuckle,

clearly attempting a joke, but it died away when he saw David's face.

"Sorry you had to see that," David mumbled.

"Sorry I couldn't help," Nathaniel tried to joke again, and David looked up at him swiftly.

"What?" he asked, confusion on his face. "You don't even like men."

"I was kidding," Nathaniel said quickly.

"Oh...of course." David flushed bright red again. "I mean, I..."

"I always thought you might, when we were younger," Nathaniel said suddenly, glancing at David. "Like guys, I mean. As well as girls."

"I..." David couldn't think of anything to say.

"It's alright, you know. I don't think there's anything wrong with it. In fact, I..."

David's eyes widened. "You what?"

"I'm kind of into them, too," Nathaniel admitted. "Guys, I mean. And girls."

For a moment, David couldn't think of anything to say. The air between them thickened, somehow, became electrified with sudden knowledge. He remembered in a flash all of the hot summer afternoons they'd worked on cars, Nathaniel's shirt clinging to him, dark with sweat and motor oil, Nathaniel's flat abdomen and burgeoning chest muscles as he stripped off that same shirt, Nathaniel's ass in those tight jeans the first day David had seen him back at the shop. The blood rocketed back into his cock with a rush that made David feel almost dizzy, and he swayed towards Nathaniel without thinking, the room suddenly spinning.

Nathaniel grabbed his upper arms. "Hey, man, you alright? I didn't mean to upset you. I just..."

He was so close, his fingers digging into David's bicep, and he was so hard that it hurt, his body pulsing with every

heartbeat. He could smell Nathaniel's cologne, spicy and sweet, the smoky scent of the rum they'd been drinking, and he swayed towards him again, his own hands coming up to grip under Nathaniel's as he pulled the other man towards him.

When his lips met Nathaniel's, it was like a wave crashing over him. His senses were flooded with it, with the taste and smell of him, the soft warm fullness of his lips, which remained motionless under David's for a second, just long enough for David to rethink what he was doing. He started to flinch back, and then Nathaniel was pulling him closer, too, and he heard a low noise in Nathaniel's throat as his lips parted, making space for David's tongue to slide along the lower one.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so aroused—the last time he'd been with Sarah, probably. He'd forgotten Brienne, forgotten the race, forgotten there was anyone in the house other than himself and Nathaniel. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think, and he knew in a moment they'd be on the bed together, and who knew where it would go from there.

And then Nathaniel pulled back, panting, and the two men stared at each other, trying to take in what had just happened.

"I've wanted to do that for about seven years," David said, his voice hoarse. "A long fucking time."

"Me too," Nathaniel murmured. He hadn't let go of David's arms, and David glanced down to see that Nathaniel was equally aroused, his jeans tight and bulging across the front.

"You don't have to go," David breathed. "We can lock the door..." he knew it was a ridiculous suggestion even as he said it, but every cell and molecule in his body was aching for release, ten times more now that it was Nathaniel touching him, Nathaniel kissing him. He'd come to his senses as soon as they stopped touching, David thought, and he'd never get another chance. That was enough for him to pull Nathaniel towards him again, to let go of Nathaniel's arms and bury his fingers in Nathaniel's hair, tangling in the messy blond shag, and he breathed him in, wanting to remember every second of

what might be their only kiss. He wanted to remember it forever.

Nathaniel's tongue brushed against his for just a second, a sweet slide of sensation, and then he pulled back again, letting go of David's arms as suddenly as if they were burning his hands. He stepped back, his face pale. "I want you," he murmured. "God, I want you so fucking bad, you have no idea. But I can't do this. Not without Sarah knowing, not without her being okay with it."

"She's not going to be," David murmured.

"Then we won't be able to do this again." Nathaniel swallowed hard, his green eyes fixed on David's dark ones. "I want it, *Christ* you have no idea how much."

"I think I do." David closed his eyes briefly.

Nathaniel's eyes flicked downwards. "Yeah, maybe you do," he said, a trace of humor in his voice. "Sarah means the world to me, David. If anything were to change about our relationship...she'd have to know about it. I can't do this any other way."

"It's alright," David said, slowly regaining a little of his composure. "I'm glad I know that about you, though. And," he paused, looking at the floor. "I'm glad you know it about me."

The two men looked at each other in silence for a moment, and David felt as if something had mended between them, as if something in that shared knowledge had begun to repair their friendship. It was a relief.

"I'm going to go," Nathaniel said quietly. "Come join us whenever you want to."

David nodded.

The second that the door closed behind Nathaniel, he went into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him and leaning up against it. He had his erection out and in his hand in a second, and he gasped as his fist began to fly up and down, the only goal to finally come, to finally reach some kind of release. He closed his eyes, pictured Nathaniel, remembered the warm press of Nathaniel's lips against his, so soon before

that he could still taste the lingering hint of rum on his lips. He thought about Nathaniel's fingers digging into his arms, about pulling Nathaniel closer to him, the slide of Nathaniel's tongue into his mouth, and from there it wasn't a far leap to think of them falling onto the bed together, of Nathaniel stripping off his shirt to reveal all of his muscular chest and stomach, and then undoing his jeans so that David could finally see his cock, thick and long and hard just for him...

"Oh *god*," he moaned, hardly caring if anyone outside could hear him as he exploded in his hand, his cock throbbing almost painfully as he came harder than he had in years, his whole body spasming with every pulse of his shaft in his hand. He sank down onto the floor, still gripping himself as the last waves of it washed over him, and he gasped for breath, the relief washing over him in a wave nearly as pleasurable as the orgasm itself.

"I'm fucked," he said out loud, to no one in particular. He'd been telling Nathaniel the truth when he'd said he was glad that they knew that about each other now—he was. He'd wondered for years...and it seemed that Nathaniel had wondered the same thing. He was pretty sure trading that secret had repaired something in their friendship, and that was worthwhile, too. But thinking of being in the shop with him every day, having kissed him, knowing that Nathaniel liked sex with men, and not only that, but that he wanted *David*... David groaned aloud. It was going to be torture on par with the constant reminders of the life he'd had with Sarah once.

How had it even happened? His ex-girlfriend and the man he'd lusted after as a teenager and into young adulthood, that he'd gotten far away from, had pulled him back into a triangle from which there was no escape. Because at the center of it was his daughter, this person that they'd built a family around, and no matter how complicated it was, no matter how much he wanted Nathaniel or loved Sarah, no matter how painful it was to be around them or to see them together, he couldn't leave. He could never, never leave. He didn't want to.

And sitting on the bathroom floor, he accepted the last thing that he'd been fighting against endlessly, the last word

that kept floating through his mind: *love*. He loved them both. Irrevocably, and hopelessly. There was no changing it. He had long ago, and he still did.

The sudden, insane idea of the three of them together crossed his mind. He let himself entertain it, for just a second—the idea that Nathaniel would confess what he'd done to Sarah, and she'd realize that she could have both men, that she didn't have to choose, that she could have the one she'd once loved and the one she loved now. David let himself picture it—the three of them sitting around the oak table in Sarah's dining room, the three of them watching television together, the three of them in bed, Nathaniel sliding down Sarah's soft, pale body as David kissed her, winding his fingers through all of that thick blonde hair the way he once had so often...

"You're an idiot," he said aloud, standing up slowly. The idea that one kiss between him and Nathaniel, no matter how searing or life changing it had felt, would suddenly result in the three of them becoming some sort of fantasy ménage à trois was the most ridiculous thing he'd come up with in a while.

An orgasm is supposed to clear your head, not make you think even more stupid shit, he thought as he leaned over the counter. He could faintly hear the noise from the living room, and he knew he'd have to rejoin the party soon. He wondered if Brienne was still out there. He hoped not.

He was going to have to cut her loose, and he knew it. He couldn't keep fooling around with her. It would get back to Sarah eventually, and if he wanted there to be even the slightest chance of...

There's no chance, you idiot. Get that through your thick skull. They're engaged, for fuck's sake.

He took a deep, shaky breath, and started to clean up, trying to make himself seem presentable again. As he dried his hands on a towel and ran a quick brush through his hair, he felt his phone buzz in his pocket, and he reached for it.

The first thing he noticed is that there were four missed calls, from the same number that was calling him now—one

he didn't recognize. But it was from San Diego.

His heart pounded, making him feel dizzy again as he put it up to his ear and answered: "Hello?"

"David?" Marcus' voice came over the line, dark and gravelly, sending David's heart plummeting directly into his stomach. "Nice try, changing your number."

"Marcus? What do you want? I told you, I'm out."

"Oh, David." Marcus' laugh came over the phone, mocking David in the silence of the bathroom. "It's not ever going to be that easy. Didn't you know that?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

David froze in place, his heart pounding as he tried to collect his thoughts. “Marcus.” His mouth was dry and cottony, and his voice sounded hoarse as he spoke. “I don’t know what you want from me, but I don’t work for you anymore. I’m out.” He repeated the words with something that he hoped approached confidence, but in reality his knees felt as if they’d turned to water. He gripped the edge of the bathroom counter, leaning against it.

I should have known, he paced. I should have known I’d gotten myself in too deep.

He knew things about Marcus’ operation, illegal things, names and locations and things that he could be liable for, if the right people ever wanted to ask questions. Or in Marcus’ case—the wrong people.

He’d been an idiot to think he could just quit and walk away, as if he’d been working at a Dairy Queen.

Marcus’ next words only confirmed that line of thought. “You’re never out, David. I don’t know what you thought, running back home with your tail between your legs, but I have a job for you. Two of our boys were picked up last night boosting, and we have a client who needs their parts now. So I need you to come out here and drive. Just a few nights, but you were one of the best. Fast, clean, efficient. You come out here, get those cars in the shop, take them apart, and then you can go back home. Although honestly, I don’t know why the hell you would want to.”

David swallowed hard. He couldn't go back. He knew better. For one thing, how would he ever explain it to Sarah or Nathaniel? And even if he came up with some excuse—that he had to go back for some of his things, or that there was something he needed to finish up at his old job, he wasn't entirely sure that it was safe to go back. What if Marcus had him do this last job, and then decided he was better off without David out there in the world? What if Marcus decided he needed David's talents around, and wouldn't let him leave at all? He wouldn't have considered any of that even minutes before, but the gravelly tone of Marcus telling him that he should have known better—and he *should* have—had washed away all of his naiveté in an instant.

What, you thought that a crew running an illegal shop, stealing cars and tearing them apart to sell wouldn't threaten you once you tried to bail? Just like you thought that you could come back home and find everyone waiting for you exactly as they were? How stupid can one person possibly be?

“David. I need an answer. And the answer needs to be yes.”

David shook his head. It didn't matter that Marcus couldn't see it, the motion was for him. “No,” he said, trying to sound as confident as he possibly could. “I'm done working for you, Marcus, and I mean it. Find someone else. There's plenty of guys just as good as me.”

“But I said I want you. I don't think you understand, David, I'm not asking. You won't like the consequences if you say no.”

“I'll manage,” David said dryly, managing to sound far more secure than he felt. “The answer is no.”

And then he hung up the phone, his heart pounding.

—

He was in a daze the next day as he left for work. With the Supra in bad shape and parked at the shop, he pulled his motorcycle out of the garage, strapped on a helmet, and took off. It had been years since he'd ridden it—he'd left it with his

parents when he'd gone away—and it wasn't the best day to pick it up again. The road was damp with a fine morning mist, slick and gleaming beneath his tires, and he felt them slip more than once as he took the turns. But as he remembered the rhythm of it, the give and take, he began to relax and wonder why he'd ever left it behind at all.

Of course, he knew why he'd left it behind. It had been a way of leaving some important item in the place he wanted to come back to, a reason for him to come home, to run into Sarah and say: *“oh, no, I'm not here to see anyone, just left my bike, that's all, until I had a place where I could store it. But since I'm here, want to grab a drink? No, nothing interesting has happened since I left, in fact, I'm really missing home. If I had a reason to come back...”*

But instead his life had taken a hard left turn and plunged downwards, and the idea of returning home had no longer been a pleasant one. Instead it had been something to dread, the idea of it filling him with shame. He had turned into a different man than the one he'd once wanted to be.

He'd thought he could leave it behind. Now it was coming back to haunt him.

His tires spun out on the slick pavement and jolted him back to reality as the bike leaned dangerously to one side. David gritted his teeth and leaned against it, pulling it back upright. He had to get it together, he thought grimly to himself. He didn't think Marcus would give up all that easily, maybe he'd keep calling, but he also didn't think that he'd go far enough to actually come after David. But he had a host of other things to worry about now, too. He had the five grand that he owed Blake—or the work to pay for it—telling Brienne that he couldn't see her anymore, trying to work alongside Nathaniel without it being awkward after what had happened the night before, and of course, the reason he was back home at all—his daughter. She needed to be the thing he was focused on the most, before the calls from Marcus or the issue of Brienne or whatever was happening between him and Nathaniel.

He wondered if Nathaniel would tell Sarah. Surely he wouldn't. Sarah wouldn't understand, and it would only cause unnecessary friction among them. It wasn't as if it would happen again.

The dart of longing that pierced through him at that thought was enough to remind him all over again how very screwed he was.

To his relief, Nathaniel wasn't at the shop. He didn't know if he'd just opted to take the day off, or if he hadn't been scheduled, or if he was just running late, but David was grateful for the chance to collect his thoughts before having to face him. The familiar routine of work would help, he knew, and so he parked the motorcycle and headed for the toolbox, intent on starting on the first car on the list taped to the side of the wall.

It was quiet, the only sound besides the clanging of metal and grinding of parts the faint chirping of birds in the distance as the sun came up further and the day warmed. After a while, David heard the sound of the key in the office lock that meant Callie, the office girl, had come in. She worked three days a week, filing papers, sending out bills, and generally running errands—which usually involved making coffee and fetching lunch for the mechanics. She was eighteen, and it was her college job, easier than waitressing and less stressful than retail. Especially at Bill's, where the usual misogynistic comments and teasing weren't an issue. Neither David or Nathaniel would have made the slightest comment towards her, and Bill hardly even noticed that she existed. In fact, David sometimes wondered if Bill knew that he'd hired her at all. So it was a good job, and she kept the wheels of the place turning while they did the work.

“Coffee?” He heard Callie's cheery voice and pushed himself out from under the car to see her standing there in blue jeans and a flowery peasant top, her blonde hair pulled up in a high ponytail atop her head. She looked years younger than eighteen, and she held out an enamel cup to him.

He usually made his own coffee in the morning, but he'd been so dazed and distracted that he hadn't done more than

scarf a protein bar on the way out. He accepted the mug gratefully. “Thanks,” he said. “How’s school?”

Callie shrugged. “’Bout the same. Well, you’re new, so you wouldn’t really know. I like my classes okay, but I don’t know if it’s really what I want to do with my life.”

“No one knows at eighteen,” David reassured her, taking a long sip of the coffee. It was perfectly made, and he breathed in the maple-scented steam. The domesticity of it settled on him—the familiar job, the coworker bringing him coffee and making small talk, the faint sounds of early morning in the distance, the scent of grease and oil wreathing the air around them, the home he’d go back to that night, the child he’d see tomorrow for dinner. It was simple, and peaceful, and it was what he’d wanted years ago, before he’d left and everything had been turned upside down.

He couldn’t let anything happen to it—this life that he was making for himself. No matter what.

—

Nathaniel didn’t turn up that afternoon. David worked until lunch, stopped to scarf down a sandwich and soup that Callie picked up from a nearby café, and then put in a couple more hours on shop jobs before taking the last couple of the day to work on the Supra. The back end looked worse in the daylight—the paint torn up all to hell, the rear bumper torn partially off, the back corner smashed partially in. He’d hoped that maybe it’d mostly be dents that he’d be able to hammer and buff out, but it didn’t look as if that were the case. Instead, he spent the time making a list of parts he’d need to order, and left that on the desk in the office, choosing to call it a day once that was finished. He was ready to head home, and spend the night in. No phone calls, no one to talk to, just himself and a beer and something on television. There’d been no one in the shop all day except for him and Callie—who had mostly kept to herself except for the coffee and lunch—and it had done a lot to bring his worries back into check. *Maybe I’ll open a shop of my own one of these days*, David thought as he kicked up the motorcycle stand and the engine roared to life. *Wouldn’t that be nice. Just me, working alone, every day.*

There had been no phone calls, either, and he'd almost managed to put it out of his head. The ride home was easy, low traffic now that rush hour was done, and he sped along the highway eager to get back to the house, order something in for dinner, and try to put the remainder of his worries—mostly regarding what had happened with Nathaniel—to rest before he had dinner at Sarah's the following evening.

All of the anxiety came rushing back the moment he pulled into his driveway.

The door to his house was hanging ajar, but not broken or damaged in any way. *I must have left it unlocked this morning*, David realized, his heart pounding. He leapt off of the bike, letting it fall in the gravel of the driveway as he raced up the porch steps and into the house.

Nothing had been stolen in the main part of the house, but plenty had been destroyed. The television screen was smashed, the couch cushions ripped open, the curtains torn down, the afghan over the back of the couch shredded. Someone had scarred the coffee table with a knife repeatedly, and when he walked into the kitchen, he saw they'd done the same to the dining table. Cupboards were thrown open, the dishes, pots and pans scattered or broken across the countertop and floor. The sink had been left on, overflowing onto the linoleum, and David darted towards it and turned it off, nearly slipping and falling in the process.

They'd done the same throughout the rest of the house. In his bedroom he found his duvet and pillows destroyed, the dresser turned over, clothes scattered across the floor, and his good watch and the three hundred dollars in cash that he kept in his sock drawer stolen. In Cora's room, the same destruction had taken place, and nothing seemed to be gone...until he looked at the spot where he'd put her toys.

After Sarah had brought her over and seen the room, she'd given David one of Cora's older stuffed bears. "She probably won't miss it," she'd said, "but if, when, she does come to stay the night here, it'll be something familiar. It'll help make her more comfortable."

It had been a sort of unspoken promise that they would get to that point, and he'd put it in Cora's room the minute he'd come home from Sarah's house, eagerly awaiting the day when Cora would come to stay the night in her room that he'd so carefully put together.

The bear was gone, an empty space on the bookshelf. His pulse hammered in his throat. Who had broken into his house? Why would they take a stuffed animal? *Maybe it has something to do with Marcus, with your refusal to go back*, he thought, and pushed it away just as quickly as it'd come into his head. Why would Marcus go through the trouble of sending someone after him and destroying his belongings? As revenge? It seemed petty. And although he couldn't figure out why someone would take a child's old toy, he *had* left the door unlocked. There was plenty of crime in Oakland to go around without assuming it had come from out of town, even with Marcus' threatening call to take into account. Someone had probably come in, stolen what they found valuable, and gotten angry when they hadn't found more than a subpar watch and a few hundred bucks—no good jewelry, no drugs, no game consoles or other expensive items. And hell, maybe they had a kid. Although, why they would have taken Cora's much loved stuffed bear and not some of the newer toys that David had bought for her, now strewn across the room, he had no idea.

The fact was that homes in Oakland were broken into all of the time. Hell, it could have been someone from one of the other racing crews, angry that they'd lost to any of the guys in David's. He'd left the door unlocked, making himself an easy mark. It probably just came down to that, he thought, and now he had a hell of a mess to clean up.

He looked at the clock. It was nearly seven in the evening. *So much for ordering in and relaxing in front of the tv*, he thought ruefully as he bent to start picking up the toys scattered across the carpet.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sarah heard the sound of the front door opening and shutting as Nathaniel came in from off of the porch as she finished loading the dishes into the dishwasher. She felt the warmth of him as he came to stand behind her, his hands resting gently on her hips, and smelled the faint cherry scent of pipe tobacco. He'd stopped smoking in college, and now his only concession to the habit was occasionally smoking a pipe that had been his father's on cool evenings outside. Although she still worried about the effects of it sometimes, she loved the smell, sweet and smoky, and the way it clung faintly to his clothes. She turned in his arms as she shut the door of the dishwasher, looking up at him as she pushed a lock of blonde hair out of her face. "Want to watch something?" she asked softly. "Or maybe make it an early bedtime?" She raised one eyebrow suggestively, glancing quickly towards the hallway. There were no sounds coming from there; Cora was fast asleep. She'd passed out almost as soon as dinner was finished and Sarah had carried her to her room.

Nathaniel pressed his lips together, and Sarah's brow furrowed. "Nate? What's wrong?" She couldn't think of what it might be. The races that weekend had gone mostly well, although he'd told her about David's loss to Lexie. Privately, she was a bit pleased—David had always been a little cocky about his driving, if rightfully so, and she knew Lexie had always looked up to him. It had been more than a little irritating at times for Sarah, especially as Lexie's hero worship of David had had a healthy dose of attraction mixed in there as

well. But he'd treated her like an annoyance, and while younger Sarah had enjoyed the fact that her man hadn't had eyes for anyone but her, her older self was enjoying seeing him taken down, just a little, especially by another woman.

There'd been a time when Sarah had wanted to race with the crew, even going as far as to buy an old Celica that was hardly anything but a chassis and a shell. David had been teaching her how to work on it, but it had been intermittent between his own car, his work, and racing, and although they'd gotten a decent amount done to it, nothing had ever come of it. And then both David and Nathaniel had left, and she'd found out she was pregnant, and any thoughts of ever being out on the streets with them, or anyone else, had fled entirely. She'd sold the car some years back, for less than she'd bought it for originally. So there was a little fleeting nostalgia at the thought of Lexie, the car that she had worked so hard on, and a little glee at the idea that she'd beaten David, who certainly had thought that she didn't stand a chance.

"Sarah, I," Nathaniel took a deep breath. "I need to tell you something?"

Her heart sped up a little in her chest. "What is it?" Her blue eyes widened, worried. "Did something bad happen?"

"I don't know." He didn't let go of her, his hands loosely settled on her hips, fingers toying with the belt loops of her jeans. "Yeah, I guess it was bad."

"You're freaking me out, Nathaniel."

"I kissed David last night." He said it quickly, in a rush, so fast that for a moment she didn't quite comprehend what he'd said. When she finally registered it, she froze in place, unable to make sense of how such a thing could possibly have happened.

He took the opportunity to keep speaking. "The crew went over to David's house after the race. Adrenaline was high, like it always is, plenty of booze, and then David said something to me about knowing that we were engaged. It didn't seem like he was taking it too well, and he went off to his room to cool down. I wanted to make sure he was okay, so I went and

knocked and went in the room, and well, I walked in on David and this girl who's been after him. She was...I caught them in the middle of something. And she took off, and there was this weird moment between us and he said something about me not liking men. And I hesitated...and well..." Nathaniel paused for a breath. "Turns out we both have a thing for guys as well as girls. We talked about it, a little. And then he kissed me."

"Wait." Sarah held up a hand, trying to make sense of all of it. "*He* kissed *you*?"

"Yes," Nathaniel said, letting out a relieved breath. "Does that make it better?"

"Did you kiss him back?"

Nathaniel hesitated, and that was all the answer Sarah needed. She ducked out of the circle of his arms, crossing hers over her chest as she faced him. "Did you like it?"

"Sarah," He shook his head. "Wait, aren't you even a little shocked that David likes men, too? That he kissed me?"

Sarah snorted. "No. It's why I didn't accept his proposal all those years ago, and why I told him he needed to leave." She saw Nathaniel's shocked expression, and rolled her eyes. "Not because I thought there was anything wrong with it, god no. Nathaniel, I've known about you for years, too. You know I don't have any problem with it. But he'd only ever been with me, really. If he'd only liked women, that would have been one thing, to be with your first forever. As unlikely as it is, sometimes that works out. And he really did love me. But I knew that if he didn't explore that other side of him, if he married me and settled down and tried to push it away and ignore it forever, one day it would just explode. He'd wonder and wonder what it was like, how much he really wanted it, how much of a part of him it really was, a little at a time, in the dark or late at night or in moments when he was alone or drunk, until it ate away at him and me and our marriage. And so I knew that he couldn't marry me, not when there was this big part of himself left to figure out, this part of himself that he didn't know or understand. You can't promise yourself to someone for the rest of your life if you don't even know who

you are yet. And David didn't know. So I told him to go find out. And it broke my fucking heart to do it, so don't look at me like *I'm* some kind of asshole, Nathaniel Newman!"

Nathaniel was staring at her as she let out a long breath. "Wow," he said softly. "I had no idea. I thought you just didn't want to marry him. That you guys weren't doing great, or something."

"No," Sarah whispered. "I loved him with everything I had in me. And I loved him enough to let him go, so he could find out what he really wanted."

"I think what he really wanted was you."

"He couldn't have known that."

Nathaniel shrugged. "Maybe he did. And now it's too late, and I think that's killing him a little, inside."

"It wouldn't have worked," Sarah said firmly. "Not then."

"So that's why you didn't tell him you were pregnant, either? Because it was so soon, and you knew he'd come right back?"

Sarah nodded, biting her lower lip. "Yeah, that's why. It would've undone everything I'd just broken my heart into pieces to do. I couldn't tell him. Not after I'd sent him away."

"I don't think that was your decision to make." Nathaniel's voice was soft, almost inaudible.

"Maybe not." Sarah looked away. "But I made it. And here we are." She looked back at him, her eyes snapping angrily again. "And we're not talking about me! You *kissed* David. That's cheating, Nathaniel. How would you feel if I kissed another man? Hell, how would you feel if I kissed another woman?"

"Upset that I didn't get to see it?" Nathaniel suggested.

"Oh Christ, you men are all the same." Sarah gritted her teeth.

"He kissed me, Sarah."

“And you liked it!” She glared at him. “Did you get hard? Did you want it to go further?”

“I stopped it before it did!” Nathaniel rubbed his hand over his face, sighing. “Yes, Sarah, I was turned on. I wanted him. I wanted to keep going. I’m sorry, but that’s the truth. I wanted him when we were teenagers—and turns out he wanted me too—and that was a big shock. It was a lot to take in, and it threw me off guard, and I had no idea he was going to kiss me.”

“And your reaction was to kiss him back. To want more.”

“Sarah, what do you want me to say? I stopped him before it went very far. I didn’t touch him other than the kiss, he didn’t touch me, I stopped the kiss and I left. I should never have kissed him back, but I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to let it even get that far.”

“Do you want him instead of me?”

“No!” Nathaniel shook his head. “Sarah, I love you. I love our family. Things are all upside down since David came back, and it’s a fucking mess, but I don’t want to leave you, or go be with anyone else.”

“Would you want him if it were us both?” She uncrossed her arms then, her hands on her hips.

The look on Nathaniel’s face was all the answer she needed. She saw him swallow hard, saw the twitch in his body as he fought the arousal that the idea had immediately summoned. “So that’s a yes,” she murmured.

“Is that so wrong? You know I go both ways, Sarah. It doesn’t mean that I’m not satisfied with you, or that I won’t be happy only with you for the rest of my life.”

“So you’d be fine never getting to fuck David?”

“God, yes.” He crossed the room to her then, his hands on her upper arms as he looked down at her. “Sarah, I’m so sorry that any of this happened. I swear that I didn’t mean for it to. I never even knew that David had any of the same feelings that I did back then. And if he still does...well, that’s not something I’m going to worry about. You’re all I need, I promise. And if you want me to stay away from him—”

“No, it’s alright.” Sarah let out a long breath. “You were honest, that’s what really matters. And I know that you’re not just interested in women. I always wondered, actually, if you’d want to be with a guy again someday.”

Nathaniel looked startled. “You’ve thought about that?”

She shrugged. “I don’t exactly have the same equipment. You might miss it. I imagine it’s all a bit different, not just the sex, but the kissing, the touching,” she sighed. “I couldn’t blame you, if you did. I’ve wondered what I would do, if you wanted that.”

“And did you figure it out?” He looked at her carefully.

“We could talk about it, if that happened. I know there’s a difference between love and sex for the sake of it. I don’t know how I’d feel. It’s not something that’s ever come up but we could have the conversation. If you needed it.”

“So why are you so upset about David?” Nathaniel looked confused.

“I...” Sarah let out a long breath. “I don’t know, exactly.” She looked up at him, her eyes a little sad. “Maybe I’m jealous, because he was mine once. Maybe I’m jealous because you were best friends, and are getting close again, and I’m afraid it would be more than just a quick fuck for the sake of something different. Maybe it’s that you didn’t talk to me about it first, and it happened without me knowing. It could be a lot of things, Nate. But even if it is a sign that maybe you need something more than what I can physically give you, I don’t think that you getting close to David in...in that way is a good idea.” She sighed. “It would complicate things, Nathaniel, a lot. He’s my daughters’ father. If things went badly...between the two of you, or if I couldn’t handle it, or if anything at all went wrong...it could have some really big consequences. And I don’t know if I’m okay with that.”

“I don’t need a boyfriend,” Nathaniel said gently, looking down at her. “It was a moment of weakness, Sarah, that’s all. Old nostalgia coming back out of nowhere, and it took me off guard. I don’t need to go hook up with a man to feel complete.

I did all of that, in college, and sowed those oats. I've got a family with you, here, and that's what matters to me."

"Okay," she said softly. "I believe you. I really do."

"Let's forget about it." Nathaniel kissed her lightly on the forehead. "I know it's easy for me to say that, but it didn't mean anything. I swear it didn't. I didn't come home and think about him, I didn't wish he was in bed with me when I crawled in next to you. I didn't think about it except to wonder how I would explain what happened to you. *You*, Sarah, that's the common denominator here. I thought about you. And I won't let it happen again."

She nodded, and she believed him. She did. She smiled at him, a small, faint smile. "I'm going to take a bath, I think," she said. "I'll meet you in bed."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

She tried to put it out of her head, but what Nathaniel had told her stayed there all throughout the next day. She couldn't help it; David was coming over for dinner that night. She was going to have to act normal, and that seemed harder and harder the more she thought about what Nathaniel had said.

She'd tried to reason it away in the bath the night before, while she'd willed the tension out of her muscles. David had been the one to come on to Nathaniel. She believed that he'd been caught off guard, that in the heat of the moment he'd allowed it to go just a little too far before he'd put an end to it. And she wasn't angry with Nathaniel—truly, she wasn't. But it had unsettled her, thrown another complication into an already very fraught situation. And if she was being entirely honest—it had intrigued her, just a little.

Intrigued wasn't even the right word. It had turned her on. Lying in the tub, alone and without anyone to judge, she'd felt herself become aroused at the idea of it. No matter how much she ignored it, she couldn't help but still have some buried feelings for David. She'd loved him once, as she'd told Nathaniel the night before, with everything that she'd had. She'd told him to go not because she hadn't loved him or wanted to be his wife, not because she hadn't wanted to spend her life with him, but because she'd believed that they could never have a full, happy life together if he was burying a part of himself in order to do it. And now that he was back, the memories were too—the good and the bad, and it was a constant, dull ache in her chest, the memory of what she'd

almost had and lost. It was only kept from being a full blown, unbearable pain by the fact that she had Nathaniel, and his love and commitment. She had found happiness again, and not even the memory of what she'd once had and wanted could change the fact that what she had now was more than enough. She wouldn't have given up what she had with Nathaniel for anything—not even another shot with David.

But the idea of them both had lingered with her and she couldn't help but picture how it might have been. David and Nathaniel alone in his bedroom, the words that might have led up to David lunging forward to kiss Nathaniel, their mouths touching for the first time, the shock of sensation at finally discovering what it was like to kiss one another. She could imagine the rush of lust, the tingling that would have swept over them, like fiery needles across their skin, driving them into each other's arms. The longer she'd thought about it, the less angry she became, and the more aroused. She'd let her mind wander a bit farther, to what might have happened if Nathaniel hadn't stopped the kiss, if he'd let David touch him, if he'd touched David...and then she'd pictured herself there too, waiting on the bed, watching them together, waiting for them both to come and give her what she desperately desired...

She'd stopped then, flushing bright red for reasons that had had nothing at all to do with the hot water. She couldn't quite believe herself—fantasizing about two men, and one of them her ex-boyfriend. She'd been a little bit of a bad girl in high school, running with the racing crew, and more than a little adventurous when she and David had started sleeping together...but thinking about a threesome with two men felt a little too far. Especially considering which two men it had been.

She'd kept thinking about it though, on and off, all day until David came over for dinner. She'd made his favorite again, and as they laughed and chatted throughout the meal, she kept sneaking glances at him when he'd look away to take another bite of his food, thinking about the kiss. Did he know that she knew? Did he want her to know? Was he embarrassed? Upset? Hoping that it would happen again?

Nathaniel had gone out with a few of the guys from the crew that night. He usually did about once a week on one of the nights that David came over for dinner, giving him and Sarah one night to talk and discuss Cora without Nathaniel there. She usually appreciated it—not because there was anything that she didn't want Nathaniel to know, but because it was good, she thought, to have one night just between the two of them as parents. It would help build a bond, and it was good for Cora, too. The confusion between her two “daddies” was lessening, but one on one time with David was good for her. Sarah had always appreciated how comfortable Nathaniel had been with it from the start, how much trust he had in her, and her commitment to making sure that Nathaniel held his place in Cora's life, too. But just then, under the circumstances, she wished very much that Nathaniel were there—both as a buffer, and so she could see how the two men reacted to each other, post kiss.

If David knew what she was thinking about, or had any idea that she knew about the kiss, he didn't let on. When dinner was finished, he offered to clean up while Sarah put Cora to bed, and she smiled as she watched him unbuckle her from the high chair, swinging her up in the air as he kissed her loudly on both cheeks, making her giggle wildly.

“Don't wind her up,” Sarah cautioned, laughing. “She'll never get to bed.”

“Oh, I'm sure she's plenty tired.” David swung her again, eliciting another round of giggles, and then passed her over to Sarah. “Good night, little bird,” he said, cooing at her as he touched the tip of Cora's nose gently. “See you soon.”

Sarah caught the trace of sadness on David's face as he turned away from them towards the table to start cleaning up, and she felt the familiar stab of guilt in her own chest. He'd never said anything to her about being unhappy with their setup, in fact, he often said how happy he was with how smoothly they'd fallen into a routine. But she saw, in moments like those, the longing for the brief moments of domesticity and family between them to be real, to be permanent. For the dinners to be every night, for him to see Cora in the mornings

when she woke up, and not in a couple of days. For him to be there for all the little moments, all of the mundane everyday things that he missed out on because he didn't live with them.

Because Sarah had kept a secret, and was with someone else.

She wondered if she'd always feel guilty, if she'd feel as if she had to pay penance for it for the rest of her life. If she'd ever feel entirely as if she had nothing to be guilty about for her happiness with Nathaniel, a happiness she might never have had if she'd called David the second she'd known she was pregnant.

David was on the porch when she finished getting Cora to sleep. She stepped outside, shutting the door carefully behind her, and glanced over at him. "Heading out?"

"If you want me to."

Sarah looked at him sharply, but there didn't seem to be anything more to the comment than politeness. "You can stay for a little while if you want," she said, walking to the porch swing and sitting down. "Nathaniel won't be home for a while, it'd be nice to have the company."

"I can go make us a drink if you like."

Sarah hesitated. She wasn't sure that alcohol was going to make the situation any better, but would one drink make all that much of a difference? "Sure," she said. "Whatever you make for yourself."

It was quiet out on the porch while she waited for him, only the faint sounds of traffic in the distance. She knew she'd been lucky to find a house like the one she had after she'd found out that she was pregnant, and that the studio apartment she'd been renting after moving out of David's house wasn't exactly going to cut it anymore. It had belonged to an old woman whose kids were moving her to a nursing home, and it was small and well kept: three bedrooms, one significantly smaller than the other two, one and a half bathrooms, a cozy living room and a kitchen with a dishwasher. There was even a small washer and dryer, which Sarah had pushed to its limits

more than once among the three of them. It had fit into her budget just barely, and she'd clung to it ever since, well aware that three bedroom houses in parts of town that weren't terrifying were rare in California, and even rarer in Oakland.

David came back out onto the porch with two drinks, the door closing a bit harder than she'd hoped behind him, and she braced herself for Cora's cry, but there was nothing. She was asleep like a rock, apparently, and Sarah breathed out a sigh of relief. Cora might fall asleep easily, but getting her back to sleep once she'd woken up could require a massive effort.

"Vodka and lemonade," David said, handing her one of the glasses. "Like we used to drink back in the day, remember? During the summer?"

She did remember, more clearly than she wanted to. They'd been sharing one the day that they'd kissed the first time—it had been something always stocked at her parents' house, and therefore easy for her to sneak as a teenager, filling water bottles with the mixture and stashing them under the seat of the car. It had been faintly warm and far too sweet, and they'd been sitting on the curb out in front of the mechanic shop after David had finished working for the day and it was closed, the parking lot empty. They'd passed it back and forth, and finally she'd turned towards him to hand it back after one particularly strong sip and seen him looking at her, his dark eyes fixed on her blue ones. He'd taken the bottle gently from her hand and set it down, slid his hand along her jaw, and drawn her mouth to his as confidently as if he'd kissed her a hundred times.

He'd tasted sweet like sugar, tangy like lemons, with the bite of vodka under it all, and she'd never been able to drink lemonade since without thinking about that warm California evening, the early summer heat hanging around them like a comforting blanket, not yet oppressive, and how it had spread through her body as he'd kissed her, lighting her up like a firefly.

She remembered vodka and lemonade with David, and she wished he'd chosen any other drink to bring out to her. His expression was innocent, and she wondered if he really had

just wanted the nostalgia, or if he was trying to bring back the memories, to remind her what she'd once had.

“David—” she started to say, but he interrupted her.

“I kissed Nathaniel.” He blurted it out, his fingers tight around the glass, and he kept talking before she could say anything. “Don’t be angry with him. I did it, I kissed *him*, and he stopped it before it went further than that. I wasn’t going to say anything, but you’ve said how we need to be honest, and —”

“David, I know.” Sarah set the glass on her knee, turning towards him. “Nathaniel told me last night.”

“Is that why he’s not here?”

She shrugged lightly. “Maybe it’s part of it. He usually makes sure there’s at least one dinner a week where he’s not here, so you and Cora can bond just the two of you.”

“He does that on purpose?” David’s eyebrows shot up. “I noticed a pattern, sort of, but I didn’t realize it was so deliberate.” He paused. “He really is a hell of a guy.”

“He is,” Sarah said softly. “He’s tried very hard to accept all of this, to make us all a family rather than fighting against it. So you can see how anything between the two of you would...complicate things.”

“Did you know about him?” David asked curiously. “That he...”

“That he likes men?” Sarah shrugged again and took a sip of her drink, relaxing a little. “Of course. Just like I knew about you. Of course I never said anything about you to him, that’s your business, not mine. And so he didn’t know, until the other night. And he didn’t know that I knew about you.”

“So...he told you?”

“We’re getting married, David. Of course he told me.” Sarah lay her hand on her leg, and the light from the porch flashed off of the small diamond on her ring finger. “We don’t keep secrets from each other.”

“And you’re not angry?”

“I was at first,” Sarah admitted. “Like any woman would be if she found out her fiancé kissed anyone else, man or woman. But I’ve always wondered how Nathaniel would feel eventually, being only with a woman, if he might need something...more. But I didn’t expect it to be you. I knew that you were both interested in men...but not that you were interested in each other.” She hesitated. The question hung on the tip of her tongue, and she knew better than to ask it. She knew better than to bring up the past, to have those memories hanging in the air between them. Not on a warm night alone on her porch, drinking vodka and lemonade. But she couldn’t help it. “So, even back then, David? Even when you were with me, you wanted him?”

The expression on David’s face was inscrutable. “Sarah, I...” he let out a long breath. “If I’m telling the truth, yes, I wanted him back then. But I didn’t know how I really felt about men. There was no one to ask, no one to tell me if what I was feeling was just how all boys that age feel, and just no one admitted it, and I’d get over it, or if it was something more. I knew I wasn’t gay—I wanted you, desperately. As desperately, or more, as I ever wanted Nathaniel. So I thought maybe it was something I would grow out of.”

“And loving me was easier,” Sarah whispered. “No conflict, no trouble, not if you were with a woman.”

“What?” David shook his head vehemently. “No, Sarah, you weren’t my...my cover, or anything like that. I *loved* you. I loved you for real, with everything that I had in me. That wasn’t a lie.”

With everything that I had in me. Hadn’t she said those words to Nathaniel about how she’d felt for David, just the night before? The guilt seared through her, hot and painful. She’d sent David away, even though they’d loved *with everything they had*, because she’d thought he needed to explore. Because she’d thought she knew what was best for him, better than he did himself.

“I’m sorry, David,” she whispered, and she wondered how many more times she would say that to him. “I made a choice

for you, and I shouldn't have. I shouldn't have made you leave..."

"Shhh." David reached out then and touched her cheek, his fingers cool against her flushed skin, and she felt the sensation of it down to her toes. "You were right, in some ways, even though it didn't really go all that well for me. I didn't know who I was. I hadn't explored that part of me at all. And maybe you were right. Maybe it would have torn us apart in the end, if I hadn't."

She leaned unthinkingly into his touch. The warmth of the night pressed in around them, and she could feel everything suddenly—the damp condensation of the glass against her fingertips, the nearness of David's knee to hers, the press of the hard slats of the swing under her legs, the heat of his breath as his mouth moved towards hers.

Sweet like sugar, tangy like lemons, and the bite underneath it all. He kissed differently now, a man instead of a boy, and where the boy had been confident, the man was hesitant. His lips brushed over hers, soft and full, and it didn't matter that they were three years past a breakup, she was transported instantly back—back to the first kiss on the sidewalk; back to the fumbling kisses between classes and the passionate ones behind the school; quick kisses on her doorstep and longer ones in the back of his car; sweet kisses and lustful kisses and the kiss when they'd slept together for the first time, when he'd gasped against her mouth when he'd first felt what it was like, the small cry that had disappeared into his, and then the long kiss as they'd found a new rhythm together. She was in the past before she could remember the present, and her hand clutched the glass as her mouth surged against his, her tongue sliding into his mouth as for one brief, searing moment, his hand slid into her hair and her arm wrapped around his neck, pulling them up against each other as easily as if no time had passed at all.

For a moment that was enough. There was no need to go further, no need to move past the press of their lips and the tangle of tongues. And then his hand moved down, out of her hair and over her collarbone, down to trace the swell of her

breast through the thin material of her t-shirt, and she pulled away quickly, gasping.

CHAPTER TWENTY

She understood, now, better than ever, and if there had been even the slightest trace of anger towards Nathaniel for returning David's kiss, it was entirely gone. After all, she couldn't be angry for something that she'd done, too. But more than that, she realized the pull that existed there, the memory of a different time, a time when they had all been themselves, and in love, with no complications or problems past simple wanting, and unraveling all that that meant for them.

She tried to catch her breath, her eyes wide and blue as she looked at David. "I'm sorry," she whispered. *Again*. "I shouldn't have—"

"No, I shouldn't have." David shook his head. "First Nathaniel, now you. You must think I'm insane."

"No," Sarah whispered. "Just lonely. And wishing for something we used to have."

She could see it in his face, that he wanted to ask if she was wishing for it, too. But he didn't. "I should go," he said quietly, looking away from her. "I think that's probably for the best."

"We can't do this, you know," Sarah murmured. "You and I. Not without Nathaniel."

David looked up sharply. "You don't mean...?"

Sarah flushed hotly, her face turning several shades of pink. "I just mean...I'm with Nathaniel. We're getting

married. I can't be with anyone else without him, no matter who it is. You understand that, right?"

"Of course." David stood up. "The moment got away from us, that's all. Just like it did with me and Nathaniel. We'll put it behind us." He cleared his throat. "It's my fault, anyway. Vodka and lemonade." He looked at Sarah then, a long look, as if he were trying to commit something to memory. And then without a word, he turned and went down the porch steps towards his motorcycle.

—

FUCK. The word repeated itself over and over in David's head on the ride back to his house. He hadn't meant to kiss Sarah, truly he hadn't. He'd meant the drink to be a sweet callback to the days they used to spend together, a bridge to reminiscing, sure, but he hadn't meant for it to turn into a kiss. And that one kiss had been enough to bring all of the feelings rushing back, swirling and tumbling through him in a hurricane of emotion. And if he added what had happened with Nathaniel into that...

He was making things worse for himself, he knew. And not just for himself, but for Sarah and Nathaniel too, and by extension Cora. Sarah would tell Nathaniel what had happened, he was sure of it. And it would cause strain between him and Nathaniel, even conflict, and Sarah would put emotional distance between herself and David, to keep it from happening again. He was sure of all of that, and it made him feel exhausted and sick. It didn't matter what he wanted. He had to keep it to himself. He couldn't ruin things. What he had now meant too much to him—he couldn't risk it on the possibility of what could be.

Not even for a second.

As he pulled into the gravel driveway, he saw the outline of a car parked on the street two houses down, next to a brick one story that had both of its cars already parked in the driveway. He knew which cars were there—mostly because one of them was a Camaro that he lusted after almost as much as he lusted after Sarah and Nathaniel. It was always parked in

the garage, and a late-model Honda Civic next to it, the family's daily driver. Sometimes the husband brought home a company car, a Ford Fusion that he left in the driveway. If David remembered any detail about the homes around him, it was the cars that they had. But the outline of the car on the street wasn't a Fusion.

He shrugged it off. It was likely a friend visiting for dinner, or a relative staying the night. He couldn't see if there was anyone in the car, and the idea of trying to get closer to check it out just felt paranoid. Marcus had stopped calling him. Likely David had called his bluff, and he wouldn't be bothering him anymore. He was glad, now, that he hadn't let Marcus scare him into going back.

He walked into the house, careful to lock the door behind him, and looked around. He'd replaced the television, hung the curtains back up, thrown out anything too broken to repair and put everything that was left back. Some things couldn't be fixed, like the scarring on the coffee and kitchen tables, but he'd put a sheet over the couch cushions to hide the rips, bought a new throw blanket to throw over the back and new bedding for his room, and moved on as best as he could. The first few nights had been difficult to sleep, but he was careful to latch all the windows and lock the door coming and going, and he firmly believed it had been nothing more than a random break in. Nothing more sinister than that. It still creeped him out, though, that Cora's bear was out there somewhere, with whoever had broken into his house, or with their kid.

It took a long time for him to fall asleep that night. He was fraught with desire and anxiety, both wishing he'd never kissed either Sarah or Nathaniel and desperately wanting to do it again. Part of Sarah's last words to him before he'd left: *not without Nathaniel*, kept echoing in his head, reminding him of the fantasy he'd had on the bathroom floor, weak kneed and so far gone he'd been jerking off with his party guests two rooms over and within earshot. The idea of the three of them together seemed so fantastical and far fetched that it didn't bear actually considering...but he couldn't help but imagine it. And not just the sex—oh god, the sex, both of them naked and in bed with him, Nathaniel's tanned skin and Sarah's pale body

wrapped around him, Sarah's mouth and Nathaniel's hands, muscles and curves and...

Christ. David squeezed his eyes more tightly shut, willing away the images even as his cock sprang up in his boxers, throbbing insistently at the first hint of the fantasy. He mentally went down the list of parts for his car, through each step of repairing it, until the ache subsided and he was finally able to fall asleep.

He woke out of a tangle of confusing, nonsensical, erotic dreams to the shrill ringing of his phone. He rolled over, groping for it, and held it up to his ear, mumbling thickly: "Hello?"

"David." Marcus' gravelly tones came over the line, and David shot bolt upright, the last vestiges of sleep slipping away and replaced by cold fear down to his toes. He'd been so sure that he'd called Marcus' bluff, but the sound of his voice on the phone recast all of the events of the last few days in a fresh light. The break in, the strange car on the street...it all suddenly seemed suspicious again.

"Marcus, it's five in the morning. What do you want?"

"Is it, now? Listen up, kid. You really pissed me off last time, but you did a good job and I gotta admit I kinda liked you, so I'm giving you one more shot. You get your ass back down here and make up for screwing me on that last job, and we'll call it square, alright?"

"What's 'making it up'?" David said, his voice still thick with sleep. "Wait, I don't even want to know. The answer was no, Marcus. I have a job here. Responsibilities."

"I've heard all about your responsibilities. The girl and the kid. Guess you skipped out on her when you knew years ago, huh? And then went crawling back from guilt? Tale as old as time, kid, but it doesn't change the fact that you had a responsibility here."

"I had a *job*," David said tiredly. "People quit jobs all of the time, Marcus. I'm glad you thought so highly of my work,

but I'm done. Trying out the straight-edge life again and all of that."

"I'm happy for you." Marcus' tone implied that he was not, in fact, happy at all. "I'm not a job you can just quit, David. Now I gave you a chance when you were down on your luck—gave you a job, a room, good pay and kept you off the streets. I protected you when those thugs were after you for those gambling debts, you remember that? Fronted you the money until you worked it off. You owe me, David."

"No, I don't," David said calmly. "I appreciate all you did for me, Marcus, and you know that. But I paid good rent for that room, and I proved I was worth that job, and I earned back that money and more. I cleared every debt I owed you. I did the work, and I left when the time was right. There's nothing owed between us."

"And if I say there is?"

"Then you're wrong." David took a deep breath. His heart was pounding in his chest, but he didn't dare show fear. He had to get Marcus to back down. "We're done, Marcus, like I've said before. Don't call me again."

"That was your last shot, kid." He could hear the regret in Marcus' voice, and that scared him more than anything that had come before. "Shame. Damn shame."

The phone went dead in David's hand.

He set it down gently on the blanket, as if it were a bomb that might go off. He had no proof that Marcus was behind the break in, or that the car on the street was anything other than a visitor with no room to park in the driveway.

But there *had* been room to park in the driveway. And in all of the years he'd lived in the house, and the years his grandfather had lived there before that, there had never been anyone who'd tried to break in. Of course there'd been the hooligan kids and the young gang members who'd steal a bicycle or a lawnmower if you left it out, and David had had his car keyed once. But never breaking into the house. And

certainly never the level of vindictive damage that had been inflicted during it.

It could be a coincidence. But the feeling deep in his gut told him that it wasn't.

Well, what was he supposed to do, exactly? He couldn't give in and go back to do the job for Marcus. Going back, doing the job and then leaving again was one outcome, but it was the only good outcome out of a list of bad ones. He might get caught and go to prison, Marcus might kill him when the job was done, Marcus might refuse to let him leave again, or—and this was most likely, David thought—Marcus would just call him anytime he needed a job done that he thought he required David's skills for, and he'd always have to answer. He didn't for one second believe that there was any real likelihood of this being one and done.

His thoughts were broken by a heavy knock on the door, and he leapt out of bed, pulling on a pair of sweatpants quickly as he headed out into the hall. To his surprise when he opened the door, Brienne was standing there, two to-go cups of coffee and a paper bag in her hand.

He was so startled that he stood aside and let her in without a word. She breezed past him into the living room, looking around and taking in the sheet on the couch, and the knife marks on the coffee table. "What happened?" she asked, glancing up at him with those wide, round eyes.

"Someone broke in," he said gruffly. "Christ, Brienne, it's not even six in the morning. What are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd bring you some breakfast on my way to work." She set the paper bag down. "I thought I'd had good doughnuts before, but my god the ones at Jerry's are *amazing*. So good I can't go more than once a week, or I'd balloon up in no time. And the coffee is pretty darn good too, I don't know what you like, so I got you the same thing I always do, a hazelnut mocha..."

She wasn't wrong. Jerry's doughnuts and coffee had been among the things he'd missed most since leaving Oakland. But no matter how good they were, visitors at six in the morning,

especially after the call from Marcus, were a bit more than he was prepared to face.

“Brienne.” David crossed his arms. “It’s sweet of you, really. But don’t you think this is a little over the top?”

She blinked at him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to overstep. It’s just you haven’t called, and I was thinking about you.”

He let out a long, slow sigh. He hadn’t had enough sleep for anything that was happening so far that morning. “Brienne, didn’t you think that maybe there was a reason that I didn’t call?”

Those round eyes went even bigger, and she let out a small sound, her lips parting as it sank in. “Oh,” she whispered, setting the coffee down. “Oh.”

“I’m not trying to hurt you. You’re a nice girl, and we had some fun. But I told you from the start—”

“I know.” She cut him off. “You’re not looking for anything serious. You did tell me. It’s my own stupid fault for thinking...”

To his horror, David saw tears welling in her eyes. “Don’t cry!” He crossed the room towards her, reaching for her hand. “It’s not you, Brienne.”

“It’s me,” she finished for him, her voice sharp. “Don’t think I haven’t heard that one before.” She dashed at the tears on her face with her free hand. “Jesus Christ, I’m a surgeon, a respected professional, and I’m in some guy’s living room way too early in the morning crying because I just figured out he ghosted me. Or tried to.” She shook her head. “Guess even the smartest people don’t have common sense sometimes.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself,” David said, trying to be comforting. “I’ll admit my signals were mixed.” He hadn’t let go of her hand, and he saw her eyes flick down to it. “It’s just not a good time for me, that’s all.”

She took a step forward. “I just really enjoyed the time we did have together. It’s been a while since,” she breathed out, angling herself towards him as she slowly closed the gap between them. “It’s been a while since it’s been that good.”

Christ she's good at this, David thought. It was working, too. She knew how to play to his ego, to make him feel, just at a time when he was particularly low, as if he were rocking her world every time he touched her. And maybe he really was. Her reactions had seemed genuine enough. But there was something about her just the slightest bit off, something that nagged at him every time he was with her.

It was quite possibly just that she wasn't Sarah. And after kissing Sarah again, he knew there was no possible way for Brienne, or any other woman, to measure up. But she was close to him, and he could smell her sweet perfume mingling with the scent of coffee, and his cock didn't seem to much care whose body was pressed up against his, as long as *someone* relieved the ache that had been hounding him ever since the night before.

He was very close to giving in. She was nearly leaning against him now, her chin tilted up, red hair spilling everywhere as those big eyes looked up into his. "Just one more kiss," she whispered. "For old time's sake."

He looked down at her full lips, soft and rosy and free of makeup, none of that sticky gloss that had smeared across him that first night, when she'd wrapped those lips around him and sucked him into her mouth, or the lipstick from the night after the race. Just her, smooth skin and full lips and big eyes, and he had a sudden, terrible desire to take her down the hall and tumble her into bed, and find the sweet forgetfulness that came with those few seconds of release.

He closed his eyes briefly. He had to cut her loose. Had to. He wasn't sure why he was finding it so difficult, or why she seemed so intent on clinging to him—a man without a particularly good job, a complicated ex and a child—but his libido was just going to have to go unsatisfied. Sleeping with Brienne wouldn't quell the yearning for Sarah or Nathaniel, and it certainly was unfair to her to keep leading her on.

He opened them again, and stepped back. "You need to go," he said firmly. "Thanks for the breakfast, or take it with you if you want, but we can't keep doing this. It's a bad time for me, and I mean it. Please don't come by again."

He saw the hurt flash across her face as she pulled back, and she reached for the paper bag, snatching it and one of the coffee cups up. “Fine,” she hissed. “You’re going to regret it.”

He couldn’t catch her expression as she whirled away from him and stormed out of the front door, but there was something in her tone as she’d said the last that left him unsettled.

It’s just the kind of thing a scorned woman says, that’s all. He looked tiredly at the coffee cup. He had the option of going back to sleep for two hours or chugging the coffee and getting an early start—and he knew he ought to do the latter. But instead he left the cup there, and trudged back down the hall. Two hours wasn’t much, but it was something.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sarah found herself dreading the next dinner they'd planned at her house. Nathaniel hadn't said anything about going out, which meant he'd be there—which also marked the first time that all three of them would be having dinner together since David had kissed Nathaniel and since David had kissed her. She still couldn't stop thinking about it. She knew she should regret it—should wish that it had never happened, but how could she? It had been everything she could have wanted...sweet, and tender, and had brought back all of the memories that she'd tried not to think about for so long...good memories. Sweet ones, ones that she had had to put out of her head for the sake of her own sanity. But not because she'd wanted to forget them.

She hadn't said anything to Nathaniel about it. For all that she'd said to David about honesty in their relationship, she didn't have the slightest idea how to even bring it up. She didn't know how Nathaniel had ever had the nerve to come up and tell her out of the blue. She didn't think he'd be angry, exactly—after all, he'd done it too—but she felt that it would change the dynamic between all of them in some way that she wasn't entirely certain of yet. It would alter something, and she was afraid to find out what it would be.

Nathaniel had offered to grill, and she moved around the kitchen in a daze as she waited for David to arrive, getting out the meat that she'd set to marinate, putting potatoes on to boil, organizing salad fixings. Every now and then, she'd catch a glimpse of the bottle of lemonade in the refrigerator, and feel her neck and face start to heat, her skin flushing pink.

If Nathaniel noticed how distracted she was, he didn't say anything. If he noticed how she barely looked at David once he arrived, instead bustling around the kitchen grabbing plates and feeding Cora Cheerios and pretending not to hear David when he asked if she wanted him to give Cora her snack while Sarah worked on dinner, he didn't say anything. Instead, the knowledge hung in the air among the three of them, between David and Nathaniel, David and Sarah, the weight of it distracting them all.

"When's the next race?" she heard David ask, and she glanced up quickly.

"Have you fixed the Supra yet?"

David shook his head. "Not yet. That's why I'm wondering. I hope I can get out there, but the parts aren't even in yet. It's going to take some long hours after work to get her back into shape."

"Probably won't be ready for the next one, then," Nathaniel said. "But that's alright. You can help Blake, and be on the road for the race after that. We're doing them just about every weekend now, except when it seems like there's some heat, then we take some time off. Don't want to risk getting on the wrong side of the cops."

"No," David agreed, and Sarah could hear something in his voice, some nervousness that made her wonder if there was something more to the statement.

"Dinner's ready," she said, balancing one bowl of potato salad and another of green beans and regular salad as Nathaniel carried the meat to the table. "Nathaniel, can you get Cora's plate?"

Dinner was delicious and, as always, the men offered to clean up while Sarah put Cora to bed. She clung to David's leg, looking up at him with the blue eyes that always reminded him of her mother, and made a small, whimpering noise. "Will I see you in the morning, dada?" she asked, pressing her cheek against his jean-clad knee.

Sarah caught the brief glimpse of pain that washed over David's face. "Not in the morning, sweetie," he said, picking her up and swinging her in the air, towards Sarah. "But soon. Mornings are for Nate."

"Nate dada." Cora had taken to tacking Nathaniel's shortened name onto her version of "daddy," and Sarah could see that was hurting him, too. For a very long time, he had been the only father Cora had recognized. Now he was sharing, and being pushed back, little by little, the more Cora started to acclimate to David.

"Just 'dada,'" Sarah corrected, but Cora cried out her name for Nathaniel again, and Sarah saw his tight-lipped smile as he came over to kiss Cora soundly on the cheek.

"I'll see you in the morning," he said to her, purposefully too quiet for David to hear. It was a consideration that made Sarah warm to him all over again as she carried Cora down the hall. That was the kind of man Nathaniel was, after all. Kind, and considerate, and giving even to the point that it hurt him. It was why she loved him.

The men were in the living room when Sarah emerged, and she took a deep, shaky breath as she approached them. She had to tell Nathaniel. It was the right thing to do, just as he'd told her about what had happened between him and David.

"Nate," she said softly as she stood next to him. "There's something I need to tell you."

He glanced over at her, the conversation between him and David dying, and she saw the nervous expression on David's face. It crossed her mind that perhaps it wasn't the best time to tell him, with David there, but she couldn't hold it in any longer.

"I kissed David," she blurted out. "Or well...he kissed me. We kissed each other. When he was over for dinner a few nights ago."

She saw a series of emotions cross Nathaniel's face, too quickly for her to pick any one of them out. "You kissed him?" he asked softly. "Or he kissed you?"

“We kissed each other,” she repeated, more firmly. “I don’t really know who went for it first, Nathaniel, honestly. It was... it was mutual.”

“It was me,” David said clearly, and Sarah glanced sharply at him. “I closed the gap, so to speak. So if you’re going to be pissed at someone, be pissed at me.”

“I’m not ‘pissed,’” Nathaniel said, not even glancing at David. “I don’t really have a right to be, now do I?”

“I was mad at first.” Sarah’s voice was small as she spoke. “So yeah, if you want to be mad, go ahead. I kissed someone else, you have every right to be.”

“And so did you.”

“You kissed another man, when you’ve been committed to a woman for years. I kissed another man when I have a man. It’s a little different.” Sarah was blushing now, her face fiery red with embarrassment and shame.

“The common denominator is who it was.” Nathaniel shook his head. “I’m not mad, Sarah. I understand. There’s a lot of history here, and it’s making itself known, one way or another. It should have been expected, I guess.”

“So what do we do?” Sarah’s expression was miserable. “I’m sorry, Nathaniel. It won’t happen again.”

“Do you want it to?” He looked at her, his green eyes sharp and direct as they bored into hers.

“I...” She stopped.

She didn’t want to lie to him. She’d meant it when she’d told David that honesty was important to her in their relationship. But she also didn’t want to tell the man she loved, the man that she was going to marry, that she desired someone else, too.

“It’s okay, Sarah.”

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “I did, in the moment. But I don’t know how much of it was real, and how much was just memory, and nostalgia, and wishing...”

“Wishing things were different?”

“Not different, no. God, no!” Sarah said quickly. “If they were different, that would mean not having you, Nate, and I can’t bear the thought of that. It’s just...I thought I was over it. I really did.”

“I thought I was over it, too,” David said softly. “Both of you.”

“What do we do?” Sarah repeated helplessly.

Nathaniel glanced at David, and they shared a look. He took a step closer to Sarah, looking down at her. “When you thought about me kissing David, how did it make you feel?”

“Angry,” she whispered. “Jealous.”

“Why?”

“I told you.” She blinked up at him, confused. “I don’t totally know for sure. Angry that you kissed someone else. Jealous, maybe because I don’t want you touching anyone else, maybe because it was David, and he was mine once. Maybe because I’m not over him. Why are we going over this again, Nate?”

“What else did it make you feel? Anything?”

She closed her eyes, swaying slightly. She *had* felt something else, of course, later in the bath when she’d let her thoughts wander off. She’d thought about the two of them together, about watching them, about all three of them in the same room, and she’d felt...

“Aroused,” she said softly, not looking Nathaniel or David in the eye. “I was turned on. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“That’s what I wanted to *know*.” Nathaniel looked down at her and reached out, brushing his fingers over her cheek. “So if you still want him, and you want me, what if we tried that? All of us, together?”

She heard David’s soft gasp, felt herself flinch as she looked up at Nathaniel. “What? You can’t mean...”

“A threesome.” He raised an eyebrow. “Maybe it’ll get it out of our system. David and I satisfy the curiosity, you get to be with David again, we all have a fun night. Just as friends. No strings. And then we move on.”

Sarah bit her lower lip. She could feel her pulse racing in her throat, a sudden awareness of her body. *Both of them? At the same time?* She couldn’t say she hadn’t thought about it, of course, it had been almost all she could think about ever since Nathaniel had admitted to kissing David. But she hadn’t expected it to really *happen*.

Nathaniel stepped closer to her, and she could feel the solid warmth of his body, the familiar nearness of him. She looked up at him, biting her lower lip, and she saw the flare of desire in his eyes. “Do you want to?” she whispered.

“Yes,” he breathed, and she could feel it in him, the barely restrained desire that the idea had roused as soon as she’d said it had turned her on. “But only if you do. You have to be sure, Sarah. If not, we’ll forget I ever said anything.”

She glanced at David, hovering nearby, and she saw the wanting in his face, the hope that this was going to turn out a certain way. She knew which way that was. And when she thought of saying no, of putting an end to the whole crazy idea right then, she felt a wave of disappointment that told her exactly how she wanted it to go.

As an answer, Sarah leaned up, reaching for the collar of Nathaniel’s shirt, and she pulled him closer as she stood up on her toes, her mouth pressed hard against his.

She felt him gasp, felt his arm circle her waist as he pulled her hard up and against him, and as she felt his burgeoning erection pressing into her thigh she felt a wave of satisfaction that she could still turn him on like this after years. He hadn’t so much as touched David yet; this was her, all her, and the idea of what they were going to do together.

His tongue plunged into her mouth, his hands sliding down her back to grip her ass, her hips rocking against him as he kissed her thoroughly, his breath warm against her lips as he groaned.

“Let’s go to the bedroom,” he said hoarsely, when he had pulled away for a second. “That way we don’t have to worry about being too loud.”

Is this really happening? Sarah found it hard to believe as they tumbled into her and Nathaniel’s bedroom, shutting the door behind them firmly as she turned towards them—and then David’s hands were on her waist.

She could tell in the space of one second that he’d been holding himself in check, waiting for her to say yes. His hands gripped her sides, pulling her against him as he reached up and tangled the fingers of one hand in her hair, his mouth crashing down on hers as his hips pressed hard against her, and she could feel how hard he was already. “Are you sure?” he whispered, breathless, pulling back slightly from the kiss. “Are you sure, Sarah? Because I want you, but you know this could —”

She silenced him with a kiss, as hard as the one he had just given her. Her mouth opened slightly, her tongue tracing the edge of his lower lip as he gasped softly, and then his tongue was sliding against hers, plunging into her mouth, and she arched into him, just as she felt Nathaniel’s lips on the back of her neck as he pushed her long blonde hair aside, his hands smoothing down her sides to grip her hips just below David’s hands.

She felt dizzy with arousal, unable to quite believe what was happening. She was caught between two men—two men that she’d been with before, countless times—and yet it felt new and strange and a little scary in the best possible way, like the first night with someone you desperately wanted and hadn’t yet been with. She swayed between the two men, the sudden pressure of Nathaniel’s hips against her ass pressing her forward into David, and she felt that they were both hard, David against her thigh and Nathaniel behind her, and she shuddered with pleasure, suddenly feeling breathless.

“You’re overdressed,” she murmured to David, her fingers slipping under the edge of his shirt. “And you.” She glanced over her shoulder at Nathaniel, arching her back slightly so

that she pressed against him, and she heard him groan, his fingers tightening on her hips.

She felt his hands sliding under her shirt as she tugged at David's, and she found herself wishing that she'd dressed differently, that she was wearing something other than her old skinny jeans and a loose black t-shirt with just a plain black bra under it. She wasn't even sure if the panties she was wearing matched.

She hoped they did.

And then she pulled David's shirt off, tossing it to the floor, and she forgot to worry about what she was wearing. It had been years since she'd seen him shirtless, and she gasped softly as she took in the sight of him. He'd always been in good shape when they were younger, owing to a fast metabolism, half-hearted gym visits and hours working on the cars. But now his chest had broadened, and he had abs, the ridges of muscle visible in the flat plane of his stomach that she ran her hand down, toying with the small dark hairs there.

"Like what you see?" David's voice was low, almost growling, thick with lust. He looked hungrily at her as Nathaniel pulled her t-shirt off and tossed it aside, and his eyes swept over her breasts in the black cotton bra, the curve of her waist, the smoothness of her stomach. He reached for the waist of her jeans, his fingers fumbling with the buttons as he worked to undo them.

He'd only just gotten it undone when Sarah turned towards Nathaniel. "Now you," she whispered, and she heard David's indrawn breath as she unbuttoned Nathaniel's shirt, revealing his defined chest and muscular arms. He'd worked hard on his body in college and he hadn't let it go since he'd moved back, and it showed.

Nathaniel shook his shaggy blond hair back as he bent to kiss Sarah, her hands clinging to his upper arms as he cupped her face in one broad palm and kissed her soft and slow. She felt David behind her undressing her, sliding off her jeans as Nathaniel's hands moved over her waist, caressing her as she leaned into him.

Her skin felt hot, her body reacting to every touch, every brush of hands or mouth. She was naked and she didn't care, wasn't the slightest bit self conscious as she fumbled with Nathaniel's belt, wanting him to be equally naked, and David too. She was aching and wanted more, more than just kisses.

Nathaniel unhooked her bra as she felt David move down her body, his hands on her waist turning her towards him, and then Nathaniel's hands were on her breasts as David knelt in front of her, his hands sliding up her inner thighs.

She felt Nathaniel's lips on her neck, his fingers toying with her nipples, eliciting small gasps and moans from her as David pressed his mouth against one of her hips and then the other, his hand sliding up between her legs as Nathaniel flicked his tongue against the shell of her ear, drawing the lobe slightly into his mouth, and then she felt David's thumb against her clit as two of his fingers slipped into her.

She arched back against Nathaniel, crying out with the wave of ecstasy that washed over her, and she felt him pressing against her, hard and hot and thick, and she ground herself back against him, taking pleasure in the moan that spilled from his lips, vibrating against her skin as his erection throbbed against her.

And then David leaned forward, replacing his thumb with his mouth, his tongue sliding over her clit in a long, slow lick that left her trembling, only Nathaniel's arms helping to keep her steady as his mouth slid over her ear and throat, small kisses that left her shivering, his breath warm against her skin.

"I love you," he whispered in her ear. "And I want you, so badly." He rocked against her, groaning as his cock rubbed against the smooth skin of her ass. "But not until you come first. And then I'm going to slide inside of you...oh god," he groaned again as she pressed herself harder against him.

Sarah cried out as David sped up, his fingers and tongue moving in tandem as she rocked her hips against his mouth, her body a wash of sensation, hands and lips and tongues on every place where she might have wanted them.

No, *needed* them.

She was hurtling towards the edge, her pulse thundering in her ears as she felt David's tongue circling her clit, his fingers finding the spot that she liked best as if he'd never forgotten any of it, and then all she could do was hope that Nathaniel's arms would hold her as she came, because she couldn't hold herself upright anymore, all she could do was give into it as the waves of pleasure crashed over her, every sensation amplified by the fact that it was everywhere—David's mouth and fingers between her legs, Nathaniel's mouth at her throat, his fingers pinched her nipple and his hand on her hip.

She bucked and writhed between the two of them, moaning helplessly as the moment seized her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Somehow she made it to the bed, her watery knees giving way as Nathaniel laid her down, and she watched through dazed eyes as Nathaniel stepped forward, David still on his knees, Nathaniel's hand wrapping around his hard, pulsing erection as David leaned forward.

Sarah had never seen two men together before, and she watched, fascinated as David's lips encircled the tip of Nathaniel's cock, Nathaniel's head falling back as he groaned, his fingers tangling in David's hair and pulling his mouth closer. She'd expected to be jealous, watching her fiancé with another man, but instead she was more turned on than she could possibly have imagined.

She'd gone down on Nathaniel more times than she could count, and she knew what every indrawn breath and gasp meant, every twitch of his hips and moan, and as she watched David slide down, taking every inch of it into his mouth, she realized she liked it. She liked watching, liked seeing the familiar movements of Nathaniel's body, hearing the sounds she knew so well, and she liked watching David, seeing him do all of the things that she'd done so many times.

"Come up here," she whispered hoarsely, and she saw Nathaniel glance over at her quickly, his eyes darkened with lust as he took in the sight of her spread out across the bed, watching David go down on him.

The two men did as she asked, and she gently pressed David back onto the bed, Nathaniel kneeling by his head as David turned to take him into his mouth once more, his head

moving in a slow, careful rhythm, keeping Nathaniel impossibly aroused while never quite pushing him over the edge.

Sarah moved down David's body, her blonde hair falling over his chest as she kissed his neck gently, remembering that there was a spot just behind his ear that made him shiver—and it still did—that his back would arch when she trailed the tips of her fingers over his nipple, that his hips bucked up, his moan muffled around Nathaniel's cock, when she gripped his hips and trailed her tongue down the line of hair below his navel. He groaned when her hand encircled his shaft, thick and pulsing, aching to finally be touched, and she felt his whole body convulse when she slid her lips over the tip of it, licking just below it in the spot that she knew he liked, one hand sliding between his legs to stroke the soft flesh there.

She rolled her eyes up and saw Nathaniel grip the headboard as he thrust into David's mouth, and then he pulled himself free, his eyes fixed on Sarah. "I want to come inside of you," he groaned, sliding off of the bed to stand behind her as David looked down, his head immediately falling back in a long, deep groan as Sarah's lips slid down to the base of his cock, enveloping him as Nathaniel gripped her hips and began to slide inside of her.

He was rock hard, his cock filling her as she arched her back, her moans vibrating around David as she kept up her rhythm. She was on the verge of orgasm already just from watching, and it only took a few of Nathaniel's deep, hard strokes to send her over the edge. She came up gasping for air, the tip of David's cock brushing against her lips as his hips bucked up, wanting more as she cried out, her back arching, grinding against Nathaniel as she came.

"I'm so close," he groaned, his fingers digging into her hips as he moved faster, and she took David in her mouth again, gripping his shaft with her hand as she moved her lips and tongue exactly the way she knew he liked, and she saw his head fall back, his back arching, heard the desperate moan as he tried to keep from thrusting up too hard, and then she felt Nathaniel's hand between her legs, pushing her towards

another orgasm as he plunged into her, his own only moments away.

Somehow they all came at once, a fresh wave of pleasure washing over her as she heard Nathaniel groan, the words spilling from his lips as he buried himself as deeply inside of her as he could go.

“Oh god, Sarah, I’m coming, I…”

Then David’s moan, his hands gripping the sheets for dear life.

“I’m going to come, Sarah, now…”

He’d always warned her in time, in case she didn’t want it in her mouth, but in that moment there was nothing she wanted more. She felt Nathaniel, throbbing inside of her, his body spasming, hips grinding against her ass as he came, and David in her mouth, and it triggered her own orgasm, the waves washing over her as she convulsed between the two men, her back arching so hard she thought it might snap. The three of them for a moment were one.

The ecstasy like electricity conducting through them.

When it was over they fell, gasping onto the bed. Sarah was dizzy for a moment, weak from the force of it, and she felt Nathaniel’s fingers slide through hers, his thumb brushing over the back of her hand.

“Was that…what you wanted?” She rolled towards him, her face a little uncertain as reality began to sink back in. “You didn’t…with David…he didn’t with you…”

“It’s okay,” Nathaniel reassured her. “We did what we wanted in the moment. It was amazing, Sarah.”

“It was,” David confirmed, his lips brushing against the back of her neck as he rolled towards her.

“Didn’t you want to find out what it would be like to be with Nathaniel, though? And vice versa?”

“Well, I did get to do *something* to him.” David winked at her. “Sarah, it’s okay. It was amazing. Getting to kiss you again, touch you—”

“But this was the only time.” Sarah looked between the two men, her brow creased. “Isn’t that what you said you wanted, Nate?”

The two men exchanged glances. “What do *you* want?” Nathaniel asked.

She couldn’t think of what to say.

He reached for her cheek, turning her face towards him. “Sarah, listen to me,” he said gently. “If you want this to be a one-time thing, and go back to our normal lives after this, we’ll do that, and I’ll never wish for it to be different. I promise. I will be happy for the rest of my life with you and only you in my bed. I wouldn’t have asked you to marry me if I felt otherwise. But you know that I have other desires, too, and you know that I want David, and he wants me. Now that doesn’t matter, in and of itself. Wanting doesn’t have to mean having, and tonight will be plenty, if that’s what you want. I swear to you I’ll be satisfied with it. But if *you* want more, too, if you want us to have more, then I’m open to that. I want you to be happy, Sarah. It’s all I truly want.”

She could tell that he meant it. His eyes were sincere, his hand gentle against the side of her face. She could feel David behind her, the tension in his body, wondering what she would say. What *should* she say?

If she were being honest, really, truly honest...she wanted more. And watching David and Nathaniel had made her realize that she wasn’t jealous of them together. She didn’t know exactly what it was that she wanted from it...but what was the harm in exploring, a little? What was the harm in trying it out?

“I don’t know what I want,” she whispered. “What just happened was incredible. I never thought anything could be like that. But I don’t know if that works long term. I don’t know if we should try to go back to normal. But I don’t think I want it to end just yet.”

“So, what does that mean, exactly?” Nathaniel looked at her carefully. “I don’t want to upset you, Sarah. I don’t want to do anything that will hurt you.”

“It means we just see what happens. No rules, other than that we behave normally when Cora is around. Not like we’re dating, or anything like that, except between me and Nate, like usual. And when we’re alone,” she paused, remembering the moment they’d just had. “We see what happens naturally.”

“With the three of us?”

“And when it’s just you two.” Sarah saw Nathaniel’s eyes widen, and she nodded. “If you’re alone and something happens...that’s okay. I want us to explore this, really.”

“Then if you and David are alone, I’m okay with that too,” Nathaniel said firmly. “It’s only alright if it’s fair, and that’s fair.”

Sarah nodded. “I can’t believe we’re doing this,” she whispered softly. “It seems so surreal.”

David ran his fingers gently through her hair, brushing his lips against the corner of her jaw. “I’m glad we are, though,” he murmured. “I missed you, more than I can say. I missed you both.”

“We have to be careful,” Sarah said. “We can’t lose sight of being friends...of being a family, just because we’re trying this out. If it starts to get difficult...”

“We’ll put a stop to it,” Nathaniel promised. “We’ll take it slow.”

“I think taking it slow means I don’t stay the night,” David said, and Sarah heard a hint of regret in his tone. She turned towards him and he took the opportunity to kiss her, his hand smoothing over her silky hair as he gently pressed his lips against hers, soft and sweet.

“I’m glad we’re doing this,” he whispered. “Because as much as I want to find out what it’s like to sleep with Nathaniel, and believe me, I do,” he pulled back slightly from the kiss and let his eyes drift down her body to emphasize his point, “I want you again, so much. I’ve missed this.” He kissed her again, his tongue sliding along her lower lip, and then bent to kiss the spot at the corner of her throat. “And this.” She gasped softly, and she felt him smile against her. “And this...”

he whispered, his fingers brushing over her nipple. It hardened under his touch, and he made a small noise low in his throat.

To her shock, Sarah could feel the arousal starting to build again, somewhere deep in her belly, and she tilted her chin up, her hand sliding down David's chest, over his abs, down to his groin. To her surprise, he was half hard, his cock pulsing in her hand the moment she touched him, lurching upwards to press into her palm as she wrapped her fingers around him.

"Again?" she whispered in surprise, and David laughed, a small short sound as he pressed his forehead against hers. "It's been a long time since I've had anything this good," he whispered. "Or wanted anything so much."

She glanced at Nathaniel, and her eyes widened as she saw that he was aroused, too, his hand between his legs stroking lazily as he watched the two of them. "Go ahead," he said softly. "I want to watch."

David groaned, a sound of pure relief as he leaned forward, one hand curling around the back of Sarah's head as he pressed his mouth to hers, slanting over her lips as his tongue slid into her mouth, tasting her. "God, I've missed you," he whispered as he came up for air. "I've missed this."

They fell backwards onto the bed, David atop her, his hands on her breasts, cupping them in his palms, squeezing them gently as he kissed her, again and again, gasping as his hips rocked up into her hand. "I want you inside of me," Sarah whispered, her thighs spreading apart as she let go of him and angled herself so that he could slide over her, her legs coming up to wrap around his hips.

David moaned against her lips, his hands molding her breasts, sliding over them to her ribs, down to her waist and hips, and then he lifted her slightly, angling he slid into her in one swift stroke.

—

HE GROANED, the sensation of it sweeping up his spine and through his body, his back arching as he thrust into her as

deeply as he could go. Sarah's moan only added fuel to the fire, her body writhing under his as he plunged into her, doing all he could not to lose control and fuck her as fast as he could until he came. The sight of her again, naked and crying out with pleasure, because of *him*, because of his mouth and hands, because of his cock inside of her, was enough to nearly make him come on the spot. It took every ounce of effort he had to slow down, to move in and out of her in long, slow strokes that made her writhe and cry out, her hips arching up and grinding against him, pulling him more deeply into her.

The sight of Nathaniel only made it harder in every possible way, his long muscular body stretched out on the bed, his hand moving in slow strokes over his own rock-hard erection in a way meant to tease, to be a show for Sarah and David. He saw Sarah glance over at Nathaniel, her eyes darkening with lust as she watched him. He started to move towards her, his eyes darting down to her lips, but Sarah shook her head.

"David," she murmured, nodding towards him. "I know you want him. I know that's what David wants."

The idea of it sent a spark of lust through him so intense that he thought he might lose it then and there. He could only nod wordlessly as Nathaniel looked at him, his hand moving faster on his cock, and David swallowed hard, slowing his strokes so that he wouldn't come too soon. He wanted to make Sarah come again, too, more than once if he could, and once Nathaniel was inside of him...

He could feel her on the edge, could see the lust in her face as she watched Nathaniel move behind David and, as he felt Nathaniel press against him, heard Nathaniel's groan of pleasure, he felt Sarah's back arch, saw her fingers claw at the sheets, and then he felt the pulse of her orgasm as it washed through her, squeezing him tightly and drawing him into her, and he knew he was on the edge.

"I'm not going to last long," he hissed, his back arching as Sarah's fingers dug into his shoulders and he felt Nathaniel press forward.

“Good,” Nathaniel groaned. “Because I won’t, either.”

—

NATHANIEL HAD IMAGINED what it would be like so many times, David’s body under his hands, hard and muscular, the curve of his ass, the way David arched against him as he pushed forward slowly, into the almost unbearable tightness. It suddenly didn’t matter that he’d come just minutes before, he was as aroused as if he hadn’t orgasmed in days. Sparks of pleasure shot through his body as he gripped David’s hips and moved forward inch by slow inch, measuring his movements by the sounds that David made.

“Oh god,” David groaned. “That’s so good, oh…” he moaned again, and Nathaniel saw Sarah gasp as David pulled back, his cock sliding into her slowly again with every inch that Nathaniel moved forward, moving in tandem, and he felt her hips buck and grind under him, seeking out another orgasm.

—

“GOOD,” David whispered. “I want you to come for me again.”

He leaned forward, kissing her as Nathaniel pressed deeper into him, and he heard Nathaniel groan, felt his cock throb harder than ever as he fought to keep control.

He felt Nathaniel press against that spot, the one that would send him over the edge, and he began to move faster into Sarah, wanting to bring her there again, too.

He didn’t think it would take much.

—

SARAH HAD THOUGHT that what they had done earlier was better than she could have imagined, but this was beyond even that. The sight of Nathaniel inside of David, his head thrown

back, his face a mask of indescribable pleasure as he moved, was bringing her quickly to the brink again, and she wasn't sure how she would manage it, how she could possibly come again, but she could feel the sensations racing across her nerves, knew that she was almost there, and she could see that David was too. He was hard and thick inside of her, each motion touching every over-sensitive nerve in her body, and she gasped as she reached up, pulling his mouth down to hers.

"I'm going to come again," she whispered. "Come with me. Both of you."

David groaned against her mouth, his hips suddenly moving faster, plunging into her, and she felt him reach down to grab her hip hard as he thrust into her once more, as deeply as he could go, and she saw Nathaniel do the same, sliding into David to the hilt, his hips rocking as he ground against David to send him over the edge.

And then, it did.

They came together, all three of them, Sarah crying out against David's mouth as he spilled into her, his hips grinding against her with a force that she knew would leave her sore in the morning, but she didn't care. She didn't care about anything but the indescribable pleasure, better than anything she could remember, and the sounds of both men as they came, Nathaniel gripping David's shoulder as he bucked into him, the force of his second orgasm that night clearly every bit as good as the first.

They fell onto the bed for the second time that night, gasping and sweaty and exhausted. Nathaniel curled against Sarah, his face pressed into her shoulder, and David did the same, his mouth against her hair as his body stretched alongside hers.

"I can't stay," he whispered softly.

"I know," Sarah murmured. "I wish you could."

"I know."

When she and Nathaniel were alone again after David had left, in the warm darkness of the bedroom, she turned towards

him.

“Are you happy?” she whispered. “Is this okay?”

He nodded, still breathless. “Yes,” he murmured against her shoulder, his lips soft against her skin. “Yes, everything is okay.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

David had worried that it would be awkward the next day at work. That was his second thought as he drove back home afterwards, still feeling slightly dizzy from what had just taken place.

His first had been how, for the first time in a very long time, he was entirely, blissfully happy.

He didn't know what it meant, or what the future would hold, but even if it never happened again, he at least had that memory, now. He'd gotten another chance to be with Sarah, and he'd finally gotten to have a night with Nathaniel. He wanted more, but he knew better than to hope for it. Sarah had said she wanted to explore, but that could change.

She'd also said that she didn't mind if he and Nathaniel explored what was happening between them—and just the thought sent a jolt of desire through him that he couldn't ignore. It almost seemed too good to be true—and he couldn't help but think that surely, something would go wrong. Sarah would change her mind, or things would get awkward between the three of them, or they'd start to fight, or realize that it wouldn't work long term. And really, had anyone ever made a relationship with three people work long term? He didn't know of any. How would it affect Coraline, if they tried to have a real relationship? Would she be teased and picked on, because she had three parents? Would anyone really need to know? After all, Sarah and Nathaniel had been together for a long time, and David was Cora's biological father. So it would make sense for the three of them to be present. Could they just

pretend to all be good co-parents, and keep the romantic part of their relationship under wraps forever? Would Sarah want that?

Did *he* want that?

He rubbed his hand over his face as he pulled into the driveway. This was all more complicated than he had ever expected it to be. But nothing could change the warm glow that seemed to suffuse his entire body. He was happy. And he planned to enjoy it while it lasted.

But he *had* been worried about work. So when Nathaniel greeted him cheerfully the next day as he walked into the shop, David felt some of the tension in his shoulders loosen, and he relaxed by a few degrees.

But then, as he walked into the office and over to the coffee pot—it was one of Callie’s days off, so it was every man for himself that morning—he felt the warm, solid presence of Nathaniel behind him, and then Nathaniel’s mouth at the corner of his jaw, kissing him lightly.

It sent a shiver through David’s body, and he gasped slightly, almost dropping the pot.

“Be careful,” Nathaniel murmured. His breath was warm against David’s skin—and he knew that spot on his neck was a sensitive one. It meant he was doing it on purpose, and that only served to turn David on more. He closed his eyes.

“Nathaniel...”

“I think you meant to say ‘good morning?’” Nathaniel moved his hips slightly, and David could feel that he was starting to get hard. David could feel his own cock starting to respond, and he bit his lower lip, setting the pot down.

“Bill’s going to get here any minute,” he said hoarsely, trying to collect himself.

“He’s not here yet.”

David turned slightly, and Nathaniel’s lips skimmed over the edge of his jaw. “Nathaniel...we shouldn’t—”

“Oh?”

“We need to take this slow. But my body is saying anything but slow. And if you keep doing that, we’re going to wind up screwing in the office in the next thirty seconds or so, and we’re going to get caught.”

“You’re right.” Nathaniel groaned the words into David’s ear. “But I don’t want to stop.”

“Neither do I.”

Regretfully, Nathaniel peeled his body away from David’s, and David was careful not to look down. He didn’t want to see the evidence of how much Nathaniel had been turned on, it would just make it that much more difficult not to bend him over the office desk and have him right then and there.

But he was right, they had to be careful.

“How was Sarah this morning?” David said with a hint of wistfulness in his voice, and Nathaniel looked at him sympathetically.

“I know you didn’t want to leave last night. But—”

“I know, I know. We’ve got to take this slow. It’s what I just said, after all.” David grinned at Nathaniel, but it didn’t quite meet his eyes.

“She was happy. Cheerful. I’m very sure she didn’t regret any of it, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I was,” David admitted. “It’s just...it’s easy to think you want something, in the moment. But then when reality sets in, sometimes you realize you made a mistake.”

“You don’t feel that way, do you?”

“Does it look like I do?”

Nathaniel glanced down at the fly of David’s jeans, barely disguising the half erection he still had. It mirrored Nathaniel’s own situation. “No, you don’t look like you regret it a bit,” he said softly, his voice thickening with desire.

“We’ve really got to get out of this office. For god’s sake, just let me get my coffee.” David laughed as he said it, and Nathaniel took one more look before acquiescing and heading

out into the shop, leaving David to make his morning cup of coffee.

Bill phoned to say he wasn't coming in, as he wasn't feeling well, and both David and Nathaniel glanced at each other meaningfully. David was almost certain they would have ended up in the office right then, if Blake hadn't called him at exactly that moment.

"What was that?" Nathaniel asked as David hung up with a sigh.

"Blake's on his way over. He wants to make good on that body work that I owe him."

"You can give me some body work."

David rolled his eyes. "There's going to be a lot of these car jokes in our future, aren't there?"

"I certainly hope so." Nathaniel threw David a wink. "Let's get some work done on the Supra while we wait for Blake to get here."

When Blake arrived, it was in an old, beat up pickup truck, with a Spyder Eclipse hooked to the tow. He hopped out of the cab and waved to the two men, gesturing for them to come over.

"This is what I picked up," he said cheerfully, pointing at the car. "Think it's got some promise?"

Nathaniel looked dubious, but David shrugged as he circled it. It was in rough shape, sure, but he'd seen worse. "It's not much more than a chassis and some shell, but we can put some better guts in it and maybe turn her into a winner. I tell you what though, this is a hell of a lot more than 5k of work."

Blake grinned. "I'll put in the work too," he assured David. "And I'll pay for all of the parts, of course. I've got some ordered already."

David raised an eyebrow. "Do you know your way around rebuilding a car? And who told you what to get?"

Blake shrugged. “I talked to some of the other guys in the crew, and I’ve got some old friends that know cars. I didn’t want to put it all on you. Hell, Nate here has done a lot for me already. Even let me race with his RX-7 once until I got something of my own, just to get some money for parts.”

Unexpectedly, David felt a flash of jealousy.

The RX-7 was a nice car, and he wondered why Nathaniel would have risked letting a rookie drive it. He looked at Blake—really looked at him—for the first time, took in the thick brown hair, the bright hazel eyes. He was skinny, sure, but he wore it well, moving with a sort of loose-limbed grace that suggested that he was comfortable with his lankiness. And he had a handsome face. What if...

David shook his head.

The RX-7 was such a well-built car that it could practically win a race with the driver asleep at the wheel, and whatever Nathaniel had let Blake run it in had probably been a friendly race for a couple of grand, nothing too high stakes. There was no indication that there was anything between the two of them—and even if there had been, David knew it wasn’t any of his business. He’d had no claim on Nathaniel. He didn’t really, even now, but the jealousy told him that he wanted to. He could still feel it, burning slightly in his gut as he saw Blake turn towards Nathaniel, and the two men exchanged a knowing glance.

“Blake isn’t too bad at handling a car,” Nathaniel said. “It was an easy race, and he almost lost it anyway, but for a novice it wasn’t too bad.”

“I’ll get better,” Blake assured him.

David caught Nathaniel’s eye, and grimaced as Blake went to unhook the car and roll it into the garage.

“You look annoyed.” Nathaniel raised an eyebrow. “Regretting agreeing to work on the car?”

“You let him drive the RX-7?” David blurted it out, knowing he sounded jealous and hating it. But he couldn’t seem to keep his mouth shut.

Nathaniel burst out laughing. “By god, you’re jealous!”

“Keep your voice down,” David hissed. “I’m not jealous.”

“Yeah you are.” Nathaniel tried to contain his laughter, shaking his head. “Trust me, Blake’s straight as an arrow. And not my type, anyway. I was just trying to help out the new kid on the block, let him drive an easy race so he could get some capital to get wheels of his own. That’s all.”

“Yeah, I know.” David grunted, his face flushing with embarrassment. “I told you I wasn’t jealous.”

“Sure.” Nathaniel rolled his eyes, smirking at David as he turned to follow Blake to the garage.

It had turned out that he hadn’t needed to worry about things being awkward between him and Nathaniel, but what he really should have worried about was keeping their new relationship under wraps with Blake around. It was torture for David not to flirt with Nathaniel, or touch him. For all the time that they’d known each other, David had kept his attraction and his feelings tightly under lock and key. Now he was allowed to flirt, to touch, to make jokes, to gingerly explore the new feelings that they’d admitted to, and with Blake there he had to pretend as if none of that existed. Everything Nathaniel did seemed to be heightened to a new level of attractiveness, as if they were in some ridiculous rom-com montage where every time he did the simplest thing, it was turned into something arousing. It made David feel like a stupid, horny teenager all over again, feeling breathless watching Nathaniel wipe sweat off of his face and leave a smear of oil there, or seeing how his jeans tightened across his thighs when he squatted down to grab a wrench.

He didn’t hate it, though. It was nice to have a reason to feel that again. To feel something other than loneliness, to feel like the days to come would be something other than bleak and repetitive.

To feel as if there was something to look forward to.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

For Nathaniel, the week flew by. In between their usual work at the shop, he and David had put in double hours helping Blake work on the Spyder—even though David was the one who owed the work, Nathaniel wasn't about to pass up an excuse to spend more time with him. The newest aspect of their relationship aside, he'd missed his friend. He'd pretended for years that there hadn't been something missing in his life without David there, but they'd once been best friends, closer than he'd ever been with anyone other than Sarah. He'd never made another friend like David since then. It was good to have him back.

The three of them had carefully avoided talking too much about what they were to each other. With how many hours he and David had been putting in at the garage, they hadn't interacted much all together. David and Sarah had had their weekly family dinner, and when Nathaniel had come home that night, David had already left. Nathaniel hadn't asked if anything had happened between the two of them, but from Sarah's attitude, nothing had seemed out of the ordinary.

He didn't really know what to say about it. He didn't want to talk about it too much, and jinx it, or spook Sarah. He liked what was happening, this burgeoning affection that they had. There'd been nothing else physical since their impromptu threesome, but he could feel the tension in the air on the few occasions the three of them had been in the same room, and there was plenty of it between him and David on a daily basis, too. Opportunities to be alone at the garage were rare, but every time he passed David, he felt the crackle in the air

between them. He knew it was going to come to a head sooner or later, hopefully when they were all three at home, and able to do something about it. He wanted a repeat of the other night more than he wanted to breathe, he thought sometimes. Having the woman he loved and the man he was closest to in bed at the same time was one of the best things that had ever happened to him.

He knew better than to expect it to go on forever. But he wanted a chance to have it more than just the once.

“Hey, bro! Wanna put something up tonight?”

Nathaniel was broken out of his reverie by Jackson, a member of a crew they had a friendly rivalry with, shouting at him from across the lot. He shrugged at Jackson as he approached, leaning back on the Skyline he’d brought with him that evening. “Maybe. Depends on what you’re offering.”

“It’s you or your other dude, the one that just came back. You guys are the best, and I wanna test my new ride up against the best.”

“Thanks for the compliment.” Nathaniel grinned. “Looks like I’m your only shot then, though. David still hasn’t recovered from Lexie taking the back end out of his car.” He glanced over at David as he said it, hoping he was still too deep in discussion with Carlos to hear Nathaniel reference that last race. David was still pissed about it, so much so that he almost hadn’t come out. He hadn’t wanted to deal with Lexie’s ribbing. Fortunately, she was nowhere in sight.

“Just wanna take your place at the top of the heap.” Jackson winked at him. “Pink slips for the Skyline? I’ll put up my import. I’ve got her here tonight.”

Nathaniel raised his eyebrows. “Now I’m interested.” He’d wanted to get his hands on an original import for a while, and he was fairly confident that he could take Jackson. It might be close, but he was sure enough to risk it.

“Sure thing,” Nathaniel said casually. “The Skyline versus your import. Sounds like a worthwhile use of my time.”

Jackson grinned. “So, are we gonna be first tonight then?”

“Let’s start the night off with a show.” Nathaniel patted the hood of his car. “Rest of the night will be boring after this.”

He waved at David as Jackson headed towards his own car. “I’m about to race Jackson,” he said, casually touching David’s arm. He wanted to do more, much more, but he kept it tightly in check. “Pink slips, for the Skyline.”

David raised an eyebrow. “You love that car. He’s putting up something good?”

“Yeah, an import he’s been working on. Ought to be worth it, and I figure I’ll walk away with two cars.” Nathaniel winked at him.

“God, you’re cocky.”

“You love it,” Nathaniel whispered as he leaned down, under the guise of digging his keys out of his pockets. “Come cheer me on, bro,” he said a little louder. “I’m going to go win a car.”

He left David standing with the rest of the crew as he revved up the Skyline and pulled it up to the start. He grinned at Jackson. “Ready to lose that old piece of junk?”

“If you saw what I’ve put into this baby, you wouldn’t be so cocky,” Jackson replied from his window.

Just seeing it had Nathaniel excited, but he kept his cool, his poker face firmly set. The car Jackson had brought was an original AE86 Corolla Trueno, and it was definitely a Japanese import. The driver’s side was on the right in Jackson’s, whereas Nathaniel had converted the Skyline so the driver’s seat was on the left side. It enabled him to reach across and shake Jackson’s hand. “I’ll check it out after I get it back to the shop,” Nathaniel said with a wink. “Now are we going to talk trash all day or are we going to race?”

“I’m ready when you are, sweetheart.” Jackson smirked.

Nathaniel cranked the engine on the Skyline and gave everything a quick scan. It looked good and felt even better. This had been one of his favorite cars since he was a kid, and building it had been a labor of love over several years. He was a little hesitant to put it up as stakes, but he was confident that

Jackson would be the one giving up the pink slip for the AE86, and he couldn't pass up the chance to snag it. He'd converted the Skyline, but if he got his hands on the Corolla he planned to leave it as is, and put even more work into it than Jackson already had.

And, if the worst happened and he did lose, there were worse places for the Skyline to go. He liked Jackson, and the crew that Jackson ran. They'd always had a friendly rivalry, and he knew Jackson would take good care of the car if Nathaniel did lose it.

Hell, I might even be able to win it back with some free upgrades later, he thought wryly. But he didn't think he was going to lose. He revved the engine a little, and the Skyline purred like a kitten. He'd done good work with this one, Nathaniel thought.

"Hooooo boy that sounds nice!" Jackson yelled from the AE86. "But listen to this music, man!"

Jackson revved the AE86, to a chorus of whoops and hollers from his own crew, and Nathaniel noticed the distinct sound of turbo, among a few other things. It was going to be a closer race than he'd thought.

He kept his poker face, though, grinning at Jackson as he pointed to the traffic light in front of them. It was red, the two girls standing underneath it shifting from foot to foot with flags upheld. Once it turned green they'd drop them, and it would be time to go.

Nathaniel looked over everything one last time, adjusted himself, and settled in. It'd been awhile since he raced just man to man, car for car, and it felt *good*. No dirty racing, no tricks or wondering if some new punk would pull something that could get you killed just so he could try and make a name for himself. There were far too many of those these days, in his opinion. Jackson raced fair, and this was simply a test of each man's skill behind the wheel and their ability to build a machine for it. It was pretty evenly matched, too, and he liked that. A real competition. He gripped the wheel, and waited for the moment when they would both leap off of the line.

The instant the light turned green, both cars shot forward, with Jackson's car coming out in front almost immediately. Nathaniel wasn't worried though, this wasn't a ten-second race, and who was faster off the line wasn't a huge deal. He shifted into third and fell in behind Jackson. It was late enough that traffic was sparse, and they zig zagged through cars easily, breezing past them as if they were standing still. Jackson threw the AE86 into a drift around a corner and Nathaniel caught his eye as he did the same.

The racers glided around the turn together, past curious onlookers. Nathaniel came out of the drift just a bit early and got a bit ahead, easily avoiding a minivan and shifting into fourth for a straightaway. It became clear that Jackson had the advantage in a straight line, though, as he quickly caught up to Nathaniel and then swept past him. As Jackson passed him, he winked, and they both laughed as they caught each other's eye.

Even with the stakes, it was still a race they were both having fun with.

Nathaniel felt more relaxed than he had in ages while racing, and he mentally played out the rest of the route they were on.

He'd just have to take the race in the turns then. The Skyline was a drifting machine after all, famously raced in the hills outside of Tokyo. The AE86 was as well, the route they'd picked was perfect for it. Jackson wasn't as comfortable in the tight corners though, and he could take advantage of that. They both slid into another turn, and Jackson went far too wide, allowing Nathaniel to close some of the gap by staying on the inside. They came out of the turn together, and Nathaniel spotted trouble almost immediately.

A local cop was parked in the lot of a diner. Nathaniel caught a glimpse of the cop taking a sip of coffee just before they locked eyes and the cop fumbled his coffee, hitting the lights immediately.

Nathaniel cursed and dropped into second gear. He shot past the cop just as the lights came on.

So much for a relaxing race.

He swerved into a side street, and saw that Jackson must have caught sight of the cop as well, as he took off in a different direction. It was good thinking on his part. The cop might catch one of them, but not both. The race was still on, though. Whoever got back to the parking garage first would be keeping both cars.

Nathaniel checked his side mirror and caught a glimpse of red and blue lights coming around the corner that he'd just rounded. His heart was pounding, the adrenaline at full tilt. It'd been a while since he'd been chased in the middle of a race, and he hoped to god he didn't get caught. He didn't want it for Jackson, either, but Sarah would give him hell. She knew it was a risk—but that wasn't going to keep her from being pissed if she had to put up bail for him.

He took another hard turn, and then yet another immediately afterward in an attempt to lose the cop. He kept a mental note of where he was at the same time, still trying to finish the race. He didn't want to lose the Skyline, and Jackson had the advantage in that he wasn't the one being chased—unless the cop had caught sight of him and put someone else on his tail.

But hell, Nathaniel thought, maybe this extra push will be what wins the race.

He took yet another turn and pulled down an alley, hoping that he'd weaved his way through enough side streets to lose the cop. It killed him to do it, knowing that it might make the difference between winning and losing, but he eased off the gas and coasted for a moment, in case the cop was listening for the engine. A few tense moments ticked by as he stared in the rearview, mentally crossing his fingers. Then, he saw the lights again. They rolled past, and Nathaniel held his breath.

The moment he saw the cop car backing up, he slammed the gas to the floor. He slung the Skyline out of the alley and down a side street. He glanced back and saw the cop come out of the alley. It occurred to him that he could win this race the same way he was going to win the race with Jackson, in the

turns. He sped down the street and looked for an intersection with the kind of turn he'd need, and preferably in the direction he was going. He actually eased up on the gas, letting the cop catch up.

He spotted what he was looking for, a left hand turn that formed an acute angle. He downshifted and threw the Skyline into a tight drift. The cop was right on his tail, and unwisely attempted the same maneuver. The Crown Vic was far too heavy though, and didn't even come close to making it. The cop didn't have a chance. He slammed directly into a parked car, and Nathaniel chanced a look back. All he could see of the driver's seat was a deployed airbag, so he figured he'd be in the clear. There was a chance the cop had called in a description of the car, but it wasn't every day that you saw a 1972 Skyline cruising the streets of Oakland, so Nathaniel figured the best description the cop got out was "late model silver import," and that could be just about anything.

If he finished the race quickly, he'd be out of the woods.

After a moment to figure out how far off track he'd gotten, Nathaniel realized he might still win the race. He was maybe a quarter mile from the garage. Two decent straightaways and a couple of turns and he'd be there. There was no telling if Jackson would already be waiting for him, or if Nathaniel would be going home as the proud owner of an '86 Trueno AE86, but he was going to drive like there was a chance.

He floored the gas down the straightaway he was on and slid into the first turn. He mentally mapped out the rest of the race in his head. He would come out of this turn, then take the next left and be close enough to see the garage, two hundred yards at the most. But as he came out of the turn, he saw something that drove that thought straight out of his head.

It was Jackson. He was coming out of a turn on the far end of the street, so that they were facing each other. He couldn't help but laugh.

Now it's a race.

He shifted and headed for his left turn, while Jackson did the same. They both arrived at nearly the same time, and

crisscrossed as they went into the turn together.

Nathaniel found himself thinking it was an odd feeling. Normally when you went into a turn with another racer you were both coming from the same direction, not opposite ones. It felt somehow wrong to him, but he kept his focus. Jackson, however, must have been feeling the same way. Maybe it was the added strangeness of being on the wrong side of the car, but the back end of the AE86 slid out, and then into a fire hydrant. The hydrant shot up into the air in a jet of water, and Jackson fought to correct it. It hadn't come close to totaling the car, but it had definitely done some damage. Nathaniel watched from the rearview as Jackson skidded into the street and gave chase.

There was no hope of Jackson winning though, not after that hit. Nathaniel coasted into the parking garage with ease, pulled into a spot and got out, watching Jackson limp the AE86 into a parking spot near his. He laughed despite himself. He might have won the car, but it looked like it was going to be a headache to fix. Jackson climbed out of the car, laughing as well.

“How is it you get chased by the cops, but *I'm* the one that ends up with a busted ride?!”

“Just proves who the better driver is.” Nathaniel winked. “Hand over those keys, buddy. And I hope you know you're paying for that body work. You break it, you buy it.”

“Oh, is that how it's gonna be?” Jackson tossed Nathaniel the keys, snorting. “Dude, you work at a garage. And you better hope that cop really did take off, it's not gonna matter if we're both in jail. How did you lose him, anyway?”

“He just couldn't keep up,” Nathaniel said, laughing as he pocketed the keys. “Don't worry, he didn't get a good look at me, and he's probably too dumb to know a Skyline from a Camry. We're fine.”

He'd spoken too soon. Just as he turned to say something to David, who was walking up ready to congratulate him, the sound of sirens cut through the night air. They were close—far too close. And it sounded like multiple.

Jackson's eyes went wide. "I guess they figured it out. We gotta get out of here!"

"Shit." Nathaniel spun and wrenched the door open. "David, get in. Jackson, you got a ride? Leave the AE86, I'll come back for it. It's not going to get anyone anywhere fast."

"I'm good, bro!" Jackson shouted, running for one of his crew member's cars. "Just get out of here!"

"Get ready," Nathaniel said grimly as he glanced at David. "We're about to go for a ride."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The next several minutes went by in a blur. It was a good thing he trusted Nathaniel's driving, David thought as he fastened his seatbelt and hung on for dear life, because Nathaniel was bound and determined to lose the cops any way he could.

Luckily for them, there were more cars than the cops could all follow, and it split them up as they started to try to chase down the racers. Nathaniel did wind up with a tail, though, and he zigzagged through traffic, taking turns so tightly and speeding down back alleys so small that David was amazed the mirrors weren't ripped clear off.

David was breathless by the time they saw the garage, and Nathaniel sped into it as the sound of sirens drew closer. The second it came to a stop David leapt out of the car, dragging down the door and panting as he pressed his hands against the cool metal, trying to catch his breath. "Fuck, that was close," he whispered. The sound of the sirens were fading. They were in the clear.

"They almost had us that time." Nathaniel leaned back against the side of the car, breathing in slowly to try to calm his racing heart.

"Yeah." David leaned against the car, next to Nathaniel and closed his eyes briefly. "That right turn down the alley was a smart idea."

When he opened his eyes, Nathaniel had turned towards him. His shoulder brushed against David's, the heavy jean

material of his jacket scraping against David's slick leather, and in that second the air between them was suddenly charged with electricity.

"We made it, though." David breathed, and then Nathaniel's mouth was on his, hard.

In that second, he was immediately transported back to the night in his room a few weeks ago, when he had kissed Nathaniel. He remembered the hesitation in Nathaniel's body, the slow lean into David as he'd given in. There was no hesitation now. Nathaniel was pressing against him, crushing him against the side of the car, and David arched against him without thinking, reaching up to bury his hands in Nathaniel's shaggy blond hair as he kissed him back.

He'd wondered if it would ever happen again, after the other night. They had talked about it, tried to figure out where it was all going. It was a loaded question, too full of possibilities that could change all of their futures. But anything could change their futures. Getting caught on the streets that night could have changed their futures. The adrenaline was running hot in his blood, the air hot and heavy around them, and he didn't care. He wanted Nathaniel again. And the thick, rigid length pressing against his thigh through Nathaniel's jeans seemed to indicate that Nathaniel wanted it, too.

As his hips ground against Nathaniel, David heard him gasp. He took advantage of it, running his tongue along Nathaniel's lower lip and into his mouth, his fingers digging into Nathaniel's skull as he felt the slide of their tongues together, tasted the sweet acidity of beer, smelled the lingering scent of sweat and exhaust on Nathaniel's skin and clothes. His skin felt hot and tight, his body aching with lust, his cock throbbing madly as it pressed against the front of his jeans. He was dying to come already, but not too soon. He wanted to savor the feeling of desire for a little longer, wanted to feel the sweet ache pulsing through his blood. What if it didn't happen again? What if they came to their senses afterwards, or tomorrow, and realized that they were playing with fire?

But not that night, David thought as he kissed Nathaniel deeply, as Nathaniel arched forward and pressed him harder

against the side of the car, his hips grinding against David's as he sought some kind of relief. Nathaniel's hands were on David's hips then, sliding up under the thin fabric of his shirt, stroking over the smooth skin of David's lower back, around his waist, down the flat plane of his stomach to his belt.

David thought he might forget how to breathe as Nathaniel yanked open his belt and dragged the zipper down on his tight jeans, his hand slipping inside David's underwear to grip the shaft of his cock, his hand sliding up and down once, twice as he slipped it free, and before David could say anything or do more than arch his hips into Nathaniel's hand, seeking out the delicious friction of skin against skin, Nathaniel was sinking to his knees.

“Oh god,” David moaned.

How many times had he fantasized about that, especially after he'd found out exactly how good a blowjob could be? How many times had he wondered what it would feel like to have Nathaniel's full, warm lips on the tip of his cock, doing all the things that he would know intimately would push David over the edge?

And now he was looking down at Nathaniel on his knees, tossing his shaggy blond hair back as he pursed his lips around the tip, his tongue sliding out to flick beneath it and swirl around, gripping David tightly as he started to slide down, his mouth enveloping David in the sweet, delicious heat of it.

“Fuck,” David whispered, his hips thrusting forward unconsciously as Nathaniel worked his way down, taking it into his mouth inch by inch. The pleasure was overwhelming, and he saw Nathaniel fumble with his own belt with one hand, freeing his thick, aching cock as he let go of David's and slid down to the base, the muscles of his throat flexing around him.

“Oh *god*,” David groaned, his hips jerking. “Careful, or I'm going to come in your mouth...oh, fuck...”

Nathaniel's eyes rolled up to look at David, and he winked as he slid back up, his tongue rubbing along every inch of the underside of David's shaft as he reached down to trail his

fingers along his own, wrapping them around it as his cock jerked up into his hand, begging to be touched.

He sped up a little then, sliding his mouth up and down in a perfect rhythm as he worked the base of David's cock with his hand, never breaking the rhythm for a second even as he began to stroke his own with more intensity, unable to stop from touching himself.

And then, as David began to gasp, Nathaniel let his mouth slip off of it, looking up at David as he let go of his own erection at the same time. "I want to come inside of you," he said raggedly. "And I'm already on the edge."

"Me too," David whispered hoarsely. "God, just finish me off and you can fuck me any way you want." His cock was hard as iron, standing out rigidly away from his body, and throbbing in the cool air of the garage. He thought if Nathaniel didn't do something in a second he wouldn't be able to stop himself from grabbing it and finishing it himself, and he didn't want that. He wanted to erupt in Nathaniel's mouth, wanted...

"Is that what you want?" Nathaniel looked at him wickedly, reaching down to touch himself again. "You want to come in my mouth?"

"Oh god yes." David couldn't think of anything he wanted more in that second, the need to orgasm making his entire body feel like a raw nerve, aching and desperate to be touched. His hips arched forward again without him meaning to, and he heard Nathaniel chuckle deeply in his throat before leaning forward.

There was no teasing this time, no slow ascent to the top. Nathaniel deep throated him, his lips brushing against the base of David's abdomen as he slid down in one quick motion, and then his hand wrapped around David as he slid back up a fraction. It was fast, and hard, his hand and lips and tongue all working in tandem, and David leaned his head back against the car, his hands balling into fists as he arched his hips, meeting each slide of Nathaniel's lips with a thrust that he couldn't stop, and then he felt it in a hot wave, rushing over his body. The world shrank down to him and Nathaniel, to the

pleasure coursing through him, and he groaned aloud, his whole body pulsing with ecstasy as he came in Nathaniel's mouth, wave after wave of it sending shudders through him.

And then Nathaniel was on his feet, and he spun David around without a word, his slick cock pressing up against David, and he gripped David's hips as he began to slide into him. "Oh god that's good," he groaned as he felt the tight heat around him, and he began to move, slowly at first and then with more intensity.

To his astonishment, David could feel his cock starting to swell again, thickening with each stroke of Nathaniel inside of his body, and he moaned, tossing his head back as Nathaniel's fingers dug into the sides of his hips.

"Fuck, I don't want this to stop," Nathaniel groaned, picking up his pace. He leaned forward, pressing his mouth against the side of David's neck, the back of it, down to the top of his spine and over his shoulder, trailing his lips across the expanse of skin in small kisses. He slid one hand down David's hip and around, and felt the hardening erection there. "Oh," he moaned against David's shoulder. "Already?"

David's response was to thrust his hips against Nathaniel's hand, the wet flesh sliding easily through Nathaniel's fist, and Nathaniel chuckled as he thrust into David again, faster this time.

"Touch it," Nathaniel whispered, his fingers trailing lower between David's legs. "See if you can make yourself come again when I do. But it's not...going...to take long...oh god!"

David could feel how hard Nathaniel was, could feel each throbbing inch of him sliding in and out, and he gripped his own cock hard, suddenly wanting desperately to come again, to feel himself explode in his hand as Nathaniel came inside of him. That thought, that image was enough to make him rock hard again, his cock pulsing as he began to stroke fast and hard, the motions less about the journey and more about that final, blissful finish.

He could hear Nathaniel's quick, panting breaths behind him, could feel the tension in the other man, the desperate

need in the way he was gripping David's hips, pulling David back against him to meet each hard thrust. They were faster, harder, and he heard Nathaniel groan deeply, heard him curse as he plunged in and out, and then as David's own cock throbbed in his hand, ready to explode at any second, he heard Nathaniel cry out.

"Oh fuck, I'm coming, oh god yes," and David felt the orgasm wash over him in a sudden hot rush, as Nathaniel buried himself inside of David, rocking and grinding against him as David came in his hand, the two of them locked together in a hot, grinding embrace.

For a second David was so breathless and dizzy that he thought he might pass out. He braced himself against the car with one hand, pressing his forehead against the cool metal, and he felt Nathaniel move away. He felt the absence of him viscerally for a moment, his stomach knotting as he thought that that might have been the last time, that he might not get to touch Nathaniel like that again. What if it had been? What would he do? How would he bear it?

He got his clothing back on and fixed before he turned around, wiping his hand on one of the shop rags. Nathaniel looked at him, and for a moment neither of them said anything.

"What are we doing?" Nathaniel whispered, and David felt every muscle in his body tense, waiting for the inevitable next words, for Nathaniel to tell him that this was all wrong, that they couldn't continue, that it was over.

And then Nathaniel's body was pressed up against his once more, Nathaniel gasping as he kissed David again, his hands knotting in David's dark hair as he pushed him against the car. "I can't seem to stop," he whispered against David's mouth, their foreheads pressed together. "We should stop."

"I don't think I have another one in me," David laughed, and Nathaniel laughed too, short and shaky as they stayed pressed together, breathing into the darkness of the garage.

"What are we going to do?" Nathaniel closed his eyes. "You said you wanted this once, a long time ago. Us. Together."

Do you still want it?"

The world spun for David in that moment, shifting and rearranging itself, the possibilities suddenly seeming endless. He could say no. It would be a lie, but it would be simpler, it would push the reset button, it would put them back to where they'd been before. Friends, one of them getting the girl, their lives going on as every other ordinary person's life went on.

Or he could say yes, and see what happened after that. He could risk everything for the chance to have everything. He could find out if the things he'd once dreamed about could be reality.

If I'm with you, then Nathaniel has to be there too. It can't be just us. Not anymore, not ever again. And I don't want it to be. I mean it, David.

Sarah's words echoed in his head, the picture of her staring at him across the kitchen etched into his brain, her knuckles turning white as she gripped the edge of the counter, her lips still pink from kissing him, her eyes wide. Still the girl he'd loved. Could he have both? Was it really not too much to ask? She had said that she wanted to explore. But he knew that what Nathaniel was asking for went beyond exploration. He wanted something real. And so did David.

"Yes," he whispered, swallowing hard. He kissed Nathaniel again, savoring the sensation of Nathaniel's lips, full and warm, pressed against his own. He kissed his cheek, his jaw, his neck, the skin there warm and faintly salty, the uniquely familiar scent of Nathaniel filling his senses, sending a warm rush of desire through his blood.

"Yes?" Nathaniel pulled back slightly, looking directly at David. "Do you mean it? We tell Sarah that we want to try this? For real?"

"What else can we do?" David shook his head. "I can't let this go. And I don't think you can, either."

Nathaniel shook his head. "No, I can't. All of us, together, the other night," he hesitated. "It was good. It went well. And Sarah enjoyed it, I know she did. So why not try for more?"

Why not try to make this real? It's unconventional, that's for sure. But do any of us really care?"

"Sarah might," David said quietly. "For Cora's sake. She might not if it were just the three of us, but she's going to care what others think, because she has a child to worry about. We *all* have a child to worry about," he corrected.

"And what if the best thing to teach her is that it's okay to be yourself, whoever that turns out to be, and love whoever you love?" Nathaniel countered. "Anyway, we'd have some time to worry about that. She's used to the three of us being at the house together, we'd just keep any affection to ourselves, and wait to see if things worked out before making it plain that we're together. And as far as explaining it," he sighed. "Some things are better worried about when the time comes."

David was silent for a long moment. "Alright," he said finally. "Alright. We'll talk to Sarah. We'll tell her we want this to be more."

"Real," Nathaniel whispered, and the scent of him filled David's nostrils again, heady and intoxicating.

"Yes," David whispered in return, his lips a breath away from Nathaniel's. "Real."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

His opportunity came a few nights later, when he went over for the weekly family dinner. Nathaniel was at the garage for the night, working on the AE86 he'd proudly won—he couldn't stop talking about it—and David's heart was pounding as he pulled into the driveway. He sat in the car for a moment, looking at the windows of the house, the lights glowing from the inside. He was a guest there, tonight and every other night, but what would it be like to go inside and have it be his home? Or for Nathaniel, Sarah and Coraline to move in with him, for Cora to spend every night in the room he'd lovingly put together for her, for them to all be a family? What would it be like to not live his life in bits and pieces—a night with Sarah and Cora here, a day with Nathaniel there, an evening with Sarah here?

Trying to make their fledgling relationship into something real and solid might blow it up. But he couldn't stand living in limbo. There had been a time when he hadn't been honest with himself about who he was or what he really wanted, afraid that it was too out of the norm, too unconventional, too risky. And because he'd tried to bury that part of himself and ignore it, he'd lost Sarah the first time.

If he didn't risk this, he might lose her again. He might anyway. But it was time to be true to himself, and what he wanted. And he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he wanted this.

He walked into the house, hitting the doorbell to announce his arrival as he opened the door. Sarah had left it unlocked for

him, and it made him feel warm to think of how much things had changed in just the short amount of time. Not all that long ago, he'd had to wait on the porch until she came out to let him in. Now he could just walk in, almost as if he belonged there. He was beginning to feel as if he did.

Cora ran up to him, yelling: "Da-da, da-da!" over and over as she grabbed him around the knees, nearly tripping him. They hadn't quite figured out yet if she was trying to say "daddy" or just his name, but he chose to believe the former. And at any rate, she was happier to see him every time, and more and more comfortable with him. And he loved her with a depth that he'd never known he could have for a child. All of his original anger with Sarah for not having told him sooner had dissipated, replaced with gratitude that she finally had told him after all. He'd have many more years with Cora than he had had without, and seeing her bright, shining face looking at him just reinforced his desire to convince Sarah that they could manage to all be together.

He didn't want to just come in and out of the house for weekly family dinners and babysitting nights. He wanted all of it. He wanted early morning wakeups and doctor's visits and picking her up from school, he wanted evenings with Nathaniel and Sarah watching tv or playing games after they put her to sleep, he wanted nights in bed with them. He wanted family nights with the four of them together and date nights with the three of them. There were plenty of logistics to work out, sure, but that didn't matter. They'd figure it out, somehow.

He thought about it all through dinner. "Nathaniel said you almost got caught by the cops the other night," Sarah said with a raised eyebrow as she spooned mac and cheese onto Cora's plate, setting that and the sliced chicken in front of her while David fixed Sarah's plate. "Think the two of you might ever find another hobby?"

David raised an eyebrow at her. "You loved the cars and the races. You used to come out with us, back in the day," he reminded her.

"Yeah, but you know I can't do that anymore. And if one of you were to get caught," Sarah glanced at him. "There's a

lot more at stake now.”

She'd included him in that, and it made David's heart race to think about it. “Worried about me, are you?” he asked, trying to sound casual as he put her plate on the table and started to serve up his own.

“You're Cora's father,” Sarah said, sounding slightly exasperated. “Of course I'm worried.”

“Is that the only reason?”

Sarah looked at him curiously, but didn't say anything for a moment. When they sat down, she changed the topic to something less loaded, and it wasn't until they were cleaning up, after Cora had gone to bed, that he had the nerve to bring it up again.

“You didn't answer me earlier,” David said quietly as he slid the plates into the dishwasher.

“About what?” Sarah wouldn't quite look at him.

“If Cora is the only reason you worry about me.”

She bit her lower lip, setting the cups into the washer and straightening. She was very close, David thought, and it made his pulse start to race in his throat. He wanted to reach out and touch her, take her hand, but he didn't. He didn't want to push too much.

“You know it's not,” she said softly. “But we agreed not to talk about it too much. To just let things be, and see what happens.”

“I don't know if I can do that,” David admitted. “Sarah, did Nathaniel tell you everything about the other night?”

“He didn't say much.” Sarah poured dishwashing liquid in the machine and shut the front of it with a decisive click. “But I saw the bite mark on his neck. David, I said whatever happened between the two of you was alright. I'm not asking questions.”

“That's the thing, I *want* you to ask,” David said, his words jumbling together as he started to speak all in a rush. “I don't want it to just be dinners with you and Cora, and sometimes

you coming over to my place, and nights with you and Nathaniel, and sometimes kisses with you on the porch, and sometimes post-race sex with him in the garage. I mean, I *do* want all of those things,” he said quickly, seeing the confused look on her face, “but I want them all together. I want the times when it’s just you and me, or you and him, or him and I to be out of the ordinary, because the three of us sleep in the same bed every night. I want dinner every night with all of us, and I want to be able to sleep over and it not be weird. I want us to be a family again, Sarah.”

“That’s a lot to ask,” she whispered, her eyes wide. “David, what you’re suggesting—”

“I know it’s out of the norm. And I’m not asking for it tonight, or tomorrow. I’m not suggesting I move in now. I just...I want us to work towards it. I want us to spend time together with that in mind, that we want to see if that can work, not just fooling around until this burns out because we don’t expect it to go anywhere. I don’t want to do any of this part-time, Sarah. I want you, and Nathaniel, and I want our family. And I know maybe it’s unrealistic, and maybe it won’t work, and maybe we’ll find out it’s too hard. But I don’t think that’s what will happen.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying I want to date you. Both of you. I want us to try to be a triad, all together. We don’t have to say anything to anyone yet, but I don’t want to be afraid to touch you in public. I don’t want to be afraid to be seen with Nathaniel.” He let out a long sigh. “Sarah, all those years ago you told me you couldn’t marry me because I didn’t know who I was, because I couldn’t be honest with myself about what I wanted. Well, I’m being honest and I’m telling you the truth now. This is what I want. Please. Just give it a try.”

Sarah sat down slowly, pressing her lips together. “It sounds...it sounds too good to be true, David. What will people say?”

“Do you care?”

“I have a child. *We* have a child. You and Nathaniel are a part of that. We can’t just shut all the noise out and ignore everyone, we have to live with them—at Cora’s school, her events, when she has friends and if other parents will judge her based on it. It’s going to affect everything, David.”

“Shouldn’t we teach her that it’s okay to be whoever you are? That you shouldn’t lie to yourself and others and hide because it’s not what everyone thinks is right, or for them?”

“She’s not even three yet, David,” Sarah said wryly. “It’s a bit early for all those lessons.”

“All the better,” David argued back. “She’ll grow up seeing it as normal. She’ll be sure in who her family is and that different doesn’t mean wrong, because it’ll be natural. Just as natural as two-parent families, just as natural as blended families or divorced families or anyone else.”

Sarah sighed. “You’re not wrong. It’s just, it’s going to be hard. You know it will.”

“Didn’t you tell me once that anything good doesn’t come easily?” David grinned mischievously at her, and Sarah threw up her hands.

“I’ve got to talk to Nathaniel,” Sarah said gently. “I’m assuming you’ve said something to him already?”

“At the garage the other night. After the race, after we...”

“When emotions were high, and you’d just had sex,” Sarah pointed out. “I need to talk to him about what this means for us, how he feels. A lot has changed in a short amount of time, David. Even if we try to make this real, we have to go slow. I need you to understand that.”

“I do understand.” David reached out then, grasping her hand and pulling her up out of the chair, against him. He heard her soft intake of breath, saw her blue eyes go wide as he reached out and brushed her hair away from her face. “We’ll go slow, I promise. I don’t want to rush you, or Nathaniel, or any of this. I mean it. But I couldn’t go on pretending that I didn’t want anything but some casual fun. Because while it’s fun, this is anything but casual for me.”

He pressed his lips to her forehead, then to her nose.

“I missed you, Sarah. All the time that I was gone, I missed you. I wished I’d never left. But maybe it’s good that I did, because maybe I’ve come back to something even better. Something that I never would have had if you hadn’t told me to go back then. Maybe it all works out the way it’s supposed to, in the end.”

“Maybe,” she whispered, tilting her chin up. “I just don’t want to break your heart again.”

“I’ll take the risk.” David bent his head and kissed her then, feeling her lips tremble slightly, feeling her back arch as she wrapped her arms around his waist, her hands smoothing along his back. He would take the risk, he thought, again and again, if it meant another hour or day or week with the chance of having her in his arms. He’d break his own heart a million times over for another night with her. And the same for Nathaniel.

It was a risk.

But he was willing to take it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Sarah turned David's words over and over in her head as she waited for Nathaniel to come home. She'd asked David to leave after the kiss, not wanting to let it go any further. Well, that wasn't quite true, she corrected herself. She *had* wanted it. She'd wanted it terribly. The memory of David in bed with her and Nathaniel was still vivid, and she wanted it again. She wanted David again. But she knew having sex with David would only have muddled things more. She needed to talk about what David wanted with Nathaniel, and she needed to do it with a clear, rational head.

Except...she'd been rational, all of those years ago when she'd sent David away. She'd done the sensible thing. And she still didn't think it had been the wrong thing to do, exactly... but it had complicated their lives in ways that she could never have foreseen at the time. And they'd found their way back to each other regardless. Maybe David was right, and the universe had a way of working things out. Maybe as unconventional and difficult as this would be, it was the right thing for them.

But Nathaniel had been by her side for a long time, through years when David hadn't. Regardless of whose fault that was, if it had been wrong or right, she needed to know what Nathaniel really wanted too, when it was just the two of them. So she waited on the couch, half watching something on television as she waited for him to come home, hardly paying attention to any of it. Her thoughts were racing too fast to take any of it in.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when the door opened and he walked in.

“Hey.” Nathaniel glanced at her as he tossed his keys on the side table and walked to the couch, bending to give her a quick kiss. “How was dinner?” he asked, walking towards the kitchen. “Carlos and I ordered pizza to the shop, but I’m still starving. Are there any leftovers?”

“Some pasta salad,” Sarah said absentmindedly, switching the television off.

“My favorite.” Nathaniel appeared in the doorway a minute later, bowl in hand, smiling at her.

“You look like you had a good night.”

“Got some good work in on the new car. How was dinner with David, though?”

It shouldn’t have been a loaded question, but considering the conversation she’d just had with David, it felt like one. “It was...fine,” she said lamely, chewing on her lower lip.

“That doesn’t sound fine.” Nathaniel set his bowl on the table and crossed the room to her. “Did something go wrong?”

“No...not exactly.” Sarah turned to face him, sitting cross legged on the couch. “Nathaniel, did you and David talk, after the race the other night? About what we—the three of us—are?”

Nathaniel’s expression turned guarded. “A little. Why?”

Sarah shook her head, sighing. “See, this is what I don’t want. The three of us tiptoeing around each other, worried we’ll say or do something to hurt someone, keeping parts of our lives quiet until we know if the others know, too. If we’re going to do this, we have to all be entirely open and honest. And that’s hard. It’s hard between two people, how much harder will it be with three?”

“So David talked to you about wanting this to be more.” Nathaniel sighed, running a hand through his hair. “He did talk to me, too. After...well, after the race.”

“And after the two of you had sex.”

“Yes, that too.” He looked at Sarah for a moment, considering. “How do you feel about that? Honestly. The two of us together.”

Sarah was quiet for a moment. “It’s confusing,” she said finally. “I feel like I’m not *supposed* to be okay with it, just like you’re not supposed to be okay with me being with David. But if I’m being honest with myself, and with you, it’s kind of hot.” She blushed, glancing away. “Thinking about the two of you, so worked up and full of adrenaline from the race, getting out of the car and just going for it, there in the garage...it kind of makes me wish I’d been there too.”

Nathaniel raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“And then thinking about the other night...it was so good, Nathaniel. David and I parted under strange circumstances. It wasn’t because I didn’t love him, or because we weren’t good for each other. And I’ve always felt like that has to be hard for you, to know that if things had fallen out a little differently—if David had been more comfortable with himself then, if he’d already been able to explore and be sure—he and I would have been together this whole time. Or if I’d just called him the minute I’d found out I was pregnant. And then you and I would never have been—”

“I know,” Nathaniel said softly, reaching for her hands. “It is hard, sometimes. But I also know that you love me, deeply. Do you wish things had been different? That David had stayed? Or come back sooner?”

Sarah shook her head vigorously. “No! That’s the hardest part. I’ve always loved David, and it didn’t stop...but I also wouldn’t go back and change any of that, because I love you, and I can’t bear to think of erasing everything we’ve had and have together. We have a wonderful life together.”

“So if the three of us are together—”

“Then it’s like having the best of both worlds,” Sarah finished quietly for him. She reached out for his hands, threading her fingers through his. “But I want to make sure that’s what you really want. Even after the other night. It’s one thing to have sex with someone. It’s even one thing for you to

see me have sex with someone. That can be a novelty, a fetish...anything. But to see me love someone else, especially the biological father of my child, to hear me say that to him, to see us act like a couple together...is that really something you would want? Is that something that you could be happy with? Because I'm with you, Nathaniel. Here, and now, and soon forever." She glanced down at the ring on her finger. "If you don't want it to go past sex then I understand."

"Sarah, I think it's a good idea."

She stared at him, wide eyed. "Really?"

"Really. And not just because I want to sleep with David." He looked at her seriously, his eyes intent on hers. "Like you said, you loved him. I think you still do, especially if you're asking me how I would feel if you said those things to him. I know very well how different things might have been if you hadn't felt that he needed to explore something else, and I'm grateful that life worked out in a way that allowed us to be together. But I think what you and David had was real, and good, and still is and could be. I think we should embrace that, and explore it together, instead of being afraid of it and running away."

"What about Cora?" Sarah bit her lower lip. "David thinks that because she's so young, she would grow up thinking it's normal. That we could teach her that people love each other in all different ways and configurations, just like any other family. But you know how other adults are going to feel. Other parents of her friends, teachers maybe. We're going to have people who don't like that we're doing this. Is that bad for her?"

"There's always going to be people who believe that the way others love each other is wrong," Nathaniel said calmly. "I think that teaching her to be true to herself is the most important thing, regardless of social norms."

"That's what I think too. It's just not going to be easy."

"Nothing good ever is." Nathaniel moved closer, reached up to run his fingers gently through Sarah's hair. "I love you,

Sarah. That will never change. If David becomes a part of that, it will only add to it, not detract from it.”

“I love you too.” She tilted her chin up, closed her eyes as she felt him lean down to kiss her, his lips soft and sweet against hers. The kiss seemed to go on forever, the soft touch of his hand in her hair, on her face, trailing down her cheek to cup her face in his hand. It made her feel breathless, warm, as if she could melt into him, and she did. She wrapped her arms around his neck, let him pick her up and carry her down the hallway to their bedroom. They undressed each other in the dim light, sweet and slow, and the moment she was naked beneath him he moved between her legs and slid into her in one swift motion.

Her gasp as he filled her sent a shudder through him, and she reached up, pulling his mouth down to hers again as he moved in long, slow, sure strokes, sending waves of pleasure through her with each one. They moved in sync, her hips rolling up to meet him with each thrust, carrying each other together closer and closer to the edge, and Sarah moaned softly against his mouth, her forehead pressed against his as he slid into her again and again, keeping that same perfect rhythm.

“I love you,” she whispered, her breath warm against his lips, and he whispered it back, the sound of the words filling the room along with their gasps and moans, the warm scent of skin and perfume and sweat, and she heard him groan as her legs locked around his waist and she arched upwards, back taut as a bowstring as she felt the sudden wave of her orgasm wash over her.

“Oh god, Nathaniel,” she moaned, shuddering against him, and she felt him stiffen, thrusting into her once more as far as he could go as he came too, grinding against her as he groaned aloud, his mouth pressed to her shoulder.

“Let’s make sure we keep doing that,” Sarah whispered in the darkness when he’d rolled off of her to lay next to her, one arm slung over her stomach as his face nestled against her shoulder. “That was good.”

“It was. It’s always good, with you.”

“I don’t want to lose this. Moments of just us, together.”

“We won’t,” Nathaniel murmured, his breath warm against her skin as he spoke. “You and I will have these moments, and you and David will, and David and I will. It won’t always be the three of us, all together. Even if we all live together someday, or we spend more time together, there will be time for just the two of us, too. We just have to make sure of it, like any other relationship.”

She heard his breathing turn slow after that, and measured, and she knew he was falling asleep. She closed her eyes too, feeling some of the anxiety recede, and she tried to picture the future with the three of them: David in the bed next to them, sleeping too, dinner together, dates as a threesome.

She still wasn’t sure, yet, if it could work in reality. But for the first time, it felt like it could be a possibility.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

As it turned out, their first date as a triad was to the local carnival. Sarah hadn't been sure about it at first, worrying that it was too public, but David had done his best to convince her, and Nathaniel had managed to do the rest.

"The people who will have opinions always will," he'd told her, echoing what David had said. "We may as well take them head on."

David's heart had almost stopped when he'd gotten out of the car to pick the two of them up, and he'd seen Sarah. Most days that he saw her she was in what she'd termed her "tired mom" getup, which consisted of jeans, a loose t-shirt, and a ponytail with sneakers. Sometimes it was just yoga pants and a long top. He hardly noticed—he thought she looked beautiful no matter what, but it had been a long time since he'd seen her dressed up for a date.

She was wearing something very similar to what she'd used to wear when they were younger—a dark denim miniskirt that zipped up the front, a black and white checked shirt that she'd tied at the waist, so that a sliver of her tanned stomach showed, and black wedges. Her blonde hair was loose and curled, falling in soft waves around her face. For a moment when he saw her, David forgot how to breathe.

Nathaniel was nothing to sneeze at either, in his usual tight jeans—except these were free of grease stains—and a weathered grey t-shirt with a navy button down open over it

and the sleeves rolled up, exposing his finely muscled forearms.

I'm a lucky guy, David thought, feeling slightly amazed at how things had fallen out as he opened the door for Sarah. She slid into the passenger seat and Nathaniel slid in behind her.

“So, ready to go eat some greasy food and play some rigged carnival games?”

“You know it,” Sarah said, grinning at him. “I’m not getting on any of the rides, though. I know we did when we were kids, but I *have* a kid now, and I’m not about to die.”

“Agreed,” Nathaniel echoed.

“Fine.” David threw the Supra into gear, laughing. He caught sight of Sarah’s glossy lips, parted as she laughed too, and felt breathless all over again. He felt like he was seventeen again, sitting next to her and longing to kiss her. He was almost dizzy with wanting it.

The carnival was in full swing when they arrived. The jingling of the music from the carousel and the other rides echoed across the field, and the smell of fried foods and sweet things drifted through the air, making his mouth water. He put his arm around Sarah’s waist as they walked, the curve of it fitting as perfectly into his hand as it ever had, and he closed his eyes briefly, breathing in slowly. No matter what else happened, he knew this night was going to be one that he would want to remember.

They collectively agreed that they wanted to find dinner first, and they wandered through the carnival grounds looking for food stalls. David caught a few interested glances here and there when people they knew saw the three of them walking together, but no one said anything or approached them, and he could feel Sarah relaxing. They got food—hot dogs for him and Sarah and a burger for Nathaniel, beers for all three of them and cheese fries to share, and found a picnic table where they could sit down and take it all in.

“I always loved these things,” Sarah said, taking a bite of her food.

“Carnivals or cheese fries?” David teased her lightly. He was sitting next to her, and he laid his hand on her thigh, feeling his pulse skip at the touch of her smooth, soft skin. He couldn’t believe he was here, on a date with the woman he’d loved for most of his life, together again with her and his best friend. It was like the past few years had fallen away, unimportant and forgotten.

“Both,” Sarah replied, laughing. Nathaniel took a sip of his beer, looking at them both warmly, and David basked in it—the easy, natural warmth among the three of them. There was no tension, no stress, no worry. It was like any other date.

“Are you still any good at darts?” David glanced at Sarah, his hand still lingering on her thigh.

“Well, let’s go and find out after dinner.” She grinned at him.

They finished their food companionably, chatting between bites. Around them the carnival was picking up, the sounds of teenagers and children laughing and talking and screaming on rides, parents clustering in small groups, music and the shouts of carnies. When the three of them were done, they headed towards one of the games, a stall where you threw darts at water balloons to win prizes. They paid for five each, and glanced at each other, all laughing.

“May the best man win,” Nathaniel said, shrugging as he tossed his first dart. It missed by a mile. So did the second one.

David didn’t fare much better. Sarah, however, was a crack shot still apparently, and hit every single one of hers. As the last balloon popped she screamed, throwing up her hands. “Look at that!” She turned towards David and then Nathaniel, high fiving them. “Looks like I haven’t lost my touch.”

Once Sarah had collected her prize, a stuffed white bear holding a pumpkin that she said would probably wind up in Cora’s room, they headed down the row of stalls, looking for others they might want to play.

“I’m going to go grab another beer,” David said, chucking his empty one in the trash. “Anyone else want another?”

Nathaniel raised his hand, and Sarah shook her head. “Maybe later. Someone’s got to drive us home.”

“Oh, am I letting you drive the Supra?”

“If you have another beer, yeah, you are.” Sarah raised an eyebrow at him, and David rolled his eyes. “Just an excuse for you to drive a cool car for a change.”

“Dude, she’s been dating me for three years,” Nathaniel said, laughing.

“And I’ve never gotten to drive anything fun!” Sarah pushed him in mock outrage. “Go get another beer, David, so I can drive something that doesn’t have crumbs in the backseat.”

He was still laughing as he walked away, towards the cart that was selling beer. He was waiting in line when he heard someone call his name, and when he turned, Brienne was walking towards him.

Shit.

“Hey!” she called out, her eyes lighting up as she hurried towards him. Every other guy around him was staring at her, too, and David couldn’t exactly blame them. She was wearing tight skinny jeans, a stretchy, low-cut black shirt, and big silver hoop earrings. Her bright red hair was pulled up in a high, curled ponytail, and her lips were glossy red again, like the first night he’d met her. It made his stomach tighten for a moment, remembering that, but he pushed the thought aside. Brienne was trouble, and he knew it. He had no reason to think about her that way now.

But it looked as if she wasn’t giving up so easily. She came up to him, stretching upwards as she wrapped her arms around his neck for a hug, her breasts pressing into his chest as her hips rocked towards him. It was a tight, intimate hug, and he gave it only a second before he gently disentangled her and pushed her away to arm’s length. “Hey, Brienne,” he said carefully. “Enjoying the carnival?”

“I am! I haven’t been to one since I was a teenager. And now that you’re here, it’s even better.”

“I’m here with my date,” David said firmly. “Dates, actually.”

Brienne’s eyes widened. “As in, two?”

“Yes.”

“What...wow.” Her face fell a little. “You really made up for lost time, huh?”

“It’s not like that,” David said gently. “Look, Brienne, I like you just fine. We had some fun together. But my ex wants to give things another try, and I want that, too.”

“She has a boyfriend. Or did they break up?”

“No,” David said calmly. “They’re together. The three of us are. Thus...dates.”

Brienne’s eyes were like dinner plates in her face. “So the two of you guys...and her?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s a lucky girl.” Brienne crossed her arms under her breasts, pushing them up in the low-cut top. David could hear the intake of breath all around him, and he had to fight to keep from rolling his eyes. She was pretty, sure, and from his experience, fun in bed. But there were plenty of pretty girls at the carnival, she wasn’t *that* exciting.

“There’s no way that’s going to last, David.” Brienne blew out a long breath through pursed lips. “Whereas if we gave things a shot, a *real* shot, I’m not going to want some other guy, too. You could have me all to yourself. Just the two of us. Do you really want someone you have to share?”

David closed his eyes briefly, trying to find the patience to deal with her nicely. “Brienne, I told you this when you came to the house the other day. This—you and me—it isn’t going to happen. I’m happy with the way things are. *I* want them both, Sarah and Nathaniel. I don’t want anyone else, all to myself or not. I really need you to stop trying to make this happen. The answer is no. I’m sorry.”

Brienne’s face darkened, and he could see the hurt in her eyes. “You don’t seem very sorry.”

“I’m sorry you’re hurt. I didn’t have any intention of hurting you. But I’m not sorry I’m with them, no. I’ve wanted this for a long time.”

She stepped back, away from him. He could see the anger brewing in her face, and he shook his head. “Brienne, we were a one-night stand. You’re making this way bigger than it needs to be.”

“And you’re making a *huge* mistake!” she spat out, glaring at him. “Fuck you, David.” She spun on her heel and disappeared into the crowd.

He shook his head, watching her go. He couldn’t figure out why she had been so fixated on him after that first night. It had been fun, sure, but he’d had one night stands in the past. And she was a surgeon—surely she had better prospects than a broke mechanic who illegally raced cars and had a sketchy past. For that matter, she didn’t act or dress like any doctor he’d ever known. It didn’t necessarily mean anything, he supposed, but something about all of it just didn’t quite add up. He’d felt like something was off with her from the beginning, but he couldn’t pin it down.

He tried to shrug it off as he collected the beers. As he turned, he saw Sarah walking towards him, and winced. He hoped she hadn’t seen Brienne. He didn’t want to have to explain how he knew her.

Sarah reached for Nathaniel’s beer. “I didn’t mean to spy,” she said softly. “We were just wondering if you got lost. Who was the girl? She seemed upset.”

David sighed. “Brienne. I met her at a bar one night not long after I moved back, and...well, she’s been after me since. I keep turning her down, but she just doesn’t seem to get the hint.” He glanced at Sarah, and a sudden idea sprang into his head. “Wait, have you ever seen her? She’s a trauma surgeon at the same hospital where you work.”

Sarah frowned. “No,” she said slowly. “But I don’t know all the surgeons. I’m an x-ray tech, usually we just send off the results to the surgeon if necessary. We talk to the nurses on duty and the general physicians more often. So I just might not

have met her. Or we might work different shifts.” She pressed her lips together, glancing at David. “If you want, I can check with some of the other doctors, see if they know her? Do you think she’s a problem?”

“No, no,” David said quickly. “That seems like too much. I told her I’m with you and Nathaniel and to stop, hopefully she’ll get over it.”

“I hope so.” Sarah linked her arm through his, and—much to David’s relief—dropped the subject.

He tried to put it out of his head for the rest of the evening. It was one of the most blissful nights he’d had in a long time—they drank, played the ridiculously rigged games, ate elephant ears and ice cream, and rode the carousel like they were seventeen again. He watched Sarah laughing as the horse she was riding—painted white and hot pink and chipped in places—bobbed up and down, and the way Nathaniel looked at her, his face adoring, and the look in his eyes when he glanced over Sarah’s head and caught David’s gaze.

As they walked back to the car, he saw Sarah look up at Nathaniel and whisper, “I love you,” and his heart ached. He didn’t know if it was from happiness or longing, or both, but all he knew was that he wanted more than anything to hear her say that to him again one day. He wanted more nights like this one, to create happy memory after happy memory of the three of them together.

He glanced down one of the alleys between stalls, and paused briefly, his eyes widening at what he saw. Behind two of the game stalls, near the trailers, he saw Brienne’s unmistakable red hair and hoop earrings, her hands waving as she talked animatedly...to Blake.

As he watched, she stepped closer to him, tipping her chin up as he said something in response. David couldn’t make out what they were saying, or if she was happy or not...but did it really matter? He was surprised to see them together, but Brienne had been at the race, and at the party afterwards, she had probably met Blake there. She’d been intrigued by the racing; since David had rebuffed her, he figured she must have

decided to see if she could sink her claws into one of the other guys, scratch the itch that way.

“Hey, David, you coming?” He heard Nathaniel call after him, and he hurried to catch up.

“Is everything okay?” Sarah looked up at him, her brow furrowed.

“Yeah,” David said quickly. “Just thought I saw one of the guys from the crew, that’s all. We heading back home?”

“Actually,” Nathaniel said, a strange glint in his eye, “I thought we could go by the garage. I wanted to show Sarah the work I’ve been doing on the AE86.”

“Sure.” David shrugged. “Sounds like fun.” He dug in his pocket and tossed Sarah the keys to the Supra.

Nathaniel grinned as he looked between the two of them. “Let’s go, then.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

They pulled into the parking lot and walked into the garage, Nathaniel unlocking it for them. He pointed to the AE86 in its bay. “There’s my new baby.”

“It’s so pretty,” Sarah said, running her hand over the hood.

Nathaniel glanced at David, raising one eyebrow before walking up behind her and setting his hands on her hips, leaning forward to kiss the back of her neck. “Not as pretty as you.”

She breathed in sharply at the touch of his lips on her neck, turning slightly in his arms. David closed the garage door, leaving the lights nearest them on, and Sarah’s mouth opened slightly as she looked at Nathaniel, who was smiling mischievously as he leaned in to bite gently at the lobe of her ear, his mouth sliding to her jaw, and then to her mouth.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him softly as his tongue brushed over her lower lip, sliding into her mouth as she let out a small whimper. When he pulled back for a second she stared at him. “Are you doing what I think you’re doing?”

“You did say you wished you were here with us the other night.” Nathaniel grinned impishly. “So now you’re here. And so are we.”

Sarah glanced at David, who was wearing a similar expression. He leaned against the car next to her, and she let her eyes drift over him, taking in the implications. She could

feel her heart starting to pound faster, with Nathaniel's long, muscled body leaning over her, and David inches away, looking at her as if he were ready to devour her.

Nathaniel bent and kissed her again, long and slow, his hands sliding up into her hair as he pressed her back against the car, his hips against hers. She could feel him hardening, his cock rubbing against her as her thighs moved apart, the tight denim skirt protesting as she arched against him. She moaned as one of his hands moved down to her clothed breast, cupping it, sliding to begin undoing the buttons as his tongue slid into her mouth. He tasted sweet and warm, like beer and powdered sugar, and she reached up, running her fingers through his hair as she kissed him.

And then Nathaniel reached down, grabbing her by the hips and lifting her onto the side of the car. With one smooth motion he reached for the zipper of her skirt, sliding it down so that it fell open, and he hooked his fingers under the edge of her panties, pulling them to one side as he knelt, his lips sliding up her inner thigh.

She started to lean forward and reach for David, but he shook his head. "This is all about you," he said, licking his lips as he watched Nathaniel's mouth make its way up her leg, watched his hands spread her thighs apart so he could reach her more easily. "You're going to have two men touch, kiss, lick, and fuck every inch of you until you can't take anymore. Doesn't that sound good?" His voice was deep and husky as he spoke, and Sarah could see the bulge in his jeans, his cock straining against the thick material. Her skin felt flushed and hot, listening to him talk that way, and she couldn't believe where she was, sitting on the edge of a car in a garage while her fiancé licked his way up her inner thigh, and her former boyfriend watched.

But she loved it. She loved how it made her feel, as if she were the sexiest woman on earth, as if they couldn't resist her. She felt Nathaniel tug her panties to one side, felt the heat of his mouth there, between her legs, and she saw the hunger in David's eyes as he watched Nathaniel go down on her, his

tongue swirling around her clit so that her legs spread open wider, her head falling back as she moaned.

When she managed to breathe again, she looked at David, her voice barely a whisper as she asked: “Well, are you just going to stand there and watch? You might as well enjoy the show.” She reached up and finished unbuttoning her shirt as she spoke, watching David stare at her breasts as the shirt fell open, revealing the black lace of the bra she had on under it, so sheer that he could see the shape of her nipples, rosy and hard through the fabric.

It was all the invitation he needed. He reached down, undoing his belt and unzipping his jeans, and she watched as he took out his long, thick cock, his hand sliding slowly down the shaft as his gaze flicked between her eyes and her breasts, his breath coming faster as he rubbed his thumb over the tip, his hand speeding up just a little as she moaned, gripping the side of the car as Nathaniel’s tongue moved in quicker and quicker circles over her clit, two of his fingers sliding inside of her to find the spot that he knew without a doubt would make her come.

She was on the edge, her legs hooked over his shoulders as he gripped her hip with one hand, steadying her as his fingers found the rhythm she liked. She felt his lips tighten, felt his tongue slide over her as he thrust his fingers into her, saw David’s hand moving over his cock as he groaned, his eyes fixed on the two of them. She could feel the muscles in her legs tightening, could feel herself hovering on the edge as Nathaniel kept going, pushing her closer and closer. He moaned as her hips arched up against his mouth, the vibrations running along her skin, and that was the last thing, that sound of pleasure mixed with the sensations of his lips and tongue and fingers.

She cried out as she came, her fingers curling against the cool surface of the car, breathing in sharply, the scent of sweat and sex mixed with the acrid tang of engine grease and oil and metal, and she heard David groan as he watched her, saw him slow his strokes in an effort not to come too soon.

“My turn,” she heard him say hoarsely, and she saw him strip off his shirt as he strode towards her, still stroking himself as he knelt between her legs. She caught her breath as she realized what he meant: she had thought he would fuck her, but he looked up at her as he knelt down.

“I can’t wait to taste you,” he whispered, his mouth tracing the inside of her leg as he leaned forward, and she saw Nathaniel begin to strip as well, slowly, as David’s mouth reached the juncture between her legs and his tongue began a slow, sweet slide over her sensitive flesh.

There was nothing but pleasure now, nothing but wanton lust. Her body was a raw nerve, every flick of David’s tongue and touch of his fingers sending fresh waves of it through her, and the sight of Nathaniel slowly pulling his shirt over his head, muscles flexing as he tossed it aside and reached for the button of his jeans, his thick cock straining against the front of them, was nearly enough to send her over the edge all over again. She couldn’t believe her luck, that she had two of the sexiest men she’d ever seen vying for their turn to get on their knees and taste her, so overcome with desire that they couldn’t help but touch themselves as they watched.

Nathaniel was putting on a show for her, she could tell, every touch and stroke of his rigid cock slow and measured, each groan and flex of muscle just for her. He watched as David pushed her legs wider apart, slid his fingers into her as he expertly brought her to the edge again, his tongue moving over her in long, slow licks as he held her there, and Sarah looked between him and David, enjoying every second of it, until she was overwhelmed with it and her head fell back, moaning louder as her second orgasm built and built, finally crashing over her with a force to match the first.

David kept going, and Sarah gasped as she felt it crest and fall for a second before a fresh wave of pleasure built, and she felt herself go over the edge again, climaxing for a third time as David kept up the same motions, never stopping or slowing down until the tremors that wracked her body began to ease, and she grabbed his shoulder, gasping: “oh my god, stop, I can’t...”

David stood slowly, his hands sliding down her thighs as he leaned forward to kiss her, moving between her legs. She reached out, grabbing his face and pulling it to hers, desperate to feel his lips on hers, aching to kiss him. She saw Nathaniel move closer, within reach of her hands, and she reached out, sliding one hand down his muscular stomach as David curled his hand around the back of her head and slid the other around her back, pulling her forward so that he could thrust into her with one swift movement.

She was aching, wet and hot, and the sensation of him filling her made her cry out as he thrust in as deeply as he could go, his hand on her ass pulling her up against him. He kissed her, long and hard, tongue tangling with hers as he began to fuck her in earnest, and she reached down to push Nathaniel's hand away, grasping his shaft and beginning to slide her hand up and down with a slow, teasing motion.

Nathaniel groaned, and Sarah pulled back from the kiss, her eyes searching his. "Come here," she whispered, and he moved closer to her, leaning forward to kiss her, his free hand sliding into her hair and caressing her face as their lips touched.

She was overwhelmed with it. The first night had been the three of them exploring each other, but now they were both wholly focused on her, and there seemed to be no end to the sensation, to them kissing and touching her, David's body inside of hers as Nathaniel kissed her and her fingers slid over his cock, feeling him throb and harden beneath her touch.

"I want you so bad," he whispered against her mouth, and she felt David shudder as he thrust into her again. She was on the verge of another orgasm, and she felt it wash over her at the same moment that she heard David groan: "oh god, Sarah, I'm going to come," and his body was pressed against hers, hot through the lace of her bra and against her flushed skin.

She was in a daze of pleasure when David pulled out, leaning panting against the car as Nathaniel moved towards her with a sound that was somewhere between a groan and a growl, grasping her by the waist and kissing her hard before pulling her down off of the car and turning her around. Sarah

bent over without thinking, skirt falling to the concrete, hands flat on the metal of the car, still warm from her body. Nathaniel gripped her ass with one hand as he thrust into her, sliding his other hand around between her legs, his fingers gently stroking her clit as he began to thrust.

Sex had always been good with David, when they'd been together before, and had always been good with Nathaniel, but she'd never experienced anything like this. She almost always came, sometimes more than once, but she'd lost track of how many orgasms she'd had now—four, she thought?—and she could feel another one building, between the steady stroke of Nathaniel's cock inside of her and the expert touch of his fingers. David was leaning against the car beside them, watching with half-lidded eyes, his cock still half hard from the view, and Sarah felt dizzy with it, her head swimming with desire. She could hear Nathaniel's labored breathing, feel his hand stroking her waist, her hip, fingers gripping her flesh as he moaned her name. He leaned forward, pressing his lips to her neck, her shoulder. "I'm going to come," he groaned, his fingers moving faster between her legs as he thrust up into her, hips grinding against her ass. "Come with me. One more time, I want to feel you come with me inside of you..."

The whispers in her ear were enough to drive her over the edge, to send the familiar spasms racing through her body, her back arching hard as she pressed herself backwards against him, wanting every inch of him inside of her as he held her to him, his own hips grinding into her as he groaned and began to shudder, spilling inside of her as she tried to breathe, tried to stay upright. She wouldn't have managed it if it wasn't for his arm sliding around her waist, holding her to him as they both trembled with the force of their climax, and when Nathaniel slipped out of her and sank against the edge of the car, Sarah did too, closing her eyes briefly as she tried to stand on knees that had turned to water.

"How was that for the fantasy?" Nathaniel asked with a mischievous grin, when he'd caught his breath and could speak again.

Sarah glanced over at him, at David, and back to Nathaniel. “Yes,” she said, still breathless, her head spinning with sex and exhaustion. “It definitely did.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Between work and taking care of Cora, Sarah couldn't remember the last time she had managed to go out and get coffee with a friend. But she'd made plans to meet her friend Madison for lunch weeks ago, and after the date she'd had with Nathaniel and David, she very much needed to get away for an afternoon.

She glanced in the hall mirror as she walked to the door, pushing strands of hair out of her face that had fallen out of her long blonde ponytail. Did she look different? She felt different, she thought. She was wearing the same clothes she always did, skinny jeans and a slightly nicer top than she usually wore around the house or to run errands with Cora in tow, but she thought she looked like she had a glow that she hadn't had before. She felt different.

Madison said as much when Sarah sat down at the table with her at their favorite Mexican restaurant in town.

"You look different," she said as she stood up and gave Sarah a hug. "Happier? Like you're sleeping more, maybe?" She laughed, and slid into her side of the booth. "Is Cora finally sleeping in on the weekends? Oh," she added quickly, pushing a menu towards Sarah, "I ordered us margaritas. It's been so long since we've gotten to sit and have a drink together!"

"It really has," Sarah agreed, reaching for the menu. "Too long. I'm sorry, things are just always so crazy, and I can't ever seem to find time to slow down."

“I haven’t talked to you since you said you called David about Cora. You never did tell me how that went, other than that he was coming back.”

“God, has it really been that long?” Sarah laughed self consciously and pushed her hair back as she studied the menu. “It’s been...good.”

Madison eyed her suspiciously. “Good? That’s all?”

The waiter saved Sarah then, coming to the table with their margaritas. When they had ordered their food and he’d left again, Madison looked at Sarah pointedly. “Come on, something’s up. I could tell from the moment you walked in.”

Sarah toyed with the corner of her napkin. She could feel her skin heating up just at the thought of talking about it, about being with both men...

“Oh my god, you’re blushing!” Madison stared at her wide eyed. “This has got to be good. Come on, spill it.”

“Well, David has spent a lot of time with Cora, and everything has gone well, and he and Nathaniel are getting along—much better than I hoped, but they were best friends, back in the day. All three of us were.”

“Yeah, of course, I know that. There’s something else you’re not telling me, though. You’re not turning bright red because David is fitting into the family.” Madison gasped. “Oh my god, are you sleeping with him again? Sarah, tell me you’re not cheating on Nathaniel with your ex! The two of you are so good together, and you’re *engaged!*”

“No, no,” Sarah said quickly, holding up a hand and shaking her head. “It’s definitely not that. I mean, it is, but it’s not cheating. Nathaniel knows.” She couldn’t quite look Madison in the eye. “And he’s um...well, he’s a part of it.”

She thought she’d never seen anyone look as thoroughly astonished as Madison did in that moment. “The three of you are...you’re—”

“Dating,” Sarah supplied helpfully. “And yes, everything that comes along with that.”

“So Nathaniel is, or do they just...” Madison couldn’t quite seem to come up with the words. “I didn’t know he—”

“They both are. Bisexual, that is,” Sarah said. “Look, Madison, you’ll keep this to yourself, right? It’s not like it won’t come out eventually, but you know how people can be, and we’d rather keep control of it as much as we’re able. I just needed someone to talk to about it, and you’re my best friend. I feel like I’m in this bubble, and I just needed to tell someone outside of that bubble, you know? Someone who isn’t in the middle of it.”

“You’re definitely in the middle of it, from what it sounds like,” Madison cracked, stifling laughter as she took a sip of her drink.

“Oh my god.” Sarah couldn’t help but laugh, too. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

The two women regarded each other for a moment across the table, and then Madison raised an eyebrow. “So, is it good?”

“Yes. Oh god, yes. I never even thought about it until... well it just happened one night. And I thought—why the hell not? It’s not like either one of them were strangers. I’m engaged to one, and almost was to the other. It’s not like I’m having some one-night-stand threesome, you know?”

“Of course.” Madison nodded gravely. “So you’re really dating David then, too? The two of you?”

Sarah let out a long breath. “Yeah, I guess we are. It feels so insane, to say it out loud. Like we’re trying to do this crazy, outlandish thing. But he and Nathaniel were best friends, once—and they’re getting closer, again. And I loved David, a long time ago.”

“Do you still?”

Sarah bit her lower lip. “Yeah,” she said quietly. “I do.”

“So why did you break up with him? You never really told me, you just said it wasn’t right. I figured there were problems you didn’t tell me about, that you guys were arguing, or you just lost the spark. You were together since you were really

young, after all, it made sense that it wouldn't last. But it doesn't sound like that was the case."

"No." Sarah shook her head. "I knew David liked men. And he'd never had the chance to explore that—never kissed a man, never slept with one. If he'd stayed with me, married me, he wouldn't have ever had that opportunity. And I was afraid it would drive a wedge between us, if he didn't have a chance to really know himself before he made a commitment like that."

"Did you know about Nathaniel? When the two of you got together?"

"Yeah. But he had his time to experiment in college, to have fun and figure out what he wanted. If he'd gone off to Silicon Valley like he planned, who knows. Maybe he'd have had a boyfriend. Maybe a girlfriend, maybe just lots of casual romances. But he'd had the chance to live enough outside of our bubble here to be sure. And back then, I didn't think David could be sure."

"And you didn't tell him about Cora because you didn't want him to come running straight back."

Sarah looked down at her untouched plate of food. "Yeah, that pretty much sums it up."

"And now there's the best of both worlds. Nathaniel and David get you and a guy—each other. You get both of the men you love. It sounds ideal, really. So what are you so worried about?"

Sarah shrugged. "It just seems too good to be true, you know? Like I'm asking for *way* too much. Other people don't even find one happy relationship, and I want *two*? I want both of the loves of my life, together, at once?"

"And sometimes separately, I imagine." Madison grinned cheekily.

Sarah turned bright red all over again. "I never knew sex could be like that. I mean, with David it was always good, and with Nathaniel it was always good and then you put the two of them together," she chewed on her lower lip momentarily. "It's just not something I ever thought I would do."

Madison shrugged. “So who cares? It’s unconventional, sure. But if you’re happy, what does it matter? You’re not hurting anyone. In fact, you’re probably avoiding hurt. Both of the guys get to be who they are, fully, and you don’t have to pretend like you don’t still have feelings for David. And I know you’re probably worried about Cora, and what people will think, and if she’ll be picked on or excluded or bullied because of her family, but you’re being true to yourselves, and that’s a good lesson for her to learn.”

Sarah sighed. “That’s what David and Nathaniel say, too. And I agree. I’m just afraid it won’t work, you know? And we’ll hurt each other more than if we’d just let things be.”

“Hey.” Madison reached out then, laying her hand over Sarah’s. “There’s always risk, in any relationship. I think you’re all going into it with your eyes open, and there’s less risk than most. You all know each other, you’ve got history, there’s a lot of love there. Don’t miss out on happiness out of fear.”

—

As Sarah drove home, she mulled over the conversation in her head. It had only served to further bolster what she felt, and what David and Nathaniel had said. It all felt too good, as if she were tempting fate, somehow, by having both of her men, and all three of them being happy. But why shouldn’t they be happy? If they had all been honest about their feelings a long time ago, years of separation and pain might have been avoided.

But in the end, she decided as she drove, things had worked out exactly as they should. David *had* needed the time to know for sure that his life back home was what he wanted. Nathaniel had had time to learn who he was, too, and so had she. They all knew what it was like to be without each other; now they could appreciate better what it meant to be together.

As she turned down the road that led out of the main part of town into the neighborhood where she lived, she noticed a silver Honda Civic a few car lengths behind. She didn’t think

anything of it until it took the next right turn with her, and then the left after that, never slowing down or speeding up.

They're probably visiting someone who lives near me, she told herself. Or they're new neighbors, or just neighbors I haven't noticed before. Or they got a new car.

There were any number of logical conclusions to the car that had just taken *another* turn along with her, and Sarah had no reason to think she was being followed. But there was an uneasy feeling in her stomach, a gut reaction that there was something off with the car keeping pace behind her.

They followed until she reached the house, and for a moment she thought that maybe she should keep going, circle the block a few times, see if they kept following—that maybe it wasn't a good idea for them to know where she lived. But it felt so paranoid, so ridiculous. Why would anyone follow her? What possible interest was she to anyone?

She pulled into the driveway and the car kept going—a little slower than it had before, yes, but kept going nonetheless. She let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, feeling foolish. Of course it hadn't been anything.

She got out of the car and walked into the house. Alicia, the babysitter, was sitting cross legged on the couch, watching an animated show at low volume. "Cora's down for her nap," she said quietly as she stood. "She was wonderful, as always."

"I'm glad," Sarah said, smiling. "Thanks for coming by during the afternoon." She dug in her purse and pulled out an envelope with cash to pay her. "There's a little extra in there. Thank you, again. It was really good to get out of the house."

"Of course, Ms. Carlisle. I love babysitting Cora, she's so sweet."

Once Alicia had left, Sarah sank tiredly down onto the sofa, glad that Cora was down for her nap still. The anxiety over the silver car had gotten her adrenaline up more than she'd realized, and that mixed with the two margaritas at lunch—something she hadn't done in a solid year, probably—had left her feeling as if she needed a nap of her own.

Her phone rang, shrill and cutting through the air, and she picked it up without thinking or even looking at the screen. “Hello?”

A deep, gravelly voice came over the line. “Is this Sarah Carlisle?”

“Um...yes?” Her heart started to pound again. “Who is this?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just listen. If you care about your family, you’ll tell David Brooks to go back where he came from. Tell him to make the phone call. You understand?”

“What? This is where he came from. This is his home. What are you talking about? Who are you?”

There was a deep, rumbling laugh on the other end. “Doesn’t matter. If you thought you were scared a little while ago, you’re going to be a hell of a lot more scared if your boyfriend doesn’t follow up on his commitments.”

“I think you’ve got the wrong person. David doesn’t have any ties to anything like that. Just leave me and my family alone, okay? You’ve got the wrong person, I’m sure.”

“Nah.” The voice drawled out the word slowly. “David Brooks made a mistake leaving. We’re going to make sure he sees that, if he doesn’t come through of his own accord. Now you make sure he knows that, girl. Or else we’ll have to find some other way to make sure he gets the message. And don’t call the police. We know where you live, and they can’t get there fast enough.”

The phone clicked off, and Sarah was left holding it, staring down, her heart pounding so hard in her chest that it hurt. Her first thought was to call the police, but what if the strange voice on the other end was telling the truth? What if someone was watching, right now?

Should she tell David? What was he not telling her? He’d left a job behind in San Diego, she knew that much, but it had just been a mechanic job, nothing big. Who were these people who thought that he owed them something? What was he keeping from her?

She'd ask him when she saw him the next night, at dinner, she decided. There was no reason to call him now, he was at the shop with Nathaniel, and she didn't want to freak him out, or have a fight with him about whatever secrets he had over the phone. Besides, she wasn't entirely convinced that it was anything more than a prank—the David she knew would never have been mixed up in something like that. It had to be a prank, she thought over and over, trying to calm herself. There was no reason to call him, or wake Cora up and get her dressed and go out to the shop to find him. They'd talk it out over dinner tomorrow, and there'd be some explanation, and he'd reassure her that it hadn't meant anything.

But she couldn't shake the memory of the silver Civic, or the anxious feeling in her gut when she'd seen it. She paced the house for hours, going through the motions of making dinner and feeding Cora, waiting for Nathaniel to get home. He'd had plans to stay late at the shop and work on his own car, and she didn't want to bombard him with texts, or worry him unnecessarily.

There's got to be some explanation, she repeated over and over in her head, trying to reassure herself.

And then, as she picked Cora up out of her high chair to take her to bed, she heard it—a heavy, insistent knock at the door. And as she went to get it, another sound. The sound of someone picking at the lock on the door at the back of the house.

She froze in place.

The knock came again. And again.

Shit.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

David was driving to the shop when his phone rang. The number was no one he recognized, and he almost didn't pick it up. But after the events of the last few weeks, he did anyway. He didn't want to talk to Marcus, or anyone else associated with the old gang again, but neither did he want to be in the dark about what was happening, either. If he didn't answer, he reasoned, he'd continually wonder if it had been him, and that was somehow worse.

Once he answered the phone, however, he was no longer sure that that was the case.

The voice on the phone was masked, either muffled or distorted, and he had no idea who it was. But it didn't matter. What they said was more than enough.

"I've got a message for you. You're going to regret not coming back. You get one more shot to fix your mistake. Do it, or else you're going to pay the price."

The phone clicked off, and David dropped it onto the seat as if it were burning him, nearly swerving off of the road in the process.

I'm not going to be intimidated, he thought fiercely as he drove, speeding up. He was done with Marcus, and done with the gang. Had he really been so naïve to think that he could just leave? True, he'd been privy to plenty of illegal activities and he'd actively participated, but he'd just been a mechanic, a grunt. He'd never thought of it in terms of anything other than

a job, albeit one that paid very well. And when he'd left, he'd given Marcus as much notice as he was able, and he'd expected that to be the end of it.

Now it wasn't. Now Marcus wanted him back for another job. And David knew that wouldn't be the end of it, either.

He couldn't go back. Not for any reason. But he had no idea how to make the harassment stop, except to ignore it. Eventually, Marcus would find someone to replace him, someone better even, and he'd forget all about David and how angry he was.

That's what David told himself, anyway, all the way to the shop.

He pulled the Supra into the parking lot, shoving his phone into his pocket and trying to forget about it. The work day was already almost over—it'd been his day off, but Nathaniel wanted help with the AE86. There was a chance that Blake might come out too to discuss some upgraded parts, and there were plans for a race meetup that weekend. It'd be late before he got home, and he doubted he'd have a chance to see or even talk to Sarah or Coraline.

He frowned. By now Cora would be up from her afternoon nap, and Sarah often called him mid afternoon to let him talk to Cora, especially on nights when he didn't see her. He'd been so irritated by the strange phone call that he'd forgotten all about it. He shrugged it off, though. It was likely that Cora had overslept, or Sarah was busy. She'd said something about having a lunch date with a friend, maybe she was still out.

But when he walked into the garage, his first glimpse of Nathaniel was his friend standing frozen beside a Camry with a busted rear axle, phone in hand and his face as white as a sheet.

“Shit man, what's wrong?” David quickened his pace, hurrying over to Nathaniel's side. “What's going on?”

“I just got a call from the babysitter,” Nathaniel said hoarsely. “She'd left her textbooks at the house, and went back to get them. When she got there, the doors of the house, front

and back, were wide open. And Sarah and Coraline are gone, but her car is still there.”

Everything around David seemed to spin. He felt dizzy, his heart dropping into his stomach as he tried to make sense of it.

You get one more shot to fix your mistake. Do it, or you're going to pay the price.

No, that couldn't be it, he told himself firmly. Marcus might run a chop shop, but he wasn't a kidnapper. He was trying to frighten David into coming back, but there was no reason to think he had anything to do with Sarah and Coraline being gone.

“Maybe they went out with a friend,” David said, trying to sound reasonable, to calm himself as much as Nathaniel, who looked as if he were about to pass out. “Come on, man, sit down. You look like you've seen a ghost.”

Nathaniel sank down on a nearby chair, rubbing his face over his hands. “If they went out with a friend, why did she find the doors wide open?”

“Could have been a break in. Someone broke into my house not that long ago, remember? You guys live in a little bit better of a neighborhood than I do, but this is Oakland. There's break ins all of the time. Have you tried calling her?”

“Of course I have!” Nathaniel snapped, and then closed his eyes tightly shut. “I'm sorry. You're just trying to help. Yes, I've tried, several times. Her phone goes to voicemail.”

“Maybe it's in her purse. Maybe it's on vibrate and she didn't pick up. Maybe they went to a movie.”

“It's definitely not the last, Sarah never takes Cora to movies. She always says she hated hearing little kids cry in adult movies, and she's not spending the better part of twenty dollars to see a cartoon. She figures Cora can go when she's a little older.”

“That sounds like something Sarah would say.” David laughed slightly, trying to break the tension. “There's got to be an explanation. They wouldn't just go missing.”

“I can’t think of one,” Nathaniel said hopelessly, running his fingers through his hair until it nearly stood up on end. “They’re missing, David, I know it. And I can’t think of who it could be, or what to do.”

David very nearly told him then, about all of it. Marcus, the chop shop, the gang, the threatening calls. But he couldn’t quite bring himself to believe that they were connected. And he didn’t want to scare Nathaniel more than he already was for nothing. The man already looked white to the lips.

“You really think they’re missing? You can’t think of any reason they might be out and Sarah not answering her phone?” As he spoke, it struck him to the heart to realize how little he really knew about the woman he’d once loved—and still did. Nathaniel had been with her for three years, he knew her routine, where she would go, why she would or wouldn’t pick up her phone, her habits now, all of the small things that knitted two people together. David knew none of that anymore. And it sent a dart of pain through him that made him ache to the core.

“No.” Nathaniel shook his head. “Something’s wrong, David, I know it.”

Nathaniel had never been an alarmist. And so David pulled his phone out of his pocket resolutely. “I’m going to call the police, then.”

—

The police kindly but firmly told David that they had to be missing for twenty-four hours before it could be filed as a missing persons case, and David watched as Nathaniel paced back and forth in the living room, his jaw clenched so hard that David could see the tendons in his neck standing out.

They’d come back to the house immediately from the shop, insisting that the police at least come over and look at the house as the possible scene of a break in. They’d poked around, but there was no sign of forced entry, the front and back doors were simply wide open. She must have forgotten, they said.

“Sarah wouldn’t be that careless.” Nathaniel looked as if he were on the verge of screaming. His whole life, David had never known Nathaniel to be anything but calm, collected, even careless at times. Now he was wound so tightly that David knew he was liable to snap at any moment. “It had to have been someone she knew. Or at least, someone who knocked on the door and caught her off guard.”

“What about the back door?”

“Maybe they picked the lock.” Nathaniel sank down on the couch, his face buried in his hands. “But I can’t think of anyone that we, or Sarah know who would be able to do that, and quickly.”

David didn’t have the slightest doubt that someone in Marcus’ gang would be able to do that. But he couldn’t bring himself to go that far yet. If Marcus was behind this then it was his fault that Sarah and Cora were gone, his fault that they were somewhere afraid, maybe hurt, almost certainly in danger. How could he live with that?

He’d come back to take care of his daughter, and now it was looking more and more like he’d made things worse than ever.

“I’m calling the rest of the crew,” Nathaniel said decisively, getting up from the couch. “We’ll put together a search party. If the police won’t take this seriously until tomorrow, we’ll take it seriously now.”

Tell him. Just tell him.

I can’t.

“Alright,” David said. “I’ll call Blake and Carlos, you call the others.”

—

They drove around for what seemed like hours, every guy in the gang piled into three cars, but there was no sign of anything. They called members of other crews with whom they were friendly, called every friend that Nathaniel could think of, drove around to the parks and the spots where

Nathaniel thought they could possibly have gone. There was no sign of them anywhere.

“Her purse is still here,” Nathaniel said dejectedly when they returned to the house well after dark, having given up on looking until the police would get involved the next day. “David, she wouldn’t go anywhere without that. Someone kidnapped her and Cora, I know it.”

No matter how much he wanted to think otherwise, all signs pointed to that. It was dark, and there was no sign of them—if she had just been out, she would have called, and David knew it. What was more, he knew that Marcus was likely somehow connected to it.

He paused, trying to think. Something poked at the back of his mind, something that had been bothering him for a long time now.

Brienne.

Nothing about her added up. She claimed to be a trauma surgeon—and to be fair, he didn’t really know any trauma surgeons personally—but nothing about her or her schedules or her interests seemed to fit that. Sarah had even talked about what long hours the doctors at the hospital worked, that they never had time for anything else, that they practically lived there. He’d never even heard Brienne really mention work after that first night at the bar.

“Stay here,” he said firmly to Nathaniel. “I’ll be back.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

David drove to the hotel where he'd gone with Brienne after meeting her at the bar, hoping against hope that she was still staying there. He could call her, he supposed, make some pretense of wanting to meet up, but he wanted to avoid that if at all possible. He wanted the element of surprise on his side, and if she turned out to be telling the truth, the last thing he wanted was to reignite her interest in him.

To his relief, he saw her car parked out in front of the hotel. Surprisingly, he remembered the room number despite how much he'd had to drink that night, and he walked directly up to it and rapped on the door, his heart pounding. He had no idea if this would be a dead end or not, but he had to follow his intuition. He'd never forgive himself if Brienne was a lead, and he had ignored it.

She answered the door after the second knock. Her hair was thick and wavy around her face, her makeup done, and she was wearing a tight black dress. David kept his eyes carefully above her collarbone. "Glad to see you're in, Brienne. We need to talk."

"Oh?" She raised an eyebrow archly. "Now you decide you want to talk? I thought you were done with me."

"I am, as far as it has to do with us sleeping together," David said tightly. "But I have some questions for you."

"I don't know if I should let you in. I wouldn't want this to go the wrong way."

“Come off it, Brienne. You’ve been begging me to come over here for weeks.”

“For things that have nothing to do with talking. Every time we talk, you just hurt my feelings.” She pouted prettily at him, but David was having none of it.

“Sarah and my daughter are missing,” he said bluntly.

Brienne looked, for a moment, genuinely startled. “I’m sorry to hear that,” she said, her voice softening slightly, and then more stiffly: “But I don’t see what that has to do with me.”

“I think you’re keeping something from me,” David said flatly. “You told me you worked at the hospital that first night we met, but nothing about that adds up. I don’t think you do work for the hospital, I’m not even sure you’re really a surgeon. Sarah’s never heard of you or met you or seen you. You never seem to be at work, and…” he trailed off. “Something just seems off.”

Brienne glared at him. “So what, because I dress sexy and like cars and have odd hours, I can’t be a doctor? What are you trying to say, exactly?”

David sighed, running his fingers through his hair. “I’m not trying to stereotype you, Brienne. It’s just that I have a feeling. A gut feeling, that something is off. That you’re not telling the truth.”

“Well here’s some truth,” Brienne snapped. “I want you out of here. Don’t come back to my hotel room, don’t talk to me again. It’s none of your business what hours I keep or what I do.”

“So you’re not a doctor?” David challenged. “My girlfriend and my daughter are gone, Brienne. Taken. Kidnapped. Do you think I’m going to just waltz off into the sunset and forget about you if you have anything to do with that?”

“Why would you think I have anything to do with it?”

“I don’t know!” David snapped. “But you show up in town just after I come back, nothing about you adds up, no one

knows you. Who takes a job here in Oakland as a doctor unless they're devoted to their work? There's a dozen hospitals in California that would pay you double, and if you're as good as you claim, should be battering down your door. So why are you here, unless you're passionate about your job and want to help this particular community? You don't seem very passionate about it, I've never heard you talk about it, ever, except for that one night. I didn't see anything in your hotel room even remotely related to medicine. And why are you still in a hotel, if you have a long term and good-paying job as a trauma surgeon? You've had more than enough time to find an apartment. And now I'm getting threatening calls, and my family goes missing, all the while you're turning up on my doorstep right after one of those calls, trying to get me to be with you. Something smells fishy here. Something isn't right."

"Are you finished?" Brienne crossed her arms over her chest. "I'd like you to go."

"There's nothing you want to tell me? Nothing you're going to say to me?"

"Just that I want you to leave." Brienne cocked her head. "Or do you want me to call the cops and tell them you're harassing me? Maybe they'd like a tip about who you used to work for in San Diego."

David was frozen for a moment. "Look, I'll go," he finally said, calmly. "But I don't think I believe you."

"I don't care," Brienne said flatly. "Just go."

He hated to go back to Nathaniel empty handed, more than anything. But he knew he was up against a wall, with no sign of it giving. So he went.

As he walked towards his car, he spied a Spyder sitting just around the corner of the hotel. He paused, looking at it more carefully. Sure enough—it was Blake's car, he would have known it anywhere.

After all, he'd helped to build the damned thing.

What the hell is he doing here? He remembered Blake and Brienne standing in the alleyway at the carnival, talking

urgently to one another. It had seemed odd—and it seemed odd that he was here now. If he was in Brienne’s room, no wonder she hadn’t wanted him to come in.

They’re probably just hooking up, he told himself. Brienne hadn’t gotten him, so she’d gone after Blake, and he didn’t fault Blake for accepting. Brienne was gorgeous. She just wasn’t who David wanted.

It’s nothing, it has nothing to do with this, he told himself as he drove away, back to the house. But nothing seemed to add up.

—

When Sarah woke up, for a moment her vision was entirely blurry. The room around her swam, and she struggled to sit up, her head pounding. Whatever they’d used to knock her out, it had been strong.

Coraline.

That was her first thought. She sat up on the bed, blinking madly, trying to make sense of her surroundings. As her vision cleared, she began to take stock of it. She was in a small bedroom, she wasn’t bound or restrained. She was in a twin bed, and next to her was another twin bed, separated by a nightstand. Cora was still asleep—or unconscious, curled up atop the duvet with a throw blanket tossed over her. They’d done that much for her at least, Sarah hadn’t even had the slightest covering.

She was still dressed in what she was wearing when she’d answered the door; they hadn’t touched her, beyond putting her on the bed. She pressed her hand against her forehead, willing the pounding to stop, but it persisted, throbbing through her temples and down to the back of her neck.

The door.

She managed to get to her feet, wobbling slightly as she made her way across the room. She twisted the knob, but it didn’t give—it was locked from the outside. She turned towards the window, hobbling across the room and pushing

the curtains aside, but the window was barred over. She and Cora were well and truly trapped in the small bedroom.

She sat next to Cora on the small bed, reaching out to stroke her daughter's hair as she fought back the panicked tears that threatened. She had to be tough, she knew it, if she was going to get them out of—whatever this was. But for a second, all she wanted to do was lie on the bed, pull her daughter's small, fragile body into the curve of hers, and sob endlessly. She had no idea what they were doing there, no idea what the people—men?—who had kidnapped them would want with them.

I've never done anything to upset anyone like this, she thought as she ran her fingers through Cora's fine, cornsilk hair. She thought of David, of how little she knew of what he had been doing or where he had been before he'd come home. She thought of the phone call, of how they'd mentioned David by name.

Had she made a mistake in telling him about Cora?

What if I don't know him at all anymore?

The thought ran frantically through her head, and she closed her eyes briefly, flashes of the nights she'd spent with him running through her mind. All of the dinners, the conversations, the nights in her living room and out on the porch. The night the three of them had spent together, the date, the wild romp in the garage—never, during any of that, had he given her the slightest hint that he'd been up to something illegal, or bad, or dangerous.

He should have told me, she thought, looking down at Cora's fragile form, and she felt a small seed of anger burst deep in her belly. If he had come home with danger trailing him, he should have told them, so they could be prepared. He was risking a lot more than just himself. And if he couldn't manage it, he never should have come.

She squared her shoulders. They would get out of this, somehow. She wouldn't let them hurt Cora, and she would figure out a way to negotiate with them, or to escape.

She gently touched Cora's cheek, and stood up again, walking to the window. She pushed the curtains aside and looked out through the bars, trying to decipher somehow where they might be, if they were still in Oakland, or if the kidnappers had taken her and Cora somewhere else.

But, she couldn't see anything of note.

They seemed to be in a house, rather than a hotel or an apartment, but all of the street signs were too far off for her to read, and she couldn't see anything that she recognized that would allow her to place where they were.

She sank back onto the bed as Cora began to stir, hopelessness starting to seep through her. What was she supposed to do, if she couldn't even orient herself? If they got away and she was lost, they wouldn't be much better off than they had been to start. She patted the pockets of her jeans, but her phone was gone. She stood and rifled through the nightstand, poked at the blankets on the bed, looked underneath it, but she only found what she'd expected from the start—they'd confiscated her cell phone. It would have been foolish of them to let her keep it.

She was just starting to straighten up after peeking underneath the bed when she heard a key turning in the lock. She quickly sat on the edge, trying to look composed as the door opened.

Two men walked in, one large and burly with a thick beard and close-cropped hair, the other lean with shaggy blonde hair and patchy scruff along his chin, as if he wanted to grow a beard but couldn't quite manage it. They surveyed the room quickly, their gaze lingering a little too long on Cora for Sarah's comfort, and then turned to face her.

"You know where you are?"

"In someone's house," she said coolly. "Other than that, no, I'm not really sure." She decided the truth would be good insofar as it didn't give anything important away, but she said each word carefully, thinking before she spoke it.

"Do you know why you're here?"

“No, I don’t.” Her voice was crisp, her gaze unwavering. *I’m not afraid of you*, she wanted to say. It wasn’t true—she was terrified. But she wasn’t about to let them know that.

“Your boyfriend made some bad decisions.” It was the burly man who said that, while the shaggy one sneered, his eyes darting between Cora and her. Sarah instinctively tensed, wanting to go to her daughter. But she also didn’t want Cora to wake up any sooner than necessary, and she wasn’t certain if she was only sleeping, or still drugged.

“Are you referring to my fiancé?”

“No, your boyfriend.” The shaggy man leered at her. “Takes a lot to occupy you, huh? You like two men at once?”

Sarah didn’t respond, only held his gaze until he looked away quickly.

“No need to be shy,” the burly man growled. “We know you’re seeing David Brooks in addition to the man you’re living with. And we know that lil ‘un over there is his daughter too. We know plenty about you. So no point in trying to keep secrets.”

“Fine,” Sarah said crisply. “So what is it that you want with us?”

“I can think of all kinds of things.” The shaggy-haired man licked his lips, and the burly one elbowed him sharply.

“David needs to come back where he belongs, do the job he signed on for. He complies with what the big boss wants, then you and the girlie go free, no harm no foul. The boss tried to make it easy, see, talk some sense into him. But since that didn’t work, it looks like we need some leverage. And you, sweetheart, are some mighty fine leverage. You and the little girl.”

Sarah, by some miracle, managed to keep her composure. She wanted to fly off of the bed, scratch the man’s eyes out, scream at him that he shouldn’t so much as look at her daughter, let alone refer to her as leverage. But she managed to stay seated, firmly in place, and simply look at him as if he hadn’t just threatened her, as if the man with the shaggy hair

wasn't looking at her daughter far more often than he was at her.

“So you want David to do something.”

The burly man shrugged. “I don't give a fat fuck what he does, to be honest. But the boss wants him, and the boss gets what he wants. So I'm just doing my job. If your boyfriend comes along and does his, then everything will be just fine for you.”

“Except I won't have my daughter's father there with me. I suppose the job isn't in Oakland?” *Try to get some information*, she thought rapidly. *See if they give anything away that might be useful.* “What happens if he doesn't comply.”

“Well, let's not go there just yet,” the burly man said, and she saw a flicker of something in his eyes that was almost sympathetic. “It won't be good for you or the girl, I can say that much. So you better hope he comes through, for your sake. Boss isn't the forgiving type, you get me? Not after so many chances.”

Sarah felt a wash of nausea roll through her, and she could feel herself pale. The shaggy-haired man saw it, and liked it—she could see it in his face, the way his eyes fixated on hers and then slid downwards. It sent a fresh wave of that same sick feeling roiling in her stomach, and she swallowed, fighting not to show it any more than that, not to close her eyes or look faint.

“I don't suppose we could get some food?” she asked calmly, as if they were a guest at anyone's house. “And how long before my daughter wakes up?”

“Should be any time now.” The burly man glanced at Cora, and then back at Sarah. “We're not used to dealing with kids, we dosed her a little heavy, maybe.” There was that flicker of sympathy in his eyes again, and Sarah knew that if she could manage to turn anyone to their side, it would be him. It would certainly not be the shaggy-haired man. Just looking at him sent a shudder through her.

“I’ll see what I can rustle up for you. No intent to starve you, or hurt you, least not until your man has a chance to make this all right. You’ll be fine for a bit, at least.”

His honesty was somehow calming, despite the ominous wording. Sarah was under no illusion that they were safe; she knew that the two men, and whoever was paying them—this boss—intended her and Cora harm if they didn’t get what they wanted. The fact that it was all out in the open was comforting, in a strange way.

“I would appreciate something to eat,” she said politely. “And I know Cora would too, once she wakes up.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Come on, Kyle,” the burly man said, gesturing at the shaggy-haired man. “Leave these ladies alone.”

Once they were gone, Sarah went over to Cora’s bed again, sitting next to her and gently stroking her face, her hair, the long curve of her back. She wasn’t afraid for herself, exactly, although she knew that likely nothing to come would be pleasant. But she couldn’t bear the thought of anything happening to her daughter. And she knew that more than anything, that would spur David to action as well.

Most likely, it would mean him giving himself up to this man, the one in charge, this mysterious boss who ran whatever operation David had gotten himself mixed up in. It might mean him having to leave them behind—for a long time, maybe forever. She tried to sort through her feelings, to see how she felt about that. She was angry, because he’d kept it from her, because he’d gotten them into this situation. Maybe he deserved it, whatever was coming.

But beneath all of that, there was no shaking the fact that she loved him—deeply, and permanently. She had never stopped. And whatever trouble he’d brought down on their heads now, she couldn’t find it in herself to truly regret calling him. Cora had needed her father—her other father. And she had missed David more than she’d ever let herself admit. For a brief period, with the four of them all together, she had felt more whole than she ever had.

But I swear to god, if I ever see him again... she gritted her teeth. The emotions rose up in her—the anger, the fear, the love, the confusion, until she couldn't sort out one from another, until she didn't know if she would slap David or hug him if he walked in the room right then, run to him or scream at him.

She wanted Nathaniel most of all. She couldn't imagine what he must be going through, how terrified and upset he must be. And if David had come clean, he would be furious as well. She wanted to wrap her arms around him, to tell him that they would be alright—but she couldn't promise that now, and she knew it. She couldn't even promise herself that, or Cora.

She was brought back to the present by Cora stirring underneath her hand, turning her head and slowly opening her wide blue eyes, blinking at the light.

“Mama?” she whispered, her voice unsteady. One small hand went to her head, and her eyes shut tight. “Hurt,” she mumbled, and Sarah's heart turned over, clenching in her chest. Every other emotion in that moment was replaced by rage—anger at David for getting them into this, fury at the men outside for keeping them here, for working for a man who would do such a thing.

She gathered Cora up into her arms, rocking her back and forth as Cora began to cry softly, no doubt from the same headache that was wracking Sarah's head as well.

“Shhh,” she whispered, stroking the back of Cora's head. “We'll get out of this, I promise. I promise, baby. I'll find a way.”

She had no idea how. But she also knew she couldn't wait around to find out what David would do, or how long the men would wait on him. She had to do something.

But how?

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

It had been forty-six hours since Nathaniel had told him they were missing when the police chief knocked at the door and told them that they were still looking, but that they hadn't seen any sign of where Sarah or Coraline might have gone.

David knew it had been forty-six, because he'd counted every one of them, and had only slept for a few. Looking at Nathaniel's drawn and pale face, he wasn't sure that Nathaniel had slept for even a single one.

"Maybe they just left," the police chief said, shifting his weight from foot to foot as he stood on the doorstep. "You know, it happens. Mothers get overwhelmed, want a new life. Is anything missing from the bank accounts?"

David stepped in front of Nathaniel before he could say anything—he could see the storm gathering on Nathaniel's face.

"No," he said sharply. "Nothing is missing. Her car is here. Her purse, her wallet, everything except her cell phone is here. All of Cora's things are here. Does that sound like a woman who took her child and ran away to you?"

The police chief had the good grace to look slightly ashamed, at least.

"No, it doesn't," he admitted. "But these sorts of things go cold quickly. We're not giving up, but it doesn't bode well that we've got no leads at this point. I'm just being honest with you."

When David had shut the door and turned back to Nathaniel, the look on his face was one of a man being torn apart from the inside. It hurt David to see it, amplified the ache that he'd felt ever since he'd realized Sarah was gone.

You have to tell him, he thought. You have to come clean. If you wait much longer, you might never get them back. Maybe you've already waited too long.

“Nathaniel,” he said hoarsely, turning towards him and bracing himself for what he knew would follow. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Nathaniel looked at him, his expression dull and exhausted. “Is it something that’s going to help?”

David had never seen him like this, ever. It frightened him more than a little, but not as much as what he expected would happen after he told the truth. He wasn’t altogether certain that he would lose Nathaniel, too, after that—that everything he’d hoped for would fall apart with this one admission.

“Sit down,” David said, grasping Nathaniel’s arm and steering him towards the couch.

“What is it?”

David took a deep breath. “After I left Sarah three years ago, things went downhill for me pretty rapidly. I started drinking a lot, partying, hooking up with different people constantly, anything to dull how awful I felt from losing her. I had a decent job at a regular mechanic’s place, but I lost it after I missed work or came in drunk one too many times. It was a...really bad time for me. I needed work, and I found it, but it wasn’t strictly legal. It was working for a man named Marcus, who boosted cars and ran a chop shop. It didn’t take much for him to bring me on full-time, he saw I was a fast driver and faster at taking the cars apart. I was still working there when Sarah called me and told me about Cora.”

He could see the gears turning in Nathaniel’s head, and he spoke quickly, before Nathaniel could come to the conclusion on his own.

“I knew they were a gang, that they did illegal things, probably more of them than just boosting cars. A lot of the guys sold drugs on the side, most of them had a habit of some kind. I just kind of shut my eyes to it. I rented a room off of the garage from Marcus, did my job, and that was supposed to be the end of it. And when Sarah called, I gave Marcus notice, and I left, like I would have for any other job. I thought that would suffice.”

“And?” Nathaniel’s voice was sharper now, and David’s heart began to sink, knowing that Nathaniel knew what he was talking about.

“And I don’t think it did,” he said, his voice almost a whisper. “I think they took Sarah and Coraline.”

“And what would make you think that?” There was a dangerous edge in Nathaniel’s tone, and he stood slowly, face to face with David.

“Because Marcus has been calling me, threatening me,” David admitted miserably. “He wants me back for a job—I expect back for good, or else to get rid of me if he thinks I know things I shouldn’t. It turned out I couldn’t just leave. I didn’t know, I swear I didn’t.”

Nathaniel was almost vibrating with fury. “You should have told me this two days ago,” he said, his voice deadly quiet. “You should have told me long before they were kidnapped. Fuck, David, you should have told us the minute you came back into our lives that you had a past like this. Did you honestly think it would never come back to bite you in the ass?”

“I didn’t,” David whispered. “I really didn’t.”

“And when I said Sarah and Cora were gone, it never occurred to you for a second, until right now, that this Marcus might be behind it?”

David hesitated, and all he saw for a split second was a look of pure rage cross Nathaniel’s face, before he felt the hard, solid crunch of Nathaniel’s fist connecting with his jaw.

David stumbled backwards, gasping, grabbing onto a nearby chair to stay upright. “Fuck!” he shouted. “Goddamnit, Nathaniel, I’m sorry. I couldn’t bring myself to think that it was connected. I hoped the police would turn up some leads, and it would be something else. Anything else. But I see now that it can’t be. So instead of fighting with each other, let’s try to do what we can to find them.”

“If you go back to Marcus, will he give them back?”

David stared at Nathaniel. “I don’t know. Maybe he will. But if I go back, he might kill me. Do you want that?” He let a moment of silence pass. “Do you?”

He wasn’t sure how much more his heart could break.

“No,” Nathaniel said finally, sinking back down onto the couch. “I don’t want that.”

David’s phone buzzed in his pocket at that exact moment. He didn’t want to touch it, but he didn’t dare ignore it. What if it was Marcus? He looked apologetically at Nathaniel, and then pulled it out.

It was a number he didn’t recognize. He answered it anyway. “Hello?”

A rough, distorted voice came over the line. “This is the end of the line, David. We’ve got your girl and the kid. You can either come back to Marcus and face up to it, or we can make sure you regret it for the rest of your life. You’ve got a day to call Marcus and tell him what your decision is.” There was a pause. “And don’t even think about going to the cops.”

The line went dead. David’s heart was pounding as he shoved the phone back into his pocket. “Well,” he said flatly, through lips that felt swollen from Nathaniel’s punch, “there’s confirmation that it is Marcus.”

Nathaniel said nothing.

“But the good news is that they don’t seem to know everything. He told us not to go to the cops, but we already have, so it seems like they don’t have all the information.”

“Or maybe it just means don’t go to the cops with this information,” Nathaniel said grimly. “So do we keep it to ourselves, and try to find a solution, or do we hand it over to the police?”

“I could call Marcus and say I’ll come back,” David said quietly. “That should put an end to it.”

Nathaniel blew out a long breath through pursed lips. “No,” he said finally, standing and walking towards David. “You said yourself you don’t know if it will make a difference. And I don’t want you hurt, or dead, either. You know how I feel about you.”

“How do you feel about me?” David looked at him sadly. “Or how you felt?”

“How I feel,” Nathaniel said flatly. “It hasn’t changed. But we have to work together and find them. No more secrets, no more lies, no more keeping anything from each other. Understood?”

David nodded. “Understood.”

“Alright then, what next?”

Before David could speak, Nathaniel’s phone went off. He answered, his face looking grimmer by the moment as the person on the other end spoke. When he hung up, he glanced at David, his jaw tense.

“That was the police chief. They want us in for questioning.”

—

On the way over, they’d established for certain that they wouldn’t mention David’s affiliation with Marcus’ gang, or Marcus, or that they knew he was connected with the disappearance. That sounded well and good, but neither David nor Nathaniel had any idea how much information the police had. It was possible that they already knew.

The police chief pulled them into his office the moment they arrived.

“Look,” he said, sitting down in his chair behind his desk and motioning for them to sit. “I know the two of you are decent guys. I’ve worked in this town since you were both in high school, and I’ve known your parents for a long time. I don’t think for a minute either of you have anything to do with Sarah’s disappearance. But I’ve got to ask some questions, because a lot of the time it’s the domestic partner who has something to do with this.” His eyes narrowed in on David. “You’re the biological father of Coraline, right?”

“That’s right, sir,” David said, trying to keep his voice even.

“And you came back recently? Why did you stay away so long?”

“I wasn’t aware I had a daughter, sir. Sarah kept it from me, for reasons of her own. Once she called me, I came back straightaway.”

“Ah.” The police chief steepled his fingers. “And how did you feel about that?”

David prickled with irritation, but he was careful not to show it.

While you’re asking these stupid questions, we’re wasting time.

“I was upset, at first, of course. But since I came back we’ve all merged into a family remarkably well. There’s no bad blood between Nathaniel and I, the four of us function well and share time, and there’s been no arguing or disturbances.”

“That’s what I’ve heard. In fact, I’ve heard that the two of you are back together again. So how does that settle with Nathaniel?”

David couldn’t think of what to say for a moment. It wasn’t a secret, certainly, but it felt strange to say it out loud, in such an official capacity. In the end, Nathaniel did it for him.

“It settles just fine with me,” he said flatly. “The three of us are all together. Sarah, David, and I. And there’s no

jealousy or conflict, if that's your next question. Our domestic life is peaceful."

"So there's no arguing between you two gentlemen over who gets the girl?"

"There certainly is not. We've all communicated how we want this to go among ourselves, and we talk about it frequently and at length. There's no domestic upheaval for you to parse here, sir, with respect."

"I can't say I'm unhappy to hear that your home life is good, and that I've no reason to suspect the two of you," the police chief said, steepling his fingers. "But it is disappointing in that, that was the last of my possible leads. I left it until last, because I thought it was the least likely. But without the two of you under any kind of suspicion, there's nothing pointing us in the next direction." His gaze rested briefly on David. "If there were any other information that might be out there, it might go a long way towards getting your loved ones home."

This was the time to speak up, and David knew it. But all he could hear was that distorted voice in his ear, telling him not to talk to the cops. They had Sarah. They had Coraline. For all he knew, they had someone in the police force, someone watching, someone who would know the minute he or Nathaniel spoke up.

"We don't know any more than you do."

The police chief looked at him for a long moment, then sighed. "Well, you boys are free to go. If you hear anything, call me. And if I have any updates, I'll get in touch with you."

David and Nathaniel both thanked him, and headed back out to David's Supra. Once they were inside, David glanced at Nathaniel. "I was right, wasn't I? To not tell him?"

"I think so," Nathaniel said. "But now we need a plan of our own. And I think that's on you."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“I can only think of two people that have had anything to do with us since I came back who are both new in town, and who we don’t fully know what they were doing before they were here. One is Brienne, the girl who was at the party that night after I lost the race. And the other is Blake.” David let out a long, slow breath. “I’ve talked to Brienne and she claims she’s telling the truth about everything, was really upset at me for questioning her after I’d turned her down, and said not to come back to talk to her again. Interestingly enough, I think she and Blake are a thing. I saw them talking at the carnival, and I saw his car at the hotel the night that I went to talk to her.”

“So we talk to Blake, then, figure out if he’s really been doing what he said he was before he came here.” Nathaniel sighed. “I don’t like this, David. This isn’t the kind of life I want to live.”

“I know.” David looked down at his hands. “I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t mean for this to happen. But we’ve got to set it right.”

Nathaniel texted Blake, asking him to stop by the garage, and he and David started to drive that way. Halfway there he got a text from Blake saying that he’d be there in ten minutes, and by the time the Supra pulled into the parking lot, the Spyder was already there.

“What’s up, guys?” Blake greeted them with an easy smile.

“We wanted to chat with you a little,” Nathaniel said, his own smile mirroring Blake’s, but David could see the tension behind it. “Get to know you better before the next time the crew all hangs out.”

“Yeah?” He leaned back against his car, and David could see the first hint of something uncomfortable about the way he held himself. “What do you wanna know?”

“You said you used to be in Malibu before this, yeah?” David glanced at him. “You came here after that?”

“I mean, I traveled around a little, but yeah this was pretty much my next stop as far as setting down any roots goes.”

“So why here? People aren’t exactly crowding to get in here.”

Blake shrugged. “I heard there was a good bit of racing going on down here. Wanted to see how I fit in. Seemed like as good a place as any.”

“Leave anybody behind? Girlfriend, kid, family?”

Blake pressed his lips together. “Nah. Look man, is this about me hooking up with Brienne? I know you guys had a moment, but she said you turned her down and weren’t interested. If she’s still your girl I’ll step off, I promise.”

“She’s not my girl,” David said flatly. “And I don’t trust her, but what you do in your spare time is your business.”

“We just wanted to have a little chat with the newest member of the crew is all,” Nathaniel said soothingly. “We’ve spent a lot of hours together busting out work on that car, but we don’t do a lot of talking while that’s going on. Wanted to find out more about you, that’s all.”

“Well, if you don’t have any more questions, I’ve got a hot date.” Blake jingled his keys in his hand. “I hate to say it, man, but it feels like there’s some mistrust here. Either that, or just a waste of my time for no reason.”

“No mistrust. And sorry if you feel we wasted your time,” Nathaniel said, in that same calm voice. “We’re just a lot

closer with the rest of the crew. We want to be able to make you feel welcome.”

“Appreciated. I’ll catch you later.”

The tension still hung in the air even after Blake had driven away. Nathaniel turned to David and shrugged. “He’s not the most forthcoming, but it doesn’t seem as if he’s got any major holes in the story. I guess we could follow up with some crews in Malibu and see if anyone’s heard of him, but do you really think he’s in on this? I don’t mean to be cruel, but the dude barely knows his way around a wrench. I doubt anyone remembers him, and he doesn’t seem bright enough to have anything to do with it.”

David shrugged. “Just wanted to cover all the bases. He’s new, that makes him a little suspicious until we know him better. But you’re probably right about him.”

“I hope so,” Nathaniel said, watching as the taillights of the Spyder faded in the distance.

—

For two days, Sarah had been trying to think of ways to escape.

Whatever they had used to knock Cora out had been much too strong—even after she was fully awake, she was still listless and lethargic. As far as care, she couldn’t exactly argue that they were being mistreated. The burly man brought them food regularly, and it was of a decent quality, and no one harmed them or even really spoke poorly to them, other than the shaggy-haired man’s leers and occasional commentary. But she knew it was only temporary. If David didn’t do what they wanted, or if they decided it was too little, too late, their treatment would change very quickly. And she didn’t intend to still be there when that happened.

By the end of day two, she was verging on desperate. She mulled over ideas in her head until the door creaked open and the shaggy-haired man came in, bearing a tray with two bowls of soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, along with water.

As he set the tray down, the key that was in his hand slipped out and fell to the carpet. Quick as a snake, before he could move or notice, she bent and grabbed it, sliding it into her pocket.

He looked at her quizzically, and Sarah smiled. “Felt a bug crawl across my foot. Do you think there’s fleas here? I was awfully itchy last night.”

He didn’t say a word, only backed away from the tray, and started to walk towards the door.

“I need to take Cora to the bathroom,” she said quickly, grabbing Cora up in her arms. Before he could say or do anything, she darted around him, out the door, and yanked it shut, turning the key.

He pounded on the door, and it echoed the rapid beating of her heart. She was out of the room, now she had to get out of the house. She had no idea where the burly man was, or if he was even home. Hell, she still had no idea where *she* was.

She hurried down the hall, whispering to Cora to stay silent. She could smell food cooking, and she went in the opposite direction, hoping it would take her to the front door without anyone seeing.

For a moment, she thought she was home free. Her hand was on the doorknob of the front door, the rest of the house seemingly empty except for the shouts coming from the shaggy-haired man, and just as she was about to turn it she felt a heavy hand clamp down on her shoulder.

Heart sinking, she turned around and saw the burly man glowering down at her. “Thought you’d take a little walk, hm?”

She couldn’t think of anything to say. It was obvious she’d been trying to make a break for it, and her mouth was dry as cotton. They didn’t have to guess at how to punish her, if they wanted to, the answer to that was right there in her arms, starting to cry.

“Back to your room, sweetheart,” he growled, his hand digging into her shoulder so hard that it hurt as he began to

steer her back down the hallway. She went without a fight, knowing better. She'd tried, at least, but she'd failed, and she didn't think that she was going to get a second shot. They'd be more watchful from here on out.

The shaggy-haired man looked ready to kill when the door was unlocked. He stared daggers at Sarah as she gingerly set Cora on the bed and turned back to face them.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I shouldn't have tried to run. It won't happen again, I promise."

"You're damn right it won't. From now on you get one meal a day, and I'll leave it in the room when you're asleep so you can't jump up and try to make a break for it. Any bathroom trips require both of us escorting you. Got it?"

Under ordinary circumstances, her heart would have sank, but all she heard was that they weren't threatening Cora. Not yet, anyway.

"I've got it," she said, as meekly as she could manage.

"Good." The burly man pushed the other out of the room before he could say anything, although Sarah could hear him starting to loudly argue from the moment the door was shut behind them.

She sank onto the bed, staring at the tray of food that was slowly going cold, her whole body beginning to shake.

David, Nathaniel...someone...please figure something out soon.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Sixty-eight hours.

It was dark when the knock came at the door. David had given up trying to get Nathaniel to stop pacing, trying to come up with ideas, theories about where they might be, what might have happened. It was all he could do to get him to sleep and eat a little bit.

David answered the door. To his shock, Brienne was standing just outside of it. She was wearing leggings and a long t-shirt—the least sexy thing he’d ever seen her wearing—and her hair was a mess. He almost thought that she looked as if she’d been crying.

“What are you doing here?” he asked sharply. He was in no mood to deal with her shenanigans.

“I need to tell you something,” she said, her voice almost a whisper.

David could feel Nathaniel coming up to stand just behind him. Even in their current state, it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up a little, sending a pleasurable shiver down his spine. “Well spit it out, then,” he said harshly. “We’ve got a lot going on right now.”

“I know. That’s why I came to talk to you.” She bit her lower lip. “Can I come in?”

“No, I think you’ll do just fine where you are. We’re a little mistrustful these days. What do you need to say?”

“It’s about Blake.”

David raised an eyebrow. “Things not going well between the two of you?”

“He...he told me something, last night.” She bit her lip again, her eyes welling up. “You were right, I’m not really a surgeon. I’m a cocktail waitress in San Diego. I was dating Marcus for a while, we split up, but stayed on good terms. He asked me to come here, try to seduce you, get you away from Sarah and the kid to draw you back—or at the very least get enough information on you to be useful.”

David saw red. He gritted his teeth, and he could tell that Brienne knew exactly how angry he was. She held up a hand quickly. “There’s more.”

“Better say it fast.”

“Blake is a plant,” she stuttered out, her words spilling over each other. “Marcus sent him to infiltrate the crew, figure out how to get you back, or failing that, do what ‘had to be done.’ I just didn’t know what that meant, until last night.”

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t realize he was behind the kidnappings. That, that was how they were getting to you. And then Blake told me—he was bragging about it—and I...I just can’t stand the thought that they took a kid! That they might hurt her! It’s one thing to try to get you, maybe tie up a loose end, but your daughter? That’s not okay. So I came and told you, just as soon as I could get away.”

David felt dizzy. There was a roaring in his ears, and he could feel Nathaniel step forward, could feel the tension in every line of his body. His hunch had been right all along—there *had* been something off with both Brienne and Blake. And now Blake was going to pay for it.

“Get out of here,” he snapped. “Go back to the hotel, go back to San Diego, I don’t fucking care, but I don’t want to see your face again, *ever*. Do you understand me?”

“You’re not...you’re not going to hurt me, are you?” Brienne looked frightened.

“No,” David spat. “Unlike Marcus and his guys, I don’t hurt women. I try to avoid scaring them, but I want you to understand that you’re not welcome around here, or anywhere where me or my family might be. Do you understand?”

She nodded quickly.

“Call Blake,” David said, his voice a low growl. “We’re getting answers.”

—

If Blake knew that something was up, he didn’t let on. Either he was stupid or overconfident, David thought as they drove to the parking garage where the crews often met up for races. He had a feeling that things might get ugly, and if they did, he didn’t want any camera evidence of it. Nor did he want to do it at the garage, where they worked.

Blake was waiting for them, leaning up against the Spyder. “Well, seems you’ve worked things out,” he called out as the two men began to stride towards him. “Brienne snitched, didn’t she? I’ll be sure to tell Marcus about that.”

“You’re not going to be telling Marcus anything,” Nathaniel growled, picking up his pace. All pretense of friendliness or ignorance of the situation had been dropped. “In fact, you’ll be lucky if you’re able to speak.”

“Threats, is it?” Blake crossed his arms. “I don’t know if I like that.”

Nathaniel walked right up to him, almost nose to nose. “I don’t give a fuck what you like.”

“I’d be careful if I were you,” Blake started to say, and then Nathaniel grabbed him by the arm, wrenching it behind his back and shoving him forward, throwing him down to the concrete floor of the garage.

“Where’s my fiancée?” he shouted. “Where’s my daughter?”

David didn’t think he’d ever heard Nathaniel directly refer to Coraline as his daughter before. He knew Nathaniel thought of her that way of course—but he’d never heard it. It ought to

have made him jealous, he supposed, or feel possessive—but it did the opposite. It made him love Nathaniel that much more. They were a family—him, Nathaniel, Sarah and Coraline. And he was going to see that their family was back together.

He crossed to stand in front of Blake's face, tapping the toe of his boot on the concrete. Nathaniel had one foot squarely in the middle of Blake's back.

“Tell me where they are,” David said harshly. “Or I'm going to kick you in the face. And these boots are heavy. I might break your nose, I might knock out some teeth. Or you can start talking.”

“You ought to be careful,” Blake spat out. “Anything that happens to me, happens to them. You think you're going to get them back by roughing me up? All I have to do is say you've hurt me, and they'll take every injury out on them. If I don't show up, or I don't call in when I say I did? They're gonna take it out on them. You kill me? They're dead. You harm me in any way, you're harming your lady and your little girl. Got it?”

For a moment, David considered putting it to the test. Adrenaline was pumping through his veins, harder and faster than it ever had during a race, and he wanted to crush Blake, to grind the betrayal out of him under his heel. He knew Nathaniel was feeling exactly the same. But they couldn't risk it. They couldn't take the chance that their actions might hurt Sarah and Cora.

And Blake knew it. It didn't matter if he were telling the truth, it worked anyway. That was the worst part of it, David thought.

He and Nathaniel reluctantly backed down, and Blake grinned triumphantly at them.

“Hey,” he said, and his tone turned pandering. “Look, I'll do you a solid. You race me, David. The Supra versus the Spyder. If you win, I'll tell you where they are. I'll even throw in a bonus—if you can beat me, I'll give you another five grand, and I'll try to convince them to let you buy your way out of it.”

David looked at him suspiciously. “All that, if I win a race? You’re that confident that you can win?”

Blake shrugged. “I think it’s worth it. And if I win, you go back to Marcus and take your medicine. And I get to keep your car, and I’ll be able to say that I beat David Brooks. You’re kind of a legend around here, you know that, right? Everyone talks about you when street racing comes up. I’d like to be able to say I beat you. Whaddaya say, huh? Sound good?” He grinned widely, baring his teeth.

David looked at Nathaniel. “This should be an easy win,” he whispered. “I think we should go for it.”

Nathaniel frowned. “Are you sure? Something’s off.”

“If I win, that’s an end to it. We get the girls and get out of this. Surely I can beat him. Hell, I built most of his car. I know how it ticks. This’ll be nothing.”

Nathaniel’s jaw tensed. “If you’re sure—”

David nodded. “I’m sure.” He turned back to face Blake.

“You’re on.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Something wasn't right, he knew that. He could feel it—it was too easy. Blake was a novice racer, at best, he barely knew a torque wrench from a turbo. David knew this was a trap somehow, there was no way that getting the girls back was going to be as simple as beating Blake in a man to man, back road race in the hills. He had to take the chance though, and hope he'd be able to survive the trap when it was sprung.

Who knows, maybe it will be that easy, he thought hopelessly. Maybe Blake was dumb enough and proud enough to think that boosting cars was the same as racing an experienced driver. But he didn't expect that that was going to be the case.

He drove the Supra up onto the line, next to the Spyder that he'd helped Blake work on. He dropped it into idle and looked over. Blake was looking directly at him, his face sullen, but he said nothing. David wanted to leap out of the car, grab him, shake him, force the information out of him. But he knew better. This was the gauntlet that Blake had thrown down, and he intended to make him regret every second of it. It was time to put an end to this particular nightmare for good.

He checked the gauges; everything looked good. The nitrous was full, he had two good charges ready. He had one trick up his sleeve just in case, and he double checked that as well. He wanted to believe that it would be an easy race, but his hopes weren't high. There had to be something else to this.

He gave the Supra a bit of gas, relieved that the idle was good. He hadn't raced it since he'd gone up against Lexie, and this was about to be a test of his own ability to fix a car. If he'd gone wrong anywhere, messed anything up or missed anything, it would be the end of it.

He gripped the steering wheel, nervous. It was go time—all or nothing, and it was just the two of them, and Nathaniel waiting behind in the Skyline. There were no pretty girls walking between the cars this time, ready to drop a hand to start the race, no shouting crowds. It was just the two of them, finger on the trigger. Like an old west shootout, when one man pulled, the other did too. The question was, who would hit the gas first?

David waited, and thought about Sarah and Coraline, and calmed himself. They were depending on him to see this through, to make the right choices. He willed himself to focus on the Spyder. He'd wait for Blake to make the first move, to show his hand, so that David could see where he might be able to get an advantage. He gently rested a foot on the clutch and the other on the gas, ready to drop both in an instant. Then he heard the shift.

The Spyder's tires spun and then caught, and it shot forward. Less than a second later, David's Supra shot forward after it. Second, third, fourth, fifth, he shifted gears perfectly, but so did Blake. The Spyder stayed a foot ahead at every shift, and then David knew exactly what the trap was, and hated himself for being so foolish.

Blake knew what he was doing, and had probably known all along. He wasn't a novice, certainly, but now the question was how good *was* he exactly? David had no way of knowing, and so there was only one thing for him to do, now that Blake had shown his hand. He had to treat Blake as if he were the best, and race accordingly. No quarter given, no taking the win for granted. He was racing for the highest stakes possible, and he should have known all along that Blake wouldn't have suggested the race, knowing how good David was, unless he thought for certain that he could win.

I've been a fucking idiot, David thought, gritting his teeth.

He'd underestimated everyone, every step of the way, from Marcus all the way down to Blake. And if he didn't win this, it wasn't just going to be him who paid the price.

I've got to win. I've got to, he thought, repeating it like a mantra as he downshifted into a turn and took the inside, intending to get out in front as fast as possible.

The second he pulled out in front, Blake rammed him, and hard. The jolt shuddered through the car, grinding David's teeth together, and when he looked over he saw Blake grinning fiercely, malice clear in his eyes.

David dropped back, and out of harm's way, shaken up. So it was going to be a fight, as well as a race. Well, that was all well and good, he frowned grimly, downshifting sharply as he fought to gain back the ground he'd lost.

If it was a fight, then he'd fight.

He wasn't going to be the only person who had underestimated his opponent. If Blake thought that playing dirty would be enough to frighten David away, he'd been more wrong than he knew. He was threatening everything David had ever loved, and David was done playing nice. He'd always raced clean, but that was going to change tonight.

He shifted and slammed the gas, determined to catch up. They both swerved around one of the few cars on the road, and Blake narrowly missed another on a blind curve. David dodged it easily and that allowed him to gain a bit of distance, but not nearly enough. He would have to come up with something if he was going to win this. He knew that the Spyder was more than a match for the Supra, he'd helped build it after all.

Suddenly he realized exactly what he needed to do. He helped put everything in that car, he knew it inside and out, and thus knew its weakness. They'd put every go-fast trick into it that would fit, but the brakes likely weren't as top notch.

In fact, he knew they weren't. Blake had been fine with a simple upgrade. If David could take him in the turns, get in

front of him, even for a second, and get him to brake, that might be enough to get them to lock for a second or more and he could widen the gap. Or maybe goad him into making a fatal mistake. That was the plan, he decided, but he knew even as he settled on it that executing it would be tough. This wasn't a cross-town race, with a bunch of side streets and alternate routes, it was a two lane road in the hills. Still, there were a few tight turns, and he intended to make them count.

On the straightaways, Blake gained no ground, but neither did David. They stayed a second apart, dodging the rare obstacle, tires squealing in the night. David saw a tight turn approaching and took his first chance, darting to the inside. Predictably, Blake tried to ram him again, but this time David expected it. He downshifted and braked, cutting back and around to the outside. Blake slammed into the guardrail and corrected, but lost a precious second. It was enough. David shifted and shot into the lead, and Blake furiously gave chase. He could see Blake's expression in the rear view, and it was murderous.

The thought crossed his mind that now would be the time for his one extra trick, but he decided to save it and instead opted for his first tank of nitrous. He needed to put as much space between himself and Blake as possible. He flipped the switch and shot forward, the inertia thrusting him back into his seat, his teeth grinding as he held on tight. He looked in his rearview to see Blake's headlights fall a bit further behind.

And then get closer.

Blake had punched his nitrous as well, but that alone shouldn't have been enough to allow him to catch up. The Spyder was at least four hundred pounds heavier than the Supra, the best he should have been able to do is keep up, certainly not catch up. Blake must have done some serious weight reduction when David wasn't around.

Fuck.

David frantically did some calculations and knew he was in trouble. They were over halfway through the race and he barely had a lead. Blake was on him now, and the first nitrous

tank had been spent. His only hope was that Blake didn't also have a second tank. It was going to be close, far closer than he was comfortable with.

They came into another tight turn, and Blake slammed into the back of the Supra, the back end fishtailing wildly. David corrected, but it caused him to lose half a second coming out of the turn, and now Blake was less than a car length behind. To make matters worse, David looked ahead and saw tail lights from another car, and swerved. But he'd swerved into oncoming headlights as well, and had to slide onto the shoulder to avoid them, jerking the car sharply to get back onto the road before he lost too much ground. Since Blake had been slightly behind, he'd had a split second's more time to react, and it gave him the moment he needed to pull ahead. David corrected quickly, and tried to catch up. He knew he wouldn't have many more chances to get in front of Blake again, and he couldn't make any more mistakes.

Get it together, he told himself grimly.

Losing to Lexie had been embarrassing. Losing to Blake would mean the end of everything. He'd never raced for higher stakes in his life, and now wasn't the time to get soft. He needed to be tougher than ever.

He shifted and fell in behind Blake, waiting for another tight turn so that he could get in front. If he could pull that off, he could use his second tank to put more space between them. He hoped for a little luck, and to his great relief, he got it in the form of a deer leaping across the road in front of Blake. It was easily avoidable, and Blake only lost traction for a second, but that second allowed David to get into position for the next turn. He shot left and took the outside, hoping Blake wouldn't be expecting this, and he wasn't. He was already listing right, expecting to shut David out, and this gave him the opportunity to pull ahead. He stomped the gas and flew out of the turn, trying to get as much acceleration as he possibly could.

I might win, David realized with something approaching elation. There was less than a third of the race left, and he had the ground he needed. Unless Blake had another tank of nitrous, or more bad luck fell on him, he had it in the bag. He

took every turn with caution, and kept his eyes peeled for wayward wildlife. He could practically feel Blake seething with anger as he tried to catch up, but David was giving him nothing.

He had the glow now, he was in the zone. Perfect shifting, dodging every obstacle, taking every turn smoothly. He chanced a look at Blake in the rearview and saw him two full car lengths behind. David almost let out a sigh of relief. They were in the final quarter of the race now, and he had a commanding lead.

Until he suddenly didn't. Moments after chancing a look, he noticed the headlights growing brighter in the rearview. The only explanation was that Blake had used his second tank. David had to give him credit, it was smart—he'd have waited for the last quarter too. And Blake had timed it so that it would be out just as they went into one of the last big turns, the perfect time to overtake him and make sure he couldn't get any ground back. David steeled himself and readied for Blake's approach.

They started into the turn, David taking center, not sure how Blake would take the turn. That was made clear immediately when Blake took the inside, but rather than try and push forward and into the lead, he drove the front end of the Spyder into the rear quarter of the Supra. David knew immediately what he was trying to do—it was the same trick Lexie had used. Blake was trying to send him into a spin, make him lose control. David steered first into, and then out of the turn. His front end slammed into the guardrail, pinning both cars against it. Metal screeched as they ground along it, sparks and smoke flying. David looked through his passenger window and saw the fury in Blake's eyes and realized that he wasn't simply trying to make him spin out. He was trying to *push him over*. For just a moment David was stunned at the realization that Blake was actually trying to kill him. He'd expected a lot once he'd realized that Blake wasn't the stupid novice he'd been pretending to be, but he hadn't expected that.

Time to stop underestimating people.

He exhaled deeply.

A calm washed over him. There was no way he was going to let that happen. He was *not* going to die and leave Sarah and Coraline at the mercy of this madman, and Marcus, and the others. They thought David was weak, that he was an easy mark. He was going to prove them so, so fucking wrong.

He steered all the way into the turn and allowed himself to spin out. The Spyder slid across the side of the Supra and forward, and David continued the spin through a full 360-degree turn, mashing the button for his second tank of nitrous at the same time. He rocketed out of the spin and after Blake, his own rage fueling his driving along with the tank of nitrous oxide. He could see the finish, a mere 500 yards ahead, and knew what he had to do. He was done trading paint, it was time to end this for good.

He turned into the oncoming lane, not caring if there was oncoming traffic, and around Blake's Spyder. He crossed in front of it, and flipped a hidden switch. An electrical signal traveled down a wire that ran the length of the car and signaled a box behind the gas tank to open. Dozens of small spikes spilled out and onto the road, bouncing in every direction. A number of them found their mark, and at once all four of the tires on Blake's Spyder exploded. The car swerved, first in one direction, then another as Blake tried to correct, but there was nothing he could do. It swerved again, this time completely sideways and the bare rims caught on the pavement and the Spyder flipped. It rolled again and again, metal and rubber flying into the air and onto the road.

David crossed the finish line and brought the Supra to a stop. He didn't bother turning off the engine, he threw the door open and watched as the Spyder came to a screeching halt. If the wreck hadn't killed Blake, he was going to pull him out of that pile and beat him to a pulp. He raced towards the Spyder, seeing red every step of the way.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Blake was stumbling out of the wreckage of the Spyder onto the road. Without missing a beat, David grabbed him by the front of his shirt, hauling him upwards. His free hand balled into a fist and connected with Blake's face—once, twice, three times, until Blake was on the ground and David kicked him hard in the ribs, and then was straddling him, preparing to punch him in the mouth again.

He heard Nathaniel yelling, felt Nathaniel grab his shoulder, hauling him back. The world was spinning, and all he could feel was pure, unadulterated rage flowing through him, the desire to see Blake split open and bleeding for everything that had happened in the last few days. The betrayal, the kidnapping, the lies and now he'd tried to kill David. It was too much.

“Stop. David, stop! We need to know where the girls are.” Nathaniel was panting from the effort of running to David and hauling him up. “I know you're angry, but we'll make sure he's turned in, along with the rest of these fuckers. But first we have to get to Sarah and Cora.”

“Where are they?” David shouted at Blake. “I swear to god, if you don't tell me where they are right now, I'm going to beat you until you can't remember your own name. Tell me, and I'll stop.”

Blake raised his hands, warding off another blow. He mumbled an address, and then repeated it more clearly, as Nathaniel hurriedly typed it into his phone.

“Come on,” Nathaniel said, grabbing David’s elbow and hauling him to his feet. “Let’s go!”

Quickly, David reached into Blake’s pocket, where a roll of bills showed clearly through the denim. “Guess you weren’t lying about the five grand,” he spat, and then he followed Nathaniel, his pulse roaring in his ears.

David couldn’t remember ever having driven with such single-minded purpose before. Nathaniel put the address in the GPS and they drove, way over the speed limit the entire time. He didn’t care about being pulled over, about danger, about anything. He had to get to Sarah and his daughter, without wasting another minute.

The address was just a house. It was a squat, faded orange color, located in a bad neighborhood, the same as any of the other low-rent houses that David could see on any street around them. In the dark it looked even worse, and he could see the paint peeling on the shutters, the bent places in the chain-link fence surrounding it.

“Let’s go,” Nathaniel said, reaching for the door handle.

“Wait,” David looked at him. “We don’t have any weapons. What are we going to do, punch our way out of however many guys are in there?”

Nathaniel lifted the edge of his shirt to show a pistol concealed under it. He laughed shortly at David’s wide-eyed stare. “I had a feeling things might get a little dicey after the race. I brought this just in case. It might come in handy now.”

They went around the back of the house, walking quietly, leaving the car on the street. The back door was locked, and Nathaniel looked ruefully at it. “I can break the glass,” he said, “and get it open. But it’s going to alert them, most likely.”

“Just get us in.”

Nathaniel took off the button-down shirt he had on over his t-shirt, wrapped it around his hand, and delivered one solid punch to the glass pane in the door. It shattered, and he quickly reached in, unlocking the door. “Better hope this is the right

house, or we're in a hell of a lot more trouble," he said ruefully.

They heard shouts coming from the living room. When they came down the hall and rounded the corner, they saw three men standing there, and Sarah and Cora cowering on the couch. It sent David's blood boiling, and he had no doubt Nathaniel felt the same.

Marcus was one of them.

"Marcus," David said coolly. "You've taken this way too far. I don't know why you're so hellbent on getting me back, but I've had enough. Let Sarah and my daughter go."

"Mm, I don't think so," Marcus said, his tone careless. "I wanted you back because you're a loose end. You're good at your job, so I figured if I could convince you to come back and work for me, I'd keep you on. I've rarely had anyone better. But since you refused to listen to reason, I think it's time to just tie up that loose end. And since you've annoyed me, I think I'll hang on to your girlfriend. My associate here seems to have some interest in the kid, so perhaps I'll go along with that, too."

A man with long, dirty, blond hair leered at Cora. Before David could say anything, he heard Nathaniel's sharp intake of breath, and then a gun went off just behind him, setting his ears to ringing.

The man slumped to the floor. To David's great relief, Sarah had had Cora pressed against her, so she didn't see anything. But he saw her white face, and he heard Nathaniel's heavy breathing, and he knew this had to come to an end.

"Sorry," Nathaniel said coolly. "But if he had those sorts of predilections, he really needed to be put down."

A tall, husky man with a beard had his hand on his own pistol. David held a hand up, digging in his pocket with his free one. He pulled out the roll of money and held it up. "Five grand," he said, his voice loud. "Take it, and let us get out of here. Never call me again, never contact me again, leave me and my family alone. I'll keep my mouth shut about your

business dealings, honestly Marcus, I couldn't give fewer fucks about it."

Marcus sneered. "You kill one of my guys, and then think you can throw money at me?"

Nathaniel raised the gun again. "Your guy might get a shot off and kill me," he said flatly. "But I'll get one off too, and I guarantee that I'll hit you. Is it worth the risk? Or maybe you could just take the money, and get the hell out of here."

Marcus glanced at the cooling body on the floor, at the nervous man next to him, and then across to David and Nathaniel.

"You drive a hard bargain."

"No, it's an easy one. Take the money, or take a solid shot at dying. How do you feel about those odds?"

There was silence in the room for a long moment. Everyone was tense, waiting for someone to move, someone to say something. Finally, after what felt like forever, each second punctuated by the sound of breathing, and Cora's small whimpers, Marcus held up his hands.

"Alright," he said. "Alright, I'll take the money."

"Send Sarah and Cora over here, and walk ahead of us to the door without your muscle," Nathaniel said. "We'll hand you the money once we're safely out of the house."

Marcus nodded.

Every step to the door felt like torture. David could feel the fear coming off of Sarah in waves, could hear Cora crying, could feel Nathaniel stretched like a bowstring ready to snap. He was waiting for something to go wrong, but to his amazement, they followed Marcus to the door, and out into the backyard.

David handed Nathaniel the money and ushered Sarah and Cora away, as he watched Nathaniel hand Marcus the money, the gun still in one hand. "We never hear from you or your associates again," he heard Nathaniel say. "You better stick to that."

“I will,” he heard Marcus promise.

David wanted nothing more than to grab Sarah and Cora in his arms, and he saw the same expression on Nathaniel’s face, but they needed to get out of there before Marcus changed his mind. They rushed towards the car, piling in as David started it quickly, throwing it into gear and stepping on the gas.

The drive back was mostly silent. He could hear Sarah crying quietly, and saw Nathaniel reach behind the seat, his fingers entwining with hers. “They took my ring,” he heard her whisper, and Nathaniel answered: “It’s alright, baby. I’ll get you another one, I promise.”

There was no question of any of them sleeping separately that night. They all piled into one bed, Sarah clinging to Cora, Nathaniel on one side of her and Cora and David on the other. It should have been a sleepless night, but they were all exhausted, and to David’s surprise, they passed out almost immediately.

To his great relief, he didn’t dream.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

When David woke, it was to the sound of the door closing. He opened his eyes and saw Sarah walking in, and she raised a finger to her lips, nodding at Nathaniel. “I just put Cora down in her room,” she whispered, sliding back into bed. “And took a shower. I needed one.”

David didn’t move as she lay down alongside him facing him. “Are you angry with me?” he asked softly. “You must be. I didn’t tell you the truth—”

She laid a finger against his lips. “It’s alright. Well, it’s not. But, I get it. You wanted to put that behind you, and you thought you could. I don’t for a second think that you did it on purpose, or that you really thought there was a chance they might come after us. That’s cowardly, and you’re not a coward.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you came after me. You and Nathaniel both.”

David felt his eyes prickle with tears. “I love you, Sarah,” he whispered. “I always have, and I always will. When you were gone, I thought...I felt...”

“Shh.” She leaned forward, pulling him to her and kissing him softly. “I love you, too. And we’re safe now. Nothing bad will happen to us again.”

“I love you too.” Nathaniel’s voice came from behind Sarah, and he curled against her, looking over her shoulder at David. “And you. I love you.”

“And I love you.” David bit his lip. “I don’t want us to be apart again.”

“You seem pretty close right now.” Sarah kissed him again, her fingers trailing over his cheek, and David reached up to tangle his fingers through her wet hair, feeling it slide over his palm.

He’d thought there could never be anything sweeter than that first night he’d kissed her again after so long, or the first night he’d slept with her after years apart, but he’d been wrong. He’d come so very close to losing her for good, and the knowledge was like a knife through him, making him want to grasp her and pull her close to him, keep her body against his so that he would know she was there.

He did exactly that. The warm curves of her body molded against his, and he felt himself harden, his body aching desperately to be inside of her. He slid his hands up under the tank top she wore, caressing her soft skin, up to the swell of her breasts, fingers tracing over her hardening nipples until she gasped and writhed against him, her back arching. Her hips pressed into his, her ass arching back into Nathaniel, and he heard Nathaniel groan, saw him bend his head to kiss the back of her neck, pushing her long hair aside.

He heard Sarah gasp, felt her squirm between the two of them, and then they were all hands, grasping at each other’s clothing, pushing the blankets back, stripping it away until the three of them were naked in the bed, Sarah moaning as David slid down her body, his mouth trailing over her breasts, her stomach, and down between her legs as he hooked one of her legs over his shoulder, tasting her in long, slow strokes that left her writhing back against Nathaniel and clutching at the pillow, small cries of pleasure spilling from her lips.

He saw Nathaniel reach down, his hand sliding along his erection, and saw exactly what he meant to do. With one smooth stroke, Nathaniel pushed himself into Sarah, filling her completely as David kept her leg over one shoulder, his tongue circling her clit in small, slow, languorous strokes as Nathaniel began to thrust into her. As Nathaniel slid out, David licked

downwards, his tongue sliding along Nathaniel's cock before he plunged into her again.

"Oh my god," Sarah moaned, her hips bucking as Nathaniel kept up the pace, thrusting into her hard each time as David pushed her higher and higher, keeping up the motion that he knew she loved. He was rock hard, the taste of Sarah and the feeling of both her and Nathaniel under his tongue driving him wild. He reached up to caress her breasts with one hand, the other sliding down to stroke himself slowly, the aching throbbing in his cock demanding something, anything for relief.

He felt her tense, felt her thigh tremble against his shoulder as she arched backwards hard, her moans turning to something that was almost a scream as Nathaniel plunged into her as deeply as he could go, grinding his hips against her so that his cock rubbed up against the sensitive spot inside of her as David's tongue sped up, faster and faster until all she could do was buck and writhe between the two of them, crying out their names as the orgasm washed over her in heavy, pounding waves.

With one smooth motion, Nathaniel pulled out of her, and David rolled her onto her back, spreading her legs and moving between them as he sank into her with one thrust, groaning aloud at the sweet relief of feeling her envelop him, wet and hot and pulsing as she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply, her tongue tangling with his as her moans vibrated against his lips.

He felt Nathaniel behind him, felt the warm, hard press of his cock, and groaned aloud as Nathaniel began to slowly slide into him, the sharp sensation of the first inch, and then the pleasurable slide, Nathaniel's thick cock filling him as he sank into Sarah again and again, pinioned between the two of them.

"I'm going to make you come again," he whispered against Sarah's mouth, tangling his fingers in her hair as he thrust into her and rocked his hips, sinking as deeply as he could.

“Good,” she whispered, her eyes flashing with lust as she watched him, looking over his shoulder occasionally at Nathaniel, his face a mask of pleasure as he fucked David with slow, measured strokes, each one making David groan aloud.

“I’m not going to last long,” Nathaniel groaned, his hips bucking as he moved a little faster, gauging David’s pleasure as he picked up the pace. “You feel so fucking good...”

“So do you,” David whispered, and he meant it for both Nathaniel and Sarah, and they knew it. “Come for me baby,” he whispered to Sarah, kissing her again as he ran his hand down her waist, gripping her hip. “I want to feel it. I want to come inside of you, make me come, god I want it so bad...”

He heard her cry out, felt her moan as he kissed her, felt her body tense and shake, felt her clench around him as she came wildly, hips arching off of the bed, as the orgasm shook her body. It was all he could take, the heat of her wrapped around him, and he felt his own body throb and then explode, the pleasure rushing out of him in a wave that burned through him as he felt Nathaniel go too, his fingers digging hard into David’s ass as he cried out and thrust harder, and then all the way to the hilt, his cock throbbing and pulsing inside of David as he came, too.

For a long moment after they came apart, no one could speak. There was only the sound of the fan whirring overhead, and their gasping breaths.

When they could again, Nathaniel propped his head up on one hand. “I was thinking about something,” he said quietly.

David and Sarah both looked at him.

“We want to be together, right? The three of us? We love each other. We want to be a family, to have a relationship—a real one.”

“Yes,” David and Sarah said in unison.

“So let’s move. Let’s go somewhere else, somewhere where there isn’t a past, where we don’t have bad memories, to a house that can start out as *our* home. Let’s leave this

behind. We have enough saved. We all have jobs that are needed anywhere. Let's just go."

It wasn't a hard decision to make. It made sense. It was, without a doubt, the right thing to do. Looking at each other, it didn't even need to be spoken aloud.

Yes.

EPILOGUE

The cool Colorado breeze swept through Sarah's hair, ruffling it around her face as she helped unload the moving truck. The house in front of them was beautiful—a two story building in need of a little love and remodeling, with white clapboard on the outside, blue shutters, and a wide porch wrapping around it. The windows were huge, the inside spacious. In the back was a fenced yard for Cora to play, and maybe the dog that Nathaniel kept talking about getting.

On her left hand, a new diamond solitaire sparkled, and below it a thin diamond band interspersed with sapphires. Very soon, when they had their wedding, two thin, plain bands would rest on either side of the two engagement rings. But first, they'd decided, they wanted to settle into their new home, their new life.

Cora shrieked and ran around the house as they unloaded boxes and pieces of furniture, putting each thing in the room where it belonged. In the distance she could see trees, thick green foliage, and it smelled fresh here, cleaner than what she was used to. They were on the outskirts of Denver, close enough to the city for her to work at the hospital, far enough away for them to enjoy the beauty of their new home.

She watched Nathaniel and David haul the heaviest pieces, enjoying seeing the flex of muscle and the gleam of sweat, imagining what they might do later, when they were alone and in their new bedroom.

Home. Ours.

She thought the words with a glow of happiness that she'd never known she could feel. She'd been happy, many times before, but this was something beyond that, a glow that she hoped would never leave her. And she knew they never would.

They were a family at last, all happy together, all where they belonged. She saw that same happiness radiated back at her in David's face and in Nathaniel's.

There were no bad memories here, no hurt, no fear. They were starting new, making a life that was only their own. The next day David and Nathaniel would go to the mechanics where they'd found jobs, and in a few days she would start at the hospital. Cora would go to preschool, and they would repair the house bit by bit, decorate it little by little, until it became the place they'd grow old in, maybe raise other children in, and make the life that they'd dreamed of in.

She saw David straighten as he set down the last box of dishes, saw Nathaniel teasingly brush past him, shooting a smile at her as he did so. She looked into the kitchen, imagined cooking meals there, spending holidays together, morning breakfasts and dinners after they'd all come home from work.

Everything they'd ever done had led them there to this. All she could think standing there was one refrain, over and over: *I'm the luckiest girl in the world.*

And when she glanced over, and saw the two men looking at her, she knew they were thinking the exact same thing.

They were all lucky. And they'd found their happily ever after.

Forever.

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