

MIKE BRAVO OPS

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ATLAS

A MIKE BRAVO OPS NOVEL

EDEN FINLEY

MIKE BRAVO OPS: ATLAS

EDEN FINLEY

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DISCLAIMERS

TRIGGER WARNINGS:

Please note that this book contains strong domestic assault themes and organized crime that includes drugs, drug dealing, and sex work.

The weaponry worship/actions/lack of consequences from Eden's characters do not reflect any of the author's personal opinions, as well as any opinions some characters might have on sex workers or the sex industry. The point of flawed characters is to make them grow.

Mike Bravo are supposed to be the good guys, but that doesn't necessarily mean they always do good things. They're hired mercenaries who make mistakes, cross lines, and don't really have any regard for the law or law enforcement. Apart from Dylan Rodriguez. Basically, they're not saints. Well, except for Saint. There's a reason his code name is that. Though, being with Iris has definitely tarnished his rep a little.

Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

CHAPTER ONE

ATLAS

NOTHING MAKES my skin crawl like being ogled while only a string separates my ass cheeks. This job is objectifying, seedy, and downright degrading. I shouldn't even be here. When I was given the option to pass on this undercover mission—working as a bartender at a strip club—I should've taken the out.

The reason I chose to do this is because I know a secret. One that affects everyone's future at Mike Bravo Ops. If I want to show Trav that I'm future leader material, I need to prove I'm not a one-trick pony. However, the longer I'm here, working in only a thong and bow tie, I'm failing to see exactly how Trav will be impressed.

As I deliver a drink to a rowdy bachelor party group, my bare ass is groped for the millionth time. The black thong I wear is tiny, and it barely covers my junk. It takes all my effort not to grab this guy's wrist and snap it. I'm a genuinely sweet guy, or so everyone says, but I have my limits. Disrespecting someone's body and consent is one of them. What someone is wearing isn't an invitation, and I'd really love to teach these assholes that lesson. But blowing my cover at this point of my assignment will not only make me a failure, but it'll show Trav I can't run my own op, let alone lead a team.

My objective sounded simple at first: Pose as a bartender at Peaches and figure out if one of the co-owners is embezzling money from the other. They can't hire a forensic accountant when the strip club is tied up in a money laundering scheme for one of the biggest drug rings in California.

Lyle Ivanov hired Mike Bravo to get to the bottom of the missing money, but I've been here for two months and have earned the trust of exactly zero employees. I've managed to get information on their side business of running drugs, who their supplier is, and where one of their cook houses is located, and Trav's on a mission to shut their drug business down, but that's not supposed to be my objective here. It's a bonus, becoming an inconvenience to the organized crime lords that run this place, but not my

objective.

The job here is one of those borderline situations where Trav probably wouldn't have accepted it, but he was busy saving his boyfriend's life at the time, and Domino was in charge. We'd debated it, went back and forth, because while Mike Bravo isn't exactly on the right side of the law all the time, Trav does try to do good in the world.

He's also not delusional, and shutting down the drug operation will only be temporary, but it's something.

My focus is on the money, but when I've managed to sneak into the offices out the back, all I could find were the fake book logs and records they've cooked up for the IRS if they come knocking. I need access to Lyle's business partner, David Smith, his money flow and finances, but the money he's taking is all in cash. His electronic financial records—or what Saint can find of them—are all legit. Or appear legit, at least.

I need more intel, but I don't even have the cooperation of the man who hired us. Lyle is never here, and I'm supposed to pretend I don't know him if he does come in because if his business partner finds out he's investigating him, someone is going to get killed.

Hell, with their already untrusting dynamic, no matter what I find, if anything at all, it's most likely going to end with someone disappearing for good. With the connections they each have separately and together, it's almost inevitable.

When it comes to that, I hope neither of them hires Mike Bravo to protect them. Providing that service for people I can't respect would be another hard line for me.

The sex industry as a whole is exploitative. The actual act of exchanging services for money, the sex workers, and nudity in general doesn't get to me, but the way workers are treated angers me.

Because of my size, my six-five ex-navy SEAL frame, most guys see me as a walking sex doll, and I hate it. I want to be seen as more than my physical appearance, so working here, where I'm not only objectified but being assaulted by groping hands every five seconds ... it doesn't sit right with me.

I go back behind the bar to start making the next order. I slump when the point-of-sale system shows it was made from the same table.

"Did one of them seriously make another order as soon as I walked away?" I ask Roland, the other waiter-slash-bartender on tonight.

“Yep. They do it so you have to go back over there to cop another feel.” He shudders. “I’ve only been here a month, and I’m already over it. I thought working behind the bar would be safer than up there.” He nods toward the stage, where there’s a man—more like a boy—slowly pulling off his thong.

I’ve noticed some of the dancers do full nudity, some don’t. I try to be respectful by turning away when it gets to that point.

Roland doesn’t have the same hesitance. He watches as the dancer I only know as Frenchie does his routine.

Another thing I’ve noticed is the ones who do go full-frontal nudity are more inclined to hang back a bit on the stage, and considering how many hands have been on my ass in the last two months, I can see why.

It’s assault just waiting to happen if they get any closer.

It’s disgusting how some people think that because they’re dancers, they can be treated less than human.

That’s not how this works.

I finish putting the ingredients in a shaker for yet another cocktail to be sent table eight’s way and lift my arms above my right shoulder to mix it well. The hoots and hollers break out a couple of seconds later from the exact table this is going to.

“You should charge extra for the arm porn you’re giving them,” Roland says.

I force a smile through gritted teeth. “These guns better bring in tips.” Not that I need the money; Mike Bravo pays amazingly well. But I need to play the part of broke bartender.

“Sadly, the only way to get great tips is by being onstage, it seems.” He continues to watch Frenchie, and that’s when I see something else in his eyes. It’s not anything sexual. It’s ... fear.

“You need more money?” I ask because that’s the impression I’m getting.

“More shifts would be good, but I’m not at ‘shaking my ass on a stage’ levels of desperation yet.”

I feel bad for him because the number one reason I hate the sex industry is that a lot of people in it don’t have any other choice. Not everyone, but a lot.

“From what I’ve seen in only the two months I’ve been here, there’s very high staff turnover. More shifts will be available soon.”

I’ve been run off my feet, and I’m here under fake circumstances.

I deliver the drink and somehow manage to avoid wandering hands on me this time, but I walk away, expecting them to immediately scan the QR code on the table and order again.

The strobe lights flash, the smoke machine works overtime, but even through the thick fog and blinding lights, I can see Roland check the POS and shake his head. I'm not even back at the bar yet, for fuck's sake.

Tonight is going to be a long night.

And as if on cue, the only thing that could make tonight worse walks through the doors. My Mike Bravo teammates, Iris, Saint, Alphabet, Decaf, and worst of all: Zeus.

It's their favorite pastime lately—endlessly mocking me for my new work uniform. They at least respect that I have a job to do here and pretend they don't know me as they approach and shove dollar bills into my thong with matching smirks on their faces.

They're lucky I don't shove them right out of this building. Assholes.

I forget why I love them.

Zeus pretends to fix my bow tie around my neck. "If you need me to take over, say the word."

Oh, right. That's why I love them. They're my teammates first, tormenting brother types second.

"With your track record, you'd think you'd know you're not allowed to touch in an establishment like this." I swat his hand away from my neck. "Find a seat anywhere and order drinks from the QR codes, gentlemen." I walk away from Zeus asking me to flex my ass.

"You know them?" Roland asks when I get back behind the bar.

"They've been here a couple of times. They're another group of table eights."

"Fun for us, then."

Unsurprisingly, my team of unruly, overgrown frat boys is rowdier than everyone else, including the incels at table eight, which I'm thankful for because it somehow makes the drink orders from that direction slow right down.

Frenchie finishes his set, and because he's completely naked, a bouncer gets up to collect the tips onstage for him. I'm finding that each dancer has different quirks or ways they do things, which is interesting. Frenchie is okay with full nudity, but he protects himself in ways others don't.

One dancer in particular isn't so careful, which is probably why he gets

the most tips. He's flirty, lets clients touch him way more than any other dancer, and as he takes the stage as he always does after Frenchie, the crowd—including my brothers in arms—goes wild for him.

I can understand it in the most basic ways. He has bleach-blond hair, is fucking gorgeous, and he has that sweet, innocent face with a sinful body. From what everyone has told me about him, he's a lifer. He's worked here since he was eighteen, and even though he's older now, he still looks like a typical mouthwatering twink.

The attraction to him, I'll freely admit to myself, is purely physical—and I try not to objectify him, but it's hard. Yeah, I'm a hypocrite. I can't help judging his profession while at the same time admiring it. Admiring *him*.

I love watching the way he moves. I might not understand his choices or why he's been here for so long, but there's something about him that seems so ... perfect.

It has to be the thousands of dollars' worth of fillers in his face and pouty lips ... and probably his ass too. Surely, no one's natural ass is that round and—

A hand slams down on the bar in front of me, and I flinch because I didn't even sense someone standing there. Luckily—or not so luckily—it's not a real customer but my boss, Trav, and his DEA agent boyfriend, Rogue.

Trav no doubt wants an update, and I've got nothing. The most I've given him in the last two months has been where the club's main source of drugs comes from—and that's not even in my job description here.

"What can I get you?" I ask and side-eye Roland.

Trav wiggles his finger for me to come closer, so I lean in, and he whispers just loud enough for me to hear over the music, "How are you holding up?"

I straighten. "Martini straight up? No problem."

He understands without me having to spell it out, and sure, I don't have any news for him, but there really is no problem here. Yet.

"I'm impatient. How long will my drink take?"

"As long as it takes," I say back.

"I changed my mind, then. Have you heard of a drink called a back alley?"

"I'll get right on that. What table will you be sitting at?"

He points to the other Mike Bravo guys.

When he walks away, I make him a bullshit drink and add the worst

ingredients possible. If he's too busy dying, he won't ream me for not getting any answers yet. I add Sambuca, Fireball, and peppermint schnapps to orange juice and add grenadine to a glass.

"People actually drink that?" Roland asks when he sees.

"Apparently. Are you able to take it over to him? I'm going to take my break while there's a lull."

"Sure." He adds Trav's drink to a tray with two other single orders, and I head out back, where the dancers' break room-slash dressing room-slash locker rooms are.

I go to my locker, grab some jeans and a jacket, and head to the back alley to meet Trav.

The warm LA night means I leave the jacket undone. I wouldn't wear anything up top at all if it weren't for being self-conscious. That, and if Trav and I are caught out here, I don't want anyone to think we were fucking around.

There's a strict *no fucking the clients* rule, but I've seen dancers take guys into back rooms, and when they come back out, the patrons are way too happy to have only received a lap dance. In my experience, having some stranger grinding up on my dick for a couple of minutes doesn't put that kind of smile on my face. That only comes after getting off.

Trav joins me in the back alley a couple of minutes later, giving me enough time to suck in some air and compose myself and figure out what I'm going to say.

"The meth house you sent me to?" are his first words. "Got interrupted by DEA before I could get any good information."

I snort. "Got interrupted by your boyfriend?"

"Yep. He was not happy to see me there. Pretended to arrest me and everything."

"Unlike the other time where he actually arrested you?"

He waves me off. "We've only got a few minutes. Why don't you tell me everything I need to know instead of mocking me and my boyfriend's relationship?"

"I've still got nothing," I admit. "And it sucks. I don't know how much more sneaking around I can do without getting caught. Someone's here during the day cleaning, security comes in before the dancers, and there's way too many people at night. They should have suggested we go in as cleaners. Other than that, David Smith is hardly ever in, so I can't figure out

when he could be taking the cash seeing as his digital financials are clean so far.”

Trav rubs his stubbled chin. “Okay, tell me who the biggest gossip queen working here is? You need to get in with them.”

There’s an easy answer for that, but I don’t want to give it because I have mixed feelings on the guy. Attractive, yes. An amazing dancer? Can’t take my eyes off him. But personally? He’s an over-the-top, flamboyant queen who takes more guys to the back room than any other. He might catch my eye, but he’s too easy. In a non-slut-shaming kind of way. I want to work for attention. Earn it.

And maybe I’m hesitating to say his name because I do have that instant attraction to him that I never trust.

“What’s wrong with him?” Trav asks before I can even answer. “You have someone in your head already. It’s obvious.”

“Are we really going to get to the bottom of this case by trusting rumors?”

“Investigating them, at least. So, who is he?”

I relent. “One of the dancers. He’s been here the longest, so he knows everyone and everything, but he’s ... confusing.”

“Confusing how?”

“I just ... haven’t vibed with him.” Haven’t wanted to.

“You’re going to have to get close to him. If anyone would know anything about the dealings of this place, it would be him. What’s his name?”

“His stage name is Lemon. I don’t know his real name.”

“Then find out. We need to start producing results, and he’s the key. This stealthy backdoor dealings and sneaking around isn’t working anymore. You need a new objective.”

Now I really don’t want to do this mission because doing it means I need to get close to ... him.

“How do you propose I even start up a conversation with this guy who I’ve worked with for months but have barely uttered a word to?”

Trav cracks one of his rare smiles that only come out when he has a plan. A dangerous, shitty, or ridiculous one. “Leave that up to me. See you back in there.”

That scares me more than talking to Lemon.

CHAPTER TWO

LEMON

BEING ONSTAGE IS something I've always craved, ever since I was a child. Sure, back then, I'd dreamed of being a ballet dancer for a major dance company or on Broadway as one of those wordless extras dancing in the background. Shockingly, even as an out and proud ten-year-old, I never saw my life turning out like this: wrapping my sleek and flexible body around a pole and sticking my ass out for people to shove dollar bills between my ass cheeks.

Do I regret it? Fuck no. I love it here. I love the power trip of bringing numerous men to their knees without saying a single word.

The tips aren't bad either.

There's just the teeny, tiny problem of still having no money. What can I say? Knee-high boots in a men's size thirteen are expensive.

My mom used to say I should have been a swimmer with how large my flippers are. But gliding through the water never gave me the same high that flying through the air did.

The only thing my feet are good for is carrying me around a stage. Everything else to do with them, I hate. Especially the idea that big feet equal massive dick. It's like I'm walking around on two pieces of false marketing. I'm disproportionate in nearly every way. I have narrow shoulders, a tiny waist, but plenty of junk in the trunk. My dick, on the other hand, while large for my slim body, is smaller than people expect. At least at work, my thong leaves nothing to the imagination, so what clients see, they get.

Though, they don't actually get access to my dick, which I think I love even more.

I love the tease, the idea of turning someone on so much, knowing they can't touch me. You know, unless I want them to.

I'm happy on this stage, climbing this pole and showing off my core muscle strength by spinning down it. I put on a fucking show, and guys live for it.

As I pull myself up the pole to the very top, twist my body, and then let go, I drop like a lead balloon but grip the pole with my strong thighs and stop

right before I hit the stage. And now, it's time to collect my tips. My favorite part.

Some dancers refuse to scrounge for money being thrown on stage, and I get it—it can sometimes feel degrading—but the majority of the time, it's the biggest power trip of all. They're paying to watch *me*.

I get down on the stage to my hands and knees and crawl toward the nearest table with the most patrons, showing off my killer smile while I lean back so they get a look at my long torso and defined abs that only appear when I'm this stretched out. They're baby abs, but they're abs.

Money gets thrown at me, and I move on to another table of rowdy guys. Hey, I play the numbers game. More guys, more money. At least, that's what I tell the newbs. If they play their cards right, they'll get money no matter which table they go to.

I'm kind of the unspoken go-to guy here. Any problems, worries, insecurities, the dancers come to me. And I love that too. I'll do anything to keep each and every one of them safe, and I might look sweet on the stage, but if you fuck with one of my guys, I'll fuck you up right back. This kitty's got claws.

The second table is full of hot, muscular men who look like they could hurt me in the best possible way. And worse, if I think about it too hard. Which I won't.

Instead, I move to the very end of the stage and rise up on my knees so my thong is the only thing separating me from the main guy up front and then pout and wiggle my hips, encouraging him to slip me some bills in the tiny scrap of material.

Then some stupid drunken oaf barrels in from the back, knocking over my meal ticket's seat in the process and then pawing at me like a lion in heat.

This happens occasionally, and I'm generally good at handling it, but this guy is three times my size. I grip the jerk's hair by the root, which there isn't much of, and say, "Easy."

"Yeah, you are," he yells with a slur in his voice.

"Oh, fuck you." I shove him off me playfully, and my words are tinged with sweetness because it's the best way to deal with drunken morons, but it doesn't work this time. He comes back at me again. I manage to shuffle backward, but I'm not fast enough.

This mammoth of a man is practically climbing onto the stage.

Where is security? When I glance over the guy's head, I notice they're

trying to break up a fight between two other meatheads.

Great.

What is with all the fuckery tonight?

Just when I think I'm going to have to bring out the big guns and somehow find a way for my foot to connect with his junk, he's pulled off me and punched in the face by—ugh.

Atlas. Pfft. What a stupid name for a pompous, judgmental bartender.

Not that I can talk. Hello, my name is Lemon, but that's my stage name. Not my real name.

I usually get a sense of people instantly, but other than the stares of disdain he gives all the dancers, I can't read the guy. The disgust in his eyes is too loud to detect what's underneath.

I'm freed from the big guy trying to climb me, but I'm stuck, frozen as I watch the bartender and the customer go at it.

Fists are swung, and despite knowing he finds me disgusting, watching a big burly man fight for my honor is kind of a turn-on.

Damn him.

Some of the guys who were at the table pull Atlas off their friend, but security is finally free to step in.

The entire group of men is tossed out on their asses, and I breathe a sigh of relief as I watch them go.

"Lemon?" A big hand waves in front of my face. "Hello?"

My attention snaps to the man in front of me, and his deep brown eyes no longer hold judgment. They show *concern*.

That might be worse.

"Well, hello, sailor. Where'd you come from?" Distracting flirt mode: activated.

"Are you okay?" he asks with genuine worry in his tone.

My throat feels tight. "Never been better."

Either he doesn't believe me, or maybe my poker face isn't as good as it used to be because he steps forward, scoops me into his wide-as-fuck arms, and says, "Let's get you backstage."

Despite wanting to protest, I let my arms wrap around his neck. "I could've handled that myself, you know." Me, petulant? What? Never.

"I'm sure you could have." Surprisingly, there's no condescension like I expect there to be.

"I can walk."

“I got you.”

Damn, if that doesn't make my insides melt.

He takes me through the door marked *employees only* to our dressing room and places me gently on a chair. When he stands again, I take in the amazing body I've tried to ignore since he started here.

The man is a tank. Tall, wide. Easily as big as the guy who pawed at me out there. He has a faux Mohawk with dark roots but blonder tips. He's jacked everywhere, and unlike my bright yellow thong that hugs my dick nice and cozy-like, it looks like his gigantop of a penis wants to escape the confines of his black one.

“Are you okay?” he asks again.

The smile that finds my face isn't even forced. “I'm good. I promise. It's all part of the job and whatever.”

He frowns. “It shouldn't be. No one should have their right to their own body taken from them.”

I stand. “Calm down, big guy. It's fine.” I try to step past him, but he cuts me off.

“Again, it shouldn't be *fine*. No one deserves to be treated that way. Even ...” He trails off.

“Even *strippers*? Careful, you almost let your judgment show, but don't think for a second that I've missed any of your derisive looks you give all of us. Your holier-than-thou view of us.” I purposefully rake my gaze over his almost naked body. “If I'm not mistaken, we're wearing the same getup.”

I can't be sure, but I swear his cheeks turn *pink*. Is he ... blushing? Or is pink one step before red when he gets so worked up he punches me too?

“I'm s-sorry,” he blurts. “I didn't mean to offend. I ...” He glances away. “You're right. We're in the same boat. Practically. And it's not that I think I'm better than you. It's that I think you deserve better. Everyone who works here does.”

Ergh. “Pitying us dancers because you have some sort of hero complex might be worse than the judgment. This might come as a shock to you, but I like working here. I love my job. I love the money, the people, the found family.”

Something flashes across Atlas's face, something like recognition, so I keep going.

“It's not the most glamorous job, and we have to put up with a lot of shit, but for some of us, we don't have anything else.”

He averts his gaze. “That’s what I mean. I know not all of you are here because you want to be. The ones who have to do it—”

“I agree. People being forced into this industry is gross, but the ones who choose to be here shouldn’t have to be treated like we’re down on our luck or we’re trapped. I’m not trapped here.”

“I’m sorry. Uh, again.”

“Thanks for the rescue out there, but you should probably get back to your job.”

“Yeah. I should. What time do you get off?”

My usual response, to anyone but Atlas, would be *anytime you want*, but did he seriously shame me for stripping and then ask me out? Fuck that noise. I go to open my mouth to give him another piece of my mind, but he gets in there first.

“I’d like to walk you to your car. If that’s okay. I’m worried that drunk asshole will be waiting outside.”

And there he goes being sweet again. This guy is so confusing.

I look up at him. “I have one more routine left after Diamante goes out.”

“Diamante?”

“You know, looks expensive but is super cheap.”

Atlas laughs, and it’s deep and warm. “Good one.”

“Would you prefer he use his real name? It’s Doug. There’s nothing sexy about a Doug.”

“Touché.” He turns serious. “Please let me at least walk you to your car.”

I relent because his concern does seem so genuine. “I’ll be done in an hour.”

“Come find me in the bar when you’re ready.”

I could sneak out the back because I’m sure those drunken morons have moved on, but I have to admit, having someone look out for me is a nice change.

CHAPTER THREE

TRAV'S STUNT got me the in I need with Lemon, but I can't help thinking it was an extreme way to get it. And when Lemon didn't even react and said it was all part of the job? I almost wanted to punch Trav for real instead of the minor tap I gave him for show. But now, making my way back out to my post behind the bar, I realize wanting to punch Trav has nothing to do with him but with guys who actually do that kind of shit. I knew Trav wouldn't have gone any further or hurt Lemon, but Lemon didn't know that. Irrational as it may be, my heart hammered in fear for him when I knew there was no real danger.

And while I don't understand why someone would choose to be a sex worker if they didn't have to be one, Lemon's right. I shouldn't judge him or anyone else for it.

What should be my main priority is protecting him and every other dancer in this place from men who feel like it's okay to cross lines purely because they're paying for it and know they could probably get away with it.

Roland looks like he's been slammed during my absence, with drink orders piling up. Apparently, watching a fight makes people thirsty.

"Sorry," I say and get stuck into the next order.

"All good, man. That was intense. Is Lemon okay?"

"He's Lemon." Yeah, I don't know much—really anything—about him, but I don't need to know his deep dark secrets to realize he's resilient. Strong. And I'm not going to lie, him putting me in my place about passing judgment ... was kind of hot.

"Looks like you impressed some people." Roland nods toward the security team, who are talking to the manager on shift, Jax.

Jax is the type of manager who only comes out of the office if there's a problem. There are great guys who are out here on the floor, making sure everyone is being treated respectfully, and then those who are lazy. Jax falls into the latter category.

I'm halfway through making a drink when Jax approaches me.

“Atlas.”

“Yes, sir?” Okay, so you can take a boy out of the military, but you can’t take the military out of the boy. Though, it’s been years since I donned a SEAL uniform.

“When you get a chance, can you come see me in my office?”

“Am I in trouble for stepping in?”

Jax cocks his head. “The opposite. You think we’d be okay with letting one of our employees get attacked so long as drinks keep being made?”

Yes. “Oh, umm, no. I just know that’s not my place.”

“Come see me when you’re finished. We’ll talk.”

“Okay.”

Time moves at a crawl from that moment. We have plenty of work to catch up on, but the seconds tick by at what seems like half speed. It used to be the same for me in the field when I knew something was coming or a mission was about to start.

I thought it was the adrenaline back then, but I’m collected and together right now.

Maybe it’s the anticipation of what Jax is going to say because I have no idea what it’s going to be.

I’m still thinking about it when Lemon takes to the stage again, this time starting in yellow pleather pants and nothing else. He doesn’t only strip on that stage, he performs, and as I watch him body roll, death drop, and crawl across the stage, it’s like being locked in a trance. I can’t take my eyes off him.

I really, really hate that Trav asked me to get close to him because before, when I’d look at him, I’d see attraction that I’d never act on because our paths rarely crossed. And now ...

Now I’m shamelessly checking out my assignment. *My mark.*

I can be a professional and all, but I can’t shake the feeling that this is going to get messy.

When there’s finally a lull in drink orders, I head out back to knock on the main office’s door.

“Come in.” Jax breaks into a smile when I enter. “You’re finished already?” He looks at his watch. I have no idea what time it is. Time is an abstract concept when you work in a strip club.

“Have a few minutes before I promised Lemon to walk him to his car after what happened.”

Jax steepled his fingers under his chin. “Can I ask why you were hired as a bartender instead of security? You’re ex-military, aren’t you?”

“I was told bartending was the only job going at the time, and I needed the money.”

“There’s more turnover in our security department than there is with the strippers. We’re always looking for security staff.”

I grit my teeth. Trav’s second in charge—the one who assigned this mission to me while Trav was busy on another job—is going to hear about this. “If it’s possible, I’d love to move to security.”

Swapping my black thong for a black suit, shirt, and tie? Sign me right up now.

“I’ll shoot Lyle an email to tell him about the situation.”

Unless ... Lyle’s the reason I was hired as a bartender instead? “Maybe you should email both David and Lyle. It should be a joint decision.”

Or, it should at least make it difficult for Lyle to say no without explaining why he needs me behind the bar.

“You could even tell them that I’m still willing to work behind the bar if we’re short-staffed for whatever reason. More hours. Double shifts. Anything.”

“You like working here that much?” The disbelief is obvious.

“I really need the money,” I say.

He leans in. “What are you willing to do for that money?”

Unease creeps over my skin. “Anything that doesn’t involve dancing. I have two left feet.”

Jax leans back in his seat. “Fair enough. I’ll shoot off those emails to David and Lyle.”

I’m dismissed, and on the way back out to the bar area, I run into Lemon. He’s in sweats, but by the hint of bare chest I can see, he doesn’t have a shirt on under his hoodie jacket. He’s got a bag over his shoulder, and he looks so ... normal.

Not that he’s not normal. Normal isn’t the right word. It’s that I’m used to seeing him in high heels or very little clothing that leaves nothing to the imagination.

“I was just coming to find you,” he says. “Ready to be my knight in shining ...” He glances down at my junk. “Uh, thong?”

“Drink it all in while you can. I got a promotion.”

“A promotion?”

“Bar wench to security.”

Lemon bursts into laughter. “You think that’s a promotion? You do know no one tips security staff, right? They’re the fun police.”

“Oh. Well, it’s still a promotion from thong to suit.”

“The only suit worth wearing is birthday, darling.”

My cheeks heat, but I ignore it. “I beg to differ. Speaking of which, let me go throw on some clothes so I can walk you out.”

“You mean you don’t want to go out on the street looking like that?” Lemon grins, and it goes right through me, making me warm inside. That’s how I know I’m in trouble.

Don’t let this get messy. *Do not* let this get messy.

CHAPTER FOUR

LEMON

“THIS IS MY CAR, and look, no one waiting to jump me.” I hold out my arms.

“I wanted to be sure,” Atlas says.

He’s put on some jeans and a zip-up jacket that looks similar to the one I’m wearing, but his isn’t done up. For someone who’s excited to wear a suit to work, he hasn’t exactly covered up.

I can see every muscle and contour. Every ab. Which means he’s flexing. For me.

And I, of course, can’t help liking that a little. Or, actually, a lot.

“So, why did you choose the name Lemon?” he asks out of nowhere.

“Why did you choose the name Atlas? Or did your parents have high hopes for you to travel the world?”

His bashful smile doesn’t match his bulging muscles and badass image. “Back when I was in the military, everyone would rib me for having no sense of direction. Which is kind of important when in a war zone. No one let me be in charge of a map. I didn’t really think about it when the club asked if I wanted to not use my real name.”

“What *is* your real name?”

He shakes his head. “Nuh-uh, you have to answer me first. Why Lemon?”

“Because Citrus Tart was taken,” I deadpan.

“No, really.”

“I look sweet but taste sour?”

“Don’t believe it.”

Damn him. “Okay, I wish it was something as cool as that or that there was a story behind it, but it’s because I like the color. If you’ve noticed, nearly all of my costumes are yellow.”

“You say costumes like you wear much of anything at all up there, but you’re right. That’s not a fun story at all. Let’s go with the sweet-but-sour story. Though, it’s hard to believe anyone like you could be sour.”

Is that ... flirting? Is this big, bashful giant flirting with me? I hope so.

I hum and step closer. “Salty, maybe.”

Maybe my sultriness needs some work because instead of closing the space between us, he steps back, and ... okay, now I’m confused.

“I’ll take your word for it. I should get back inside. Get home safe.” He doesn’t even wait for me to be in the safety of my car before he stalks away, and I can’t help thinking, *What the fuck just happened?*

I head for my apartment, which is only a couple of miles from the club. For the minimal price I pay—by California standards, at least—it’s super close to the Sunset Strip. I could afford to move somewhere else with what I earn, but I have bigger plans for my money than where I lay my head at night. Plus, I fell in love with the building and have lived here since I moved to LA from Napa Valley what feels like a billion years ago but was really only seven. Peaches was my first-ever gig since moving here, and it’s as if I blinked and now I’m a twenty-five-year-old stripper no longer dreaming of making it in Hollywood. I didn’t even have dreams of making it big. Just getting some work. Any work. That dream died somewhere along the way, but at the same time, I don’t really regret where I am now.

I pull up to the old Hollywood-style mansion that was converted to apartments sometime in the eighties. Some people call it run-down, but I prefer to say it has charm.

The slight sting of rejection over Atlas practically running from me still lingers as I walk up the steps to the stoop and open the front door, but by the time I’ve reached my one-bedroom place on the second floor, I’ve convinced myself I misread the entire conversation. Maybe the entire night.

Atlas was making sure I was okay after what happened. It doesn’t change that he looks down on me. Literally and figuratively.

How can someone so giant be so ... giant? What did his parents put in his cereal as a kid, HGH?

I try to forget Atlas, especially while I take a shower because if I think of that body while I’m naked, there’s no way I’m not jerking off, but I’m too tired, my muscles are aching in the way they always do after I dance because I throw my whole self into it, and I want to go pass out in bed.

But the minute I’m cleaned, dry, and I pull the sheets back, my phone starts ringing. I flop onto my stomach on the mattress and whine because a phone call in the middle of the night can only mean one thing. One of my guys is in trouble.

I grab my phone from where I placed it on the charger before jumping in

the shower and answer without looking at who it is. It could be any number of people I've helped get back on their feet after involuntarily landing at Peaches for some quick cash.

Atlas may judge me for my chosen profession, but he was right when he said not everyone who works in the sex industry is there by choice. They shouldn't have to sell themselves if they're not comfortable with it, and when I meet these scared men, it's impossible for me to not offer a helping hand.

"What's wrong?" I answer.

A croaky voice whispers, "You were right."

"I'm always right, but what about this time?" I actually look at the name now because I can't tell the voice right away.

It's California, who we ended up calling Callie for short. Bleached-blond himbo who always used to strip to remixed Beach Boys music.

He left the club three months ago, despite my warnings, to chase a *Pretty Woman* dream. I've been guilty of it—once—but when a famous rock star asks you to go on vacation with him, you go on vacation with him. Then realize he's in love with his manager and you're a pawn. I learned my lesson, but hey, I brought them together, and now they're happily married, so all is right with the world.

From the shake in his voice, the hushed tones, it sounds like Callie's experience was worse than mine.

I sit upright. "What happened?"

"I need to get out of here."

"Did he hurt you?"

No answer.

"Callie?"

A sniffle this time.

"Where are you? Can you get somewhere safe?"

"I'm, uh, on Sunset Boulevard, right near his apartment."

"That place I helped you move into? Is he with you?"

"No. I got out of there, but ... I'm scared he'll come after me, and there's nowhere I can go."

"Okay, okay, okay." I rack my brain, trying to think of places close to where that apartment is. Ah. "There's an old diner on the corner of Sunset and Curson Ave. Get there, and I'll come get you as soon as I can. If he follows you or you get in any trouble, call the police."

"As soon as they find out I'm a trick—"

“I know. Calling the cops is a last resort. They might be able to at least keep you safe until I can get to you.”

Atlas isn't the only one to look down on our line of work. Going to the police when we have problems is like talking to a brick wall. It's always our fault if we're assaulted because we're the ones who put ourselves in high-risk situations.

Sex work shaming at its finest.

We're people too, damn it. We have the right to our own bodies, and we should be protected when putting ourselves in a position where we share those bodies with others for money. Not ridiculed. But apparently, that's not how life works.

As soon as anyone finds out what we do for a living, all credibility is lost. It's complete bullshit, and it's why I do this kind of thing—get out of bed when I could be sleeping to save the day. And maybe Callie's life.

Because if we don't have each other's backs, then who will?

So, I get back in my car in search of a runaway stripper whose Richard Gere turned out to be a plain old Dick.

Callie's waiting outside the diner, shirtless, no shoes, and only wearing sweatpants.

I didn't think of the no-parking situation when I told him where to go, but it's close to three in the morning, so it's not busy, and I can stop in the far-right lane and lay on the horn.

Callie practically jumps out of his skin.

What did that asshole do to him?

I wave him over, and it's not until he appears under a streetlight that I see his face properly.

He's black and blue all over his right eye and cheek.

Callie gets in the car but refuses to look at me or let me see the damage up close.

“I've already seen it, so you may as well show me.”

He turns, and fuck, there's a good amount of swelling too.

“I'll kill him,” I say.

Callie huffs. “Can you just ... get me away from here for now? That's all I need. A place to crash and ...”

He trails off, no doubt asking himself the very question most of us go through at some point.

And then what?

“You can stay with me until you get back on your feet. You’re lucky my couch is free at the moment.”

The number of times someone has needed that couch is countless, and while I try to tell myself that I don’t need to move somewhere with a second bedroom, my hopes that this crap will stop happening are always dashed.

The other side of me, the small, cynical side, says that if I offer up someone a bed instead of a couch, they might outstay their welcome.

I want to help people, but I don’t want to be taken advantage of.

“Are you ready to talk about it yet?” I ask a few blocks later.

“Nope.”

“Do you need a hospital? Is it only the face or—”

“Just the face. How am I going to go back to work with a face like this?”

He points.

“To be fair, no one looks at our faces.”

He snorts. “True.”

“You want to come back to work, then?”

“I don’t have any other choice, do I?”

He could stay on my couch until he gets a job that pays as well as stripping does, but with no college education, no experience other than dancing, and the chances of even getting an audition without an agent are about as good as winning the lottery, he’s trapped.

“It’ll only be short-term,” he says. “Until I catch my big break. Channing Tatum did it.”

Yeah, but he’s also Channing Tatum.

I don’t say that.

“A couple of months, tops,” I encourage.

Neither of us believes it.

“Thank you,” he says. “For picking me up. I don’t have a lot of people I can call—”

“Don’t mention it. I’m Mr. Fixer. I just wish things had turned out differently for you. You were so excited when that client offered you the world.”

“You weren’t stupid enough to believe him, though.”

“Hey, it lasted longer than I thought it would.”

Callie laughs. “Wow, you had that much faith in me?”

“It wasn’t you I doubted. It was him.”

“You don’t even remember his name, do you? It’s Stephen.”

“They’re all johns to me. Anyone with a savior complex who storms into strip clubs, whorehouses, or any other establishment and offers someone the world, they’re looking for someone they can easily manipulate. They’re control freaks with anger issues.”

He winces. “I wish I could say you’re wrong, but ...” Callie gestures to his face.

“I’m sure there are exceptions to the rule. I just have no desire to put myself on the line like that.”

“My lesson’s been learned.”

And because I’m me, and I hate when my cynical side comes out because I believe positivity brings happy things, I say, “Your man is out there somewhere, and may he be blessed with a big bank account but an even bigger heart.”

“Honestly, I’d settle for the big heart. I’d rather be broke but happy and treated with respect.”

“Ah. The elusive respect. That’s even harder to find than love.”

Love is easy, but falling hard and fast comes with consequences because until you truly know someone, you have no idea who they are underneath.

CHAPTER FIVE

ATLAS

AFTER GOING into stealth mode and breaking into Domino's house for payback over making me wear a thong, I find out he must be sleeping at HQ tonight because his bed is empty. Empty, but not made. If it was any of the other guys, I'd suspect he heard me sneaking in and got ready to pounce on whoever had the balls to break into his house, but I know Domino. He never makes his bed.

If Trav's compound wasn't so far away, I'd head up there just so I could smother Domino with a pillow. So instead, I'll do the next best thing to freak him out.

I make his bed, clean the few dishes in the sink that I walked by on my way in here, and make the place spotless. That'll teach him.

His cleaning lady comes on Wednesdays, so he'll know someone else has been in his house, and no one will suspect it's me because, like I said, everyone thinks I'm the sweet one purely because hookup culture isn't for me.

After I've done that, I head for home, but while I'm not distracted with getting back at Domino, I have time to think. And thinking isn't good because my mind immediately goes to the way Lemon stepped toward me and rasped that he tastes salty.

In that moment, I wanted to do more than take his word for it, but I don't want to go back to meaningless hookups like I did in my early twenties. Also, there's the added element of Lemon technically being my job now. Or at least the main focus of my mission. Trav said to get close to him, but getting inside him is not what he meant by close. Others on the team might not hesitate to fuck someone as hot as Lemon for intel, but morally, I don't want to blur those lines.

I'll get information from Lemon by being his friend. I'm friends with a lot of guys I find attractive. Hell, my Mike Bravo team is made up of jacked guys with pretty faces, and I've never been tempted.

This'll be a walk in the park.

At least, I think that until I show up for my first security shift early the next day. The club isn't open yet, and Lemon's onstage, working on a new routine. He's in bright yellow heels, tiny workout shorts, and an oversized T-shirt that he's tied to the side up near his rib cage so his abs are on full display.

He reaches behind him and grabs the pole with both hands while leaning forward and doing a body roll to show off every muscle contour in slow motion.

This isn't going to be a walk in the park. He's too sexy. Too enticing.

I would call Trav and tell him he needs to find someone else, but months of trying to get a break in this place will go to waste. Not to mention the whole promotion thing I'm gunning for.

I need to be professional, but the way my cock responds to Lemon is testing my strength. And I'm a strong motherfucker.

But work will always come first.

Ben, the head of dancer security—security guards do both bar and dancer security, but there are two distinct managers of each—approaches. “Joining the clothed side of the business, huh?”

“Apparently, I have to say goodbye to tips for it,” I pretend to complain.

“We're paid our worth.”

Is it just me, or did that sound like he thinks the dancers and bartenders are worthless? I glance at Lemon again because what he's doing takes talent. All you need to do this security gig is muscles.

“We can go into the office to talk if you'll be too distracted out here?”

Oh shit, am I that obvious? I shake off the trance Lemon's moves have me under and remind myself to be professional. “Out here is fine.”

“Take a seat.” He gestures to one of the tables close to the stage. “You already work here, so you know how this place runs and where everything is, but I just want to go through expectations and duties before being on the floor tonight.”

I nod. “Got it.”

“It's all straightforward.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Lemon take hold of the pole and flip upside down with his legs spread wide. The urge to watch him is so overpowering that I regret not choosing to go to the back office because Lemon doing the splits midair is something that should be paid attention to.

“When making an assessment of a situation, you always have to be

conscious of the fact we want our customers to come back,” Ben says. “Dancer safety is obviously important, but that doesn’t mean the clients aren’t allowed to have any fun.”

My brow furrows. “How so? The rules are clear: no touching.”

“But there’s a difference between a touch and a grope.”

Is there? News to me. “So how do you determine where the line is? Or do you ask each individual dancer what they’re okay with?”

“They have to be okay with whatever the club says, or they can go work somewhere else.”

That. Is. So. Fucked. Up.

And it makes sense as to why I’m constantly being touched by randoms in the club. The dancers probably are too. Unless customers are doing something outlandish like Trav did, we’re supposed to turn a blind eye and pretend it isn’t happening.

Now I really hope the owners are screwing each other over and we can get this place shut down for good.

The working conditions here haven’t been great, but silly, naïve me thought that security was missing it when it would happen. Nope, they just don’t care.

I grit my teeth. “Okay, then where’s *your* line so I have a reference.”

“If they’re all having fun, let them be.”

Frustration bubbles up inside me. “Don’t the dancers need to feel safe in the environment they work in? They’re the reason the patrons come in, so they should be protected.”

“If they don’t like it, they can leave.”

The sad thing is I don’t even think he can hear his own entitlement in that.

He leans forward. “And that goes for you too.”

I’m screwing this up with my do-gooder attitude, so I shrug and say, “No skin off my nose. Let jerkwads be jerkwads so long as they bring in money.”

“That’s not really what I said. We wouldn’t let any of the dancers get assaulted or anything.”

Why are people under the impression that any touch without consent isn’t assault?

I squash down my annoyance. “Got it. What else do I need to know?”

“Come with me, and I’ll show you where we keep the cash until it’s

taken to our banker.”

Considering electronic funds is the most commonly used source of payment these days, the amount of cash flow I’ve seen is huge. All the IRS would need to do to take these guys down is watch for a few hours to see something isn’t right.

But I need to get to the bottom of where the extra cash is disappearing to.

Ben and I head for the back office, and as we pass the stage, Lemon takes a break and looks at me with a wide smile while he takes a sip of water. He’s all sweaty, panting, and if the look he sends me tells me anything, it’s as if he was putting on that show for me.

Or maybe that’s wishful thinking.



Lemon continues to taunt me all night, and as much as I’m enjoying being clothed for once, being a bouncer is boring. At least with bar work, I was able to focus on making drinks to make the time go faster, but no. Each painstaking minute that ticks by, each glance and teasing smirk Lemon sends my way from the stage, the more hard I become.

And I’m so fucking hard for him.

Reluctantly.

I’m trying to figure out my attraction to him because it doesn’t make sense. In a relationship, I don’t share. When I’m with a partner, they know they’re mine, and I want to know that I’m theirs too.

Their *only*.

You don’t get that when you date a stripper, so I don’t know why every move he makes up there under those stage lights has me picturing images of that body in bed. Under me. His face contorting with pleasure that I could bring him.

I have to remind myself that can never happen.

Because I arrived early, I’m the first sent home, and when I pull my phone out of my pocket as I leave the building and head for my car, I check the awaiting messages I’ve been sent during my shift.

Domino:

Did you seriously break into my house and CLEAN?

Atlas:

How did you know it was me?

Domino:

Because if it was any of the other guys, I'd be pulling glued dildos off the ceiling and out of my underwear drawer.

Damn. Good point.

Atlas:

You deserved it.

Domino:

I deserved a nice clean house? Thank you.

Atlas:

No, you deserve to be paranoid about me getting into your house whenever I want after you've put me through months of pointless hell.

Domino:

If your payback is for you to clean my house, I can make life really hard for you if you like.

Atlas:

Don't forget I know things about you. Things you're keeping from Trav.

Domino:

In my defense, I thought it wouldn't have taken this long for them to see you're a security asset. Have you been playing nice?

Atlas:

I'm always nice.

Domino:

You are. But ... you can also be pretty judgy.

I pull back. Once I'm on the road, I hit the Call button on his number.

"I am?" I ask as soon as he answers. "You're the second person to call me that this week."

"You're not judgmental, but you can be judgy when it comes to sex. You used to look down on Iris and Zeus and stories of their antics."

"No, I didn't."

"You'd roll your eyes and leave the room."

"Is ... is that being judgy or removing myself from the conversation?"

"I'm just saying, you could stand to be more sex-positive. Not everyone buys into the 'wait for the right kind of partner to come along' deal you've got going on. It's okay for you to have that opinion, but you have to realize that others are allowed to want no-strings sex."

"I do," I mumble but can acknowledge he might have a point.

“Maybe this job will end up being good for you. You can learn from it. Grow. Become the best 2IC Trav’s ever had.”

Domino trusted me with his secret because he wants me to be the one to take over from him when he leaves. A few months ago, he told Trav that if he ever met the right woman to settle down with and she wanted him to quit Mike Bravo, he would.

Turns out, while I’ve been here, a few of the guys were assigned bodyguard duty for a pop tour. I’ve never known Domino to fall so hard and fast, but he has with a woman connected to the band.

“I still can’t believe you’re leaving. We might need to change the origin of your name. Domino: falls hard and fast for some random army woman who’s a single mother.”

“Hey, I’ll take it.” He pauses. “She’s worth it.”

“She’s there, isn’t she?”

“Yep.”

“Tell Maggie I say hey.”

“She’s sleeping. Find out who’s embezzling Lyle Ivanov’s money so I can hurry up and put in my resignation.”

Trav and Domino have been side by side for years. It’s going to be a massive change for Mike Bravo. There are definitely going to be people upset by this. But no one more than Trav.

“I still think Trav’s going to kill you for resigning.”

He laughs. “Nah, he’ll be happy for me.”

“Will he, though?”

“Yup. I’m sure of it. Like I’m sure you can get through this job in a timely manner because I’m impatient.”

“Maybe I’m trying to get you to slow down a bit here. You’ve known Maggie for, what, a couple of months? Are you sure you want to quit?”

“Technically, I’ve known her for years. Sort of. Known *of* her. Anyway, when you find your Maggie, you’ll understand.”

I *want* to find my Maggie, but maybe Domino is right. Maybe this judgmental streak I didn’t know I had is not only holding me back from moving this assignment along, but holding me back in other areas too. Like love.

Holding me back from taking chances on people I’m attracted to because of silly reasons like their occupation.

My mind flashes to Lemon for the quickest second because as much as

I'm open to new possibilities, it can't be him.

He's my target. My mission. He can't become anything else.

CHAPTER SIX

LEMON

MY NEW ROUTINE has been a huge hit, earning me more than my usual tips for a regular week, and I really only have one person to thank for that.

While I was rehearsing and Atlas and Ben were talking the other day, I couldn't help noticing every time Atlas looked over at me. Hell, I didn't even need to meet his gaze to know. His stare burned into my skin and set me on fire. Especially with my pole work. I made note of every time I felt that heat.

So on Friday night, when I find him after my shift hanging out in the dressing room-slash-break room, I smile at him. I'm tempted to thank him or taunt him, but after the way he shut me down after one innocent flirt, I decide not to torture the man.

"Good night?" he asks.

"Great night. Usually when I'm ready to head home, I'm exhausted, but after this week, I'm buzzing." The two grand in my pocket probably has something to do with that.

That wasn't only because of my new routine, though. It seems the guys in charge have changed things up a bit. I had way more private room clients tonight, some looking for only lap dances, but most looking for a little more of the snorting variety.

It's where I make the most money. Not that the big bosses know that. I'm their main income source when it comes to the drug side of the business at the club. On the street is a different manner. I don't like doing it, but I don't have any other choice. Having been here the longest, I'm the one they trust most.

They really shouldn't. I've been doing this for so long I know exactly how to palm some extra cash. Skim off the top. It's not like they make me keep a ledger of the income and output.

Some guys want to try the merchandise first or make me do it—which is why whenever offering, I have one line of actual drugs for the client and another of plain old vitamins for me that won't do shit.

I don't touch drugs. I've seen what it does to people, and I have no

desire to go down that path.

I'm not judging them because everyone needs an escape sometimes, but have they ever heard of a vacation?

Then again, coke is less expensive than a trip to Hawaii.

"You want to go somewhere to get a bite?" Atlas asks out of nowhere.

It's so unlike him and abrupt I step back in shock.

He chuckles. "Or not."

"No, I'd love to, but I'm shocked hearing it from you."

"Have I really been that standoffish?"

It would be funny if he didn't seem genuinely confused.

"Maybe standoffish isn't the right word. You've seemed really uncomfortable here is all, and I get it. A lot of new guys are when they start."

"It doesn't help I was a little judgmental at first," he admits.

"Ah, so you do see it now?"

"I do, and I'm sorry."

"Hey, if you feel the need to put others down to make yourself seem more righteous, go on ahead. Just don't expect to make any friends along the way."

"I want to be friends," he blurts. "I mean, I hope we can be? Starting with this peace offering? Will you come with me to that diner a few blocks away so I can buy you something to eat?"

"Sure, but I'm buying. When I say I had a great night, I mean I had a lucrative one."

He unleashes a smile that somehow looks bashful and sexy at the same time. "I like to treat my friends, so it's cute you think there won't be a fight over the check."

"Oh, bring it. I am an expert at that dance."

Atlas stands, his huge domineering frame towering over me. "It seems you're an expert at many different kinds of dancing."

My lips quirk. "Does that mean you watch me while I'm onstage?"

Again with the flirty rasp that I can't control a lot of the time. I hold my breath and wait for him to back away like he did last night or suddenly change his mind about going to dinner. Or would it be breakfast? Whatever meal you have in between the hours of 1:00 and 5:00 a.m.

Instead, he steps even closer. "Everyone watches you. It's impossible to look away."

My breath catches, but before I can lift my head to look him in the eye,

he steps back, turns on his heel, and heads for the door. “Get dressed, and I’ll meet you outside.”

While I’d love to go home and shower all this glitter, sweat, and oil off my body, I worry if I did that, my bed would be too inviting and I’d crash out, so I throw on my usual sweats and jacket and head out the alley door, sending Ben a salute as I pass.

He gives me a nod in return.

Atlas’s silhouette in the dark alley almost looks inhuman. He’s so big and bulky, and okay, I have to admit, in that all-black suit? It might even be sexier than when he was in a thong.

I think back to his abs and, like, zero percent body fat and quickly flip back to the thong being sexier.

The sexiest thing I’ve probably noticed about him, though, is that he doesn’t know he’s sexy. Or he doesn’t care that he is.

He’s a hard person to read, that’s for sure. The judgment I used to see in his eyes is gone as I approach, and I thought for sure when he started working here that he wouldn’t last, but here he is, only a few months later, losing the snobby attitude and being friendly.

I like the new Atlas better, even if he’s impossible to read. Or maybe that’s what I like even more.

Doing what I do, seeing all walks of life come through those doors at Peaches, from married “straight” guys to businessmen wanting to blow off steam, I’ve gotten to know how to pick out people’s personalities in the blink of an eye.

I was wrong—not entirely, but mostly—about Atlas’s first assessment, though, and it makes me want to learn more. He’s a refreshing surprise and a challenge to figure out.

“Ready?” he asks.

“Yup. Will we leave our cars here, or you want me to drive?”

“It’s literally two blocks, but you’ve been in heels all night, so if you don’t want to walk, I’m okay with that.”

“You’re sweet, but I’m used to the heels. Let’s walk.”

We head off in the direction of the same diner I picked Callie up from and take a booth toward the back.

It’s practically empty at this time of night, and I have no idea why they still operate these insane times, but my guess is they bank on all the people partying to hit them up for a greasy burger to satisfy their drunken taste buds.

Gladys, the sixty-something-year-old waitress who's worked here for longer than I've been alive probably, brings us glasses of water, but her gaze lingers on Atlas way too long. Either she also finds him drop-dead gorgeous like I do, or she's noticing he's a lot out of place.

Atlas looks overdressed in his suit with me in sweats, but it also makes me feel like a movie star. Look at me over here, obviously important with my very own tank of a bodyguard.

I flip my imaginary long hair and wave to no one.

"What are you doing?" Atlas asks without taking his eyes off his menu.

"Waving to all my adoring fans."

He glances up and around the restaurant. "Are you high?"

"I sometimes pretend to be rich and famous, but that doesn't mean I'm delusional. Or under the influence."

"Are you under the influence?"

I lean forward and open my eyes wide. "You tell me."

"Well, your pupils aren't dilated, and you're not acting any more ridiculous than usual for you."

I sniff. "I don't know what you're talking about. I am a dignified and classy man."

"Mm, I can see all your ... class when you're on the pole." Atlas takes a sip of water.

"Hmm, that sounds mighty judgmental again, but you promised you weren't going to do that, so I'm just going to say what my momma always taught me. To please a man, you need to be a lady in the streets and a sailor in the sheets."

Atlas sprays his water everywhere as he chokes on it. "Your ... mother actually said that to you? As an actual sailor, should I be honored or offended?"

"Holy shit. So when I called you sailor, it was actually true?"

He nods. "Ex-navy."

"Damn. That's hot. The only thing hotter would be if you were like a SEAL or something."

He averts his gaze.

"Oh holy mother of sexy. You were, weren't you?"

"Guilty."

I groan. "So hot. So, so hot." The waitress comes back over to ask for our order, and I smile at her sweetly. "I'll have the double beef burger with

curly fries, chocolate shake, and a piece of your lemon pie for dessert.”

“With ice cream?” she asks.

“Are you a monster? Of course with ice cream.”

“Sorry, Andrew. How could I have been so silly.” She turns to Atlas.
“And you’ll have?”

He’s staring at me, unblinking and unwavering.

“He’ll have the same,” I answer for him.

“Won’t be long.”

Atlas is still staring at me when she moves away. “Andrew?”

“Guess that cat’s out of the bag. You have to give me your real name now.”

“Andrew ...”

“I know I don’t suit the name, but I like it. What’s wrong with your name?”

He shakes his head. “No, I mean that I’m ... I wasn’t repeating your name. I was telling you mine.”

“Huh?” My eyes widen when it clicks. “Your name is Andrew too?” I laugh. “That’s funny.”

“It’s been years since anyone other than my family has called me Andrew, but yeah.”

“Same. Even my mother called me Lemon before she passed a couple of years ago.”

“She knew what you did for a living?”

“She knew that I danced in a club, but she was under the impression I was a go-go dancer or drag queen. At least, that’s how I framed it to sound.”

“She wouldn’t have approved?”

I wave him off. “She supported my dancing, my being queer. She probably wouldn’t have cared about the stripping, but she would’ve worried for my safety.”

“It’s a legitimate concern.”

“That’s why I didn’t tell her the whole truth. I didn’t want her to stress over it. High cholesterol was not her friend. I didn’t want to add stress to her heart.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, but I was surprised she lasted as long as she did. When she found out her heart was having issues, instead of slowing down, she kept doing all the things the doctor said not to. She’d always say, ‘I’m here for a

good time, not a long time.’ Fuck, I miss that crazy wench.”

“You call your momma that?”

“She would appreciate it. She was a young mother with genetic congenital heart failure.”

“What about your dad?”

“Never knew him. I don’t even know if my mother knew who he was. It was me and her for a really long time, and now ... it’s just me.”

Uh-oh. That might have been too personal because he’s giving me that stare again. The one he did after he saved me from that guy trying to climb onto the stage with me. It’s pity and deprecating at the same time.

“Other than my boys at the club, I mean. I look out for them the way my mother looked out for me growing up. A lot of the guys don’t have anyone, and ... I like to be that for them.”

He leans in. “I’m glad they have you, but answer me this. Who do you have to turn to?”

“Lots of people, I’m sure.” But as I think about it harder, I’m not sure at all. Because while it’s true I’m there for the dancers—I’m a shoulder to cry on, an ear to vent to—I’ve never been in a position where I’ve needed them.

If I called, would they come running?

Having to question it at all probably means I have my answer.

Well, fuck if that isn’t a depressing thought.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ATLAS

THE LIGHT FADES from Lemon's eyes so quickly, and I immediately hate myself for it.

I'm generally good at being a friend, a confidant, someone who likes to help others, but there's something about Lemon that makes me awkward as fuck.

"Did I say something wrong?" I ask. "I find I say all the wrong things around you."

"No, you just made me realize that while I have a million friends, I can't really think of anyone who'd be there for me if I needed it. Truly needed it. What does it mean if you're a grown-ass adult and don't have anyone in your corner?"

"I'm sure that's not true. Like you said, you help a lot of the dancers. You're like their mother hen. Those are the kinds of people who'll always have your back." At least, that's how it is with Mike Bravo. If one of us is in need, the rest of us are there.

"Mm. Maybe. I guess I'll have to hope that it never comes to that because it's not a theory I want to test out, if I'm honest."

"Fair enough." I'd hate to ever be in a position where I felt like I had no one to turn to. There are stories, mainly from my Mike Bravo teammates, where they didn't feel safe in their own squad, and their COs would do nothing about it. I was lucky enough to have a great team of guys around me, but I was also shy and quiet, didn't ruffle any feathers, and never told anyone my sexuality unless they flat out asked. I didn't keep it secret, but I didn't wear it like an advertisement like some of the other guys did. I've always felt safe being a queer man.

That might also have something to do with looking like I could break anyone in half with a snap of my fingers, though.

"Tell you what," I say. "If you ever need help, I'm there. Give me your phone, and I'll put in my number."

Lemon eyes me. "Why does this feel like a trap? Are you trying to get

into my pants, because I have to say, the whole gentlemanly act is unnecessary.”

“No, I ... uh.” My whole face feels hot, and I hate having to explain this next part to everyone.

Lemon laughs. “Relax, man. I’m joking. But wow, the rejection. It hurts.” He’s either joking or making one of those half-true jokes. He doesn’t appear to actually feel rejected, but I have the urge to console him anyway.

“It-it’s not l-like I don’t find you attractive.”

His smile doesn’t waver. “I’ve noticed you watching me. I figured it’s either attraction, jealousy because your big frame could never wrap around a pole like me, or you sit there wondering how a boy like me ended up stripping for a living.”

I didn’t realize I was that easy to read. “At one point or another, it’s been all three.”

Lemon leans back in his seat. “What’s your deal? Married?”

“Nope. Single. Just not interested in sex for the sake of it.”

“Ah. Demi?”

I hesitate to answer because I have contemplated that label before, but it never really ... fit. “I don’t think so. I think it’s purely a want-to-be-in-a-relationship thing for me. I did the hookup scene when I was younger, but it always made me feel ...”

“Used?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what it was. Everyone seems so obsessed with sex that it actually made me think there was something wrong or different about me because I want it to be special and with someone I care about.”

Lemon eyes me with his lips parted in ... shock?

“You might not understand it—”

“No, I do. I just ... didn’t think guys like you existed.”

“Guys like me?”

“Yeah. Non-sleazebags. It’s like finding a unicorn. Can I touch your hair? Is it good luck? Do you poop rainbows?”

“I choose to take those as compliments and not condescendingly.”

Lemon’s smile fades. “I am actually serious. I guess being in my line of work, I don’t always meet the nicest people. I’m used to being treated like a cheap lay, so to find someone who doesn’t ... who won’t take advantage of that, I’m in awe.”

And I’m surrounded by a sudden whirlwind of guilt. Because even

though everything I've said is true, it's not like I'm *not* taking advantage of him. I'm using him to get information, and this is why I don't like undercover assignments. The lying. The deceit.

Our food arrives, and the burning sensation in my chest is probably reflux from the stress of the job, but I shovel the food into my mouth anyway.

I'll regret it later, but if I fill my mouth with food, I won't say something I'll regret—like outing myself and the whole operation.

I've worked too hard for months to throw it all away because a sexy-as-fuck twink is making me feel a tiny bit guilty.

I knew getting closer to him was going to be a bad idea, but I'm a military man. I might not be navy anymore, but it's in my blood to follow orders. I just really wish Trav hadn't ordered me to do this.

"I've made this weird, didn't I?" Lemon asks around a mouthful of food.

"Weird?"

"You kinda disappeared for a bit when I said I was in awe of you. Want me to go back to calling you a judgmental douche-canoe?"

I put my burger down. "You called me a douche-canoe?"

"Oh. That must not have been to your face." He grins at me.

"Nice to know where I stand."

"Hey, now that you've loosened up, I don't think you're judgmental anymore, but I can call you that if it will stop making you feel weird about being friends with me."

"I don't feel weird about being friends with you." I totally do.

"Good." Lemon wipes his fingers on his hoodie and pulls out his phone. "Because I'm going to take you up on that offer to be my knight in shining armor should I ever need one. You've already done it for me once, after all." He hands over the phone.

"I thought you could've handled that situation all on your own?" I mock but put my phone number in anyway.

His voice turns softer now. Meeker. It's unlike the Lemon I've observed for the last two months. "I'm sorry for being defensive about it, but I kind of have to lie to myself with that kind of thing."

I frown. "What kind of thing?"

"I have to convince myself that if you hadn't been there that everything still would have been okay. In this industry, you have to be able to cover your ass because eventually, you'll have to save it on your own."

And this goes to show that even though I knew Trav wouldn't hurt him,

Lemon had no idea.

More guilt eats at me. “I won’t let anyone hurt you. I promise.”



Even though my focus has shifted from trying to find evidence to milking Lemon for leads, I haven’t given up on finding something behind the scenes. And with me moving to security, I now have access to the safe where they keep all the cash.

I have a shift tonight, and I want to try a different tactic.

Lyle Ivanov is certain it’s his business partner stealing from him, but with the number of people who work here, it really could be anyone when we’re talking about cold hard cash. And it’s not like Lyle isn’t making bank on all this laundered money.

When Domino told me about the job, he let me know that Ivanov was complaining because last year, he cleared five hundred thousand in tax-free cash, but the next financial year, he was only looking at two hundred.

Rich people problems.

When asked if it could be that he was having a slow year, he protested that if anything, more “merchandise” is being sold than ever before.

I understand he has a right to be suspicious, but it all feels a little too “Wah, my illegal business is ripping me off!”

I give Saint a call to organize surveillance on the safe to see if all of the security team are aboveboard.

He answers on the second ring. “Hey, Atlas, what can I do for you?”

A muffled voice sounds in the background. “It’s too early in the morning for you to sound so chipper.” There’s a bark, followed by more of Iris’s whining. “And now you’ve woken up Princess Smooshy Face. No, baby, it’s too early for chaos.”

“Ignore him,” Saint says.

“He does know it’s almost 10:00 a.m., right? I’ve already gone for a run, showered, had coffee, and done some work on ideas to finish this job.”

“It’s his day off. I, however, am on call. So what do you need?”

“I need surveillance equipment, but it needs to be tiny. Like I can hide it in a safe, and anyone getting in and out of that safe won’t be able to see it.”

“Hmm. Let me see what I can do. Off the top of my head, I don’t think we have anything like that in our arsenal, but I’ll ask Trav and Ghost. Worst-

case scenario, I'll take a trip out to see Ricky. He can get his hands on anything."

"And has," Iris mumbles, probably referring to the time Ricky and our boss Trav hooked up. Life lesson learned for Trav. Fucking your arms dealer isn't good for business.

"I'll head out and go see Ricky now before my shift tonight, but if you find anything that'll work, let me know."

We end the call. I grab my keys, phone, and wallet and head out the door, but before I can get in my car, I get a text.

It's from Lemon.

Emergency at Coffee Dreams in West Hollywood. Hurry?

Fuck. I jump in the car and take off.

It's lucky we did end up exchanging numbers because I didn't think he'd need to use it so soon. But that begs the question, how much trouble could a stripper get into at a cafe? Really.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LEMON

Do I feel bad calling Atlas's bluff? A little.

But when he comes tearing up the street in his Mustang not long later and parks illegally on the sidewalk so he can rush inside, I'm stunned.

I stare at him, wide-eyed, while he frantically searches the coffee shop for me. I'm on a stool at the front window and raise my hand like a scolded schoolchild.

Atlas rushes over to me. "What's wrong?"

"Umm. Coffee emergency?" I hold up the cup I ordered for him in the hopes he would come but had also resigned myself to knowing I'd probably have to drink it along with my own. "You're ... here."

"You messaged there was an emergency," he says, breathing heavily. "I probably racked up about fifteen speeding tickets and ran through at least two red lights."

I bite my lip to stop from laughing because I do actually feel bad about that. "Sorry. I—"

"You were testing me?" He still hasn't taken the coffee from me, so I put it back down.

"No? Uh ... yes? In my defense, I didn't think you'd actually come, let alone break a million laws to get here." Movement out of the corner of my eyes catches my attention. "Uh, speaking of which ..." I point to where a beat cop is checking out Atlas's terrible parking job.

"Fuck." He runs out of the store, so I pick up his coffee and follow him.

Atlas begs and pleads with the officer, but it's too late. He's getting a fine.

After the cop gives him the ticket and walks away, he turns to me with a scowl on his face.

"Umm, I can pay for that," I say.

Whether it's my offer to pay or he accepts my apology, his features suddenly soften. "It's okay. I was worried about you, is all."

"Wow. Way to slap me in the face. Maybe I shouldn't have texted you."

“I’m glad you did, even if it was a false alarm. If you needed the reassurance that I’m not full of shit, then that’s on me. I should’ve convinced you better that I will be there for you.”

“Hmm, nah, it’s on me for having trust issues.”

Atlas smiles. “That too. A little bit.”

“Coffee?” I hold out his cup again.

“Thank you.” He takes a sip, and I watch as his tongue darts out to lick his lips when he swallows down the first sip.

Damn, he has a sexy mouth.

“Wanna hang out?” I ask.

He’s either taken off guard, or he has plans because he glances back at his car and then checks his phone, hesitating before finally saying, “Sure. What I had to do can wait. I need to be home in time for my shift tonight.”

“You forgetting we work together? I need to be back too. Let’s go for a drive.”

“Have anywhere in mind?”

I tap my chin. “I know just the place.”



“Griffith Park? Really?” Atlas sounds surprised and disappointed.

“Not a fan?”

“I’m fine with it. I didn’t picture you as the hiking type, though.”

“Oh, we’re not here for the hiking. I have a special spot.” Okay, that makes it sound way dirtier than I mean it. “Nearly everyone who comes here wants to hike to the top to see the Hollywood sign. There are a lot of other trails that are shorter and have great views.”

“I used to train here. It was torture.”

“When you were navy?”

“Uh, no, after I left. Had to stay fit and all.”

I check out his bulging muscles and lick my lips involuntarily. “Mm. I agree to the staying fit part, but you might take it to a whole new level. What are you, zero percent body fat?”

“That’s impossible. I maintain a three-to-five-percent range.”

I snort. “So basically zero. Any lower and you’d be dead.”

He shrugs. “I’m a physical guy.”

I close my eyes and take in a stilted breath. My brain is extra guttery

today, but also, when someone who looks like Atlas says he's physical, I can't help but imagine him doing physical things. Sweaty, naked things.

"Maybe we should take one of the more intense hikes."

Atlas cocks his head. "Why?"

"I have all this pent-up energy when you say things like that. I need to expel it somehow, seeing as you're not into casual sex."

"I didn't say anything sexual at all." His cheeks pinken, and it's so weird to me that this huge, giant, badass-looking dude blushes, but I love it.

If it didn't make me more sexually frustrated, I'd want to make him look like that permanently.

"I know, and that's the worst part," I admit. "But I will do my hardest not to objectify you."

And yet, my brain fills with fantasies of Atlas giving me permission to objectify him all I want and taking off his shirt so I can have some eye candy. My brain is so mean to me.

Atlas, of course, doesn't do that. He just glances around and asks which way we're going.

My fantasies die a quick but horrible death. "Follow me."

The trail I've brought him to is one of the easier ones because while there's a bit of an incline, it's nothing compared to the others. But the point of coming out here isn't for the hike itself but the view of LA highways with the San Gabriel mountains behind it. It's a mixture of corporate greed and road rage but with the stillness of nature in the background. It somehow soothes me.

It's a reflection of myself. Outside, I'm a chaotic mess. The dancing, the drama, the flare. Inside, I'm looking for my Zen. The calm.

I want to be settled, but I'm yet to find the right balance. Out here, breathing in the freshest air you can get in LA, seeing the two worlds coexist side by side, it gives me hope that I'll one day find it.

I love what I do, and I love my life, but like most people in my profession, I have to consider how long I can keep it up for.

"You okay?" Atlas asks out of nowhere.

We haven't been hiking long, and there's no way we're doing the whole trail. Even though it is one of the easier ones, it's a six-mile return hike. No, thank you.

"What, you tiring out already? Is this considered weight training for you? Carrying around all your muscles has to be heavy."

“Do you always deflect when someone asks how you are?”

Yes.

“Don’t mind me. Whenever I’m here, I tend to get in my head a bit, but in a good way. You know, assessing my life choices, my future, how to reach the next level of awesomeness.”

“Ah. All the important questions in life.”

Less than a mile in, we come to my favorite spot. It’s where the elevation part has started to kick in. It’s only slight, but it’s enough to make a ledge for me to sit on and bask in the view.

When I sit my ass down, Atlas stands over me.

“Need a break already?”

“Nope. This is the spot.”

Now he looks even more confused, but he joins me anyway. “This is the amazing view you wanted to show me? It’s of a freeway.”

“It’s quintessential LA.”

“If you say so.”

“Sit. Watch.”

He does. For about two whole minutes. “Am I supposed to be waiting for a car accident to happen?”

“No. It’s supposed to make you think. You know what game I love to play? Picking out random cars and picturing the type of person driving it. Where are they going? Do they have a family? What does their life look like compared to mine?”

“That’s a whole lot of words for you hate your life.”

“Are you being judgy again?” I turn my head to find him looking horrified.

“No. Sorry. I heard how that might have come across as soon as I said it, but ... why do you spend so much time thinking about how others live if you don’t want something different or more in your own life?”

Okay, maybe he has a point there. “I don’t hate my life—it’s the opposite. But I guess I’m waiting for it to all implode or for me to realize that being a forty-year-old stripper probably isn’t going to bring in a lot of money. I guess I like picturing what my future life could be once I’ve run out of talent.” Is that too deep? Maybe. “And before you say it, yes, stripping is a talent.”

Atlas doesn’t react to my attempt at self-deprecation, just returns to silence and turns back to the view, but I don’t take my eyes off him because I

can see that he's thinking about the bigger picture.

"I guess it is a little daunting," he eventually says. "Looking toward the future. Nothing lasts forever. Eventually, we all die, and the majority of people don't have a legacy to leave behind."

"Okay, my thoughts were depressing. Yours are macabre. I come out here to feel better, and you've made me want to jump off this cliff."

"Please don't. Cleaning up dead bodies is a pain in the ass."

I laugh. He doesn't. But when I stare at him intently, he cracks a smile.

"Enough depressing talk," he says. "How'd you get started at Peaches, and what has made you stay so long?"

"I thought you said no more depressing talk?"

"You said you loved it."

"I do, but you're not the first person to judge me for what I do for a living. Sometimes it's tiring."

Atlas nudges me with his beefy shoulder. "You should ignore judgmental assholes."

"If I did that, we wouldn't be here contemplating how depressing life is."

"Hey, I apologized."

"You did. You're just never going to live it down."

"Fair enough. What are David and Lyle like, really? I've only met them a couple of times, and they don't pay much attention to us lowly employees. Not like how they pay attention to the dancers."

"Mm. Lyle can be a decent guy when he wants to be. Despite coming from ... an unsavory background."

"But not David?"

"Lyle claims he wanted to start this business as a legal source of income, considering his whole family have been incarcerated at one point. Lyle initially had good intentions, but this industry isn't easy. David is one of those bosses who's greedy. Everything comes down to his bottom line. If it doesn't make him money, he's not interested."

Atlas presses his lips together. "Is that why we're told in security to turn a blind eye to inappropriate behavior because we want the clientele to come back?"

I scoff. "Sounds about right. Don't get me wrong. All the guys on your new team are good at protecting us if we ask for it, but that might be where the problem is—we have to ask."

“You shouldn’t have to,” he agrees.

“Do you think everyone is loyal to David and Lyle?”

I turn toward him, and maybe it’s paranoia, but that’s a weird question to ask. “What do you mean? Loyal how?”

“Are they the type of bosses who are respected, or would anyone screw them over in a heartbeat?”

“I think if anyone was to screw them over, it says more about that person than who our bosses are.” And now I’m done with this conversation because I don’t know what he’s getting at.

Why is he asking questions about our bosses?

I go to stand, but Atlas grips my wrist.

“Did I say something wrong? I’m curious, is all. I don’t really know the people I’m working for. What if I’m part of a huge sex trafficking ring?”

“Sex trafficking? Is this another hero complex thing where you think all us dancers need rescuing?”

There’s that bashful look of his that I will never get used to. Not on someone so ... big and tough-looking.

Maybe I’m guilty of doing the exact same thing as Atlas. I, of all people, should know not to judge a book by its cover. I’m seen as a stripper, someone cheap, someone nasty, but deep down, I’m a protector. Like Atlas is.

“I don’t understand how or why you and the other dancers choose to do what you do. And I’m not trying to sex shame here or say that your job is beneath me. I just ... don’t understand it.”

“Just because you don’t understand something, that doesn’t mean it’s not right for others.”

He runs his hand through his hair. “I know that.” Now he sounds exasperated. “This is coming out all wrong. What I’m trying to get at is I want to understand so I can stop being ignorant about the industry as a whole. I’m trying to *not* be the asshole here, even though it’s totally coming across that I am.”

I stand. “In that case, I’m going to show you. Turn up half an hour early for your shift tonight.”

He looks up at me. “Why am I suddenly scared?”

“You don’t need to be.”

He so needs to be.

CHAPTER NINE

ATLAS

DID I spend most of the afternoon overthinking what Lemon has in store for me? Possibly. Even though I made him promise he's not putting me back in a thong and making me go onstage, I'm still not sure that's not what's going to happen.

Especially when I find Lemon waiting outside the employee entrance out the back of the club.

"You don't need to look like I'm going to take you inside and shoot you."

"I'd prefer that over making me get onstage."

"I already told you I wouldn't do that, didn't I?"

"You did. But I don't trust you."

Lemon dramatically puts the back of his hand to his forehead as he pretends to faint. "The heartbreak. It hurts. Life isn't worth living anymore."

"You done being dramatic?" I ask because I'm not going to fall for it. I'm not.

"Did the guilt trip work?"

"Nope." Definitely not. No way.

Lemon grins. "You're a horrible liar."

Well, that sucks for my job. I could tell he was already getting suspicious of my questions, and I don't know when I became the person who can't talk to another human without sounding like I'm interrogating them.

Lemon grabs my hand and drags me inside, but instead of taking me to the dressing room or the stage, he keeps pulling me through to one of the private back rooms.

"What are we doing in here?" I ask.

"I'm showing you why I love this job so much. Sit." With surprising strength, he pushes me toward the single armchair facing a raised platform with a pole in the middle of it.

"Is it safe to sit, or am I going to sit in a pile of dried cum?" I ask.

Lemon smiles but doesn't actually answer me, so I sit on the edge of the

chair, taking up the least amount of space as possible. This only amuses him more.

He puts some music on, Nine Inch Nails's "Closer." It starts with a simple beat, and as Lemon kicks off his shoes and unzips his hoodie jacket, my mouth dries.

"I've seen you dance before," I rasp and have to clear my throat.

"That's putting on a show for a room with many people in it. In here, it's just me, the client, sometimes security when we have someone new or known-to-be-handsy regular. But my point is, back here, I can do anything I want. I'm in control. It's a power trip."

He has no shirt on underneath his hoodie, and as he steps closer to me, he teases a little skin by opening his jacket wider.

My tongue darts out to wet my lips, and he pauses just out of reach, looking smug.

"See what I'm doing to you already? We haven't even gotten started yet, and you're practically drooling."

I want to deny it, but I can't.

"Sit back further," he says, and I find myself immediately doing it.

Whatever substances have been deposited on the chair over the years is forgotten when Lemon strips off his hoodie completely and throws it across the room.

One of his knees lands on the armrest beside me, and then he leans over me and places his hand on the back of the chair.

He's so close I can smell his citrus aftershave mixed with the tiniest hint of sweat. My suit pants tighten, my cock no longer connected to my brain and taking on a mind of its own.

Lemon lowers himself, body rolling on top of me, but still doesn't touch, and maybe, I'm finally starting to understand.

It's like going into a high-risk situation. I love leading. I want to be the one up front, taking charge and making sure all my men come home safely. If it weren't for my shit sense of direction in unfamiliar areas, I could've easily become a high-ranking navy man. I like being the one in control, the one responsible, and I love calling the shots.

But here and now, it's not me. It's all him.

And knowing I can't reach out and grip the back of Lemon's neck and pull him down on top of me drives me crazy in ways I don't like.

It brings out that primal need, the one I always push down. He's making

me weak, ready to beg to be touched. To fuck. To ask for release just to rid myself of the frustration building inside me.

No matter what I do, though, no matter what I want, I can't have it. Because he won't let me.

Lemon shuffles back to stand in front of me. I'm thankful for him putting a stop to this before I get too worked up.

Only, he's not stopping at all.

He turns his back to me and glances over his shoulder as he spreads his legs. The muscles in his slim but toned back contract when he bends over, sticking his delectable ass and those sexy dimples at the base of his spine in my face. I'm just thankful for his sweatpants—

That are now gone.

He's in his token yellow thong and nothing else, and as he bends over the rest of the way, folding himself in half to show off his flexibility, I get a glimpse of what he's packing between his legs.

It's covered by the tiniest amount of fabric, but the imprint is mouthwatering. I'm having visions of leaning forward, moving the string from between his cheeks, and eating him out until he can't take it anymore.

I shift in my seat because I'm so turned on it's uncomfortable. "I get your point." My voice sounds like I've swallowed gravel.

He turns around to face me again, his long, lean torso and tight abs on display. I try to force my eyes to look at his face, but they don't cooperate, dropping even lower toward his cock.

Lemon lets out a breath that sounds like a contained laugh, but when I finally do get my gaze to move away from his junk, there's nothing amusing in his face. It's lust, pure sex, and downright sinful.

"Want to touch me?" he taunts.

"Desperately, but it's against the rules."

He places his hands on either side of me on the chair and lowers his body close to mine. "I make the rules."

A shudder runs through me, and then Lemon takes my hand in his, stands upright, and runs my fingers over his clavicle and down his chest. He keeps going lower, lower, and just when I think he's going to cover his very hard dick with my hand, he steps away again.

This up close with him, it's so different than watching him onstage. Up there, like he said, it's putting on a show. In here is a lot more intimate. Sexier.

But then that makes me think of all the men I've seen Lemon disappear back here with, and that's a huge turnoff. Usually. Because it makes me feel unspecial.

I can't say that my body agrees with that at the moment, though. Not when he swivels his hips, dips, and then body rolls his way up on me. His knees drop to the chair's armrests once more, one on each side of my big frame. It's the first time he's brushed up against me, his thighs close to my hands, which are now in my lap—and that I'm using all my strength to keep there. His ass moves against the top of my legs as he grinds and thrusts his crotch in my face.

"Touch me," he instructs. "On your own this time."

I swallow hard. "I ... uh ..."

"Do it."

I really shouldn't. This was a demonstration. He has made his point. I don't want to cross lines that we can't uncross.

"I don't bite," he says. "You know, hard."

Fuuuuck. Screw touching him. I want to touch myself.

My cock aches, and I want nothing more than to get off. I need something to distract me. Something to do with my hands. So I do as he asks and follow the trail he took my hands before. Clavicle to navel.

When one of my fingers brushes on the gap between his belly button and the top of the thong, he swats my hand away, and I jump.

"Shit. Sorry." I think I've done something wrong, but then Lemon backs off me and stands.

"See? I have all the power. And that's why I love this job."

I want to protest about him stopping, but I'm glad he did, even if I have a raging hard-on now and probably will for my entire shift.

"It's dangerous, isn't it? Getting that close? Have you ever ... you know ..."

Lemon pulls on his sweats again. "Have I ever fucked a client? Is that what you're asking?"

"No, no. Not what I meant at all." I know Lemon hates being treated as if he's easy, but now that he's said it, that's all I can think about. "Wait, have you? I assumed you did in these back-room deals."

"No. I haven't. Okay, maybe I followed a famous rock star on vacation once when he asked, but other than that, I haven't been tempted by any clients."

“Then how do your clients always look so damn happy after they leave the back room?”

“One, ouch. My dance skills are amazing. And two, drugs. I think I get more deals in those rooms than requests for private lap dances.”

Ah. That makes sense, and I know I shouldn’t be relieved about him not crossing lines with clients, but I am. “Have any clients gone too far with you?”

“Occasionally.” It’s scary how casually that comes out.

I’m dumbfounded. “How can you be so okay with being sexually assaulted?”

“Whoa, slow down there. I mean, they’ve touched me when they weren’t supposed to. Tried to kiss me. Every dancer who works here knows how to handle a handsy client, but if things do get rough, like I said, we ask one of you security boys to be in here with us.”

How does Lemon not understand that even touching without permission is still assault? “I wish there was a way to make it safer for you all.” These dancers need protection. They shouldn’t have to worry about that stuff when they’re just doing their job.

Lemon steps forward to kiss the top of my head. “That’s really sweet. But I kind of wish guys learned not to touch what isn’t theirs without permission.”

“That would be the easier solution.”

“Apparently not, but that’s a whole other issue.” He puts his jacket back on. “Ready to get to work, or do you need a minute?” Lemon glances down at my cock, which is trying to escape my suit pants. “Careful with that. You might poke an eye out. With your height, it’s like eye level with whoever will be sitting down out there.”

“That would be an interesting incident report to fill out. Insurance for liability would call and be like, ‘How did one of your patrons lose an eye?’ ‘Oh. Just your run-of-the-mill penis accident.’”

Lemon pulls me up off the seat. “Oh my God, that would be amazing. Get out there now. Damage some faces.”

“You’re a feisty little thing.”

“And don’t you forget it.” He walks out of the room first, and I have to admit, forgetting about anything that just happened will be impossible.



I shouldn't have let Lemon give me a lap dance. I should have put a stop to it. Because all I've done the whole night is watch him, and every time he takes someone through to that back room, I picture what he's doing to them. What he did to me.

Not only does it turn me on, but it pisses me off because even though I told myself not to cross lines or act on my attraction, Lemon and I haven't even kissed, and I still don't like the thought of him in that room, grinding up on other men.

Maybe this is why I'm hopelessly single. When I am interested in someone, it hits hard. Intense. It would be enough to make anyone run away.

When I watch yet another guy walk out of that room with a big smile on his face, I can't help wondering if Lemon let him touch him, and I have to shake that thought free.

Lemon pats the guy on the shoulder. The trick is young. Gorgeous.

Then Lemon's eyes lock with mine, and his grin widens. He sashays over to me, turning heads from every direction. He approaches, only wearing that tiny thong of his and silver, reflective boots. With the heel in them, they make him taller, but he still only comes up to my shoulder.

He places a hand on my folded arms and lifts onto the balls of his feet to lean in close to my ear. "Careful. You could crack a molar if you grind your teeth any harder."

"Did he touch you?" I don't mean to growl.

Lemon's blue eyes meet mine. "Did you learn nothing from our lesson before? They only get to touch me if I want them to."

"Did you want him to?"

"Even if I did, that's my decision."

Fuck. I sag. "I know. I just ..." Just what? I'm reading too much into this connection, this pull I have with Lemon, that I'm letting out my inner caveman.

It's not an attractive quality. It's really fucking toxic.

"I'm sorry. I know it's your job, but before when I was the one back there, I felt like the only one. Seeing the revolving door of men all night—"

"Aww, you feeling not very special?"

He mocks it, but that's exactly what the problem is. It's why, even if I were to break my own rules and have casual sex with Lemon because my body hates me and responds so fiercely to someone unobtainable, it wouldn't

satisfy me.

It could very well wreck me.

“Next time, you could come watch,” he says. “You’ll see it’s purely business.”

“I’m good.” I couldn’t think of anything worse.

“Trust me.” He turns to the nearest customer and grabs him by the lapels. “Want a private dance, baby?” he purrs.

Then when I see the man he’s propositioning, I almost laugh, but I fight really hard to hold it in.

Now this, this is *real* payback.

I smile at Domino. “He’s worth every penny. You should go for it.”

Dom being here is questionable, considering he’s a straight man, but I can only assume he’s here for an update on the job. I’ll give him one. After he gets a lap dance.

“You know the rules, big guy. New client means I need security with me,” Lemon says to me.

And unlike two minutes ago when I was dreading this, I’m now excited to follow them into the private room.

Domino couldn’t look more uncomfortable as he takes the seat, doing exactly what I did earlier by sitting on the edge like the fabric has cooties.

I stand by the door, arms crossed, with the straightest face I can manage.

“It’s two hundred,” Lemon says and shoots me a look.

He glances at me, then back at Lemon, pulls out his wallet, and thrusts the money at Lemon.

“Thanks, sugar.” Lemon takes the money and places it by the speaker where the music is hooked up to. He hits Play on a track I’m not familiar with, but it has a sultry tone and a good beat.

While Lemon’s back is turned, Domino turns to me and mouths, “I hate you.”

I blow him a kiss.

Then Lemon takes to the small platform and starts one of his pole routines.

Domino leans back and sinks into the chair, probably relaxing because Lemon’s not going to be grinding up on him. Or so he thinks.

And when the first song ends and another kicks in, that’s when Lemon makes his move. He stalks toward Domino.

I can’t help myself. I take my phone out of my pocket but fold my arms

again, leaving the camera part peeking over the top of my arm. It's on silent mode so when I hit Record, they don't know.

I'm not going to post this publicly or anything, and I'm not getting Lemon's face in it. Only his lean, sexy body all over a disinterested Domino, who's trying to look like he's turned on. The guys will have a field day with this.

I'm the best friend a guy could ask for, really.

Lemon does what he did to me—leg up on the armrest, groin in the client's face, while he body rolls and dips, showing off all his lean muscle.

If his routine is the same, he's going to turn around any minute to stick his ass out, and as much as I'd love to get Domino's reaction to that on camera, I worry Lemon might catch me recording, so I stop and pocket my phone again.

Just in time too. Because as I expected, Lemon turns.

His eyes find mine while he slowly bends forward, and uh-oh. I get the feeling he's about to make a point again. I've already learned one lesson today. Can't he give me a break?

No, he can't.

He lowers himself so close to Domino's lap and rotates his hips a couple of times, but he's only there for a couple of seconds before he stands again. They didn't actually touch.

It's the second time I've been in this room tonight and the second time I've had to learn that Lemon has all the power.

But there's something else about this time that's different. Yes, he's in control. What he says goes. Yet, I can't help noticing the difference between the dance I got and the one Domino's getting.

Lemon let me touch him. He took my hand and moved it all over his body. It was only when I touched him by myself that he swatted my hand away.

He's showing that he *wanted* me to touch him.

That maybe I am special.

Or, at least, more special than someone who's paying him to dance for them.

I give him a resigned "You win" look.

He backs away from Domino. "Time's up. That was fun. You can come back anytime. Didn't even try to grope me once."

Yeah, there's a very straight reason for that.

“Thanks,” Domino says. “Uh, do you mind if I have a minute to, you know, calm myself down?”

“Sure thing, hot stuff, but I have to leave my bodyguard to make sure you don’t ... you know.” Lemon makes a jerking-off motion with his hand.

Domino laughs. “Got it. Will do. Or ... won’t do, actually.”

Lemon walks past, collects his money from where he left it, and heads outside the private room.

“What the hell, man?” Domino says immediately, and I can’t contain my amusement.

I double over and can barely breathe.

Once I get myself under control, he says, “Okay, you have officially gotten me back.”

“Damn straight I have. What are you doing here anyway? You couldn’t have sent one of the other guys?”

“I was on my way home from HQ. Saint asked me to bring you this.” He pulls out a small device from his back pocket. It’s a tiny camera that I can stick to the roof of the safe, but I’m still worried it’ll be too big.

“How am I supposed to hide it so no one can see that?”

“What’s the lighting like in the room with the safe?”

“Like every room in this place. Dark and depressing.”

He holds it up, and okay, the receiver is the biggest part on the damn thing. “The good thing about this camera is it doesn’t have a light on it. It’s tiny, so the chances of seeing it in the dark are small.”

“Small, but not zero.”

“Would they suspect you if they were to discover it?”

“I’m the last person to have been shown the combination and been given access to it. I’d be on the top of the list of suspects.”

Domino rubs his chin.

“I’ll take it, but I might go see Ricky in the morning to see if he has anything better before I go attaching anything.”

“You didn’t go see him today?” Dom asks.

“That was the plan, but, uh ... a friend needed me to help him. It’s a long story.”

The over-the-top gasp is worthy of an Oscar. “You have *other* friends?”

“You better get out there before everyone thinks we’re hooking up in here.”

“Okay.” He hands me the device. “Let me know how it goes.”

“I really do get the impression that it’s someone else and not David Smith who’s skimming off the top.”

“Find out who. Lyle Ivanov will want to know.”

I nod. “I’m getting close, I can feel it. I’m trying to pull information from the dancer who rubbed himself all over you, but I get the impression he doesn’t trust easy. He got suspicious merely from being asked about what David and Lyle are like.”

“You’ll get there. And soon, I hope. But don’t put yourself in danger to pull it off. Your life isn’t worth risking.”

“No one’s is,” I agree.

I need this case solved. Like, yesterday.

CHAPTER TEN

LEMON

GIVING Atlas a lap dance was the best move I ever made. It was epic. It was fucking hot. But the man either has the willpower of a god, or his insane muscles weigh him down too much for him to just grab me, push me against the nearest surface, and fuck me until I can't walk.

Okay, maybe giving Atlas a lap dance wasn't so smart after all. Because while it will go down in history as one of my most re-lived memories while jerking off, I don't have the same steely willpower that he does.

He's flipped the dynamic that I love about my job—the one where I make all the moves and I'm in control. Now, whenever I'm onstage and I can feel his hot gaze on me, I can barely hold on to that power. That upper hand.

Atlas makes me weak, but when it comes to him, I don't want to be strong.

When I arrive for a Tuesday shift, the first thing I do once inside the club is look for that giant of a hunky man dressed in his all-black suit. He's by the bar, talking to Roland. The slim tie, the tight fit of his pants ... I sigh at the fine specimen that he is.

That's when Diamante shoves me from behind. "Keep moving."

I don't take my eyes off Atlas. "Walk around me."

He slaps the back of my head. "You know the rules. Don't screw the crew. You have to work with them."

"I'm not screwing anyone." Yet, the way I continue to stare at Atlas definitely says I want to.

"Have you seen Callie?" Diamante asks. "He's staying with you, isn't he?"

That's what makes me finally break from the Atlas trance.

"What do you mean?"

"He was supposed to be first up, but he never showed. I had to go out there unoiled. Not a single inch of my body was shiny, Lemon. Unacceptable."

"He left the apartment around lunchtime and said he'd see me at work.

Did you call him?”

“No answer.”

Fuck.

I stare at the stage, where Romeo is just starting his routine. That gives me a couple of minutes.

Diamante follows me into the dressing room, where I immediately take out my phone and try to call Callie. Same thing happens to me.

No answer.

It rings and rings and rings but never cuts out. Doesn't even go to voicemail.

I don't know what this means, but I know I don't like it. Not one bit.

“I need to get out there,” I say. But I also need to find Callie.

“You go. I'll cover for you out there.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you. I'll be back as soon as I can. Keep all the tips.” I'm already halfway out the door.

He calls after me. “I was going to!”

I laugh and try Callie again, hitting the back alley to get to my car.

That's when I hear it. The faint sound of a phone vibrating somewhere close by.

I end the call to stop the ringing in my ear, but the vibrating also stops. Hitting Call again, I let out a gasp when the vibration starts back up.

Callie's here. Somewhere. Or at least his phone is.

I check the dumpster closest to the door. Nothing. The next one also comes up empty. Well, other than trash. But as I turn to check the dumpsters on the other side of the alley, I see a foot sticking out from behind.

“Callie,” I call out.

A muffled groan fills the air.

I rush over to him and pull the dumpster away from the wall. My heart breaks at the sight of him, lying in the fetal position, clutching his stomach. I get down on my knee and whisper, “What happened?”

“What do you think happened?” He has resignation in his voice, but he doesn't need to accept this. He shouldn't *have* to.

“Let me help you up.” I grab his arm, but he shrugs out of my grip. “You can't stay out here.”

“I know, but I can't move too fast.”

“What did he do?”

Callie slowly sits up and rests against the wall of the building. He

winces as he grits out, “He turned up to the club and asked if we could talk, but when he said he’d given me enough time to cool down and come back to him, and I told him no ...” He sucks in a sharp breath. “He threw me against the wall and beat the crap out of me.”

“Shit, Callie.” I sink to my knees. “Where hurts?”

“Everywhere,” he croaks.

“We need to get you to a hospital.”

“No. No hospital. I can’t afford it.”

“I’m paying.”

Callie huffs. “I’m not going to take your money.”

“If it makes you feel any better, it’s technically not my money. Come on. Let’s get you inside. You can rest on the couch in the break room while I go earn some tips to get you all fixed up.”

We slowly get him off the ground. He’s limping, holding his side, and if I had to guess, I’d say he has broken ribs at the very least.

“You’re a heavy fucker.”

He chuckles. “Ouch. Don’t make me laugh.”

Once inside, I get him to the couch and cover him with a blanket. “I’ll be right back.”

I check the stage to make sure Diamante is still out there doing his thing, which he is. He’s started a new number. If Romeo isn’t back here, it probably means he’s in a private room earning extra tips, so if I’m going to get the money Callie needs faster than doing it on stage, now’s my chance to do it.

It’s a risk, doing this now at the beginning of shift, but I don’t have much of a choice. I’ve been here so long I know all the access codes to every room. Every locked door. Even the safe.

I don’t do this often, and I’ve never done it for personal gain. Only when I’m desperate. Skimming off the top when it’s a drug deal is one thing. This is flat out stealing from people who won’t hesitate to kill me if they found out. Which is why I reserve doing this for when one of my dancers needs it. And Callie definitely needs it.

I sneak into the office and move as fast and silently as I can to the safe where the extra flow of cash is stored. An X-ray, doctor consultation, and an emergency room visit are going to be in the thousands, so I take what I hope will cover it, shove it in my jacket pocket, lock everything back up again, and get the hell out of there.

Callie’s eyes are closed when I get back to the break room, which is

helpful to me because I don't want him knowing where I got the money. No one can know. If he found out and didn't tell the bosses, they'd see him as just as disposable as I am. If he knows and does rat me out, you know what they say, no good deed goes unpunished. Though I'd understand.

Our bosses aren't only strip club owners. They're tied up with some really bad people, and they're known for making people disappear. How they haven't turned on each other yet is beyond me, though I've been waiting for it to happen.

I shove the cash into my locker to come back and get after I go out onstage. I'm going to ask Romeo and Diamante to cover for me, but I need to make an appearance and at least make some money the honest way tonight.

If I can manage to rope in someone who wants a private lap dance and maybe a bump at the same time, I could get even more.

So I do what I was born to do. I go out on that stage, shake my ass, put on a show, and take my damn clothes off. The small, minor problem with that is it's a weekday, so tips are lousy. The only consolation is I snag two clients wanting back-room dances, and one of them is there for the drugs, not my body.

I haven't earned nearly enough, and on a regular night, I'd stay until I did, but the sooner I get Callie to the hospital, the better.

When I get back into the dressing room, both Diamante and Romeo are crowding Callie.

"Can you two call someone else in for me while I get him to the hospital?"

Romeo cocks his head. "Won't they be more likely to come in if you ask?"

"I don't know. Will they?"

Diamante shrugs. "You're like our stripper mother. I know I'd be more likely to pick up one of your shifts than anyone else's."

Romeo points to Diamante. "I want to be offended, but I can't refute that I'd be exactly the same."

"Fine. Do we know if anyone else didn't have plans tonight?"

"Try Hunter," Romeo says. "He's probably still asleep and hasn't had the chance to make plans." Hunter stays up all night and sleeps well into the evening. He's like a vampire.

I call him real quick, and he groggily accepts to come in, so I put my sweats back on, grab the cash from my locker, and get Callie to the hospital.

□

“It’s not that bad,” Callie says.

I pace in front of his hospital bed. “Not *that* bad? *Oh, hey, Callie, how did your boyfriend try to win you back? Oh, with just some broken ribs. Aren’t I so lucky?*”

“I’m not getting back together with him. I might not look like it, but I have more dignity than that.”

I stop pacing and go sit on the side of his bed and take his hand. “Don’t let him take any more of it. You need to get out of LA.”

“I have nowhere to go. My parents won’t take me back. I don’t even have the money to get me back to Nebraska. What am I supposed to do?”

“There are other strip clubs. Other cities. New start.”

“Do you know how much it will cost to start over somewhere new?”

“I can help you. I have a bit saved up, and—”

“No. I can’t take your money. You’ve already done so much for me. For others who have gone through similar or wanted to get out of the stripper game completely.”

I squeeze his hand. “I don’t think you have any other choice. Next time, he might not go so easy on you. They say the hardest and most dangerous part of a domestic violence situation is after the abused leaves. The only escape is to disappear so he can’t find you.”

Callie’s phone starts ringing on the tray table thing next to his bed. “It’s him.”

“He’s not going to give you up. Let me help you.”

When his phone stops, it only starts back up again.

“Okay,” he relents.

“They said you can go home, so you can rest up for a few days in my bed. I’ll take the couch, and—”

“I think he knows where I’ve been living. I thought I saw his car the other day outside the apartment.”

“Fuck. My money is there too. I would say you could stay here where you’d be safe, but that’ll take a huge chunk of money you need to start over.”

Callie throws his head back on the pillow in defeat. “Starting over. I don’t want to do this.”

“I know.” I give his hand one more squeeze. “I don’t want you to either.” And not only because I’ll miss him.

What I said is true—I do have some money saved up at home that I could give him. It's the reason I don't spend my entire paycheck and why I say I'm always broke. Because the money I do have isn't for me. It's for them. Anyone. If someone wants out of this life, I have the means to give it to them.

But at the same time, moving your entire life and starting fresh is expensive, and I don't have nearly enough for him in my stash.

I'm going to have to take it from the club again.

The risk is even higher after tonight, but there's no other choice. Not if I want to keep Callie safe.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ATLAS

I STORM into headquarters with the footage I pulled from the safe last night. I went and saw Ricky yesterday, and he had a lens so small you wouldn't see it unless you were really looking for it. It's wirelessly connected to a device that records the footage, which I put in my locker so no one could see it, and it was the perfect setup that I needed.

Except now, when it isn't perfect.

It's so far from fucking perfect.

In fact, it's probably worst-case scenario-type shit. So far, it had only shown expected activity. Bouncers depositing cash overflow from the bar.

And then ... I shake my head because I can hardly believe it.

I head for Trav's office, prepared to walk straight in there, when I remember that now he has a partner, it's safest to knock. I've already seen Rogue naked and writhing on top of my boss, and I have no desire to see it again.

When he immediately tells me to come in, I let out a breath of relief.

Domino is in there too, looking over Trav's shoulder as they scrutinize something on Trav's computer.

"What's up?" Trav asks without taking his gaze off the screen.

"We have a problem. A really big, huge problem. I've worked out who's taking the extra cash at the club."

Domino stands upright. "Why is that a problem? That's good news. Let's tell Lyle and get paid."

I run a hand through my hair, messing up the faux mohawk. "Because the person taking the money isn't Lyle's business partner. It's ..." I glance at my feet.

"It's that stripper who you forced upon my lap," Domino says.

Trav's face lights up. "He forced who upon what now?"

Domino waves him off. "I got a lap dance from a dude, and in Atlas's defense, it was good payback for making him wear a thong to work for eight weeks."

“I wish I had video,” Trav says.

I take out my phone to send it to him. “You do now. Just AirDropped it to you.”

“Excellent.”

“Can we get back to the actual problem here? It’s not me being ground on by a thieving twink. Also, two hundred for a private lap dance? He’s not only ripping off the club.”

I snicker.

Trav ignores him. He’s too busy watching the video.

“I almost can’t believe it’s Lemon,” I say. “He makes more than any other dancer in that place.”

“Drugs?” Trav asks, paying attention now. Though, I assume he’s multitasking because he’s tapping away on his phone, most likely sending the clip to his boyfriend of his straight second-in-command getting a lap dance by a dude.

“Says he doesn’t touch the stuff,” I say.

“Klepto?” Domino asks.

“Maybe? He doesn’t seem the type to take it for selfish reasons, so it could be a compulsion. It’s not for attention. If either David, Lyle, or anyone else discovers it and passes it on to them, he’s dead.”

“What do you want to do about it?” Trav asks. “We were hired to do a job. If you complete that job, this stripper’s life is on the line. If we pull out without giving them answers, they might hire someone else.”

“Either way,” Domino adds, “when we took the job, we knew that if it did show David was taking money, he’d be killed.”

“Yeah, but considering what David and Lyle are mixed up in outside of the club, one less wannabe mobster on the street might’ve been a good thing. Now that it’s someone whose only crime is stealing from bad guys ...”

“Though, is that what this is?” Domino asks. “Your profound ability to see the good in people? So much so, you tend to excuse their shitty behavior?”

“It’s not that.” Is it that? Maybe. “I need to find out why he’s doing it.”

Trav leans back in his seat. “I hate to side with Domino here, but he makes a point. What happens if you find out he does it for the sake of it because he’s a greedy bastard? Will that mean you’re okay with putting his life in danger? What if it was someone else at the club? Are you only being protective because it’s the guy I told you to get close to? What if it was

another stripper?”

My gut tells me there's a reason for it. Legitimate or not, I haven't decided.

“What can we do for Lemon if we do hand over the intel?” I ask.

“Tell him to take all the money he's stolen and use it to start over.”

This is what I wanted. To have answers. To solve the case and put this job behind me. But now that I'm at the finish line, I don't want to cross it. Because not only am I attracted to Lemon, but when I was told to become friends with him, I feel like I actually did.

It wasn't just for information on the club.

I like him as a person.

He's so different from me in the way he looks at sex and his occupation, but he's not bitter over the misconceptions of the job. Annoyed, maybe, but he has a right to be when people—myself included—are so ignorant when it comes to sex workers. People like to pretend they're all lost causes or drug addicts or have no morals so they can feel better about themselves. If they look like trash and act like trash, then strippers must be trash and deserve whatever they get. They deserve to be assaulted and sometimes even killed, because without them, there'd be one less lost person in need of saving.

It's a very toxic way of looking at it. At least my ignorance came from a place of caring—thinking that people who would get paid to share their body had no other choice.

Lemon showed me how and why that's not the case.

“He's a good person,” I say.

“Even for a thief?” Trav asks. “If any of you stole from me, all trust would be gone. I wouldn't kill you over it, but you sure as hell wouldn't be working for me anymore.”

I think of Lemon, the lap dance, the hike he took me on, the genuine surprise when I turned up because he asked me to ... All of that doesn't scream a guy willing to do anything to get ahead.

There has to be a deeper reason, but even if there's not? Lemon's still a human being. We all make mistakes. I can't believe he's doing this out of malice. But then, David's still a human too. I just haven't gotten to know him. Maybe under the issue of how he makes money, he's a simple family man. Maybe he has kids.

“I don't think we should've taken this job,” I murmur.

“I probably wouldn't have,” Trav says.

“Oh, so this is all my fault?” Domino asks.

I run a hand over my head. “It was supposed to be simple when we were pitting bad guy against bad guy and hoping they’d end up taking one another out, but now it’s blown up into something so much bigger and complicated.”

“If you say Lemon is worth protecting, then we’ll protect him,” Trav says. “Go to him. Find out why he’s stealing and ask him if he plans on stopping.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

Trav has to think about it. “We’ll burn that bridge when we come to it.”

And no, he’s not mixing metaphors.

The moment I’ve been waiting months for is finally here, and shit’s about to get explosive.



Keeping everything under control and stoic is usually really easy for me, but as I watch Lemon on my next shift, all I can think about is why he’s doing it. What does he spend the money on?

I time it so I need to “take a piss” at the same time Lemon leaves the stage but then run through all the different ways I should act toward him without fucking everything up.

He’s his usual bubbly self, maybe looking a little tired, but he lights up when he sees me. “Hey, how has your night been?”

“Uneventful. You?”

“I have diner money again if you want to take me out after I’m done.”

Perfect. It’s away from big ears, surveillance, and anything else that could pick up our conversation here.

“Sounds awesome. I’m dying for that burger again. How do they make it so good?”

“Probably lard.”

“And my appetite is gone.”

“Please.” Lemon swats at my hard abs. “You could do with some fat in your diet.”

I pinch his slim waist and smile despite my reservations. “So could you.”

“Then it’s settled. And I’m paying this time.”

“I told you, I can fight over a check all night if I have to.”

Lemon steps closer to me, only dressed in his bright yellow thong because he hasn't gotten dressed yet from just coming offstage, and as the space between us narrows, my cock responds.

I can't help blurting out, "What are you doing?"

I don't mean right now. I mean in general. Why is he putting his life on the line? Surely, everyone who works here knows what real business their bosses are in. They know they have connections to equally horrible people. *What is so damn important it's worth risking your life over, Lemon?*

He blinks up at me, looking innocent instead of wearing his usual cheeky smirk. "Trying to convince you to let me pay tonight?"

"I can promise to let you try? Does that count?"

"No. But thank you. I guess." He walks away, and I watch him before actually heading to the bathroom and then going back out onto the floor.

Even though both of us have a couple of hours left here, I'm dreading the end. I'm too scared to ask him what's going on because the answers will make it all real. Too real.

I don't know how to protect him from this other than telling him to stop and hope that Lyle and David never find out.

My nerves are shot, and that doesn't happen to me. I have run into war zones, been under heavy fire, and almost died so many times I've lost count. But Lemon's in danger, and for some reason, I'm drawn to him.

I like him.

I like him so much I'm not concentrating on what I'm supposed to be doing. A client grabs Hunter around his wrist and tries to drag him into a back room, and it takes me a second or two to respond—and that's after Hunter lets out a loud "No."

This whole mess with Lemon is clouding my judgment and reflexes.

I grip the guy's shoulder, putting pressure on one of the nerves that run down his arm. "Let. Go."

He does immediately.

"No touching, or you're out."

"I want a private dance," the guy slurs.

I glance at Hunter, and he rolls his eyes.

"Fine. But I'm bringing my bodyguard with me."

The guy pouts, but I follow them to the back. Still, the entire time we're there and Hunter's dancing for the guy who's so drunk he probably won't remember it in the morning, all I can think about is damn Lemon.

While I can't be sure that my physical attraction is blinding me to the kind of person he truly is, I generally have a good sense of people. Sure, Domino says I like to see the best in everyone and that possibly causes some blind spots, but there's something about Lemon that makes me give him the benefit of the doubt.

He has purpose in everything he does, so I have to believe he'd have a purpose for stealing too.

I'm back out on the floor when my phone goes off in my pocket, and I take it out to have a look. We're not supposed to have our phones out here, but everyone does.

My gut sinks.

My body is like lead.

Because Lemon's at it again.

If I'm in the club, I'm within range to view the live feed from the camera in the safe. He's taking more money.

I watch in horror as he takes out more than he did the other night. A lot more. So much more that there's no way it won't go unnoticed.

What is he doing?

Without thought or telling any of the other security guys where I'm going, I head for the offices. My feet are thunderous, more so than usual. The Mike Bravo team always joke I sound like an elephant and they can hear me coming from a mile away.

Lemon must hear me, too, because when I get to the room, he's rushing out of it. Or trying to.

I block his path. His eyes glance up at me in fear, and his bottom lip trembles.

Whatever his excuse, whatever he's gotten himself into, he's in deep.

I don't know where to start. I don't know what to say. So I go with the only thing I can say. "What the fuck have you done?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

LEMON

OF ALL THE times I've done this—and I have done it many, many times for many different reasons—all the risk has been worth it. But as Atlas stares down at me with fire in his eyes, I wish that anyone else but him had caught me because I don't want to prove him right.

I don't want him to think I'm not worth shit. That I'm a lowlife. Scum. That I'm just like the mafia-wannabes who run this club.

I tell myself not to put words in his mouth and that I can't know exactly what he saw, so I try to pull off nonchalance as I come up with a valid reason to be in this room.

There isn't one.

“What do you mean? What is it you think I've done?” If I can't lie, I'm great at playing the dumb himbo card if I have to.

He doesn't buy it, though. “What are you doing in here?” His tone suggests no matter what I say, he won't buy my delusional act of innocence.

I have absolutely no reason to be in here, but let's make one up anyway. “I heard David or Lyle were coming in tonight, so I was tidying up for them. They like a clean workspace.”

Atlas narrows his gaze but then glances down the hall. “Get out of here. Before anyone else finds you. And don't think for a second you can run. We're still going to the diner after our shift.”

Where he'll have David and Lyle waiting to kill me off? No, thank you.

As soon as I get the chance where Atlas isn't watching, I'm out of here.

Unfortunately, that takes a lot longer than I'd like. He doesn't leave my side for the rest of the night.

Private room dances? He's there.

While I'm onstage? He's right off to the side of it.

Adrenaline courses through me, but instead of giving me the high it usually does, it makes my heart pound, my stomach lurch, and I'm about one performance away from throwing up all over the stage.

Fight or flight has kicked in, but the only problem with that is fight isn't

exactly an option here. Atlas could basically flick me and I'd go flying across the room.

I need to get out of here.

After my last dance, I'm due to be on the floor, trying to get clients into the back rooms. Atlas will no doubt be there with me, watching my every move. So I need to sneak out of here before then.

When I reach the break room, Atlas is already there, arms folded, scowl sent my way. I ignore him and go to the fridge to grab my water bottle and then head for the bathroom. I'm not dressed, I don't have the money I stashed in my locker earlier, and even though I know I'm pissing away Callie's future by running while I still have the chance, the thing is, if I'm dead, then we're both fucked.

Atlas follows me into the bathroom.

"Really?" I ask. "What do you think I'm going to do? Climb through the window up there in a *thong*?" I point to the small square window that could fit a small human like me, and it is exactly what I planned on doing. "Can I have some privacy for just a few minutes?"

He doesn't say anything, but he does relent.

The second he's out the door, I tip the trash can and all its hand towels upside down, leaving a mess, but I don't care. I can either be fast or quiet, and I know that if I take too long, Atlas will come barging back in here.

I'd like to say I look like a parkour champion as I climb the trash can and dive out the unlocked window, but I'm sure I look more like an overweight pup trying to fit through a doggy door.

I drop into the alley but fall because my silver knee-high boots are too smooth to grip onto anything. I'm not injured, so that's the main thing. Now to get up and run.

But the minute I stand upright, two figures appear out of goddamn nowhere and box me in. They look vaguely familiar, but in my line of work, I've seen a million faces, and just like Bon Jovi says, I've rocked them all. In one way or another. Probably to that very song.

Clients? Goons for David and Lyle's side business? Could be either.

"Going somewhere?" the bigger one asks. His voice is deep. Intimidating.

"Yeah. Home." I try to step past them, but they don't let me. Should've known that wouldn't work.

The smaller of the two takes off his jacket and throws it at me. "Put that

on. You're coming with us."

I want to cry out, to scream for help, but who's going to come save me? If any of my dancers miraculously hear it, what are they going to do? Turn their thongs into a slingshot and fire scrunched-up dollar bills at them?

Ooh, great idea for a reality TV show: Stripper Wars.

"Do I have any other choice?" I ask as I slip on the jacket. They're both built, muscular, but even so, the bomber jacket barely covers my ass.

"Nope," the taller one says.

"Can I at least go put on some pants? If I'm going to die, don't I at least get that amount of dignity?"

They both laugh like I'm joking. That ... could be a good sign, right? I'm not getting my hopes up, though.

I expect them to throw me in the trunk of a car or manhandle me, but they don't. They walk either side of me, a few blocks to the very diner I'm supposed to meet Atlas at. If he comes, will he save me? Or is he the reason David and Lyle have already sent their henchmen?

Numerous times I think to try to run, but where to? They've probably got guns, and I'm in my heeled boots. I need to be smart about this.

Maybe the diner has a bathroom window big enough to fit through too.

No one even blinks at my ass mostly sticking out when we enter, but it is the middle of the night, and the place is nearly empty. There's the waitress, kitchen staff, and one table with a couple.

The goons lead me to a booth in the opposite direction of the other patrons and tell me to sit.

When I do, the guy who gave me his jacket sits next to me so I can't run away, and the bigger one slides into the booth opposite me.

"Going to treat me to a piece of pie before you kill me? Is this like a last meal kind of thing?"

"Do you want pie?" the guy across from me asks.

"I'd rather live, if I'm honest."

The one next to me laughs. "Atlas was right about you."

Atlas?

Just as I think that, Atlas appears and slips into the seat next to the guy across from me.

"What was I right about?" He places my clothes in front of me, sweatpants and my hoodie. That were in my locker.

My gaze flies to his because he broke into my locker. Where the money

He puts that on the table too.

I stare at the wad of cash. "I am ... so confused."

"Lemon, I'd like you to meet my boss, Trav, and his second-in-command, Domino."

My gaze flits between the both of them. "Boss? Second-in-command?"

Atlas's eyes hold a hint of remorse as he says, "I'm not a bartender. Or a bouncer. I work for a private ops firm."

The boss, Trav, is opposite me, and he leans forward. "We were hired by Lyle to find out who's been skimming off the top when it comes to the club's profits."

I swallow hard.

"Lyle thought it was David," Atlas says.

"I didn't even take that much," bursts out of me.

"There's twenty Gs right there." Atlas nods to the stash on the table.

"It's not for me."

Domino huffs. "Holding it for a friend? Is that what you're going with?"

I was going to, but not now.

"I don't think Lyle or David will care why you stole it," Trav says.

"Do you? Care, I mean." My voice is meek. I'm never meek. But I'm at these guys' mercy. Whoever they are. Private ops. What even is that? Military shit? Why are they in a strip club trying to find out who's stealing from whom?

"Why do you ask if we care?" Trav cocks his head.

"Well, you have your answer. I'm the one skimming off the top. I'm wondering why you haven't gone straight to Lyle and David and told them."

"You have Atlas to thank for that," Trav says.

I turn to Atlas, but he's avoiding eye contact.

"He says you're not the type of guy to be greedy or selfish and that you must be using the money for something worthwhile."

"Depends on if you think cute boots are worthwhile." Being a smartass is not my most brilliant idea, but I'm cornered. I'm *scared*. I have no control over this situation, and how am I supposed to know if I can trust these men or not? They kidnapped me without my pants.

"Lemon," Atlas warns. "Do you realize how serious this is? Don't think for one second David or Lyle will hesitate to kill you."

"One of the other strippers is in trouble," I admit. "I stole it for him. But

he doesn't know where I was getting the money. I told him I saved it up."

"What kind of trouble?" Trav asks.

"He left the job a couple of months ago to move in with some rich client."

"Uh-oh," Trav says.

"Yeah. Let's just say they didn't end their relationship on the best of terms. He moved in with me a couple of weeks ago, but now the ex-boyfriend is stalking him. I found Callie outside the club last night covered in bruises. The asshole broke his ribs. I took the money so he can get out of LA. Be safe. I have another ten grand stashed at home I was going to give him too."

"Where'd you get the other ten K?" Domino asks. "It stolen too?"

I shift uncomfortably. "Some of it. Some is from what I've managed to save while stripping. It's not the first time a dancer has needed a clean break. Don't know if you know this, but our lifestyle isn't always glamorous. Not everyone in the industry loves it like I do."

"I don't think you actually like it," Atlas says.

"What would you know?" I snap.

"I've seen how you care for the other dancers. They come to you for advice. Tips. If they're having relationship problems, want to work on a new routine ... you're like their big brother. I might not have understood the power you feel from stripping until you showed me—"

Trav puts his hand up. "Hold up. You got Atlas to strip? Is there a video?"

"I didn't strip," Atlas says. "He did. Uh ... for me. Like ... privately."

Trav sags. "Please tell me you're not fucking your mark?"

"M-mark?" I stutter.

Atlas's eyes turn soft. "After months of getting nowhere, Trav told me to get close to the person who would know the most about the dealings inside the club. Which is my point. I don't think it's the stripping you love, it's looking after everyone else."

"So the whole savior act, the—" My gaze snaps back to Trav. "You. You're the one who grabbed me onstage a few weeks ago."

"Guilty."

I gasp and turn to Domino. "And you. I gave you a lap dance."

"You did." Domino at least looks a little guilty for that. Trav has no guilt whatsoever.

"So this whole thing has been one huge setup? Well, you know what?"

Fuck you.” I point to Trav and then Domino. “Fuck you.” And finally, Atlas. “And definitely fuck you. I thought you changing your judgmental tone toward me meant you were growing as a person. No, it was just to get some information out of me.”

Atlas reaches across the table for me, but I pull away and try to bury myself in the backrest of the booth.

“I didn’t like lying to you, but it was more lying by omission. Everything I said to you about me is true. And you’ve shown me how biased I can be when it comes to the sex industry and opened my eyes to the fact that while it’s still seedy, everyone in it isn’t.”

“I wish I could believe you, but I don’t. Can I go now? I need to get Callie this money.”

“Let us help with Callie,” Atlas says.

“No, thank you. I’ll make sure to put the money back that I took so Lyle doesn’t know. Thanks for not ratting me out immediately and giving me a chance to make things right.” I’m monotone, closed off.

This hurts so much. Like any betrayal, I’m taking it personally. I probably shouldn’t. Atlas was only doing his job. But I dunno. It felt ...

I shake my head. I don’t know what it felt like. I’m attracted to the man, but that doesn’t mean shit. I maybe thought he wasn’t like other assholes. Ones who lie to get me into bed. Atlas has had the chance to fuck me, but he’s not like that.

Doesn’t mean he’s Prince Charming though either.

“Lemon, how much money have you taken over the years?” Trav asks.

“Not that much. I usually do it in smaller doses, but with Callie, he needs the money, and he needs it now. I’d say, the most I’ve taken in a single year is maybe fifty grand?”

The three of them share a look, but it’s Atlas who speaks first.

“Lemon’s not the only one skimming off the top.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I KNEW Lemon had to be stealing for a good reason, but it's killing me that he's upset I lied to him. We were becoming friends—real friends—and now he probably thinks everything I did for him, like saving him from Trav or showing up when he tested me by saying he needed help, that I didn't mean any of it.

He avoids eye contact with me, has barely looked at me since he found out I'm not who I say I am. Technically, I am. It's just my job that's not me.

Again, this is why I suck at undercover work, and I hate hurting or disappointing people.

He needs an apology, and I'll give him one, but not in front of Trav and Domino. The best way to kiss my promotion goodbye would be to show them that I might have feelings for the guy. Not that they're *feeling* feelings. Just ... I'm attracted to him, and I like him. It's no big deal.

Then his blue eyes cut into me, and guilt hits me again.

I'm thankful for Trav's interruption. "Okay, first things first. We'll get Lemon's friend squared away and out of the state. At least in a safe house until we can organize a permanent move. Then—"

"Wait," Lemon cuts in. "Y-you'd do that? For me. Someone who's stealing and lying? What makes you so sure I'm telling the truth?"

Trav points to me. "Because Atlas says you are. If it turns out you're not, you'll put him on my untrustworthy list. So if it's not true, now's the time to say it. He saved your ass. Are you going to save his?"

Lemon's still terrified. I can see it. But he's trying not to show it. With all the faked confidence in the world, he says, "In his defense, I might be really good at manipulation. Why punish him for me being that good?"

Trav side-eyes me. "Is he always like this?"

He's not—not all the time—but he's trying to show us that he's not afraid, even though it's obvious he's shit scared.

"Pretty much," I say. "But if he wants our help, he'll stop."

My words must get to him because the false bravado stops. "I don't need

your help with Callie. I need it with the club. If they've noticed money going missing, that means they're on to me, and if they find out—"

"Someone's taking more money than you," Trav says. "Lyle noted that each year, his profit from the club has become less and less, even though business has been steady. Both sides of it. We're not talking a measly fifty grand here. We're talking half a million dollars over the last three years."

Lemon's eyes widen. "Those assholes are making that much money, and we have to live off tips? For real?"

"Not the thing you should be focused on," I point out.

"It has to be David," Lemon says.

I nod. "That's what Lyle thinks, but his financials are clean."

Lemon scoffs. "Really? And where'd you pull that information from?"

"His bank records, the computer at the club," I say.

"His personal laptop?"

Trav, Domino, and I glance at each other.

"Laptop?" I ask.

Lemon sighs. "For hired PIs, you don't do your research, do you? You know that ugly-as-fuck manbag David carries around with him? It has a tiny eleven-inch laptop in it. If you want answers, it'll be in there. Getting it, on the other hand, will be nearly impossible because it never leaves his side. As for bank accounts, surely someone of David's stature has an account in the Caymans or Switzerland or somewhere. You know, one of those ones that has no name attached to it?"

"But there's no money going in or out of his normal accounts from any of those types of accounts," Domino says. "So where is the money?"

"I could find out for you," Lemon supplies.

The word "No," flies out of me, but I can tell Trav and Domino are interested.

"If you don't rat me out to Lyle, I can help by digging deeper at the club. I've been there for eight years. Everyone trusts me."

That's true, but no. He has already risked so much by taking money out of the safe. This will be even more dangerous.

"I'm willing to make a deal," Trav says.

"No," I say again.

Lemon pins me with his blue eyes again. "You don't get a say in this. You lied to me. Besides, I fully expect you to make that up to me by protecting my ass if everything goes south in there."

“Fine,” I relent. “But so you know, you can’t use the ‘you lied to me’ excuse forever.”

He smiles. “We’ll see about that.”

Yeah, I bet we will.



We pick up Callie from Lemon’s apartment, who’s reluctant to trust us and is in a lot of pain, but it wouldn’t take much for his ex to figure out where he is and come finish the job, or worse, force Callie to go back to him.

I don’t know Callie well. He had quit before I started at the club and only recently came back, but in the shape he’s in, he won’t be dancing again anytime soon.

We’re at Trav’s safe house in Glendale because Lemon insisted on staying with Callie to take care of him but still go to work, and it’s the closest one to the club. It’s one of his most run-down properties because it’s neglected for most of the year, but it’ll do.

It’s a two-bedroom cottage where the flooring is cheap linoleum, the yard doesn’t even have any grass, and there’s only one bathroom, which looks like it came out of the seventies. And not even in a cool retro way.

“We’ll get working on finding a more permanent place for Callie while you keep doing what you’re doing,” Trav says.

“How do I speed this process up?”

“It’s one of those jobs that’s going to take time. Like the Rowling case. We thought we were done, and then nope, something reeled us back in. It’s not something we want to rush either. Especially if it’s actual lives we’re putting on the line with our accusations.”

This is why I love Trav. Why he’s so good at leading. There’s no pressure to rush it. He’s thorough. I want to be as comforting as he is if I were to take over from Domino.

He claps my shoulder. “We’ll get there. I’ll keep you updated.”

Trav and Domino leave, and when I turn, Lemon’s staring at me with a frown.

“Why are you still here?”

Ouch. I laugh it off. “I love you too, Lemon.”

“No, really. I’ve got this handled. You can go.”

“You’ve got this handled, do you?” I gesture to the bedroom we set

Callie up in. “Is that your idea of protecting him? Because I’ve gotta say, it needs some work.”

“That happened while I wasn’t with him.”

“I’m not saying it’s your fault, but be honest, what could you do if he did come after Callie while you were with him? I’m highly trained and have extensive experience in hand-to-hand combat. It happens to be my specialty.”

Lemon’s gaze narrows. “To me, you’re still a struggling bartender who happened to be in the military at some point.”

“I get it. You’re angry. But it’s not like I had the option to tell you what I was really doing there.” I gesture to the couch. “Do you want to talk this through? Get it all out in the open? Because the only lie I ever told you was that I was working at Peaches because I needed the money. Everything about me was real.”

He doesn’t move. “You promise?”

I think about what I’ve told him over the last few months, or more specifically, the last couple of weeks where we’ve been getting to know each other. “I told you I used to be a SEAL when I was in the navy.”

“That’s so not playing fair.”

“Fair?”

“You can’t play the SEAL card.”

“What SEAL card?”

“Even if the setup of how we became friends is fake, you’re like this real-life knight in shining armor, saving me from handsy clients, helping my friend even after you lost all respect for me, and now you’re reminding me you’re a goddamn national hero. Not to mention the whole gentleman act you’ve got going on. Wanting to have sex with someone special. Just shoot me. Get it over with because you can’t be real. Unless you are real and have been put in my life by some higher power to punish me for not keeping an honest life. I’m in gay hell because the perfect man is right in front of me, and he’s not interested in letting me blow him.”

And I almost lose my damn footing because now *that* idea is in my head.

I approach him and gently push him toward the couch so we can sit to have this conversation. It’s a conversation we need to have now he knows the truth about me.

We sit side by side, taking up the small space that is the tiny couch, and as much as I want to look at him while I say this, I don’t have the guts. “To be more accurate, I never said I wasn’t interested in that. In you ... In sex

with you.”

He sits up in a rush. “Really? So we can—”

I hold up my hand to stop him. “I said I’m not interested in *empty hookups*.”

“Ugh.” He slumps back again. “Same thing.”

“No. It’s not. I assure you, if you had not been my assignment, it would’ve been extremely hard to say no, even if all you could offer was meaningless sex. Because you’re sexy, the only man to tempt me to break my self-imposed rules, and I can’t get the way you move out of my head. Do you know how many times I’ve replayed your lap dance in my memory? Countless.”

Lemon leans in, slowly, closing the minuscule gap he left between us. “Can I point something out?”

“I almost want to say no because I get the feeling you’re going to try to tempt me again.”

“What’s wrong with that?” His eyes glimmer.

I hold my breath and whisper, “I’m not strong enough to say ‘no’ any longer.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LEMON

THIS MAN IS KILLING ME.

I know I should still be mad at him, but how can I be? He had the chance to rat me out; he didn't. He didn't have to offer to find somewhere safe for Callie to stay, and he didn't have to hang back with us to make sure if on the off chance Bastard Ex did find Callie that we'd be protected.

I so badly want to surge forward and kiss him. Climb into his lap. Explore his insane body with my tongue. But I'm trying to respect his values.

Yet, when he says stuff like he might not be able to say "no," I get ideas. Hot, naked, amazing ideas.

"Lemon?" he says, snapping me out of my moral dilemma.

"I'm technically not your assignment anymore now that I'm on board to help you willingly."

"That might be true, but I'm still on the job."

"And I'm no longer your job."

Atlas reaches for me, cupping my cheek in his big hand. "It's cute you don't think my number one priority isn't getting you out of there at the slightest hint of any danger. I need to protect you."

"Why?"

"Because of something I said to you the first time we went to that diner. The reason I knew in my gut that you weren't taking that money for yourself was because of what you told me that night. You look after everyone, but who's there to look after you? I want to be that man. Your person to turn to."

"You can be that person and still fuck me." We're so close now. Please, for the love of God, put me out of my misery and kiss me.

"No, if we were going to have sex, I wouldn't just be your friend. I would fucking own you."

The thunderbolt of lust shoots right through me, and I shiver. My cock goes from interested to about to explode from his words and his breath on my damn cheek alone.

Atlas pulls back. "And doing this while we need to focus on other things

isn't the way to do it."

No, I internally scream out because I don't care what we have to do or what's happening outside the two of us right here and now. I want to get lost in the moment. I want him to get lost in the moment.

Strength is usually seen as a good thing, but all I want is for Atlas to be weak. Weak for me.

Callie's voice from the other room breaks the spell. "Holy fuck, Lemon, if you don't ask that man to own you, I will."

Both Atlas and I laugh, but it dies quickly.

"He is kind of right, though," I say.

"That I should go fuck Callie instead? He's too injured for me." Atlas smirks.

"Ooh, Navy SEAL's got snark."

"You don't know the half of it. My boss and Domino? They're the tame ones out of everyone who works for Mike Bravo, and even then, they're still immature. They once had a bet that spanned over five years where Trav had to have over-the-top pimped-out furniture and pretend it was his aesthetic. If he told anyone or changed a single zebra-print rug or neon light, he lost the bet."

Other than the slight disappointment from him changing the subject completely off of us and him owning me, I can't help being intrigued. "Did he win?"

"Nope. Domino sabotaged him in the last couple of months. Made Trav get a tattoo of Dom's name."

"They sound fun."

"You should meet the others. Like I said, they're the tame ones."

Realizing Atlas has all these people around him who are his friends, his family, it only makes me see how lonely my life is.

I've got the dancers at the club, but are they anything more than colleagues who I look out for? It's hard to tell.

I've gone from horny to depressed in about thirty seconds flat. "We should go to bed."

"There you go trying to have sex with me again."

Atlas genuinely makes me smile.

"Always. Just assume anytime I speak, I'm trying to lure you into sex."

"Noted."

"I'm gonna go bunk with Callie." I stand.

He does too.

There's a moment of pause, of complete hesitance on both sides to walk away. The warring inside him is obvious, and I know with a small push, there's a chance he might cave, but I'm trying to be respectful here.

He's told me his terms.

It's not that he's not interested in me. It's that there's a whole lot of fucked-up shit going on at Peaches, and he was hired to get to the bottom of it. There's some innuendo there about peaches and bottoms, but we're in too serious a situation to point it out. The club drama should be his main focus, not just a piece of ass. A piece of ass he's already said he'd own if I let him.

Would I let him?

I don't know. I've never had a real relationship. No one takes you seriously when you get paid to strip your clothes off for a living.

Except Atlas does.

He gives a curt nod. "Good night."

I mimic his action. "Night."

We walk our separate ways to the opposite bedrooms, and I climb into bed next to Callie, not bothering to take off my sweats Atlas fished out of my locker for me.

Tonight has been a mindfuck, and I know it's the right decision to stay strong and not give in to those primal urges telling me to play musical beds and accidentally on purpose land on top of Atlas.

"You're an idiot." Callie's soft voice breaks through the loudness of my thoughts.

"Tell me about it."

"Okay, well—"

"That was a figure of speech, jackass. I know I'm an idiot."

"Seriously, if I wasn't so messed up, I'd be climbing into bed with that man."

Jealousy isn't a foreign emotion for me.

When Callie left those months ago because he was "in love," yeah, I thought he was crazy, but I can't deny the tiny seed of jealousy too. Because he found someone who wanted him for him.

Or, that was the impression we were under back then. His current state is exactly why I have trust issues.

Taking a risk like Callie did ... I wish I could do it myself, but under my confident exterior lies an insecure person not sure if he's worthy of love.

It's hard to tell when that happened. Possibly when my mother—the only caretaker and best friend I've ever known—passed away, leaving me alone. Or maybe it was when I fell into stripping, and despite my loud opinions on the industry and telling everyone that being sex-positive is okay, I worry that after years of being treated as disposable, deep down, on a subconscious level, I believe the stigmas surrounding strippers.

How many times do you need to be told something before you start to think it's true? Ten times? Twenty? Try hearing it hundreds.

"He doesn't do cheap hookups, and everyone in the universe knows I'm cheap," I say.

"Nah, that's Diamante. I reckon you'd be a firecracker in the bedroom." He turns his head toward me. "And you deserve to be happy, Lemon. You're so good to all of us at the club, but I've never seen you take something for yourself."

"And you're suggesting I go take Atlas? Have you seen the man? If anything, he'd be the one taking me."

On my knees, from behind, against a wall—the possibilities are endless.

I shake my thoughts free before my dick gets carried away. "Go to sleep already."

"Can't. In too much pain."

I sit up. "Shit. Where are the painkillers? I'll get you some."

"I think I left them in the kitchen."

I get back out of bed and grab the meds and a glass of water for him. Once he's downed them, I return the glass to the kitchen and leave it in the sink. I almost jump out of my skin when Atlas appears out of nowhere, his dark silhouette seeming twice as big as usual.

The house is filled with the blue-y hues dusk brings, painting Atlas in a cold light, but when he steps forward, closing the distance between us, there's nothing but heat and fire in his eyes.

That same air of tension surrounds us, like there's a force field keeping us in place.

I want him so badly, but I'm too scared to go for something I've never allowed myself, despite wanting it.

The words "Own me" are on the tip of my tongue, eager to be said. To be screamed.

But what Atlas says truly knocks me off my game. "One night."

"W-what?"

He steps forward again, pressing against me with the lightest of touches. “If all you’ll give me is casual, I can break my rules this once.”

As if giving me the words I need—to take that pressure off about what I do and don’t deserve or having to be someone’s partner, perfect boyfriend, and all the other normal things I have no idea how to do—our bodies collide in an explosion of pent-up lust and sexual frustration.

Our mouths come together. When his tongue pushes inside, it’s intense. Fierce. It’s downright debilitating in the best way. We haven’t even gotten started and I’m already at his mercy. Under his thumb.

I’m completely under Atlas’s control, and when his hands move down my sides and grip my hips, and he pulls me against his hard body, a grunt falls from me.

He keeps moving his hands lower until he gets to my ass, but instead of squeezing it like I expect him to, he lifts me as if I weigh nothing. My legs wrap around him instinctually.

Atlas holds me tight, close, and he never stops kissing me.

I’ve had frantic sex before. Needy.

But this is consuming, and I’m quickly realizing Atlas is right. After this, he’s going to own me. Whether I want him to or not.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ATLAS

WHEN THIS ALL goes to shit and I lose my promotion, my heart, and my pride, someone will ask me what happened, and I'll only have one answer for them.

Lemon happened.

I could be throwing away everything I've worked for, and for what?

Lemon moans into my mouth and reminds me of why I'm taking this risk. Because no matter how many times I tell myself that I know who I am and what I want and that Lemon doesn't fit into the plan I made for myself, I can't fight the draw I have to him.

It's impossible.

It's been there since the beginning when my denial was at its strongest, but getting to know him on a deeper level these last couple of weeks, my denial has faded, and urgent need has taken over.

I turn us so I push Lemon's back against the wall of the kitchen cupboard. His mouth is pliant under mine, following my lead.

He digs his nails into my back through my shirt, and I want to feel them on my skin. But I'm also in no rush because like this, with his body wrapped around mine, my cock rubbing against his through our clothes, I'm sinking deeper and deeper into a haze that I never want to leave.

I break from his mouth and kiss down his neck while I breathe in his scent, which is more musky than citrus right now.

He's a mix of dried sweat, oil, and his signature fragrance. It's probably the pheromones sex brings out or whatever they're called, but his smell is intoxicating. The taste his neck leaves on my tongue, even more so.

"Atlas," he rasps.

"Mm?" I don't stop kissing his skin.

"Do what you promised."

I lift my head. "What I promised?"

His blue eyes are even bluer in this light. "Take me to bed and own me."

"Are you sure?"

"I want it. I want you."

I thought they were the words I needed to hear, but they're not. They're just icing on the cake.

I pull him off the wall and carry him through the house to the bedroom.

My shoes sit on the floor in front of the bed, but I'm too busy paying Lemon attention to notice. I stumble, and we fall onto the mattress with a laugh.

"Ouch," Lemon croaks. "You're not as light as you think you are, big guy."

"Sorry." I quickly climb off him and stand above him at the end of the bed.

He eyes me from head to toe, making my skin flush with heat. His gaze pauses on my pants, on the tent in them, and he licks his lips. I don't even know if he's doing it on purpose.

"You know, I wasn't actually complaining while you were on top of me, but now I'm glad you took it that way because I have to say, this is a great fucking view. The only thing that will make it better is if your clothes weren't blocking my sight."

I take a mind-numbingly long time to undo the buttons on my shirt.

Lemon leans up on his elbows, his legs hanging off the end of the bed, and he watches intently.

"I could give you some pointers on how to strip quicker."

"I'm sure you could, but you're not going to."

He cocks his head. "I'm not?"

"Nope. I can do it on my own." With one pull on either side of my shirt, my buttons pop off all the way to the bottom of the shirt.

"Do you know how many shirts you'd go through if you did it like that? You'd make a horrible stripper."

I slide the shirt off my shoulders, revealing the muscles I know Lemon loves so much. "Are you really complaining about it?"

He doesn't take his eyes off my abs. "No, but at least pay the stripper some common courtesy by not hurting the fashion."

"I'm so sorry my clothes aren't rip-away like yours. But speaking of which." I reach for his sweatpants, but he grabs my wrist.

"Hey, whoa, these are Versace. No ripping them."

"Do you want to do the honors, then?" I stand back and watch as he sits up, unzips his hoodie, and throws it across the room. He shimmies out of his sweatpants next, and then he's left in his bright yellow thong.

I see this sight every day at the club, but there's something about him like this that's just ... different.

His cock, straining against the tight material, is hard because of me. For me. I want to taste him so badly. The urge is too strong to resist.

I drop to my knees in front of him and grip his wrists as he digs his thumbs into the sides of his thong.

Lemon meets my eyes and doesn't break that contact while we lower his underwear down his legs together. He lets go when we get them past his thighs so I can take them off the rest of the way.

His cock springs up, resting against his abdomen. He's already panting, and I haven't even touched his dick yet.

It brings a smile to my face because the whole time he was giving me that lap dance, or anyone else I've witnessed, the only heavy breathing he's done was from exhaustion. From the physical toll dancing takes out on him.

This is completely different, and as I lean forward and take his swollen tip into my mouth, his breathing stalls completely.

I love it, but I also don't want to kill the guy. I glance up at him to find him watching me, so I lower my head, sucking him into my mouth and loving the way his eyes roll back.

Lemon's legs squirm as if he's trying to get them on the end of the mattress so he can buck up into my mouth, but he's too far on the edge of the bed for it to happen. He resorts to gripping my hair to control me that way.

I let it happen. He deserves it. His whole job is about turning other people on. I want him to take what he wants. What he needs.

He lets out the sexiest moan I've ever heard, long and loud, and even though Callie calls out, "I can hear you!" the only thing I do is put my foot out to slam the door closed. Because I'm not going to make Lemon stop making noises for me.

I drink him down, suck him to the back of my throat, and as much as I'd love to do so many more things to him: rim him, fuck him, pinch his nipples—ooh, I can do that.

I reach up, taking his hard nipple between my fingers and squeezing.

The "Holy fuck!" he releases is the reward I wanted, but my cock has had enough teasing.

With my free hand, I undo my belt, button, and fly, cursing myself for not having done that sooner. When I finally manage to get my cock out, I've only given myself the smallest amount of relief when Lemon's breathing

quickens.

He writhes. “I’m gonna ... I’m ...”

I take him to the base, all the way to the back of my mouth, and as he unleashes in my mouth, his cum trickling down my throat, I crave my own release.

He tastes exactly how I thought he would. Salty yet somehow sweet.

His frantic writhing turns to slow aftershocks as he continues to thrust into my mouth a couple of times. Then he’s boneless, laid out for me, with a look of complete satisfaction.

That might be even hotter than the face he made while he came. And yes, I was watching the whole time.

I stroke myself, waiting for Lemon to come back online, but watching that, him letting go, it’s just as satisfying as an orgasm. Not wanting to disturb his recovery time, I stand and start jerking myself with the mission of getting me to the edge the quickest way I know how.

“No. My job.” Lemon tries to lift his arm, but it flops back down beside him.

I chuckle. “The sight of you completely wiped out because of me is all I need.”

I continue to stand over him, stroking, looking into his blissed-out expression.

He bounces back enough to nod, and then when he can manage, he lifts his legs, holding on to his knees and exposing his hole for me. “Come all over me. My balls, my ass ... everywhere.”

“Fuck,” I hiss and speed up.

My muscles ache, my legs buckle, and in the next moment, I paint his skin with ropes of cum.

He tries to lower his legs, but I don’t let him. I get back on my knees and lick my own release off him until he’s clean. My tongue trails over his balls, and he lets out a little “mmm” noise.

When I’m done, I sink back onto my knees, grip his waist with my hands, and pull him to a seated position. Like this, he’s taller than me by a couple of inches. He cups the back of my head, leans in, and kisses me softly.

I’m not sure where to go from here or what’s going to happen—with the club, with Callie, or between Lemon and me—but I do know if Lemon asked for anything in this moment, I’d give it to him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LEMON

AFTER CROSSING the lines Atlas said he wouldn't, I can't help feeling guilty. In the moment, it was so right. I wanted him, he wanted me, and we both made promises I'm not sure we meant.

Even though I'm shit scared of letting someone in properly, I want to try with him, but because he said it would only be one night, I'm not sure how to play it this morning.

He's asleep, holding me tight while I'm curled up beside him, my head lying in the nook of his shoulder.

His breathing is steady, and surprisingly, I fit against his giant, hard body. I've never slept more comfortably.

But my fear is that when he wakes up, when this physical connection ends, what happens then?

I'm overthinking this, but I can't get my mind to stop. I have no idea what time it is, considering we were hooking up when the sun started rising, but it's well and truly bright now.

"I know you're awake," Atlas says out of nowhere.

I lift my head. "How?"

"Your breathing changed about twenty minutes ago, but I was hoping you'd go back to sleep."

"My breathing changed. And that woke you up?"

He cracks one eye open. "SEAL, remember?"

"Oh. Right." I trail my fingers down his wide chest.

"You're still mad, huh." It's not a question. Not really.

I don't know what I am. "I understand why you couldn't tell me. For all you know, I could've been in David's pocket. You couldn't tell anyone because it would risk everything, but it still feels ..."

"Icky," he supplies for me.

"Exactly. I'm thankful you didn't slip and were honest about not being able to hook up with me, though. If we'd done what we did last night and then I found out all of this, I think it would've made me feel even more used

than I already do.”

Atlas moves his arm out from under my neck so fast I fall back on the pillow, but then he’s there, resting on his elbow and looking down at me. “I never wanted you to feel used. I needed information, and I figured—”

“Oh, sorry. I don’t mean by you. I mean in general. I spout about dancing empowering me—and it does, don’t get me wrong—but yeah, sometimes, it makes the thoughts of worthlessness get in my head. Though I tend to think it’s more the stigma and other people’s opinions that make me think that way.”

“As someone who used to be under the impression those stereotypes were correct, I want to say on behalf of all the ignorant, pompous asses out there that we’re twatwaffles.”

I laugh. “I know.”

“There’s a few ways I can make it up to you and show you how much I respect what you do with your body.”

“Yeah? How?”

“By showing you what *I* can do with your body.” Atlas leans in to kiss me, slowly, teasingly, but then there’s a knock at the door.

“You two up yet? Sounds like you are in more ways than one. Walls are paper-thin, dude.”

Atlas buries his head in my shoulder. “I hate him.”

“Who is that?” It didn’t sound like either man I met last night, and I know it’s not Callie.

“Zeus.”

“Zeus? Really?”

“Yeah, because he has sex with anything that moves.”

“With permission, right?”

Atlas laughs at the same time Zeus yells out, “They’re the ones begging me for my cock! Always.”

Atlas rolls off me and sits up. “I’d like to say he’s being a cocky, arrogant A-hole, but when you see him, you’ll realize why that’s true.”

Can one person really be that hot? I’m around attractive men all the time, so surely he’ll be another pretty face in a sea of pretty faces. I get out of bed and throw on my sweats from last night, prepared to meet this so-called man who fucks like a Greek god.

My feet stall in the doorway because with one look, I can say without a doubt I can see why he’s called Zeus. Damn.

Atlas bumps me from behind. "Told you."

Zeus has smaller muscles than Atlas, but he's in proportion with his height. He's a drop-dead gorgeous guy with luscious, silky hair and a killer smile. He's maybe just under six foot, his skin is smooth, his jaw and nose are prominent in a modelesque way, and he oozes sex.

Being shirtless probably helps with that.

"Why isn't he wearing a shirt?" I ask Atlas, but Zeus answers for me.

"Whoever the guy is in the other room asked me to take it off, and he's injured. Can't deny a man anything when he's injured."

"I have the sudden urge to break my ankle," I blurt.

"Down, boy," Atlas says and pushes past me.

"Ooh, you got a whole Daddy/boy vibe going on?" Zeus asks.

Atlas slaps him on the back of the head. "What are you even doing here?"

"Trav and Domino sent me to help. I really am sorry for not taking your job at the club. I didn't realize it came with perks." He turns and eyes me.

"I am not a perk." Yes, I'm a strong-ass man who definitely wouldn't have fucked Zeus had he come to work at the club instead of Atlas. Yep. That's the lie I'm going to keep telling myself and, more importantly Atlas.

"You're lucky you got me instead of Zeus," Atlas says. "Trust me on that. He would've slept with you the first day on the job."

"Yeah. Lucky," I deadpan.

Atlas cocks an eyebrow at me, and I immediately want to run into his arms. Because while Zeus is hot, and it's true, we most likely would have slept together had it been him, it still wouldn't have been what Atlas and I have.

It would be my usual. Mutual orgasms followed by feelings of being used and empty.

What Atlas gave me last night was so much more than that. It was passionate, intimate, but most of all, it was an exchange of respect. It's sad I can't remember the last time I'd been *respected* in the bedroom.

I approach Atlas, rise up on my toes, and touch my lips to his. That puts a smile on his face.

"Does Trav know about this?" Zeus waves a finger between us.

"Not ... exactly," Atlas says.

I look up at him. "Will it be a problem if he does?"

He says "No," even if his eyes say *yes*. "We'll keep it separate from the

job. It might even help. You know, if we're caught where we shouldn't be, oh no, impromptu make-out session."

I mock gasp. "Your job sounds horrible."

"The worst." Atlas grins.

"Okay, now I'm glad I didn't take the job if it would make me look at someone like that," Zeus says.

I don't know what he means by that, but I don't want to break eye contact with Atlas to ask, and neither does Atlas. Atlas does flip Zeus the bird, though.

"What?" Zeus protests. "You look at each other like I look at Pop-Tarts. That's really unhealthy."

I finally break from Atlas. "Wait, what's unhealthy? Looking at someone like you want to eat them or Pop-Tarts?"

He has to genuinely think about it. "Both."

Atlas puts his hand at the small of my back, and it's so comforting and warm but foreign at the same time. "Coffee?"

"All of the coffee. Need it."

"Go sit at the table. I'll bring it over to you."

"Careful, I could get used to this," I warn. And it's definitely something I'd need to get used to. I sit at the dining table across from Zeus, and he just stares at me. "Can I help you with something?"

"Maybe." Zeus leans forward. "I think you're the first guy I've ever seen Atlas with. I was beginning to think he was ace. There's nothing wrong with that, but it's why you're a ... surprise. Am I allowed to pinch you? I kinda want to make sure you're real."

That makes my gut flutter and fill with dread at the same time. Because while it's absolutely flattering that Atlas would choose me, it's a lot of pressure too. Having Atlas tell me he doesn't do hookups is one thing. Hearing it from someone else ...

"Does that scare you?" Zeus asks. "Do I sense a fellow commitment-phobe?"

"No. I want commitment. I've just never found it before. So even the possibility is ..." I lick my lips.

"Daunting?"

"Exactly. I'm going to screw it up. I know I will."

A cup of coffee lands in front of me out of nowhere, and I flinch. Stealthy that one is. Atlas kisses the top of my head. "If you screw it up, we'll

talk it through. We're going to go slow."

"With the dating and emotional side, right? Because I don't know how to do slow with the physical stuff."

Zeus laughs. "I approve."

Atlas blushes.

All is right with the world.

I lean back and sip my coffee. "So, what's the plan going forward?"

"Trav said something about David's personal laptop," Zeus says. "We need to get our hands on it."

"How are we supposed to do that?" I ask. "David's rarely ever in."

"It's true. I think I've met him once in the months I've been there."

Zeus pins me with his stare. "We need to give him a reason to come in. Trav thinks we should get our newly appointed assistant to do it."

"You want to use Lemon as bait?" Atlas exclaims. "No. Not happening."

I touch his arm. "The overprotection is cute but not necessary. Use me as bait, how?"

"Not bait," Zeus says. "But if you were to tell David there's a problem at the club, he'd come to you, right?"

"I-I can do that. What kind of problem, though? I can't put anyone at the club in danger, and it's not like I can flat out say there's money missing and he should come take a look. It would tip him off that Lyle's on to him, or worse, make him look closely and realize I've been stealing money too."

"Trav was thinking you could tell him you're having problems with another employee. Like a serious issue. Or one of the managers is harassing you. Surely out of everyone who works there, there's someone you could name."

"Ben," Atlas says. "He doesn't care about any of the dancers."

"Ben's always treated me nicely. He can be standoffish, but—"

"On my first shift in security, he told me to basically let all of you be assaulted because we want returning customers."

I blink. "He what?"

"He said let clients get handsy without letting them cross a line. When I asked where that line was, he said wherever I want it to be."

What an asshole. "Okay, even with Ben being a dick, I'm still not comfortable putting anyone else in the firing line. What if I call David and tell him I want to talk to him about a base wage increase? That way, he can't

palm it off to anyone else other than Lyle, and you're in contact with Lyle, right? You could tell him that if David claims to be too busy to come in."

"No," Atlas says flat out. "You don't want David's attention on you, and from what I understand of the guy, you don't demand things from him."

I pull my innocent yet playful stripper persona out and lean toward him. "It's adorable you think I need to demand what I want when I look like this." I bat my lashes and run my finger along his jawline.

Atlas grits his teeth. "If you think that's going to sell me on letting you do that to David, you're completely wrong."

"Ooh, jealous Atlas is jealous."

Zeus cuts in. "It's a great idea, though. If you can swipe David's laptop and clone it while Lemon distracts him with that adorable face, we might be able to get what we need."

Atlas grunts. "Fine, but I swear if David lands a hand on you, we won't have to worry about Lyle killing him in the end."

I know I shouldn't love his jealous streak because of toxic masculinity and all that crap, but what can I say? No one's ever cared for me like that.

And I think I like it.

Now, I have to put my money where my mouth is and not fuck up this ploy to get David to the club. Oh, and not piss him off by asking him for money.

I'm starting to regret my idea already.



"Hey," Romeo says, and I practically jump out of my skin. I turn so fast my head hits my open locker door. "Whoa, jumpy much?"

Yeah, that kinda happens when you realize after years of stealing from your bosses that you're not as subtle as you thought, and now you're practically bringing attention to it. I'm smart. I really am. I just lack that thing called self-preservation.

"Didn't sleep well."

"Where'd you disappear to last night?"

Out a bathroom window. No biggy. "I slipped out after my last number. I couldn't be bothered to work the floor."

Romeo steps closer. "What's going on with you?"

"Nothing. It might be time for a vacation is all. I'm over the bullshit,

you know?”

His face lights up. “Boys weekend in Cabo. I’m in.”

Not really what I was thinking, but I pretend to be interested. “Cocktails, sun, beach. Perfect.” And Mexico would be a perfect place to hide if David decides to kill me.

But I have to do this. If we can prove that David is also screwing Lyle out of his share, then maybe my measly fifty K will go unnoticed. The last thing I want is to be accused of taking everything.

Atlas enters the dressing room with a bag full of cash to place into the safe. He smiles on his way past, and just having him here makes me feel safer. He said he’d look out for me, and I believe him, but fuck if this isn’t nerve-racking.

I wish I could go back to thinking I was getting away with it unnoticed. I was under the delusion that I was invincible, and all that’s going through my head is what would’ve happened if the guys Lyle had hired to figure it out wasn’t Atlas’s team.

Doing what I do, I’ve never felt truly unsafe. Not when it comes to my life anyway. I’ve always known Lyle and David did shady business. Hell, I’m dealing their drugs for the club. I’m in deep. It’s a huge reality check. One that I needed.

As much as I want to help my dancers, I need to lie low for a while. Relocating Callie will clean me out. I lift my head and send up a silent prayer that none of them get in trouble in the next few months.

“Are you fucking the bouncer?” Romeo asks.

“What?”

“You two made eyes at each other. Like you’ve seen each other naked.”

“Yeah, he sees me practically naked every night. Duh.” But my voice squeaks. I’m nervous about having him know. Atlas even said it would be a good cover story. But part of me wants to protect it. Or maybe myself.

The more people who know, the more people to tell when I inevitably fuck up somehow and it ends.

Despite visions of Atlas throwing me over his shoulder and carrying me out of here, riding off into the sunset together, and living happily ever after, the doubt is still preventing me from running with the idea.

Plus, I don’t actually want to leave, even though my reality check came with a huge realization that my time is running out here at Peaches.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Romeo asks. “You’ve been weird the last

couple of days. Is it the Callie thing?”

“Weird how?” The last thing I need is to be seen as acting off. It would be suspicious.

“Not yourself. I’m worried about you.”

That makes me pause. “Y-you are?”

“We all are. You’re the glue that holds us all together. If there’s something up with you, there’s something wrong with all of us.”

My nose tingles, and without permission, water leaks from my eyes. “Damn you.”

“Are you ... crying? Oh shit, you’re dying, aren’t you? Cancer from all the bleach you use on your hair?”

I laugh through a sniff. “No. I just ... I needed to hear that. That you appreciate me.”

Romeo punches my arm, and he’s got guns for biceps, so it hurts more than it should. “Of course we do. I don’t think I would’ve made it through my first week here if it weren’t for you. Do you remember me asking you to teach me how to even work a pole?”

“It’s a fond memory. Mainly because I remember the bruises the next day from falling on your ass repeatedly for an hour.”

“Then you taught me how to protect myself from the creepy guys in the back rooms. How to fake snort the drugs so I can stay level-headed. You taught us how to be safe and how to survive this industry. We’d be nothing without you.”

Just him telling me that gives me the confidence to go through with the plan. I texted David earlier and asked to meet him, and he replied he won’t be able to get here until tomorrow night. If I can hold on to Romeo’s sentiment for the next twenty-four hours, everything will be fine.

Because if it can all get pinned on David, I’ll have a small chance of being able to continue what I do. My life here is so much more than stripping. It’s protecting others. It’s my home.

I know I won’t be able to do it forever anyway. It’s not like guys want fifty-year-olds getting naked and grinding all over them. You know, unless they’re into the daddy vibes, which I most certainly would never be able to pull off. Philosophical question: What does a twink become when they’re in their fifties?

A twas? A twank? *Twinkstinct*.

All I know is that’s in the future. One day, I’ll hang up my bright yellow

thong, but I don't want that day to be anytime soon.

"Time to get back out there," Romeo says.

"Yep. I'm up after you."

My nerves are getting the better of me, and the last thing I want to do is go out there and crawl around a stage.

"Hey." Atlas stealth attacks me from behind, his gentle hands touching my shoulders, and again, I jump. I hope it's possible to get used to him doing that because I can't even blame the nerves this time. He came out of freaking nowhere. "Are you doing okay?"

I bury my head in my hands. "No. I'm really not."

Atlas turns me toward him and holds me to his wide chest. "This is why I didn't want you getting involved. I've been trained for this. You haven't."

"But I have to do what's best for everyone here."

"No," Atlas says into my hair. "You need to start looking out for yourself. You always put everyone else first, so now it's your turn to be a priority. If you're not going to do it, I will."

I shake off the doubt and look him in the eye when I say, "I can do this."

"If you want out at any time, we'll have you mic'd up and on our comms. All you have to do is say a key word or phrase, and we'll get you out of there. Understand?"

I do understand.

I understand that if I screw this up, retirement will come earlier than I'd planned.

I can't let that happen.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ATLAS

“IT FEELS WEIRD IN MY EAR,” Lemon complains.

“That’s what he said.” Iris’s voice comes over comms. Because of course he does.

“That’s weird too. It’s like hearing voices in my brain,” Lemon says.

“You should really get that checked out,” Zeus adds.

“Could you go easy on him? Please?” I ask.

Lemon and I are in the one teeny tiny restroom in the back of the club—the only employee bathroom—trying to get Lemon ready to do this.

“If you don’t want them to hear what you’re saying, put your finger to your ear and press the device once. It will put you on mute.”

Lemon does it right away.

“Just remember to turn it back on when you’re ready. We need to hear if you’re in trouble when you’re with David.”

He turns it back on again. “I’m worried I’ll forget.”

I’m still uneasy about Lemon doing this, but he’s a stubborn son of a bitch, and the more I tell him I’m worried about him, the more determined he gets. Maybe if I show support, he’ll back out like I want him to.

“You’ve got this,” I say. “I have all the faith in the world.”

His smile is weak. “Reverse psychology only works in reverse.”

There are musings in our ears, wondering if that even makes sense, but it does to me. He knows I don’t want him doing this, therefore, I can’t trick him when I say he’ll be fine. Even though I know he will be because I won’t let anything happen to him.

After fitting Lemon with his comms, I let him get to work and then slip out the employee entrance where one of the other security guys is stationed tonight. “Going to get some air before spending the night sucking in the scent of sweat, cum, and that damn smoke machine that’s about twenty years old and smells like farts.”

Grey laughs. “I know what you mean. Why do you think I ask for this post whenever I’m working?”

“I’ll be back in five.” I head around the building and down the side alley, where Trav’s waiting in a car, and jump in the passenger seat.

“Your boy ready to go?” he asks.

I could refute that Lemon is mine, but now’s not the time to get into that. I point to my ear for us to go to mute because if Lemon hears me doubting him, he’ll stress even more. “I still don’t think he should be doing this. He’s nervous, and you know what happens if a UC can’t get their nerves under control.”

“I also know what happens on missions when you’re involved with someone on the same team. I don’t think *you* should be doing this. It’s obvious something’s going on between you two, and I thought you were better than that.”

“Better than what? Just because he’s a stripper, that doesn’t mean he doesn’t deserve—”

“I mean because he’s part of your mission. I didn’t think you’d cross lines. That’s an Iris thing to do.”

The whole reason I accepted this job was to show Trav that I’m leadership material, but because Lemon tempted me and I chose to break my rules, that could be in jeopardy now.

I wait for something like guilt to make me apologize for it or maybe disappointment to hit over risking everything, but it’s not there. “You know I don’t make decisions like this easily, and even then, I don’t even know if Lemon was a decision. It ... kind of feels like it was inevitable. It’s why I didn’t want to get close to him in the first place, so if you really think about it, this is your fault. Not mine.”

“So you believe him wholeheartedly when he says he knows nothing about David or anyone else from the club? You don’t think he could be covering for someone? You haven’t known him long.”

I lick my lips because while that’s true, I trust Lemon. “I’ve known him long enough to see who he is deep down. What he’s all about. He’s the most selfless person I’ve ever met. To his own detriment, I might add.”

“I trust your instincts. I’ll be out here in the car if you two need to escape. Iris, Saint, and Zeus are inside being their distractingly loud selves, and here ...” Trav pulls out a flash drive. “When you get David’s laptop, copy everything on it to here.”

“No problem.” Unless, you know, I get the laptop and someone catches me with it. Or David notices it missing. Or we can’t even separate David

from it in the first place. Yeah, this plan is great.

“David’s car, incoming,” Angel says from a rooftop across the way where she’s keeping an eye out for us.

“I better get back in there.”

And this plan better work.



Lemon is sexy up on that stage on any given day, but hearing his heavy breathing in my ear while he does it only adds to the experience.

We have to make it out of this alive because I still have so much I want to do with him. I might not allow myself to have random sex whenever I feel like it, but now that I’ve already broken that rule with Lemon, my libido is like a freight train with no brakes.

I almost want to hurry this along so I can get him home and under me again.

I also want to get him out of here so Zeus stops tucking money in his thong. I swear his fingers linger longer than needed.

Lemon collects the rest of his tips and, as he stands, meets me dead in the eye before running offstage.

“I’m going to take my break,” I say to Ben.

He waves me off. I haven’t had a break all night so I could take it at the right moment. David’s been in his office this whole time—the one with the safe—which works out perfectly for us.

“Want me to do a money run on my way out?” I ask Ben.

“Yeah, thanks.”

Next obstacle is down.

Now to pull this off.

This is the part of the job I’m good at. Covert ops. Sneaking around. It’s hard to believe, considering my size, but I’m a quiet person by nature. Noise-wise, I may as well be invisible.

This mission has an added layer of adrenaline, though. I’ve always had faith that if a situation went south, I’d be able to get myself out. With Lemon being in the thick of it this time, it’s not just me I have to think about. Sure, getting my teammates out is also a priority in intense missions like this one, but usually, said teammates are completely capable of doing it themselves. With Lemon, it’s on me.

I need to get him out.

I need to make sure he's safe.

I need him to be mine.

Heading for the bar, I take out the canvas bag from under the cash register and fill it with the overflow of cash, leaving just enough in there for if the bartenders need to make change. I send a salute to Roland at the other end, who's serving customers, and make my way out the back, where Lemon is waiting.

Pacing.

I put my comms on mute and step closer to him. "Are you okay?"

He nods.

"Can you even talk?"

Now he shakes his head.

I knew this was too much for him. I knew it. We shouldn't have dragged him into this. We should be protecting him with every source of power we have.

"Good thing about it is employees asking for a raise should be nervous." He's goddamn shaking.

"I'm not letting you go in there. You can't. Not like this."

"Tell me we'll get it done, and I'll be fine. I just need to know this is worth the risk."

I can't promise that. I can never promise that.

We don't know how our missions are going to go. We try to think of everything, from minor obstacles to ridiculous ways marks could react, but at the end of the day, the best we can do is plan for the most likely of scenarios and have a backup for our backup. And right now, our backup is to get the fuck out of here and never come back.

David's office door opens, and he steps through. He's in his forties, with dark hair and eyes, and he looks like a professional businessman in his suit, but there's that air about him that screams mob boss, or at least wannabe mob boss.

"Lemon. I thought I heard murmurings out here."

Let's hope that's all he heard.

"Ready for that chat?"

Lemon nods, and I try to subtly point to my ear for him to turn his comms back on. He runs his hand through his hair and then skillfully turns his comms mic back on.

Smooth.

He might pull this off after all.

“Mind if I get in there first?” I hold up the bag of money. “Deposit from the register.”

“Go on ahead.” But then David stops me. “Atlas, right?”

“Good memory. It might take a while to count all this. Is that okay?”

“Sure. Lemon and I can have our talk out here.”

“Thanks.”

I spare one glance back at Lemon when I walk toward the office, and he looks like he’s about to puke. My heart calls me to go back to him and support him in this, even though I can’t, but my legs must agree with my head because it feels like I’m moving through water. Against the tide.

Lemon distracts David while I enter the office, their chatter loud in my ear. Everyone else on comms is silent, either on mute or not talking because we’re trained to be quiet in these situations.

The adrenaline kicks into overdrive as I search for David’s bag. I have to be quick with the money so I can spend the time I need with his laptop, but I also need to be smart. So I empty half of the money into the safe without bothering to count it but keep some in the bag so I can look like I’m counting if they come back in here.

David’s bag isn’t in plain sight, and I guess it would be too much for us to ask for it to be that easy.

While I search, I listen to Lemon struggle out there, asking for a raise. I have to hand it to him, he is right about nerves selling it.

“I-I ... I hate to ask, but I’m in a bit of trouble and n-need s-some help.”

“What kind of help?”

“The m-m-money kind. I was kind of hoping, maybe, sort of, possibly ___”

I hate how cute he sounds. I can even picture his pout.

“How much do you need?”

“Oh, I’m not asking for a handout. I was wanting to ask if it’s possible to get a raise in my pay. I know we’re mostly paid in tips, but a bigger base pay will help me out a lot.”

Ah-ha. Found the laptop under his desk and tucked against the side. I climb under there and pull out the laptop and set it up on the floor. The technology Trav has access to means as soon as this thumb drive is connected, it’ll immediately start downloading everything that’s on his

computer. Passwords and firewalls have got nothing on this CIA type of gadgetry. The red light flashing on the side of it will turn green when it's all done.

So while it does its thing, I turn back to the money and count, glancing sideways at the open laptop in the middle of the floor. The desk covers it from the outside looking in, but if Lemon can't draw out this conversation longer, there's a good chance I'll be caught putting the laptop back.

We didn't think it would be so easy for David to say yes. Though, I'm not so sure I'm liking his terms.

"Instead of giving you, what, a couple more dollars an hour, what if I gave you a loan?"

There it is. A giant red flag. When Lemon can't repay the loan, with what I'm assuming is a ridiculously high interest rate, David will own him. I don't even want to think of what they'll make him do.

Say no, Lemon. Be firm on asking for a raise instead. I want one of the other guys to fucking say this. We're connected by comms, damn it. But I can't say it because they're probably within hearing range. I may be stealthy when silent, but my voice carries.

"That would be amazing," Lemon says.

"That wasn't part of the deal," Trav says in our ear. Too fucking late. "Don't tie yourself to this man. Back out of it."

Suddenly, Lemon's stuttering gets even worse, and all he makes are ah, ee, ii sounds. The heavy breathing in our ears suggests he's freaking out, and I need to get back out there and save him.

Fuck this. I shove the money inside the safe but make sure it still looks like I counted every dollar, write some bullshit number on the clipboard—clearly, they don't take records seriously in this place, otherwise, Lemon wouldn't have been able to steal fifty grand a year for however long he's been doing this—and by some miracle, when I turn back to the laptop, the thumb drive flashes green.

I yank it out, put the laptop away, close the safe, and walk out before Lemon can have a real meltdown. They're sitting on one of the couches I've seen dancers napping on in between numbers.

Lemon stares up at me with pleading eyes.

"All done," I say. "Office is all yours."

David puts his hand on Lemon's thigh. Way too high for it to be considered only friendly. "Let's finish off this conversation in my office."

A chorus of “Don’t do that” and “What a creep” fills our ears. Even though they can’t see the hand on Lemon’s thigh, the undertone of his words is enough to tip everyone off.

“Don’t you need to get back out onstage?” I ask Lemon. “I thought I heard one of the other guys ask you to cover his number for him.”

Lemon breathes a sigh of relief. “Oh, right. I totally forgot. Thank you for reminding me. You should become my personal assistant instead of security.” He turns to David. “Can I think about the loan some more?”

David’s not happy, but I don’t care. If he so much as lays one finger on Lemon, this whole mission will be moot because he will be dead.

“Come to me anytime at all,” David says to Lemon, still eyeing me as he goes back into the office.

As soon as the door’s closed, I grab Lemon’s hand and pull him toward the bathroom to lock ourselves in that one tiny stall again.

The minute he’s in the safety of being behind a closed door, he falls into my arms and shakes.

His whole body shudders in long but quick pants. “That was way too intense.”

“We never should’ve asked you to do it.”

He glances up at me through glassy eyes.

“He offered,” Trav says in my ear.

I pull out my comms piece and point for Lemon to do the same.

“Breathe,” I say to him.

He hands over the earpiece with a shaky hand. “What is happening to me?” His breathing is stilted, and he’s about to cry, and I remember the first time I ever went on a real-life mission. I was trained and still went through hell afterward.

I pull him to me and wrap my arms around him. “It’s an adrenaline crash. It messes with your body. It’ll be over soon.”

As if giving him permission to let go, he sobs on my shoulder.

“I got you. Let it out. Your part is done. You don’t have to do any more.”

He sniffs and pulls away, wiping his nose with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. “Did it at least work? Please don’t tell me I’m going through all this emotion and crap for nothing.”

I pull out the drive. “Everything we need to know is on this file. Hopefully, this is the smoking gun we were looking for.”

“And if it shows nothing?”

I’m not actually sure he wants the answer to that or not, but it’s a reality we might have to face.

“Then it’s someone else, and we keep going until we find them. I won’t let you take the fall for it.”

Lemon glances down at his feet. “Technically, I did do it.”

That’s true, and maybe it’s my draw to him that’s making me defend his actions, or perhaps it’s that he’s stealing from people who already have so much wealth by exploiting those Lemon is trying to save, but either way, I will protect Lemon with my life if I have to.

Because even though strippers have a bad reputation and they’re always seen as below other people, the truth is, Lemon is a stripper with a heart of gold.

He deserves to be protected. Just like he’s protecting every other dancer in this place. If he’s not going to look out for himself, I’m going to have to do it for him.

Simple as that.

“Let’s get you home.” I hold him close.

“I still have to dance—”

“Tell them you’re sick. We’re leaving. End of story.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

LEMON

ATLAS'S FACE as he watches me dance is nothing short of comical. He's super cute when he's pouting. But as much as I love his caveman "I'm putting my foot down, and you're doing as I say" act, it turns out I win when it comes to being stubborn.

He can own me all he wants in the bedroom, but when it comes to my life, I'm always going to be the one in charge.

And he's not happy about it. Not in a red flag kind of way because as soon as I told him I was going back onstage no matter what and I don't do well with people trying to control me, he backed down immediately. Then looked guilty.

Now he's all sulky, and I have to say, it might be his best look on him yet.

I watch him while I do my routine with his arms folded and a ridiculously fat bottom lip, and I get through my entire number with a smile on my face, which is better than the adrenaline crash or whatever that was earlier. Atlas said it was an adrenaline crash. I thought it was a full mental breakdown.

I've never experienced anything so intense before, and now that my body has had time to adjust, time to process, it ... actually wants to feel that intensity again.

It makes no sense because, at the time, it was the worst. Now, it's like the high I get from being onstage isn't enough. I need higher risk. Bigger reward.

It simmers under my skin, driving me right offstage and onto the floor. People grapple for my attention, giving me tips and asking for a private dance, but after dismissing them with a "maybe later," I approach the one guy I want to take to the back room.

"Proved your point yet?" Atlas rumbles.

"Nope, but I will. Follow me." I want to take his hand and drag him after me, but I need to look like I'm actually bringing money in, not fucking

around with my ... Atlas while at work.

As soon as I get him into the room and we're completely alone, I shove him down on the armchair. He willfully goes because we both know I couldn't manhandle him if he didn't want me to.

Atlas isn't fixated on what bodily fluids might be leftover on the chair this time and sinks right into it. "You going to give me another lap dance?"

I straddle him but don't lower my weight onto his legs yet. Leaning forward, I support myself by holding on to the top of his chair. We're almost touching. Our legs, our bodies, our foreheads. Our breaths mingle. "Remember the rules back here?"

He nods.

"No touching me unless I give you permission."

"What did you have in mind?"

Wouldn't he like to know. "I love the idea of teasing the fuck out of you again, but I'm desperate for something else."

"What's—" He gasps when I move my hand and rub his hard cock over his suit pants.

"This," I whisper.

I have to force myself to back off him, though, and go to the raised platform in the room. There's a hidden compartment to the side where some of the dancers put their up-front pay so they can't get jumped when the client goes to leave, but I've never bothered with that. If they're going to steal their money back, they'll do it no matter where you put it. That, and the few who have tried haven't gotten past my bouncer anyway.

Regulars know not to even try.

I stash a towel and extra body oil in there because after every dance I do, I'm sweaty and then need to reapply the oil to get back out there.

I have to laugh at the oil I've got in this room, though.

"Should I be thinking about why you have lube in here?" Atlas asks, and I glance over at him.

This could be a moment to tease, to bring out that pouty side of him again, but I fear if I overdo that, it won't be fun anymore. So I go with the truth. "It's not lube. It's body oil. So I can be all shiny and glittery out there." I gesture toward the closed door.

"Should I be scared about what you plan to do with it?"

I grin. "Don't worry. There's only one part I'm particularly interested in covering in this oil." My eyes dart to his crotch.

“Condom?”

“You won’t need one.” I hold up the bottle. “External use only, which, I mean I’m assuming means you can’t drink it, but if college kids can get drunk by doing butt chugs, it probably means I shouldn’t put glittery oil up my ass.”

Atlas narrows his gaze at me.

“Trust me, Atlas. You’re going to love it.”

I drop the oil to the floor and sink to my knees in front of him, running my hands up his clothed thighs. Atlas widens his legs but keeps his stare trained on my face.

His hands grip the edge of the armrests, and I think having his hands so close to my head is testing all of his control.

I reach for his fly. “I’ve been dreaming of having my lips wrapped around your massive cock since the moment I saw it.”

“Then what do you need the oil for?”

I tsk him and shake my head. “Stop worrying about the damn oil and enjoy. There’re so many things I want to do with you.”

“At work?”

“You really are a choirboy when it comes to work ethic. Come on, join the dark side.” I pull out his cock and give it a gentle, slow stroke. “Take five minutes for yourself.”

Atlas throws his head back, and I know I’ve won. I give him a few more strokes before I lean forward and take him in my mouth.

Immediately, a moan falls from my lips, and precum leaks from his tip. He tastes even better than I imagined. The whole time he licked his release off my skin the other night, all I’ve wanted to do is see what his cum tastes like. One drop isn’t enough, but I’m also desperate to feel his cock. Around me. In me.

Even if it won’t be in my ass, that won’t stop it from feeling good when I sit on his lap and have his cock between my thighs while I writhe on top of him.

I want both things, and I want them both right this second. It’s no surprise I’m needy in the bedroom. Usually, I love it when things are all about me, but this ... well, it’s still about me because I want it. I want him. But more importantly, I want to bring Atlas the most intense pleasure he’s ever experienced because tonight must be the night for it.

He gave me a taste of what it’s like to be him, and now I’m going to

show him what it's like to have someone like me.

I can't wait any longer. Even though I want to lap at his cock until he comes down my throat, I want to feel him more. I want to be close to him. On the same level. Even if we can't face each other while we do it.

I pull away and stand, my dick valiantly poking up and out of my thong. Atlas lifts his hand to try to pull it down, but I step away from him and do it. Slowly.

Atlas sucks in a sharp breath, giving me a massive power trip, but as much as I want to hold on to that and tease him with it, I want him between my legs more.

I reach for the oil and pour it generously into my hands. I wipe some in between my thighs and then make his cock completely shiny and glittery next.

He's still completely dressed other than having his cock out, and I'm completely naked. It's one of those situations where it might look like he's the one in control, but he's really not. Just like I showed him that I'm actually the one in charge when I'm with a client, he has no power here.

And to be honest, the way his eyes are hooded and he's breathing heavily, I'm not sure he even wants any.

When he's slick and oiled up, I turn my back to him, putting my ass in his face. He moves in closer—I can feel his breath near my hole—but I don't let him get close enough.

I reach behind me and grip his hair, looking down at him over my shoulder. "Rules."

"Damn you," he grumbles.

When I finally lower myself to his lap and trap his cock between my thighs, I get that connection, that closeness I was wanting.

I start slow, rotating my hips, watching his cock slip in and out of my clenched thighs. Behind me, Atlas is silent but obedient, even if I can see his hand out of the corner of my eye, and it looks like he's forcing himself to keep hold of the chair.

The idea of driving him so crazy that he has to white-knuckle the armrest turns me on something fierce.

I'd be tempted to let him touch my cock if it didn't feel like he was winning. I want to keep going until he begs to be able to touch me.

"Please, Lemon. Can I ... Can ..."

"What do you want to do?"

He lifts his hips, sliding between my legs. His cock brushes against my balls.

“Yes,” I hiss. “Fuck, yes. Do that.”

When he does it again, it’s harder this time, and my ass contracts, seeking to be filled. I have to remind myself that as much as I’d love to say screw it and ask him to fuck me, internal burns from the wrong kind of oil really isn’t appealing. Neither is having to explain that one to a hospital.

Atlas quickly and easily loses rhythm, but not in the way I want. “I need leverage,” he says.

“Grip my hips. Only my hips.”

With that, he’s able to gain more speed. More control over his actions. And he’s able to make my skin break out in goose bumps and shivers run down my spine.

My cock aches. With every push between my legs, every brush against my balls, I only fall deeper and deeper into neediness.

“Oh God,” I moan.

“I can take care of your problem if you let me.” Atlas doesn’t slow down. If anything, he speeds up.

“Fine. Touch me. Please. Jerk me off until I make a huge mess.”

I don’t have to tell him twice. He’s still able to use my body as leverage, so when he wraps his fingers around my hard shaft, he keeps pace. Keeps giving me visions of what it would be like to actually be fucked by him, and I can’t wait to find out in person.

We need to make it happen.

As soon as possible.

“Lemon, I’m gonna ...” His breath hitches, his hips pause, but his hand keeps going.

And when the warm cum hits my thighs, I can’t tell if it’s his or mine.

I glance down. His. Definitely his. Because as I see him erupt, my skin painted with his cum, it triggers my own release.

It hits so hard I almost have to close my eyes and hold on to whatever I can while I ride it out, but I refuse to look away, our cum mixing, our bodies breathing in sync.

My chest rises and falls with his.

He hugs me from behind and lays his head in the middle of my back.

His lips pepper small kisses along my shoulder blades and up to the back of my neck. “That was amazing.”

When my legs are no longer Jell-O, I stand and grab some much-needed Kleenex in these back rooms.

“Fuuuck,” Atlas says. “My dick and my pants are all glittery now. Please tell me this oil easily comes off.”

I turn to him and try not to laugh while I hand him a Kleenex. “Oh, honey. Don’t you know the number one fundamental law when it comes to glitter? Once it’s there, it’s there forever.”

“I’m going to have a glittery dick for the rest of my life? The guys are going to think I fucked a unicorn.”

“Why would the guys see your dick?”

“The team often stays in close quarters on jobs, and how many times have you seen your coworkers’ dicks?”

“Yeah, but we take our clothes off for a living.”

“You’ll find Mike Bravo isn’t all that different. We just have more weaponry.”

I step closer to him. “Question. How does one go about joining Mike Bravo? Could you imagine me in my thong with a rocket launcher? I’d be hot AF.”

His big arms wrap around me, and his beefy hands squeeze my ass cheeks. “Yeah, you would be.” With him sitting, his eyeline is right at my softening cock. He stares at it for a brief moment, licks his lips, but then looks up at me. “But also, let’s make sure you never meet my teammate Iris.”

“Why? Now I want to meet him.”

“Of course you do.” He stands and puts himself away, staring down at his black pants and trying to assess how much glitter is there and how obvious it is. Luckily, it only has the occasional sparkle when the lights hit it.

Not going to be as bright as a glowstick under the club lights or anything. Oops.

“This is going to be fun to explain to the dry cleaner.”

I pull my thong back on. “You get your clothes dry-cleaned?”

“Easier than doing it myself.”

“Just how much money do you have?”

“I almost don’t want to tell you.”

Oh shit. Right. “Then don’t. I don’t think I actually want to know.”

“I won’t tell you exact numbers, but ... I could show you?”

I cock my head. “Show me how?”

Atlas steps forward, his hands going to my hips. “Don’t go to the safe

house tonight. Come home with me.”

“To your place?”

He nods.

My imagination runs wild. “Okay, yes.”

“Yes, we can leave now?”

“Hey, the only reason we stayed as long as we did is because you told me not to.”

“Why won’t you let me take care of you?” he complains.

“Because I don’t need it.” I walk toward the exit of the private room, but Atlas pulls on my hand.

“Everyone needs to be taken care of now and then. Let me be that for you.”

Fuck if my heart doesn’t explode everywhere.



Atlas, as it turns out, isn’t slightly well-off. His house in between Dodger Stadium and Silver Lake has to be worth at least two mil. Easy. I’m in awe as we drive up to the elevated, two-story, dark navy craftsman-style home.

“Okay, seriously. How does one join your club of muscled men? I want in.”

Atlas smiles. “We’re all ex-military, each providing a particular skill the team needs.”

“Your skill was bartending?” I snark.

“Stealth and hand-to-hand combat, actually.”

Damn. Figures.

“Okay, so all I have to do to join is enlist in the military and become some super fighting badass dude, and then I’m in.”

“It’s adorable you think I would let you anywhere near the military, active duty, or anything that puts you in harm’s way. That includes joining the chaos that is Mike Bravo.”

That’s good because the idea of serving in the military holds absolutely no appeal, but I pout anyway. “You don’t let me have any fun.”

“Says the person who literally had an adrenaline crash two hours ago from doing something high stakes.”

“Just because I was a nervous wreck after it doesn’t mean it wasn’t fun. What’s fun without a little mental breakdown?”

The driveway is steep, and as Atlas pulls the car around the back of the house ... or should I say houses—there’s another one back here.

“You’re a confusing kind of grown-up,” he says.

“Ah, that’s where you’re confused. I’m a grown-up in age only. Up here, I’m like Peter Pan.” I tap the side of my head. “Also, you have two houses? Two.”

“That’s a guesthouse.”

“I have a guest couch.”

Atlas doesn’t laugh like I expect him to. “Is the money thing an issue? It has been in the past, but I don’t give a shit about money.”

I snort. “That’s because you have it.”

“Touché. What I mean, though, is I know I’ve been lucky enough to get where I am. Thanks to Trav, I have more than I ever thought I could, but my money isn’t who I am. It’s just another piece of me that gets in the way sometimes.”

“How?”

“Some of my boyfriends in the past have been really superficial. Materialistic. The same way having casual hookups made me question my self-worth, I would sometimes get the feeling from boyfriends that they were only with me for my money.”

I lean toward him, crossing the center console with my upper body and bringing my mouth close to his. “Lucky I decided I want to be with you before I found out about the money, then, huh?”

His lips twitch. “Lucky or a tactical move on my part?”

“Either way, money won’t be an issue between us. Unless ...” I pull back again, and he slumps. He doesn’t get my lips until he answers me this: “Unless you don’t trust me not to steal it?”

When Atlas’s mouth forms a tight, thin line, my gut sinks. But he recovers with, “With me, you wouldn’t need to steal it. I trust that you’d come to me if you had a problem. If you asked for money to help someone like Callie, I wouldn’t hesitate.”

“Really?”

“I have all I need. I have a home, which I love, a classic car I have no intention of getting rid of ever—I’ll rebuild it, get a new engine, do anything I have to do to keep it running—and I’m settled. Everything else is just gravy, and using my position to help people in need is the kind of person I am.”

I'm learning that the kind of person he really is ... is too good to be true.
"What's the catch?"

"Catch?"

"You can't be this perfect. Nobody can."

It seems like I've hit a nerve because his jaw hardens like he's grinding his teeth. "How about we go inside and I'll show you around?"

"Is that deflection?"

He turns to me, his dark eyes shining with something that looks like regret. "I'm not perfect, Lemon. Nobody is. But every day, I get out of bed and try to be the best person I can be. Make up for past actions—what I had to do in my career as a navy SEAL. I've done bad things because I was ordered to, so when it comes down to the way I live my personal life, I try to control every decision, every move, and every consequence. The consequence of trusting you even if I shouldn't is simply monetary. The consequence of not giving you money when you say Callie needs it because I don't trust you could be the difference between his life and death. It's a no-brainer."

The way Atlas lives—his outlook, his entire demeanor ... it's amazingly sweet. He might not think he's perfect, but in my eyes, there can't be anyone else like him on the planet. There's no way. He's selfless, forgiving, kind, and if I'm honest, that's intimidating as hell.

Getting into something serious with him would be scary, but fuck if I'm not open to it.

"Okay. Show me your house."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ATLAS

WE ONLY MAKE it through half of the house before Lemon attacks me. In the laundry of all places. He's all mouth and tongue, his needy body grinding against me while he begs me to get him off.

We use our hands, and I swallow all his whimpers until we both unleash for the second time tonight.

It's been so long since I let someone into my life that I've forgotten what it's like to get regular orgasms from anything other than my hand, but I could get used to having Lemon around.

I just hope this isn't too much for him. The house, my money ... so far, he's taking it well. Really well. I can't be sure if it's me or my house that made him so horny he had to take me right there in the laundry room.

I meant every word when I said money isn't a big deal to me. And even though he stole money from the club he works at, that doesn't mean he'd steal from me. As long as he knows he can come to me with anything, he wouldn't have a reason to.

I'd buy him anything he wanted. I'd buy him the moon if it were possible.

I want him to let me in.

To trust me back.

He's pressed against my chest, breathing heavily. "I'm exhausted."

I'm leaning back against the washing machine I never use, and I'm just as exhausted as he is.

"Tonight's been a big night. Let's get you to bed. You can see the rest of the house tomorrow."

"There's more? I thought this was the end because it's the laundry room."

"There's still the guesthouse and the main bedroom."

"We still haven't seen the main bedroom? What was that fancy-ass room next to the entry?"

"Spare room?"

“How many rooms do you have? Did you buy this place to fill with kids or something?”

I hesitate to answer because it’s another assumption people get wrong about me. On the outside, I look tough. I look mean. But I just want to build a life where I get to love freely and be loved. Unconditionally.

“I’ve thought about it, for sure,” I say vaguely. “Don’t know if I could do it while I’m still working for Mike Bravo, and I’m trying to get a promotion at the moment, so who knows? Maybe it won’t happen, but the option’s there if I want it.”

Lemon averts his gaze. “You’d make an amazing dad. Me, on the other hand ...”

I wrap my arms around his waist. “This isn’t important to discuss right this second. You getting enough sleep is. Come on.” I try to move, but he grips on tighter.

“Can’t move. I’m dead on my feet.”

I smile against the top of his head. “You want me to carry you?”

He nods.

I’d call him lazy if I didn’t fucking love it. I grip him under his ass, and he jumps to wrap his legs around me.

I carry him like that down the hall to my bedroom, but other than a muttered “Jesus Christ, it’s bigger than my apartment,” he doesn’t comment further.

I lay him down gently on the bed, and he’s practically asleep by the time he crawls up to where his head hits the pillow.

The warm bed is so inviting, especially with a passed-out Lemon in it, but I still have work to do. After I swiped the flash drive, I managed to palm it off to Iris inside the bar, and now that they’ve had a few hours to crack the encryption, I want to see what was on there. No, not want to. *Need to*. Because I need David to be stealing so we can take the heat off Lemon.

I grab my laptop from beside my bed and carry it out to the living room so I don’t disturb Lemon sleeping.

I log in to Mike Bravo HQ, hoping Saint or Ghost has managed to crack the encryption, but what they have found so far is small. They’re probably all asleep, letting whatever program they’re using do its thing, but I’m impatient, so I hit Call on the phone number of the tech room. It’s not waking anyone up if they’re not in there.

“You get home all right?” Trav answers. That can only mean one thing.

We've got nothing, and even Trav is getting desperate.

"Uh ... uh, yeah, I did. You're up late."

"I'm as invested in finding answers as you are. Especially if you're involved with a mark."

"He's not a mark anymore," I point out.

"Right. He's one of our own now, which is why we need to protect him. I just hope the guy is worth it."

"So do I," I murmur, but something deep down, warming my chest, is the instinct, the hunch, that he is. "Have you got anything yet?"

"Saint's working on it. It looks like your boy was right about David having secret accounts stashed around the globe, but we're still having a hard time connecting them to missing money at the club."

"His electronic accounts were clean, which means he has to be moving the cash," I say.

"But he's hardly ever at the club, and you would've noticed if he was taking massive piles of cash from the safe when he was there."

True, which means ... "Okay, so the take needs to be happening in between emptying the safe and depositing the cash into the bank."

"Who deposits the cash?"

"A club manager and someone from the security team, but it changes duty each time, and I'm not in the inner circle of trust with the other bouncers, so I've never been asked to do the banking."

"Do you think it's interception?"

"It has to be an inside guy. If David doesn't touch the cash, it will be easier to play the denial card if Lyle found out. We also can't rule out it being someone other than David."

"Sounds like you have your next assignment, then. Finding out who does the bank runs, when, and if we can put someone on bank watch."

I'm pissed we still don't have an answer, but we're getting closer. Soon this will all be over, and then ...

I don't know what then.

Without me working at the club, it will be easier for Lemon to dismiss what we could have. He was against a relationship from the beginning, and while he's giving me what I want now—for us to give it a shot and be together and see where this takes us—he might be expecting or hoping for it not to work out.

He doesn't have confidence in something serious, but I need to show

him what serious looks like. What it could *feel* like.

So despite wanting to wait up and watch as fresh files are loaded into the system, I close my laptop, get off the couch, and join Lemon in bed, where I plan to hold him until the sun comes up.



The bed is cold when I wake. Empty.

“Lemon?”

“Out here,” he calls.

I slip out of bed and pull on a pair of sweats, only to walk out and find Lemon on my couch. Completely naked. “Not that I’m complaining, but is there a reason you didn’t wake me up for the strip show?”

He doesn’t take his eyes off the TV. “You’ve seen me strip a million times by now.”

“I have, but that doesn’t mean I’m tired of it.”

Lemon’s bright blue eyes turn to me, shining in the morning light. They fill with heat as soon as they land on my naked torso. “I’d rather watch you strip.”

“And fall on my face trying to do a sexy dance move when my big-ass body doesn’t cooperate with trying to be graceful? No, thank you. What are you watching?” I throw myself on the couch next to him, putting my arm along the backrest of the chair to stop myself from tempting to grope his naked skin everywhere I can.

Lemon’s dick seems up for another round, but all my worries from last night are still in the forefront of my mind, and I meant it when I said I don’t want this to be just about sex. I don’t want him to get his fill and walk away, so I want to show him what being with me for real, with no end in sight or even in our minds, could be like.

“I might have fallen into a Real Housewives I hadn’t seen, and I’ve been bingeing for hours.”

“Why didn’t you wake me up?”

He turns to me and presses my cheeks together with the palms of his hands. “Because you look so freaking cute when you’re sleeping.”

I try not to preen under the compliment, but I can tell by the way his hands heat that I’m going red. Like usual. I have no idea why I do that. It should be illegal, and my body should control itself, damn it.

Not because of toxic masculinity or any of that crap, but because it basically shouts my feelings from the rooftop. In this situation, I don't mind Lemon knowing how I adore his affections, but it makes it really awkward when I constantly do it around him and I'm trying to ease Lemon into this thing called dating.

Lemon releases my face, presses his lips to mine softly, and then snuggles into my side. "So have your guys found anything on David yet?"

"Can you go put some underwear on if you want to talk shop? It's too distracting with your cock, right there, begging for my attention."

"I know a way to make him go to sleep for a while if you're interested."

I groan because I'm definitely interested. "Maybe later. I have some questions I need to ask you about the club. It's not that I'm not dying to make you come again, but—"

Lemon bounces. "They did find something, didn't they? Is there a chance I won't end up tied to a cinder block and thrown in the ocean?"

"Should I be offended you seem more excited about that than jumping my bones?"

He throws his hands up in defeat. "I'm excited about both, but I can't exactly give you orgasms if I'm dead, can I? So can we hurry this along? Ask what you need to ask, and then we can get naked again."

"You're already *naked*."

"Fine, let's do some work so I can get *you* naked again."

"We think David has someone on the inside. Someone who does the bank runs."

"So it could be anyone on the security team," Lemon says.

"Exactly. Or one of the duty managers. Or both. Seeing as two people always go."

Lemon purses his lips. "You got a pen and paper I can use?"

I stand. "You can get dressed while I get them."

Lemon stands, too, and lets out a comically exaggerated sigh. "Fine. I will go put my lemon juicer away."

I close my eyes. "Please tell me that's not what you call your dick."

"I could, but I'd be lying. Think about it, though. If you squeeze it enough times, you might just make lemon juice. And you know what they say about making lemonade from lem—"

"I can't even with you."

"Thank you!" he calls after me while he heads for my bedroom.

His cock is finally away when I get back and hand over the pen and notepad.

“What are you thinking?” I ask.

“I’m thinking if I write down everything I know about our suspects—”

His words are drowned out by the serious implications of him handing over this type of information. I know he’s willing to help—I’ve asked him to help—but as I stare down the possibility of Lemon injecting himself into this even more, it becomes too real. Too serious. I need to let him know what he’s really getting into if he’s going to cross this line.

“They’re *my* suspects,” I say. “You might have been dragged into this by Trav, but you’re only helping us. Mike Bravo.”

“They’re *our* suspects. I’m already involved. I need to save my own ass here.”

“Even if it means throwing David under a bus? Possibly a literal one?”

Lemon shakes his head. “Do you know how hard it would be to orchestrate someone getting hit by a bus? Trust me, Lyle would have other plans for David.”

“My point is, I don’t have any stake when it comes to David. He’s been your boss for what, seven, eight years? All I’m saying is, help us, but when it comes to pulling the trigger, leave it to me.”

He stops writing down names and looks up at me where I stand over him. “Isn’t helping you pulling the proverbial trigger? Besides, I don’t even like David all that much. He’s never there, he treats us like possessions, and you saw how he suggested I pay for that loan he offered me.”

While Lemon makes a point, I don’t think he truly understands.

“Talking about hypothetically taking another life and actually doing it are two completely different things. Trust me when I say I know.”

He taps the pen on the side of the notepad. “So, you’ve ... You’re ex-military, so I guess it makes sense.”

And here’s the part that’s tricky. How much I tell him. I take the seat next to him on the couch and take the pen and paper from him, placing it on the coffee table.

“If we’re going to do this attempt at a real relationship thing, I need you to know everything about me. Maybe you’re not ready for this, but I’d rather know now if you can’t handle it. In my line of work, in Mike Bravo, I’m asked to do things that even the military couldn’t carry out.”

To his credit, Lemon doesn’t even look a little bit scared. “I really want

to make a joke about you being a serial killer here, but I'm under the impression this is a topic not to make fun of."

"It's not fun for me. That's the difference. I don't want to do it, and I feel guilt and remorse every single time, even in situations where it's kill or be killed. I *hate* it. But I've also gotten used to the aftermath. The self-loathing. The fear of being a monster. I try my best to live an honest life outside of my job to make up for the lives I've taken, but I wouldn't wish that kind of guilt on anyone. So before you help, before you get even more involved, I want you to think about what it would mean. If you don't want to help us, that's fine, because we will always find a way, but I do need you to realize the extent of what you're doing."

His voice is smaller than it's ever been when he starts talking again. "I'm kind of in that situation right now, aren't I? If we don't find who the person who's really stealing, it's my life on the line."

"Not if they don't find out that it's you. We won't tell them."

"But they'll keep looking. You guys were smart enough to put a camera inside the safe. What's to stop Lyle or David from doing the same?"

"I'm surprised they don't have constant surveillance on it."

"I'm assuming it has something to do with not having any hard evidence the cops could use if they're ever raided."

That's true. All of their cash coming and going is out of that room. With there being cameras on the floor for the safety of the dancers and other employees, it would be easy for them to see that the cash flow of the business is nowhere near the amount of money they put inside that safe.

Here you go, IRS. Here's all you need to put the owners away for a very long time.

"It's up to you. I've been at this job longer than projected, and we will appreciate any and all help you can give us, but now's the time to back out if you want to. Putting that pen to paper is crossing that line. This is your chance to say no."

Even though I need answers and to solve this case, I'm hoping with all hope that Lemon protects himself here.

He doesn't. "I'm in now. There's no turning back."

That's exactly what I was afraid of.

CHAPTER TWENTY

LEMON

ATLAS IS STILL the sweetest man I've ever met despite what he does for a living. But having the hard truth of his skill level in my face tells me the shit I've gotten myself in is deeper than I ever could've imagined. And there's no escaping it.

What I said to Atlas is true. If I don't help his team of dreamboats, if they don't find who's stealing more than I am, I'm going to take the fall for everyone. It's me or them.

The thought of quitting and running away has occurred to me, and I think it's what Atlas wants me to do, but if I do that without a good reason like Callie has, I'll only look guilty, and they'll come after me twice as hard.

I did what I had to do. I sold out each and every member of the management team and the security guys. I have no idea who's stealing the money, but I know each of their situations. I know Ben is getting a divorce. That's a lot of lawyer fees he needs to pay for. Jax is just a dick in general and likes making money off us dancers without having to lift a finger. He wouldn't turn his nose down at a chance to make extra cash.

There are a few others who it could be, a couple more who I'd say would never do something like that, but the truth is I can't rule out anyone. Even if I want to.

What Atlas said about being responsible for whatever happens to the culprit is on a constant loop in my head. I was fine with throwing David under the bus, and I can't say I'd feel much guilt if it was Ben or Jax, but any of the others? I've been here for eight years, and a lot of the other employees are like family to me. Not like the other dancers are, but we're still close. They look out for us. Most of them anyway.

I hope the information I gave Atlas is useful, and karma may bite me in the ass, but I hope it's one of the assholes who are helping David.

I can't say whether the guilt over ratting them out to Mike Bravo will hit me when the time comes, but since Atlas admitted what he does, what he has done, in his line of work, I've seen the pain behind his eyes. The hurt.

I want to fix him and make him whole again, but I don't know how. It's not like I can go and re-live every life he's ever taken. What I can do is show I support him. That I know he's had to do bad things for the greater good, and now, thinking about it, I realize we're a lot alike. Me and him.

I steal for those I love who need it. Atlas kills for the safety of everyone he's never met.

Okay, so maybe he's the bigger hero in this situation, but I understand him on an entirely new level.

And as we climb into his car to head for the club, I see him in a new light. I understand his hesitance in telling me and how he might feel about himself. Maybe I should be more scared than I am. Or disgusted. Or even shocked.

But I'm not. If anything, I'm more drawn to him.

I might need extensive therapy.

Or maybe it's that I can see past all of that.

"You okay?" he rumbles, and I flinch. Not on purpose, of course, but damn it, he looks hurt.

"Jumpy. I think I will be until your case is solved. Because every time I walk through the doors of that club, there's a risk of them finding out I stole from them."

"A-are you sure it's not ... me that's putting you on edge? After—"

I reach over and grip his massive thigh with my tiny hand, which only looks smaller next to his giant body. "It's not you."

He leans in and cups my face. "I will never let any of them hurt you."

I believe him, but it still doesn't take away the nerves. I give an unconvincing nod.

He pulls back and doesn't start the car. "Is it possible for you to quit?"

"You know the answer to that. It would look suspicious if I left, and I've already been taking more time off than any of the other guys. I'm already acting weird, according to Romeo, and I have to keep showing up, or I may as well walk in there wearing a sign saying 'I'm the one you're looking for.'"

"But you're not the one Lyle is looking for."

"I'm part of the problem."

"You could quit in a nonsuspicious way. Give them two weeks' notice. Tell them it's time to retire—"

I gasp. "You think my body is all saggy and worn-out already?"

"Stop deflecting with humor."

I bite my bottom lip. “Dancing is all I’ve ever done. It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do. Sure, I didn’t think it would be around a pole while practically naked, but I don’t know how to do anything else. And I can’t leave my guys. My dancers. They need me.”

Atlas finally starts the car. “I had a gut feeling that would be your answer.” He’s disappointed but doesn’t try to fight me on it.

Not going to lie, it makes me fall for him a little bit. Hell, I think I’m falling more and more every day. Bit by bit. Moment by moment. Everything he does convinces me that he can’t be real. That he’s too good to be true.

Yes, he has a darkness in him, but at this point, in our world climate, I think everyone does.

“I think we should do something tonight after work,” Atlas says out of nowhere.

“Is it have sex and then sleep? Because you know I’ve been waiting to have your dick.” Am I self-conscious that whenever we hook up, he hasn’t even tried to get in my ass? A little. But I’m sure he has his Atlas reasons.

He pats my knee. “You’ll get it. But not tonight.”

I’m almost petulant when I say, “When?”

His lips quirk. “When it happens. Are you not okay with what we’ve been doing?”

“More than okay, but you know, sometimes you just need a huge pounding.”

Now he laughs. “Noted. I’d rather save that for when I’m not preoccupied with a job to do. How am I supposed to make you fall for me if I’m distracted while fucking you? I need to give you all of my attention when that happens.”

I was right. His reasoning was the most Atlas thing to ever Atlas. “What was your plan for tonight, then?”

“To get you out of your head. You’re jumpy, you’re fidgety, and you’re not yourself. We need to find the essence you had when I first met you.”

“The essence that made you judge me, you mean?”

“Don’t let other people’s snap judgments define who you are. You’re an amazing, caring protector, and all I could see you for was someone who takes their clothes off for money. I’m the asshole in that scenario, not you.”

“You could never be an asshole. Not a true one.”

“Even after I laid everything out for you?” He’s so adamant that I’ll only see him as a killer, but I don’t. I don’t think I ever could.

“Especially then. And I want you to know that I’ve thought about it. A lot. It doesn’t change a thing for me. If anything, it makes me want you even more.”

Atlas frowns. “Really?”

“You might not be able to see that you’re full of light, but I can. Maybe you have dark corners, but your soul, the man you are deep down ... you’re pure sunshine.”

“If you say so,” he murmurs.

“Case in point. You’re taking me out tonight. I have no idea where, but I trust you.”

“Good. Because where I want to go is special to me.”



I manage to get through my three numbers, plus private dances, without getting so anxious I break down. But I suppose it’s easy when I have Atlas watching over me all night.

That, and looking forward to where he said he’d take me when I finish. Little do I know I’ve had no need to be excited. Because as I stand in the middle of who knows where and watch Atlas set up a small tent in the dead of night, I’m unimpressed.

“Camping? You brought me camping? I’m starting to think I gave you the wrong impression when I took you hiking. Do these clothes look like they belong in a tent?”

Atlas’s head pops out of the tent flap, shining that ridiculous yet somehow sexy headlamp in my face. “You’re wearing sweatpants.”

“These are Valentino,” I exclaim.

“Yeah, those words mean nothing to me.”

“They’re too expensive to be this far in the woods.”

“Do sweatpants have locator beacons that alarm if they’re too far out of a city?”

“Valentino ones do. They’re city sweatpants.”

“I know a solution for that.”

“Is it go home to civilization and a real bed?”

“Nope. You can always take them off and put them in the car. I won’t complain.”

I gasp. “Where someone might kidnap them?”

Atlas climbs out of his hole and gets to his feet. He walks over to me with way too much amusement. His long finger dips into the top of my waistband, and he pulls me against him. “What’s with your penchant for expensive sweatpants? They look like the same as mine from Old Navy.”

This time, my gasp is so hard I almost pass out. “Old. Nav ...” I gag and choke on air.

“So dramatic. How much do you spend on your precious sweatpants, anyway?”

I put my hands on my hips. “Are you implying I wouldn’t have to steal money if I didn’t do so much shopping? Because I’ll have you know, I shop outlet, online marketplaces, and thrift stores, thank you very much.”

Atlas looks more amused than before. “Actually, I was wondering how much your sweats were worth seeing as you won’t let me rip them off you. I could always replace them if the mood strikes.”

“If all of this was to get me naked, you could’ve just said so.” I drop trou and kick off my flip-flops and sweats, no longer caring where they land.

Sort of.

Okay, as soon as they hit the ground, I have to pick them up and place them gently in the tent, but the thought was there. Of not caring. And when I turn around again, Atlas is still smiling at me. He doesn’t ask for an explanation, but I give him one anyway.

“I never had nice things growing up, so even though my designer clothes are from outlet stores or secondhand, the label means something to me. That’s the real reason I’m obsessed with my clothes. Because I earned them, paid for them myself, and I want to look after them. It might be materialistic and shallow, but ...” I shrug. “They almost feel like an accomplishment? Something tangible. I like helping the dancers make better lives for themselves or get them out of trouble, but I can’t hold that in my hands. I can’t bottle it. So each time I do a good deed, I use my next pay from the club to buy myself something nice.”

Atlas doesn’t look so smug now. His hard features soften. “I promise to never hurt your sweatpants.”

“Thank you.” I step toward him. “But now that you’ve got me out of them, what are you going to do?”

Atlas pulls me close, wrapping his arms around my naked waist. “I’m going to lay you down in this tent, and I’m going to do something absolutely wild.”

“Mm. Keep talking.”

“I’m gonna cuddle the fuck out of you while we watch the night sky turn to dawn. Because I’m here to get you out of your head, not to distract you with sex. Sex is fleeting. Sex is a temporary high. I want to give you a memory. Because that will last forever.”

I don’t think I’ve heard anything so romantic. Ever.

Even if it’s in a campground. Which is outside. Where all the bugs live.

I’d endure the outdoors if it meant getting more of Atlas.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

FALLING ASLEEP UNDER THE STARS, with Lemon in my arms, talking to each other about stupid shit like constellations, star signs, and him getting excited that our two earth sign horoscopes are the most compatible, is just about the most bullshit-filled night I ever could've given him.

But hey, it worked. Because as the sun beats down on us from high in the sky, he's still asleep in my arms, and he hasn't flinched or stirred once.

Despite his protests against camping, it suits him. Guess the air mattress isn't a poor excuse for a bed after all.

My phone vibrates beside me, and I lift it to see a text from Trav.

I hate to wake Lemon up, but I know he'd want to hear this. I nudge him. "Lemon? It's Trav. He's ready to move Callie."

Lemon's eyes slowly crack open. "Now? It's the middle of the night. Like our night. You know what I mean. Why's the sun so bright?" He closes his eyes again.

"The roof flap is still open from when we were stargazing last night."

Lemon chuckles. "Roof flap."

"Why's that funny?"

"Sounds dirty. I'd like to open your roof flap."

"You're so tired you're delirious. Want me to video call Callie so you can say goodbye?"

He grunts and sits up. "No. Watching those I help move on to their new start is what I live for when this kind of thing happens. Like, it's my own version of watching them get their happily ever after, even if they come back months later or I never speak to them again. They have a new opportunity. A gift. It makes risking my life for them worth it, you know?"

I know exactly what he means, and it never ceases to amaze me how different Lemon and I are, yet we're the same in so many ways. "I get it." I sit up too. "Mike Bravo once took down a group of human traffickers, and seeing a lot of their victims reunited with their families made doing the horrible things to save them worth it."

Lemon looks into my eyes and whispers, “Exactly.”

I’m so tempted to pull him to me and never let go, but we need to get out of here if he wants to make it to see Callie off.

So I stand, pick up his neatly folded sweats, which are near the entry, and gently hand them over.

I can’t say I understand the value he puts into designer clothes—the value *anyone* sees in them, really—but they’re important to Lemon. Which means I’ll treat them with respect. Even if I do find it weird I’m starting to think of them as more than an inanimate object.

He smiles as he stands and pulls them on. “They thank you for being gentle with them.”

“Okay, I’m sorry. I have to draw the line at talking clothes.”

Lemon laughs, and it’s so light and carefree. I want to make him laugh like that all the time. I want to take all his worries about his future, his life, and the drama at the club away from him and fill him with the kind of joy he had when we met.

With Lemon’s help, packing down the camping equipment takes even longer than if I did it myself, but I don’t have the heart to tell him he’s more of a hindrance than help. Him wanting to help makes me happy, even if he’s a disaster.

“You’d think with how much pole experience you have, this wouldn’t be so difficult.” I smirk in his direction.

“Dancing around poles and pulling on them are completely different.”

“Oh, I thought you had plenty of experience pulling on poles too.”

Lemon cracks up laughing. “I like this side of you. Playful. Snarky.” His eyes meet mine. “Sexy.”

And now I need to move faster because we do not have time for the way he’s looking at me. “Get your sexy ass in the car before I do something that will hold you back from seeing your friend.”

“Oh, thank God. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but closest thing to camp I can pull off is my attitude and some of my stripping costumes.”

“I promise to never bring you out here again.”

“No. Don’t do that. I ... actually liked it out here. I just don’t know how to do”—he waves at the half-disassembled tent—“that.”

I approach him and kiss the top of his head. “Leave it to me.”

With him out of the way, I get everything in the car within minutes.

When I climb into the driver’s seat, Lemon’s scrolling through some

photos on his phone. Most of them are of him and Callie.

“Ready?” I ask.

“I guess so.” He puts his phone away. “I know I literally just told you that I love this part—that it makes the payoff worth it—but Callie and I were close before he moved in with Fuckface, and I kind of, maybe, okay, this is horrible, but I had a gut instinct he’d be coming back. This time ... it really does feel like goodbye. And that’s the part that sucks. I’m happy for him to be moving on and getting out of his situation, but—oh, shit. We need to stop by my place and get the money I was going to give him.”

“Don’t worry about that. It’s covered.”

“What do you mean, covered? Did one of your super-secret undercover badasses break into my place and take it? I’ll have you know I keep it somewhere they’ll never find.”

“Underneath the floorboards in your closet?”

Lemon’s eyes widen. “How did you ...”

“Please. Everyone thinks they’re so smart by hiding stuff there. My suggestion is hide it in the floorboards in the middle of a room with a piece of furniture on top of it. But also, no. No one broke in to steal your stuff. Trav’s paying for Callie’s new life.”

“What? Why?”

“Trav’s a good guy. Do you know why he started Mike Bravo in the first place? It was so he could recruit ex-military who were LGBTQIA because he had such a hard time as a gay ranger. He looks out for other people because he knows what it’s like to feel unsafe within his own team.”

Lemon sucks in his bottom lip. “That’s the military, though. Why would he help some random stripper he doesn’t know?”

“His philosophy doesn’t only extend to military. It extends to anyone who needs help. He has the means to help, so his motto is why shouldn’t he?”

He’s silent for a beat, but then he says, “I think I’ve been in my industry for so long that I forget genuine people exist.”

Even though I shouldn’t smile at that, I do. “Hey, we finally have something in common because doing what I do, all I deal with is corruption. Government, your bosses, and everyone in between.”

“Aww, when our children ask us how their daddies bonded, we’ll say, ‘We both dealt with really shitty people all the time.’ So romantic.”

“You’ve ... thought about us having kids?” Too soon, maybe, but I barely got Lemon to agree to trying something real with me, let alone think

about a real future together. The fact he is ...

“I mean, that was a joke, but isn’t that what relationships are all about? I’m new to this, so I don’t know what I can and cannot think or say about it.”

“You can think and say whatever you want, but for future reference, mentioning kids this early might scare anyone else off.”

“Not you?”

“Nope. I can’t say for certain whether children are in my future or not, but if you’re thinking about it, then that means you’re imagining a future with me. Whether it happens or not, it tells me you’re actually trying here, and that’s all I can ask.”

Lemon reaches over and puts his hand on my thigh. “You know, having this boyfriendly, datey person is actually better than I was expecting.”

I grin. “I’m trying really hard to take that as a compliment.”

“It is. I thought it would be suffocating and annoying, and you’re like, only half of those things.”

“You make me feel so wanted. Which am I? Suffocating or annoying?”

“Unfortunately, neither. Where are your faults, by the way?”

“You already saw them. My quick-to-judge attitude and my inability to say no to a pretty face.”

He playfully slaps my leg. “Now I’m the one who’s not sure if I’m being complimented or not.”

“Payback for the suffocating and annoying remarks.”

Finally, that Lemon spark is slowly coming back out, but when we pull into the safe house’s driveway, it disappears again.

“Okay. Brave face time,” he tells himself more than me.

“Need a hand putting that face on?” I lean across the center console, cup Lemon’s face, and press my lips to his. I let my tongue slowly open his mouth and distract him from this painful goodbye.

Goodbyes suck. In my line of work, especially back when I was on active duty, you never knew if goodbye was a see you later or the last time you’d ever see your loved ones. That might have even been easier than in this case. Lemon is saying goodbye to a friend knowing he’ll miss him and he’s not coming back.

I break the kiss. “Just remember, it’s better to think of Callie living his own life than ending up in a grave because of his fucked-up ex-boyfriend.”

“That helps, but so did this.” Lemon kisses me again, harder this time, and as much as we need to get out of the car and get this over with, I want to

stay here a bit longer. Just a second. Okay, a few seconds.

It's not until there's a tap on my window that we both flinch and break apart.

Ah, there's good ol' reliable Trav with his arms folded and typical scowl on his face. I'm sure he trained himself to look like that as much as he can because as far as intimidation tactics go, it's a good one.

"Uh-oh. Someone's in trouble," Lemon sings.

"Nah. He always looks like that." But when we climb out of the car, Trav's stoic face doesn't change.

And when he says, "We've got a problem," I realize it must be serious.

Trav turns to Lemon. "You can go inside and say goodbye while I talk to Atlas."

"If it has something to do with Callie or the club, don't I deserve to know?"

"No," Trav booms in all his authority, and for the first time since I've met Lemon, he doesn't fight.

Hell, I think his ass is on fire with how damn fast he runs into the house.

"What's the problem?" I ask.

One look from Trav, and I already don't want to know.

CHAPTER TWENTY - TWO

LEMON

I KNOCK on Callie's bedroom door. "If you think you were going to get away without saying goodbye, you have no idea how wrong you are."

He's standing by the dresser, his back to me, and I must surprise him because he jumps a mile high.

Right. Don't sneak up on a DV survivor. "Sorry, did I scare you?"

He turns slowly toward me and smiles. "All good. I was just ... you know, contemplating life."

"Why would you hurt your brain like that?"

His eyes hold sadness. "Because leaving everything behind sounds like a dream, but being on my own is possibly the scariest thing I could ever face."

"Scarier than being killed by some psycho with a vendetta because you left him?"

Callie goes to open his mouth but thinks better of it and nods. "You're right. I want to be free. You have no idea how much, but ..."

I can see the warring in his eyes. "You're making the right decision."

"Am I?"

I approach him and wrap my arms around him. He's bigger than me, more muscular, but he's got nothing on Atlas.

"I know it's scary, but I have faith you'll be okay. The world is your oyster and all that other inspirational crap."

"I ..." He pulls away, and his blue eyes are glassy. "I'm in too deep."

"In too deep with—"

"Ready to go?" Trav booms from the doorway.

Callie flinches again. "Yeah. Uh, yeah. Of course."

He gathers his stuff on the bed and leaves the room while I stare after him. Worried for him. Worried where his head is at.

Trav's still standing in the doorway, assessing me like the way I am Callie.

"I'm worried he's going to go back to him," I say.

That catches Trav's attention. "Why do you say that?"

“He’s questioning whether he’s making the right choice, but how can he not see? I know leaving is the most dangerous part of a domestic abuse situation and that a lot of people stay or return because they have no other means of getting out. No money, no support. We’re giving him all that. Why is he wanting to stay for *him*?” I can’t begin to understand the type of emotional toll a relationship like that would take on a person, and I’m sure I’m being somewhat ignorant about Callie’s situation, but I can’t help asking myself why. Why wouldn’t he choose a fresh start?

I look at our lives and realize it might not be as simple for him as it would be for me. I’m used to being on my own and not asking for help. If he leaves, he really is completely on his own. I’m independent, have never been in love, and never had a proper relationship. So yeah, maybe I shouldn’t judge Callie for his lack of good decision-making when I’ve never been in his position.

“We’ll make sure he stays safe,” Trav says.

I want to believe him, but unless they plan to babysit Callie forever, I don’t see how they can ensure that.

“I think Atlas is waiting for you by the car to head to the club for your shifts.”

“Already?”

“He said something about going back to his place to shower first.”

As much as a shower with Atlas will distract me momentarily from worrying about Callie, I don’t think I’ll be able to relax until I know Callie is out of here.

“Can you let Atlas know when you drop Callie off at ... whichever new city you’re taking him to?”

Trav’s smile is tight. “Sure.”

“Thanks.” I head outside, where Callie’s waiting by a car with Domino in the driver’s seat.

I run into Callie’s arms one more time and hold him close. “You’re going to do great things. I just know it. Maybe this was your *Pretty Woman* moment. Right here. Your next Richard Gere won’t be a dick, and the only hands he’ll lay on you will be gentle and soft ... and maybe a bit rough if you ask him nicely. But always with consent and out of love. Never hate.”

“You make everything sound so easy.”

I pull out of his arms to look into his eyes so he knows I’m serious when I say, “I have a secret for that. I’m faking it.”

Callie laughs before turning serious again. “Thank you for being there for me. I hate ...”

“Hate what?”

He shakes his thoughts free. “I hate that I won’t be able to be there for you when you need help.”

“Pfft.” I slap his shoulder. “I never need help. I’m *that* awesome. Maybe wherever you land, you can become awesome like me and help others in similar positions to yours.”

“I’ll start a charity in your name.”

“The Lemon Fund for Wayward Strippers! I love it.”

Atlas’s big hand lands on my shoulder. “We really should get going, or we won’t have time to shower camping off of us in time for work.”

“You went camping?” Callie asks, his eyes wide. “Okay, it’s official. I need to get out of this town before an asteroid hits and kills us all.” Callie’s joke, while funny, doesn’t hit with the right punch. Like he’s forcing it.

“I’ll miss you,” I say. “And I’m only ever a phone call away if you need me.”

“Though try not to,” Atlas says. “His ex could track your phone in hopes he one day calls you,” he clarifies.

“Oh. Right. I didn’t think of that. Though, how would they know it was his number?”

“They could track any area code outside the SoCal region. Hack into your phone and record calls. Technology is easy to get your hands on any information you need.” Atlas eyes Callie now. “Any at all.”

“It’s best if I don’t call,” Callie says.

Logically, I know that. It makes the most sense. But fuck if my heart isn’t breaking a little.

I just have to do what I’ve done with the others. Say goodbye and picture his best life.

“Okay, I suck at these things,” Callie says. “I’m gonna ...” He points his thumb in the direction of the car.

I watch the road long after the car disappears, imagining Callie finding someone who’ll take care of him and give him the world. Or maybe even taking what seed money he has, starting his own company, and becoming the next millionaire. I hope he finds the thing that makes him happy.

“Ready?” Atlas asks.

“I guess I’m going to have to be.”



For the whole drive to Atlas's home, he's been acting ... not like Atlas. Actually, he's been acting like the judgy jerk I met months ago. Actually, no, it's not that either. He's not judging me this time. His behavior is just ... off.

"What was the big problem Trav needed to talk to you about?"

"He was being dramatic," he says. He's stoic. Calm.

Serious.

"Was it about David?"

Atlas side-eyes me before turning his attention back to the road. Without answering me.

"What, you don't trust me now or something? What happened? What did I do?"

"It's not you."

"So it is about David."

Finally, I get a chuckle out of him. "You manipulative little shit."

"It's my finest quality, but tell me. Please. I thought we already agreed I'm in this just as much as you and Trav are. This has become my mission too."

He groans. "Lemon ..." Atlas winces. "This is a serious situation, and I've been ordered to make sure you and I carry on as usual. It will be easier to do that if you don't know any of the details."

"Did you get a break in the case? Some dirt on David?" Excitement builds in the pit of my stomach. Could I really be out of danger soon?

"We have a lead."

"A lead that's a problem because ..." I put my finger to my chin, rubbing it like an old-timey crime solver in thinking mode. Oh, who am I kidding—I am not good at this kind of thing. "Eh, I'll never figure it out. I'm just happy the heat might be off my ass soon. Then maybe you'll want to get inside it."

Atlas fully laughs now. "I love how you can go from scared about being killed to wanting to have sex in the blink of an eye."

"In my defense, if it was my last day on this earth, my only regret would be never having your monster cock inside me. My mouth loves it. I'm sure my ass would too."

A shiver runs through Atlas, and even from across the other side of the car, I can see the goose bumps prickling along his arms.

“I’m tempting you, aren’t I? Think we have time before we head for the club?”

“No,” he growls. “We definitely do not have time for that. We do have time to get handsy in the shower, though. Which I’m going to need because, fuck.” Atlas shifts and pushes down the bulge in the front of his pants.

“You know, if you’re not interested in doing that ... like, if you’re not into it, that’s okay too. I can stop asking. It’s not everybody’s thing, and I’m not going to make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

“What reason did I give for not hooking up with you in the beginning?”

“That if we did, you would own me.” Even recalling the deep rasp and the way it was so claimy sends a bolt of lust through me.

“Trust me when I say it’ll be tenfold once I’m inside you.”

“I’m counting on it.” I’m ready. I don’t know how or why or why now, but I am. I’ve already agreed to giving us a shot, and while it’s still early days, I think I’m acing this boyfriend thing. “So what are you waiting for?”

“I’m waiting until my mind can be on you. On your pleasure. And only those two things for a minimum of twenty-four hours.”

“You can go for twenty-four hours?” I fake cough. “Suddenly, I feel really, really sick and might have to call one of the other dancers to cover me at work.”

Atlas grins. “Nice try, but we have to be at the club. We need to act like nothing has changed. We don’t want anyone tipping anyone off.”

That seed of hope begins to grow. “You really have found something out. It’s someone else at the club.” All my suspects roll through my brain like a credits scene at the end of a movie, but I have no idea who it could be.

“We’ve found a possible someone, but the thing is, we don’t know if they’ve acted alone or there are others. We’re looking into it. We have to keep going, and hopefully, in a few days, we’ll have both earned a nice, long vacation.”

“Mm, a vacation where I’m dicked out for twenty-four hours straight.”

Atlas huffs. “Don’t get your hopes up. What I meant by needing a whole day was that I don’t want to rush it. I want to take my time. All night. Napping, feeding you snacks in between. Making sure you’re hydrated.”

“Hook me up to an IV of fluids and go to town on me. We’ll be good.”

Atlas laughs. “I have no idea how I got here or how I’ve ended up being so smitten with you when you are the very last person I ever thought I’d be in a relationship with.”

I don't let the hurt show on my face. Instead, I pretend to be offended. Because if you're joking, people can't really see how their words hurt. I touch my heart. "You make me feel so wanted."

I should've known Atlas would see right through my charade.

"That wasn't me judging you again. It was an observation, is all." Atlas pulls into his driveway, up the hill his property sits on, and stops the car around the back of the house. Then he leans in to get my attention. He has it. He always has it. "Everyone I work with jokes that I'm a true romantic. That I want the fairy tale and that I'm really picky with my partners. Or lack thereof. And while I don't see my one-man type of guy attitude as being a romantic, I did picture my future partner to be ... as the guys put it, a damsel-in-distress type. They'd joke that SEALs all have a savior complex, and while I'll never admit it aloud or to them, they might be right. And you ... you fit none of that. You're independent. Strong. Stubborn. You're everything I thought I would never go for, but here I am, wanting to be with you." He keeps moving closer, into my space now. His lips land on my cheek. "And I wouldn't change you for anything in the world. Because I admire every—" Another kiss, lower this time along my jaw. "—single." Kiss. "Part of you."

"Take me inside and show me how much."

"I'll race you into the shower." Atlas is out of the car in a second flat, and I'm still strapped in.

Stupid cockblocking seat belts.

I get out and race Atlas to the door. He's still working his keys when I catch up.

"From now on, I'm not going to wear a seat belt. They waste time."

"So do keys," he says as he tries to pull the right key free from the tangled mess on his key chain.

"That's it. No safety measures ever. Unlocked doors and no seat belts. I'm sure nothing will ever, ever go wrong."

Atlas finally gets the door open, and I quickly run past him and down the hall to his bedroom. I'm stripped off and in his shower in seconds. I turn the water on before stepping under the spray of the waterfall showerhead.

The bathroom is amazing, with dark tiled walls, an open shower with only a glass partition between the sink and the wall, and hanging plants above the claw-foot bathtub along the far side of the room.

Atlas waltzes in a couple of moments later like he doesn't have a care in

the world.

“I win,” I say.

He leans against the vanity, arms folded, still completely clothed. “Do you? Are you sure about that? Because from where I’m standing, I’ve got an amazing view. What do you have?”

That. Bastard. “You tricked me into getting my clothes off? How many times do I have to tell you I’ll do that for you for free.”

Atlas straightens and lifts his shirt over his wide shoulders. He’s huge. My gaze gets stuck on his amazing muscles, which is why I almost miss when he says, “I’m giving you time to prepare.”

“Prepare for what? You’ve already told me you won’t fuck me.”

His pants go next, and then I’m faced with his giant cock trying to escape his very tight light gray boxer briefs. There’s a small wet spot next to the outline of his mushroom tip, and knowing it’s me that’s making him that hard is such a turn-on, my dick responds in kind, leaking for him.

“Just because I won’t be inside your ass, that doesn’t mean I’m not going to drive you crazy in other ways. Make you beg for release. Send you to work sated and happy.”

I have to reach between my legs to give myself a stroke and release some pressure. “I’m waiting,” I taunt.

I finally get what I want. Atlas. Naked.

He stalks toward me, his dark eyes on mine that are so intense I don’t dare glance anywhere else, even though his taut muscles, narrow waist, and hard cock are incredibly tempting.

When he reaches me, his presence eclipses mine with how big he is. He doesn’t need to do anything or say anything, and I know I’m about to crumble under his every whim. Whatever he desires, he can have.

Just when I think he’s going to lean in to kiss me, his hands land on my ass, and he lifts me as if I weigh no more than a feather, turns us, and pushes me up against the wall.

My legs wrap around his waist, our chests press together, and where our hips meet, the sensation of his steel cock against mine has me begging for more, even though he technically hasn’t given me anything yet.

His strong gaze doesn’t leave mine, even as he reaches between our bodies and takes us both in his hand. He has to fix his stance, bending slightly so there’s enough room for his hand and for me to sink down on his legs so we line up, but from that first stroke, I’m hooked.

I'm an addict.

I'm addicted to his hands, his eyes, the way his hair remains standing tall even when it's wet. Just like the product that slowly breaks down the more water that runs through it, it's almost a perfect analogy for what Atlas does to me.

Little by little, I open up and let him in. Little by little, I melt into him.

Soon, there's going to be no resistance left.

Soon, he won't just own me in bed.

He'll own me wholly and completely.

I thought I'd be scared of that. Of permanence. Something serious.

But with Atlas? I want to keep falling.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ATLAS

THERE'S a reason we're not supposed to get involved with a mark. And that reason is right in front of me.

I'm supposed to act like everything is okay. Everything is normal. But it's not. It's so fucking not.

Instead of getting ready for a shift at the club and preparing Lemon for the possibilities of what's to come, I'm in the shower, staring deep into his soul and wondering how in the world someone so beautiful could ...

I shake my head. I can't go there. Not yet.

I need to take this moment for what it is. Possibly our last.

If not because of what Trav told me back at the safe house, then because this case is nearly over. Doubt over whether Lemon will want me after we're not working together is still at the front of my mind, and so are the secrets between us, but if Lemon will have me, I will still want him.

Not just because of the amazing way he looks in the heat of this moment—flushed skin, lips parted, blue eyes not straying from mine—but because of who he is on the inside. His kindness. His instinct to protect those who need it. And evidently ... those who don't need it. Or maybe want it.

And all I'll be able to do is be there to catch him when he crumbles. If he'll even want me.

I can no longer hold back. I lean in and kiss him like it might be our last time. I hold him like the support he needs. Now and later.

I held off any temptation when it came to him because I didn't want to enter anything without being completely honest, but I can't tell him the latest intel.

He has no idea what he's gotten himself into, but I'm going to be there to make sure he gets out.

I need to keep him safe.

Lemon started out as my target. And now everything I have, everything that I am, will go into protecting him.

My tongue tangles with his while I stroke us. I'm still going slow.

Admiring how he feels, his hot skin against mine, the cascade of water trickling over us from my amazing showerhead that cost way too much but was worth every penny.

He moans desperately into my mouth, and I swallow every sound, every whimper, every harsh breath.

Slowly, I pick up the pace, stroking faster and faster until I can no longer keep kissing him because I forget to breathe. But I stay close, my forehead on his.

The sweetest sound falls from his lips as he throws his head back. "Atlas. Fuck."

He squirms, his hips trying to take over, his desperation climbing. His body trembles, and I want to feel him fall apart in my arms.

I'm not delusional enough to think that giving him an orgasm will make him fall in love with me. Or forgive me for keeping a secret from him again, but I agreed with Trav when he told me to keep my mouth shut.

Until this whole thing is over, I can't tell Lemon the truth. The spitfire that he is will go after the people responsible, and no way am I putting him in that line of fire.

Lemon's too precious. Too fragile. And despite thinking he's a rottweiler, he's actually a Chihuahua. All aggression and tiny bites. He's breakable.

And I don't want to break him.

I'm getting close to the edge, wanting to experience the high together, so I move my head to the side, putting my lips near his ear. "I'm going to need you to come soon, baby."

"Noooo," he complains. "I don't want this to end."

Neither do I, but I think he's talking about the sex, not *us*.

"We'll come back for more." I kiss down his cheek and suck on his neck. "Over, and over, and over again."

"Promise?"

My lie feels thick on my tongue and sits heavy on my chest. "Always."

"Fuuuuck." Lemon shudders, and then every muscle in his body tenses. His legs grip me tighter, he grunts through gritted teeth, and my hand fills with cum.

I follow him the second I lift my head and see the look of sheer pleasure on his face. Flushed cheeks, blown pupils, his mouth hanging open with his plump lips swollen from kissing.

I hold him close and ride the orgasm wave, wanting it to last forever but knowing it won't. Because after we've come down, after we've had our fill, it's time to put my mask back on. The one that doesn't look worried for Lemon. The one that wants to take him and run, to keep him safe, but that's not going to be possible.

We can't tip the perpetrators off that we've been made aware they know about Lemon. The secret's out. They know what he has done and that he has helped us for Lyle. Because there's a big fucking mouth amongst us, and now the option is to face it or flee. And despite me begging Trav to let me take Lemon to his ranch to hide out until everything can be rectified, we're not ready for the big showdown yet.

We have the intel, and now we need to work out how to use it in an advantageous way. We need to strategize so everyone walks out of the situation alive.

After a close call a few months back where Trav underestimated who he was going up against, he doesn't want to take any risks.

If it weren't for David and Lyle rarely showing their faces at the club, I would've put my foot down and said Lemon's not going. To which I can already hear Lemon's complaints in my ear: *If I'm in danger, everyone at the club is in danger. We need to warn them.*

Then he'd run right into it, metaphorical guns blazing, and let everyone in the whole damn place know what's going on behind closed doors.

He's too trusting, and part of me knows we've only begun to scratch the surface of how many people are truly involved.

"I still think we should call in sick and stay in bed." Lemon's still clinging on to me.

And even though I would kill to make that happen, to have Lemon by my side until everything is over, my military background wins out. "I have to follow orders," I say.

"Okay, then I *order* you to take me to bed."

I'd laugh if he wasn't so goddamn tempting. "You're my partner. Not my boss."

Lemon unwraps his legs from around my waist. "Partner?"

I cock my head. "Boyfriend? Dating-type person? Whatever label you're comfortable with."

"I'd prefer boss, but I guess Trav has that covered."

"You'd be right about that."

“Fine. I suppose boyfriend will have to do.” He puts his finger to his lips and taps like he’s thinking. “Am I a good boyfriend so far?”

I lift my hand and wiggle it in a so-so gesture.

He gasps. “You’re such a liar. I’m the best boyfriend ever.”

“Why does it sound like when someone calls their pet the best dog ever.” I pat his head. “Who’s a good boy?”

“You’re ruining boyfriends for me!” Lemon folds his arms and looks so damn cute I almost get lost in the easiness of being with him.

“We need to rinse off and get dressed.”

“You rinse off. I need to wash my hair. It’s all greasy and gross.”

That works well because it’ll give me time to arm myself up to my ears.

For whatever’s coming, I’m going to be ready.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

LEMON

I'M SHOWERING. In my boyfriend's bathroom.

I'm washing my hair. In my boyfriend's shower.

I'm rinsing my boyfriend's cum off my stomach.

Boyfriend.

Nope. Still sounds weird.

I have a boyfriend, and you don't, so suck it, loser ... Okay, I would never say that to someone, but I don't think I'll ever get used to the word. I need to practice in my head before I do something stupid in public like call him my friendboy or, worse, say something cringey like "I've taken a lover."

Atlas is still kind of acting weird. While he was getting us off, he was so attentive, focused. It was as if he were touching me for the very last time. It was deeper than any other sexual experience I've had before ... on an emotional level, of course. Physically, he could be a lot deeper. So much deeper. Filling me all the way up deeper.

But as soon as he rinsed off and got out of the shower, he stared at me. Not in an ogling way like he has in the past, but in a ... concerned way? Maybe a bittersweet way? I don't fucking know.

All I know is his boss said we have a problem, and now we need to pretend like we don't. Which will be easy for me because I have no idea what the problem is.

I finish showering and wrap a towel around me, quickly drying off, but before putting my clothes back on, I want to find Atlas. Maybe coax him into a round two before we absolutely have to leave for the club if we want to be there on time for our shifts to start.

He's not in his bedroom, so I amble down the hall, looking in every room, but they're empty too. A light is on in the guesthouse, so I walk across his courtyard, not caring that I'm only wearing a towel. If his neighbors have a problem with public nudity even though I'm covered, that's their problem. And they better get used to it because Atlas and I are boyfriends now.

Boyfriends.

Definitely still weird.

Before I can enter the open doorway, though, Atlas's voice stops me.

"Contingencies are in place," he says. "I'm packing the car now while Lemon showers."

I peek around the corner to see Atlas pacing the guesthouse living room, with a duffle bag on the couch that looks like it's filled to the brim.

"Let me know if and when I need to get Lemon out safe." There's a pause for whatever the person on the other end is saying, and then, "Yeah, I know. Act normal. How's the Callie situation progressing?" Another pause. "So he did get on the bus?"

Bus? I thought they were getting him out of town. Not just shipping him off.

"That's good news, at least. I should go before Lemon realizes I'm gone. Keep me updated."

He ends the call, but when he turns, he sees me in the doorway.

"Too late. I noticed you were gone." I fold my arms to try to look intimidating, but who am I kidding? Next to Atlas, I probably look like a toddler throwing a tantrum.

"How much did you hear?"

"Hmm, I'm thinking you should tell me what that whole conversation was about instead so I can add context to everything that I heard."

Atlas's lips turn up at the edge. "Yeah, that's not how this works."

"Then how does it work?"

"What do you want context for? I'll answer that. Maybe."

"I heard you ask if Callie got on a bus. I thought your guys were taking him to wherever he was going? Like, out of state. Not on some random bus that Stephen could check for tickets in Callie's name."

"That was the plan, but Callie asked to take the bus instead."

"And you allowed him to? Do you know what he was saying to me before he left? That he thinks he might be making the wrong choice. That he was thinking it would be better if he stayed with Stephen. What if he—"

Atlas steps closer to me. "This is why we still had Domino tail him for a while because we suspected the same thing. But Lemon, even if he was going back to him, you can't help people who don't want to be helped."

"That's bullshit," I yell. "When you're faced with no other choice, some people don't get the *chance* to be helped."

"You're allowed to be upset," he says soothingly. "But the thing is, if

Callie chooses to go back to his ex when that chance to get out has been presented to him on a silver platter, he was always going to go back. This isn't a 'no other choice' situation because I agree with you—sometimes getting out *isn't* an option. But Callie had that option. That's all I'm saying. Besides, this is all moot because Callie got on that bus. He's on his way out of town as we speak."

I take a deep breath, coming back from the brink of panic because Atlas is right. Callie's on a bus. He's not going back to Stephen. It's okay.

"Are you ready to go to work?" Atlas asks.

"We have some embezzlers to fry."

Atlas smiles and boops me on the nose. "I have some embezzlers to fry. All you have to do is go up onstage and do what you do best."

"Take my clothes off?" Way to make me feel cheap.

Atlas leans in and whispers, "Steal everyone's goddamn attention with how amazing you are."

Swoon. "I do like attention. Do you think your op will be over with tonight?"

"It's hard to say."

"Because you don't know or because you're not allowed to?"

Atlas shoves me toward the main house. "You're so nosey."

"Can't help it."

"My team and I have it handled from here, okay?"

"I'm going to choose to believe that's because I've already helped you enough and not because you no longer trust me." Fishing? Maybe. But I can't help thinking he's not telling me everything, not so it would keep me safe, but so I can't foil their plans.

"It's not that I don't trust you," he says.

Meaning it's his team.

They can't really think I'm part of this, could they? Then again, what do they really have to go on? I steal money all the time to help others. It's possible they don't buy my Robin Hood act.

I want Atlas and his team to trust me, but to do that, I'm going to have to trust them. And their plan. Even if their exact plan is vague and being kept from me.

I see the logical reason why they're keeping me in the dark, but still ... the only reason they've made it this far in their investigation is because of me.

I'm still warring with the whole thing by the time we're ready to go. Atlas packs the full oversized duffle bag in his trunk, and we get underway.

Yet, the clawing sense of doom never leaves me. Something doesn't sit right in my gut. Whether it's because Atlas won't tell me what's really going on or being worried about Callie on the road, I'm not sure. Everything is just a little ... off. Atlas's behavior, the case, everything that's happening. It almost feels like I'm trying to do a math equation without all the elements, and fuck that. I didn't finish high school for a reason, and that reason is math.

"You're thinking really loudly over there," Atlas says.

"I'm thinking about math."

"Eww, why?"

"Because something doesn't add up, and it's annoying me."

Atlas's hand tightens on the wheel. It's subtle, but I notice. "Are you going to be able to handle this? Going to the club and pretending like you know nothing?"

"I do know nothing. That's what's driving me crazy."

"If you can't let it go, I can call Trav. I can get us set up in a safe house somewhere until this all blows over. You know, so long as no one else at the club is in on it, notices something off, tells David about it, and he doesn't put out a hit on your head because you're the one who helped us and Lyle take him down."

"Geez, well, when you put it like that ... I can pretend to know absolutely nothing. Not even my name." My voice goes all high-pitched. "Actually, why don't we do that? Let's change my name. I could change my favorite color and become Lime! Ooh, Tangerine."

"Or, you could maybe stay away from the citrus fruits and be plain ol' Andrew."

I purse my lips. "Nah. I can't pull off Andrew. Neither can you. Ooh, let's both change our names. My new name could be ... Assassin, and yours could be the new Lemon Juicer. Because of all the lemon juice you squeeze out of—"

Atlas barks out a laugh. "Please stop. But also Assassin? Really?"

"I'll kill you with my good looks and charm."

Atlas relents. "Actually, that checks out." He pulls into the parking lot of the strip club. "Okay, Assassin. Ready to pretend to be Lemon for a while longer?"

"Of course. Lemon Juicer can't be without his Lemon by his side now,

can he?”

Atlas leans over the center console and kisses me sweetly. “You’re lucky you’re cute. Let’s get to work.”



When I’m onstage, my nerves are at a zero. I focus on my core work, my pole tricks, and taking money from desperate men. But each time I come off that stage, Atlas is there. Crowding me. Always right behind me. He hasn’t done that before, yet we’re supposed to pretend like nothing’s going on. He’s doing a piss-poor job compared to me, and he’s the professional.

It’s making me more nervous than I need to be. Maybe I could ask Romeo if he’ll let me take his shift on stage and add in extra numbers tonight so I can be out there where I’m not worried about David or Lyle trying to kill me.

When a regular asks for a private dance, I’m actually thankful to get a break from Atlas’s overprotective gaze.

Am I thankful he’s here? Fuck yes, because without him, I probably would’ve been found out and killed already. But his intensity tonight is making me particularly paranoid.

I like Gary, the regular I’m about to dance for. He seems like a lonely old man who likes the company of dancers. He never tries to touch, never crosses the line. Just enjoys the show and then leaves.

I’ve never asked about his backstory, but with the way he plays with his wedding ring whenever he’s here, I can’t tell if it’s guilt or grief he feels whenever I dance for him. I choose to believe it’s the latter because he seems like a sweet guy, and I don’t see him paying strippers to turn him on if he had the option at home. But even if that was the case, it’s not my problem to deal with.

I’m here to do a job, and it’s a job I do well.

With Gary, I’m able to let loose and do my thing, and it’s almost enough to make me block out the money drama.

That is, until Atlas barges in and yanks me off my client. At first, I think it’s a weird eruption of jealousy, even though Atlas has never shown that toward me with any of the patrons at the club. But what he says next makes my blood run cold. “We need to get out of here. Now.”

Panic immediately claws at my throat. The grip Atlas has on me, the

urgency in his voice ... it scares the shit out of me.

My gaze ping-pongs between Gary and Atlas. "I-I'm so sorry, Gary. Here ..." I break free from Atlas's grip to fetch Gary's money and hand it back over to him. "This one is on the house. Sorry I have to cut it short."

He looks confused but takes the money and leaves without a word.

"What's happening?" I ask Atlas.

"The guys tailing David say he's heading this direction."

"And? He owns this place. He stops in from time to time. Rushing out is not normal behavior, which is what you told me the plan was."

"Trav said to get you out of here, so I'm doing it. End of story." He grabs my arm again and tries to drag me from the room, but I break free again.

"I haven't pushed you to tell me what's been happening, but now you need to. If we have to run out of here, what about the other dancers? Are they in danger? Why is David coming here such a big deal?" Oh fuck. "Did they figure out I was a diversion? They know everything, don't they? I'm dead. I'm a dead man."

Atlas closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, and it's as if I can see his thoughts as they flash through his head. He's trying to decide between lifting me over his shoulder and taking me out there kicking and screaming or telling me the truth. The whole hoisting me in the air and dragging me out of here sounds like a hot role-playing game we could do one day, but I need the truth this time. Because the way he's been behaving, the reluctance to share information suddenly ...

"Stop thinking that not telling me is protecting me. I need to know if my actions will affect everyone else here. Who do I need to protect?"

Atlas whirls on me. "That's the thing, Lemon. If it were up to you, you'd save everyone. Even those who don't deserve it, okay?"

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

"There were suspicions of a mole. They've just been confirmed. Now David is on his way here, and if you don't get your ass out of here, he's going to kill you and blame every missing cent on you. Do you understand?"

I'm frozen, mouth gaping, fear rushing through me.

Atlas steps into my space and lowers his voice to a softer tone this time. Calming. Soothing. "Do you understand?"

I nod wordlessly because I can't ... I can't do anything. Speak, move, cry ... I'm completely still.

“Let’s go.” Atlas takes my hand and pulls me along, my feet cooperating with his lead and not my brain’s.

I was hoping whatever information they found out today would get me out of danger, not put me in the middle of more.

When we hit the main floor, I barely notice the patrons being led outside. I mean, I see it; I just don’t comprehend it.

“Fuck,” Atlas mutters under his breath. We turn and head backstage, through the employee door, and down the corridor to the dressing room, where he directs me to my locker. He opens it and pulls out my sweats. “Put these on now.”

He moves toward the fire escape door that leads to a back alley.

“What are you doing?” I ask as he inspects something.

“Seeing if the alarm will go off if we leave out this way.”

“It will. Ask me how I know.”

“Are you dressed yet?”

“Can I change out of my heels?” I’m usually fine with going home in my boots, but I get the dreaded feeling I’m going to be running a lot tonight. I have a sixth sense when it comes to looming cardio.

“No. Let’s go.” He reaches up and detaches the alarm connected to the door.

I catch up to him just as he tries to shove open the door. It doesn’t budge.

He tries harder to the point his muscles bulge, and ... nothing.

I glance around at the empty dressing room, noticing the other dancers are missing. There’s usually always someone coming or going at this time of night.

“Okay, we’re going to have to leave via the employee entrance. Stay behind me, and if I tell you to run, run.”

See, cardio. I knew it.

Then Atlas bends over and pulls up the leg of his pants, taking out a gun from a holster around his ankle.

“What the fuck? Has that been there the whole time?”

“Just tonight. Let’s move.”

I follow him closely, still not entirely sure what’s happening, but I also trust that he wants to keep me safe. I have no doubt about that. So even if I think he might be overreacting—think, hope, same thing—I do as he says. As we reach the employee exit, though, and it’s another locked door that won’t

budge, that's when true reality sets in.

The emergency exit hasn't been opened in God knows how long. Being stuck would make sense. Two doors that are impossible to open? Can't be a coincidence.

Atlas taps his ear. "They've locked us in. They have to have someone on the inside."

"You've got your comms in?" I yell, way too loudly.

Act like everything is normal, my ass.

Behind us, the sounds of voices carry down the hallway.

Atlas quickly glances around before shoving me into the small bathroom. "Time to use the bathroom window again. There's no chance I'll be able to, but you've got a shot of getting out of here, and that's the main thing." His deep brown eyes, the panic they hold, the sorrow ...

My eyes begin to leak. "Atlas—"

He kisses me quickly. Chaste. Not even enough to let me gauge what he's thinking. "You get out. You get safe. That's all I care about."

But that's not all I care about.

I can't just leave him here.

He doesn't give me a choice. Atlas slams the door shut, and when I try to twist the handle, there's hard resistance. Like he's on the other side holding it so it's impossible for me to get out.

That's when I hear, "Ah. I think we found the nark."

I think it's Jax, the duty manager on tonight.

Is he the one involved?

"Nark? I ain't no nark."

"Where's Lemon?" Jax asks.

It's all muffled through the door, but it's as clear as day to me. It cuts through me like the bullets they want to put in my head.

So, it is Jax. Makes sense because he's never really given a shit about this place.

"Lemon? Was he even scheduled on tonight?" Atlas asks, playing dumb.

Kind of hard to do when—

"You're the one who's been shadowing him all night and for the last month."

Yeah. That.

Our tryst hasn't exactly gone unnoticed.

"I have no clue where he is now. I think he left not too long ago."

Or, I should have.

Fuck, I need to get out of here. I close the toilet lid as quietly as possible and climb up onto it.

Come on, Lemon. You've done this before, you can do it again.

I tune out the murmurings outside the door and focus because if I don't get out of here before they catch me, Atlas will probably do their job for them by killing me with disappointment.

I hike myself up and squeeze through the small gap, but I kick over the handwash, and it tumbles to the floor with a loud clanging.

Go, I tell myself. Go, go, go.

With all my strength, I push myself out and then remember to protect my face as I fall. I hit the ground with a loud thud, and I hope no one inside heard it. The music would usually cover it, but for the first time, I'm realizing there's no sound coming out of the bar.

And they were ushering patrons out.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I need to get Atlas out of there.

And Romeo.

The rest of my guys.

I climb to my feet and dust myself off with only one thing on my mind. I need to find Atlas's boss, Trav. Or Domino. Or maybe that God-like one.

A lone figure stands at the alleyway entrance, blocking my path, which means I'll need to exit the other side, but when I turn, I smack into someone. They're not large. Only a bit bigger than me.

But they're familiar.

The smell of beach and coconut fills my nostrils, but that can't be right. His hands grip my arms to keep me upright, and then I'm looking into the blue eyes of someone who shouldn't be here.

"Callie? No, you were gone. You were on your way out of town. Why did you come back?"

His eyes cast downward as he speaks in soft whispers. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

And that's when I notice David and Callie's asshole ex-boyfriend standing behind him.

What in the *RuPaul's Drag Race* is happening?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ATLAS

I DON'T WANT to move away from the bathroom door until I'm sure Lemon made it outside. If the loud thump followed by the weak "Ow" tells me anything, I think he made it.

I hope he made it. I won't be able to concentrate on the job if he's here. Instead of focusing on what I have to do, my focus would be solely on making sure Lemon's safe.

"Step aside," Jax orders for maybe the fifth time.

Between him and Ben, I could take both of them out right here and now, but the gun in Jax's hand makes me hesitate. I've been shot before. It's really not fun. And thanks to Trav and Domino being in my ear most of the night, I know they're close, along with Iris, Saint, and anyone else who is available.

So I give way for them to check the bathroom while hoping the loud thud really was outside and he's not on the tiled floor bleeding from hitting his head on the sink.

I let out a breath of relief when it's empty. "What's even happening?"

While I can pretend to know nothing about what's going on, I'm under no delusion that they'll buy it. Especially if they're in as deep as Callie.

Fucking Callie.

Trav's been in my ear all day, ever since Domino found a phone in Callie's room. A phone with one number and one number only on it. And our suspicions were confirmed when Callie got off that bus and into a car with his ex-boyfriend.

The same ex-boyfriend who is Stephen Dawn. Of Dawn of America banking. David's key to embezzling all the money he wants through the bank.

We fell for Callie's act hook, line, and sinker. Though, my gut tries to tell me it wasn't entirely an act. His pain looked real. Whether or not he gave his boyfriend permission to beat the shit out of him is the question.

And Callie was their pawn to find out how much Lyle knew. It's impossible to know what tipped them off in the beginning, only that they

grew suspicious enough to send Callie in undercover. Just like Lyle sent me in.

Now it's my job to find out how much Jax and Ben know while the rest of the guys pull Lemon to safety.

"We can't see Lemon," someone says in my ear.

How can they not? He's outside the window on the west side of the building.

"Did Atlas get his directions mixed up again?" Iris asks.

"No," I growl but in perfect timing for Ben to have asked, "Are you a cop?"

"Motherfucker," Trav now hisses over comms. "It was the *east* side of the building, and they've already got to him. David, Stephen, and Callie parked around the back and must've gotten Lemon on his way out the window."

Fucking shit fuck cock.

"From now on, we should get Atlas to give directions like he's five," Iris says.

There are two conversations happening at the same time, one in front of me—being accused of being a nark, a cop, DEA, and any other drug-related law enforcement agency—while my teammates continue to taunt me over my crap sense of direction.

Honestly, I don't even know why they trust me to give directions at all anymore. North is up, and then it's Never Eat Soggy Waffles in a circle. So how did I get it wrong?

"Maybe he'll do better with starboard and port, seeing as he's a navy man," Saint says.

"Okay, but which part of the building would be the bow of the ship?" Iris asks.

"The entrance. Duh," Saint replies.

So happy to have a couple talking random shit while my boyfriend is being dragged back inside after his chance of escaping.

"We doing this or what?" I say loudly to Jax and Ben. "Take me to wherever you've been told to take me."

Jax waves his gun toward the main floor of the club in a way that makes me, one, hope the gun isn't loaded, and two, think he has never shot a gun before. They flank me on either side as they lead me back through the small corridor backstage and out of the employee door.

They've rounded up every single person on shift today and put them at tables around the room. Every dancer, every bartender, every security guard.

So no matter what or who is deeply involved, this layout indicates there's only a select few who are really in on it.

I don't even think Jax and Ben know why they're rounding everyone up. They're following orders, just like I would if it was Trav who told me to do this.

Lemon is nowhere to be seen, but neither are David and Stephen either.

Ben shoves me down on a chair, and then he and Jax stand in front of the whole group. As I glance around the room, matching confused gazes land on each and every other person, including my own because I still need to play dumb, even though the second David comes in here, that charade will be all over.

But when he does eventually come out, my gut sinks because Callie and Stephen are with him, but Lemon isn't. He can't have disposed of Lemon so quickly and easily, right? Lemon would fight. He'd scream bloody murder and get everyone's attention.

David's dark eyes meet mine, completely soulless, and then his lips twitch ever so slightly. "Cuff that one." He points to me, but I have no idea who he's talking to. "We know he's in on it."

Callie's the one who moves, and I have to grit my teeth to stop from calling him a traitor and basically confirming what David's saying. Sure, they know for certain, but I might be able to pull others onside. I doubt it, but I'm not going to cut that off completely. Not yet.

Callie pulls out zip ties from his back pocket, and the whole time he's cuffing me, I can't help imagining snapping this bitch like a twig with my bare hands, and the temptation is strong, but I can't.

If I kill him, they'll kill me, and then I'll never make sure Lemon is safe. I trust my guys to get in here and do their thing. My patience game is strong, even if Lemon tests it.

Constantly.

"You're probably all wondering what's going on," David says, addressing everyone. "I'll tell you. There's a rat in our midst. The worst kind of rat too. The sneaky kind who leaves distractions in their wake, and it takes you that little bit too long to find."

He's literally not saying anything. They're all big words. I bet if I told them that David is stealing money from the club, they'll be more inclined to

care.

Or maybe they won't. As long as their ass is safe, they might not want to speak out against their boss. I know I wouldn't.

"I want this to be a learning experience for you all. I want you to see what we do to narks." His eyes meet mine once again, and what he says makes my blood run cold. "And the people who associate with them."

"Whoa, wait," one of the security guys says. I forget his name because we haven't been put on shifts together much. "What did Atlas do?"

Yeah, David, what did I do? I'm just going to bide my time and wait for David to dig his own grave. Hopefully.

Unfortunately, David is smarter than that. "That raid about a month ago where we lost our supplier and have been scrambling for a new shipment of merchandise? He took it down."

Guilty.

"I didn't know anything about that," I lie. Expertly.

I might hate lying, but I'm good at it. Especially in life-and-death situations. The trick to lying well is keeping everything inside you calm.

Yeah, I'm worried about Lemon. My heart lurches for him, and my inner caveman wants to destroy every single person in this room until I can get to him, but I don't let any of that show. I can't, or we're both as good as dead.

Trav and the others are all listening through my comms, and I want to give them the okay to do whatever's needed to take David down, but more than that, I want them to find Lemon while David's preoccupied.

"We're waiting for your signal," Trav says. "But we don't have eyes on you. You need to tell us where we need to be."

Because I'm cuffed and they can't see my hands behind my back, I subtly tap my fingers together. Not enough to make a sound in the room, but hopefully enough for the mic to pick up the tapping and amplify it. I tap out L-E-M-O-N N-O-T H-E-R-E. F-I-N-D L-E-M-O-N in Morse code on my wrist.

The sooner they can get him safe, the sooner I'll annihilate anyone I have to.

Part of me even hopes that David's the type of guy to do a slow torture. If he really wants to show the rest of his employees what will happen to them if they snitch, it's a good idea to drag it out with me.

"You didn't know anything about it?" David hums. "And we should

believe you, why?”

I shrug. “What’s not to believe? What makes you think I did have something to do with it? It could have been a fuckup on your supplier’s end. It could’ve been anyone else in this club.”

“Except you’re new.”

“So’s Roland, the other bartender who was hired not long after me.”

“Roland didn’t turn one of our best dancers against us,” David says.

“I didn’t do that either.” My nonchalant demeanor, my disrespectful *don’t give a shit* attitude, is getting to him.

He’s trying to hide it, but the tips of his ears turn bright pink, and I swear I can hear one of his molars crack from across the room.

“Yet, you know who I’m talking about,” David says.

“Diamante?”

“Dude,” Romeo says from a few tables over. “Now you’re pulling Diamante and Roland under the bus with you? What did they ever do to you?”

They weren’t on shift tonight. That’s what they did to me. Thank fuck they’re not here too. This way, they can’t be hurt if I put heat on them.

This is going to get solved tonight. By tomorrow, it will all be over, Lemon will be safe, and even if I’m not there to hold him, I will know that I gave my life for someone who deserves to live.

Lemon is goodness wrapped up in a pretty package. He’s perfect. Compassionate. Selfless.

He’s worth sacrificing for.

“He’s not throwing anyone under the bus,” David says. “Everyone with eyes has seen you and Lemon together. It’s no secret you’re a couple.”

I will not let my resolve crack even for a second. “Eh. We were fucking around, but he was no one special. Where is he anyway? If you’re so worried about me turning him against you, why isn’t he here in the hot seat with me?”

David’s single-word response leaves me cold. “Leverage.”

It’s good news that he’s alive, but for how long is another question.

“We found him,” Trav says in my ear, and that helps me regain composure. “We can’t get to him, though. He’s in the office where the safe is. Bound and gagged.”

Under any other circumstances, Lemon bound and gagged might have elicited excitement out of me. Not this time.

“He’s safe,” Trav reassures me. “We’re going to try to get this window

open, but it might not be possible without making a lot of noise.”

Come on, I chant in my head. *Get him safe*.

“If you’re going to kill me, just get it over with,” I say.

“Where’s the lesson in that?” David asks.

Bingo.

“Bring Atlas over here and in front of everyone to see,” David barks.

“He’s handcuffed to the chair, and I’m not gonna be able to lift him,” Callie says.

“Don’t talk back,” Stephen snaps at Callie, who flinches.

Still haven’t made my mind up about him yet. Is he an evil douchebag or still a victim? It could go either way.

Callie comes over to me again, head held low. “Stand up.”

I think he’s trying for commanding, but there’s nothing strong in his voice at all.

As much as I’d love to go full dead weight on him and have everyone watch as he tries to drag me over to David, I don’t want him to be punished any more than he already has been. Even if it’s fake and he does turn out to be an evil fuckface, I wouldn’t feel right doing it on the off chance he’s as trapped as we all are here.

So, I stand for him, and he helps carry the chair I’m attached to as we walk toward David.

I expect a James Bond–like villain speech to happen before David gets out the pliers and says something about losing my fingernails first. Until I talk.

If he really wants me to talk, he doesn’t have to threaten me to do it. “You know what I’ve really loved about working in this place?”

David shoves the back of my head. “No one cares.”

I ignore him. “I love the loyalty all of you have, but I could never work it out. Are you loyal to David or to Lyle? Or is it both?” I crane my neck to get a better view of David. “What would happen if, say, they had to choose between you or Lyle? How many do you think would follow you?”

“That’s not the issue here.”

“Isn’t it?” I cock my eyebrow.

“Someone fucking gag this asshole,” David orders.

“I thought you wanted answers? I have lots of them. Like, how money from the safe goes missing. Who Stephen works for. Oh, for all of you who don’t know Stephen, that’s him right there. Well, I can’t point, but the one

who Callie left the club for. Delightful guy—” Suddenly, Stephen’s tie is balled up inside my mouth.

I immediately spit it out. “Gonna have to do better than that.” I address everyone again. “Stephen here works at the bank where David and Lyle do all the business banking. You know, the laundered money from the drugs, the —”

This time, they tie it around my head.

It’s cute they think that will stop me. I keep talking, completely muffled now, though. “Heb been bealing momey fom ba cub.” I don’t think they understand me.

There are chuckles in my ear, though.

“Maybe we should change Atlas’s name to Diversionator,” Iris says.

Seeing as no one can understand me in here, I’m hoping my muffled words at least get through to them. “Emon oup yep?”

Saint’s voice cuts in. “Was that *is Lemon out yet?*”

Good boy.

“We’re working on it,” Trav says.

Not good enough, I want to yell but can’t.

“What’s Atlas talking about?” Jax asks, only cementing my thoughts on him all along. He has no idea what David’s been up to or why he had to gather us all in this room.

In fact, the more I glance around at every confused face, every concerned pair of eyes, the more I’m coming to the conclusion that no one here knew.

“Fuck,” Trav hisses again.

I love that man, I respect him, but he has a fucking tell, and the worst thing you want to hear him say is the F-bomb in that tone.

“Lyle’s here,” he adds. “With guys.”

Ooh, let’s add that drama to the already lit fuse in here.

“This could either work in our favor or against us,” Trav says. “He wanted an update, but I’ve been dodging his calls ever since I told him we have a lead that it’s David but are waiting to confirm.”

“Then what’s he doing here?” Iris asks.

“If I had to guess, he’s decided David’s to blame either way and has decided to take matters into his own hands.”

Trav’s right. This is either going to help or hinder, but I’m leaning toward help. If they’re too busy trying to kill each other, Lemon, myself, and

every other innocent person here might have a chance of getting out of here unscathed.

“Wait,” Trav says. “He’s not going in the club.”

What is he doing? You can’t say that to someone who can’t see what you’re talking about, damn it.

“He’s ... Oh fuck.”

“Oh fuck,” Iris echoes.

“Fuuu whaaa?” I scream.

At this point, I don’t care if they know I’m talking to people outside. David and Stephen look at me weird, but they’re cut off by the loudest sound of ... is that chains?

I turn to try to glance out the entrance but know it’s no use. There’s a turn and a corridor leading to the stretch of road outside. It’s not like they want a front door showing off everything going on in here.

“What’s happening?” David asks.

I feel the cold metal of a gun barrel against the base of my skull. I purposefully make my answer a jumbled mess of nothing.

“What?”

I repeat the same amount of syllables as if I’m saying something, but I’m not.

“Atlas, playtime is over,” Iris says. And you know when that fucker says it’s over, it really is over.

“Lyle has his guys chaining all the exits,” Trav says. “You need to get out of there, and you need to get out now.”

What about everyone else? What about Lemon?

“As soon as Lyle does whatever he’s planning—”

“Gas can,” Iris calls out.

He’s torching the place.

“As soon as Lyle lights the fire, we’ll get Lemon out.” Then Trav says to someone else. “Bolt cutters. We need ’em.”

“From where?” Saint asks.

“My car. In the alley. Trunk.” Back to me. “Atlas, you focus on getting free. Think you can do it?”

Of course I can fucking do it.

And there’s no better time than the present. Enough screwing around.

With a gun still to my head, I do the only thing I can do. I duck to my left, away from David standing behind me, get to my feet, and spin, knocking

David over with the force of a chair to the gut.

David lifts his gun, but I pin his arm to the floor with the chair leg. He cries out in pain and drops the gun, but it's not the only one I have to be worried about.

My next target is Jax because I know for sure he has a gun on him too, but when I find him, he's staring wide-eyed, hands up in the air.

Wow, these guys really didn't come prepared, did they?

As I glance down at the handgun on the ground, I realize it's the same make as the one Jax had before.

One gun.

A whole bunch of guys who think they can fight.

Even with my hands tied behind my back, connected to a chair, I could take any and all of them. And hell, it's a lot quicker than I thought it would be. I run at Ben, and with one kick to the middle of his chest, he's down.

Jax now runs for the gun next to David, but I whip the chair over my head, putting my double-jointed arms to good use, so the chair is in front of me and facing out. Do I think it will stop a bullet? No. But it will slow them down. Works as a great weapon, too, when Jax is too busy trying to take the safety off the gun.

I swing my arms, hitting him across the face with the chair, the satisfying crunch of bone bringing a smile to my face.

The smell of smoke fills the air. Lyle must have set the place on fire already, and it's not going to take long for this place to go up in flames. That glitter oil took forever to get off my dick; I can only imagine how flammable that shit is.

David tries to get back up, holding his dominant arm, but I don't let him. I put the legs of my seat over his chest and head, caging him in, the gun out of reach.

"Nuh-uh." I'm still fucking gagged. "Can homone ge hiff fing off me?"

Callie moves fast and undoes the tie.

It's then I notice Stephen is ... gone? Did he escape somewhere that's not blocked off? Does that mean there's an exit? Without the watchful eye of Stephen, Callie confirms what I'd hoped was the case.

He's a victim.

A survivor.

We share a look of mutual respect, but it's cut off by David squirming beneath my seat.

“You smell that? That’s Lyle coming to take out his revenge on you. We told him what you did, and evidently, the rest of your employees are your collateral damage. Retribution day is here, my friend. How are you going to get out of it?”

A deep rumble of a voice appears behind me. “I think the better question is how are you going to save your precious boyfriend?”

I turn. Stephen’s there, holding a bound and gagged Lemon. Ah. There’s another gun. I was beginning to think these drug dealers and embezzlers didn’t know how to arm themselves properly.

No one moves.

The smell of smoke becomes overpowering, the area becoming harder and harder to see.

“We don’t have long until we all die in here,” I say. “You let Lemon go, I’ll let your cash cow go, and we can all walk away. Sort of. Every man for himself trying to get out of here, am I right?”

Trav sounds impatient when he says, “You really don’t have time for this.”

Thanks for stating the obvious, boss.

“We all need to get out of here before we become barbecue.”

“David, let’s go,” Stephen says.

“Let go of Lemon first,” I counter when David tries to get up again. He wriggles, trying to work his way out from the narrow leg chairs holding him in place, but all I have to do is put my foot down on his arm to get him to stop.

My big foot can be heavy when I want it to be.

Stephen turns to Callie. “You take him.” He shoves Lemon toward him, and Callie reaches out to take hold of Lemon, but Lemon pulls out of his grip and glares at his friend.

Ex-friend by the death glare Lemon’s giving.

“Let him go,” Stephen says.

I do as he says, and David stumbles over to Stephen.

Just when I think they’re going to turn and leave to try to find a way out of this furnace, David reaches for Stephen’s gun. I move quickly, dropping to the floor and trying to worm my way to the gun where I can get my hands around it.

It’s only a quick second until I reach it, but it’s enough time for David to get a shot off. Despite having the seat of the chair protecting me, I’m right. It

doesn't stop the bullet. Even though my side burns like a thousand suns, I can tell it's not serious. A graze at best. A painful one.

I do not miss the burning sensation of having a bullet rip through my skin.

Maneuvering with this chair is getting old, but it must shield me from David's view because instead of continuing to shoot at me, he and Stephen run toward the employees-only area. The closed employee area. With smoke billowing through the hinges. Smoke means fire. Fire needs oxygen to grow.

They're not really going to—yup.

Stephen opens the door, and the whole building shakes with the explosion of fire.

Good news is the bad guys blew themselves up.

Bad news is, they just sped up everyone else's deaths.

And then the last thing I want to hear tears through my comms. "Trav, I can't find your bolt cutters."

We're all fucked.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

LEMON

THE FIRE FEELS like it's in my throat. Flames lick at the walls. Everyone is running around like chickens with their heads cut off, trying to open the front door, smashing windows that are so high up there's no way they'd be able to climb up to them to escape anyway.

Callie's betrayal stings, and I still don't understand it, but I don't really care about that. What I do care about is Atlas, lying on the floor, struggling to move.

A hand lands on my shoulder.

Callie.

I want to tell him to fuck off, but I have no voice.

I'm consumed with worry, so when Callie rips the duct tape from my mouth and takes out a knife to free my wrists, I'm too busy rushing over to Atlas to analyze why he'd do that. I'm not so out of it that I don't think to grab his knife off him.

I free Atlas amongst the chaos between coughing and freaking out about being burned alive.

"We need to get out of here," I say.

He's already on the ball.

Panic seeps into my bones. My muscles. I'm practically frozen in fear, which is why Atlas has to grip me tight and pull me with him.

"Where are you?" he yells.

It's hard to hear him between the screaming over everyone else, the frantic rush.

"I can't hear you," he yells again.

"Do we go out the way David and Stephen tried to?"

"For it to have built up that much to explode like that, I'm fairly sure that part of the building is toast."

Like we will be if we can't get out of here.

Fire moves like it has a mind of its own, the ceiling right above us catching now.

“This way,” Atlas says, following everyone else down the corridor to the front entrance, where the guys are pushing and pulling against the chains that keep the door secure.

There’s nowhere else for us to go, and the walls are closing in.

Atlas turns to me and then unzips my hoodie.

“I don’t think getting naked and having sex should be your priority,” I try to joke.

He doesn’t laugh. He quickly strips me out of it, turns it around, and shoves my arms in the other way. He reaches around me and does the zip up my back. It kinda feels like a straitjacket, but then I understand. He lifts the hood and puts it over my nose and mouth to breathe through. It’s smart, but I don’t know how helpful it will be.

He smiles but then turns his head and yells, “Trav. Everyone’s at the front door. You need to get us out of here now.”

I can’t hear what they say, but when Atlas repeats himself, I realize they didn’t reply at all.

“Where are they?” I ask Atlas.

“I don’t know. I’m hoping comms is just fucked and they can’t hear me.” He raises his voice. “Everyone get close to the floor. Smoke rises, so the cleanest air is down there.”

The smoke is thick, only getting thicker. The heat is almost unbearable. My skin is on fire, and breathing is more difficult even through the cloth.

Sobs fill the small hallway as everyone starts to sink to the floor to get as low as possible.

The frantic rush to get out is gone and is replaced with a kind of somber defeat.

This is it.

This is how I die.

How we all fucking die.

Atlas pulls down the hood from around my face. With ever-lasting devastation, he touches his lips to mine, and I know it will be for the last time.

All I can think is at least I won’t die alone.

Atlas holds me close, his big arms wrapped around me, and I find peace.

The crackle of the fire eating into the infrastructure, a loud banging from God knows what—pillars collapsing, the frame bending, I’m not sure—all of the sounds slowly drown away as I fall asleep.

My entire body is heavy. Fatigued.
It's so easy to let go.
Darkness overcomes me.



I can still feel the fire licking at my skin, the smell of burning flesh surrounding me, but I can no longer smell the smoke.

The fire is burning so bright the light radiating off it is practically white.
It hurts to swallow.

It hurts to move.

And when I try to whine about it, a deep rasp comes from my throat.

“Hey,” a soothing voice says. It's also deep, but it's smoother. Definitely doesn't sound like they've swallowed a parking lot's worth of gravel. “You're okay.”

For a moment, I believe the voice, but I don't know how it can be so sure. I don't feel okay. I'm far from okay.

“Atlas, I think he's waking up,” the smooth voice says.

“Atlas,” I croak. He's here with me.

Slowly, I'm able to open my eyes.

I'm expecting to see red flames, dark smoke, but when I realize I can breathe and that the ceiling is paneled, lights so bright beaming down on me, and I have on an oxygen mask, I can finally believe what the voice was saying. I'm alive.

Still hurts to even move, though.

Atlas's hard features and soft lips appear above me, his brow furrowed as he assesses me. Assesses whether I'm all right.

“Is this heaven?” I ask.

Atlas's smile is certainly to die for.

“It's cute you think you'd go to heaven,” that smooth voice says again, but it's not Atlas.

I turn my head to find Diamante in the visitor's chair of my hospital room, tapping away on his phone like he doesn't have a care in the world.

“Where ... what ...”

“Shh,” Atlas says. The side of the bed dips with his heavy weight. “You're in the hospital. There was a fire—”

“At the club.” The oxygen mask fogs up with my every word, so I pull it

down off my face. “David?”

Atlas shakes his head.

“That Stephen asshole?”

“Evidently, they don’t know how fire works. Which is a shame because I wouldn’t have minded killing them myself. Though having it be their stupidity is kind of like karmic justice.”

I almost don’t want to ask this next thing because I’m scared of the answer. I don’t want it to be either option, if I’m honest. “Callie?”

Atlas’s lips form into a flat line.

“Even if he made it out of there,” Diamante cuts in, “he’s dead to us.”

“Did he make it out?”

“He’s the only one not accounted for,” Atlas says. “Well, him and Lyle, but Lyle wasn’t inside.”

I close my eyes as my brain slowly tries to process what he’s saying. “But Lyle is still unaccounted for?”

Atlas leans in and lowers his voice. “Police say he’s on the run, but between you and me, he’s not coming back.”

“Because he’s dead?”

Atlas sighs. “So great to keep that between us. The reason why it took my guys so long to get us out of there was because they couldn’t find the bolt cutters to set us free, and the other half of the team went after Lyle and his men.” He turns the small TV above my bed on and flicks to the news.

There, in grainy footage, is a gunfight.

“This has been playing nonstop. They’re reporting it as an organized crime war, which is good because it takes the heat off us. Trav’s a decent man. He’s a fair man. But if you go after one of his own, you better be good at hiding because he will hunt you down. Of course, I never said that, it didn’t actually happen with Lyle, and Lyle is on the run after torching his own business and getting into a gunfight with his own men.”

Diamante snorts. “Of course.”

“How is everyone else?” I ask. “Romeo?”

“Getting discharged tomorrow,” Atlas says.

“The security team?”

“Worst was some burns to their hands and smoke inhalation. Which is why you’re still in here. It’s also why you should keep this on your face.” He replaces the mask.

My next sentence comes out muffled. “Why didn’t you get bad smoke

inhalation?”

“Have you seen the size of his chest?” Diamante asks. “He has lungs the size of an elephant.”

“Also, you keep forgetting I used to be a SEAL. I’m used to holding my breath for long periods of time. It was part of my training.” Atlas kisses the top of my head. “Rest. I’ll get to take you home soon enough.”

“I still don’t know what happened,” I say. “How was Callie involved? How was it all connected?”

Atlas takes my hand and squeezes. “You said it yourself that Stephen was a friend of David’s. Isn’t that how he and Callie met in the first place—he would come to the club? Turns out Stephen is heir to the Dawn of America banks. Don’t ask me why he was cooking the books and the numbers and the banking for David. It’s not like he needed the money when he was in line to inherit literally billions, but he was the one who was stealing the money for David. When the banking was done, duty managers and security staff were instructed to only go to Stephen instead of a regular teller. Stephen would give them the receipts for the two equal accounts but put aside a huge chunk and wire it into David’s offshore account.”

“That still doesn’t explain why Callie did what he did.”

“The only person who can answer that is Callie, and we don’t know if he perished in that fire or ran once he got outside. But you know how when we went to say goodbye to him, Trav said we had a problem?”

I nod.

“They’d found a cell phone in Callie’s room. He’d been in contact with Stephen the whole time, and while we wanted to believe it was because he couldn’t escape the hold Stephen had on him, we knew there was a possibility that Stephen had sent him to spy on the club. To make sure no one was on to him and David.”

My head hurts. “So, you’re saying you think from the moment Callie called with the black eye, to me promising to look after him, housing him ... I was being played?” That cuts fucking deep.

Diamante stands and appears above me now. “Like I said before. If he did survive the fire, it doesn’t matter. He’s dead to us.”

“To all of us.” Romeo stands in my open doorway, wearing only a hospital gown. “I’m thinking of adding this into my routine. What do you think?” He turns and shakes his bare ass.

“I think not even a fire can slow you down.”

Atlas's lips touch the top of my forehead. "The same could be said about you."

Without taking my gaze off him, I say to my friends, "You might want to give us some privacy for this."

"I'd rather stay and watch," Diamante says.

"Let's go." At least Romeo's on my side.

As soon as they leave, I take the damn oxygen off again.

"Lemon," Atlas warns.

"I need you to kiss me."

"When your lungs are better."

I grip his shirt and pull him closer. "I need you to kiss me. Now."

"You really think demanding things will work?"

"Yep."

He relents. "I hate what you do to me."

I don't. "What do I do to you?"

"I'm so gone for you I know I'd do anything you asked." He brings his lips down on mine, soft but with the stubble around his mouth rough and firm.

I take him in, caress his tongue with mine, and savor the feeling of having him here with me.

We made it.

It's over.

Both David and Lyle are gone.

I want to keep kissing Atlas in celebration until I'm breathless. Which, okay, fine, is sooner than should be expected.

I pull away, wheezing.

"And that's why I hate what you do to me. Because even though I want what's best for you, you tempt me into doing things that could hurt you." Atlas replaces my mask once again, and I take deep, long breaths.

"How long will I be stuck here for?"

"A couple of days. For whatever reason, you got the smoke inhalation the worst."

"Maybe from all the hyperventilating I was doing while thinking we were going to die."

"Yeah, that would do it. Don't worry, though. The doctors say you're going to be fine. Everyone is walking away with minor burns, and only one person needs a skin graft. All in all, it's amazing any of us survived it."

I reach for his hand and give it a squeeze. “When they put me in that room by myself, all I could think was that they were going to kill you and then come back and kill me. I thought I was going to lose you.”

“My only focus was making sure you got out of there,” Atlas whispers. “I thought I was going to die, but as long as you were safe, it would be okay.”

I shake my head. “I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself. I just got to have you, and I’m not ready to let you go.” I avert my gaze as I say, “I don’t think I’ll ever be ready.” I lift my eyes. “Is that normal?”

Atlas smiles as a tear slips down his cheek. “Honey, that’s a relationship.”

“If we can’t kiss, can you at least give me a hug?”

Atlas leans over me, and I wrap my arms around him, running them down his back. He flinches when my fingers trail over his side.

I pull back. “What’s wrong?”

He tries to shrug me off. “Bullet hole. I’m fine. Don’t stop touching me.”

“You were shot?” I yell.

“I’m really going to have to teach you to use your inside voice. Or tell you less top-secret things.”

“Why is getting shot something to keep on the DL?”

“Lyle setting the fire was one thing. Police saw it as an insurance scam. When it comes to gunshot wounds, everything needs to be reported. Inspected. Looked at closely. The cops aren’t only looking for Lyle but the men he had with him, and if I somehow was in the middle of all that, I’ll go down for it. It was a graze. I’m fine. Look.”

He stands and lifts his shirt, showing a white bandage with a small speck of red in the middle.

“You’re injured,” I say. “I want to take care of you.”

“I know you do, baby. But it’s your turn to be cared for.”

“I don’t know how to let that happen.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve enlisted a few helpers.” He focuses on the door, where people from the club, some of them injured and wearing matching hospital gowns, others who weren’t there that night, stand, smiling at me. “They’re all here for you.”

When I questioned if anyone from the club would have my back if I really, truly needed it ... I have my answer.

And it makes me feel whole.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ATLAS

I TRIED PUTTING this off for as long as I could, but I wasn't exaggerating when I said I'd give Lemon whatever he wants.

I still think it's too soon for him to see the aftermath of everything. He's barely been released from the hospital, and he begged me to bring him to the club. Or what's left of it. Which is nothing.

I let him have his moment. To inspect it, find any of his belongings in the debris, and I don't say a single word.

There are no words when your whole life is reduced to ashes, is there?

Peaches might have been a strip club, but it was Lemon's world. His dancers were his life. His purpose. I have no idea how I'd feel if Mike Bravo was destroyed.

Lost, out of control, nothing to look forward to. Though, that might have been before I met Lemon.

No matter what happens in my professional life, the idea of having Lemon with me somehow makes it worthwhile.

I took the job at the club to prove I can lead, but during the process, I found something much better than a pay raise and more responsibility.

I found my heart.

And watching as Lemon breaks down as he says goodbye to his past, that heart is breaking.

Breaking for him.

Breaking with him.

I want to console him, but I'll wait until he's ready. He needs to grieve, and I'm not going to push him on how long he should dwell over this.

I have the means to let him chase whatever path he wants, but if I offer him the world before he's ready to accept it, all he's going to see me as is the guy who tried to make him live by someone else's timeline.

He slowly makes his way over to me, the charred remains of one of his silver boots in his hand. "Everything is gone."

I rub his upper arms. "I know."

He looks up at me with watery eyes. “What the hell am I supposed to do now?”

“Whatever you want to do.”

Lemon glances back at the pile of bricks and dirt and rubble. “I know logically I couldn’t be a stripper for the rest of my life, but I thought I’d still have a few good years left in me.”

“There are other clubs,” I say.

“Not like Peaches. All the other ones I know of cater to bachelorette parties and are Magic Mike–type shows. They’re not looking for a twink to wrap themselves around a pole. I loved that everything we had here was raw. Primal. It was ... I don’t know. It was empowering instead of demeaning. I could show off my actual dance talent here.”

“I know.”

“What do I do now?” he asks again, maybe hoping for a different answer from me this time. Some direction.

I pull him close to me and wrap my arms around his back. “You could come home with me. Stay with me until you figure it out.”

“Y-you want me to move in with you?”

“I’m not asking you to give up your apartment or anything, but—”

“Oh, shit. I’ll probably have to if I can’t find another job. I won’t be able to pay rent. I won’t be able to keep my adorable condo that I love. I’m going to be homeless. I managed eight damn years in LA without ever needing to spend a night on the street. Now—”

“I’ll never let you do that. You can stay with me. However long you want. I’ll pay for your apartment. I’ll do whatever you need me to do to make you comfortable. You’ve gone through a lot.”

Lemon grips my shirt. “Take me home and fuck me until I can no longer focus on the loss.”

“Oh, baby. That’s the easiest thing in the world you ever could’ve asked for.”

“Are you saying you’re ready?” His voice is barely above a whisper.

“Are you? Remember what I promised you?”

He pulls back to look into my eyes. “I want you to show me how you own me. All of me. I want to feel you move inside me.”

A low growl builds in the back of my throat. “Let me take you home.”

Lemon has always been sturdy. Confident. For someone so small, he has a take-charge kind of personality. I love that about him. But this pliant,

following-my-lead side ... yeah, I love that too.

I can't wait to take him home to my house, maybe run him a bath, massage his tired muscles until they're loose and he's relaxed. There's a process with sex.

I don't want my partners to ever feel used the way I have in the past. Sex isn't about getting off and bailing. Sex is about intimacy. About getting closer. Sharing an amazing bond with another human being.

And I want to show him everything.

When we arrive outside my place, Lemon tries to bridge the gap between our seats. His hand flies to my pants, rubbing over my half-hard cock behind the confines of my zipper. He wants frantic and needy, but I'm not going to give it to him.

I cover his hand. "Let's go inside."

"That's what you'll be saying later." The bright, mischievous Lemon shines in his blue eyes, and it's amazing to see him make an appearance, but I'm not going to give in.

We have the entire future to have quickies when we have the urge to get off. There's nothing wrong with that type of sex. But the first time Lemon gives his ass to me, you bet I'm going to give it my all.

I hold my hand out for him while I unlock my front door and then lead him down the hall to my bedroom. I gently sit him on the bed and run into the bathroom to turn on the bathwater.

When I come back out, Lemon is already starting to take his clothes off.

"Nuh-uh. No touching. Stripping you is my job."

"That would make for an interesting routi—" His mouth slams shut as if he's just realizing there are no more routines at work. His job is gone, and it's as if I can see the missing part of his soul disappearing in his clear blue eyes. It's fading away.

"For right now," I say slowly, "every inch of your body and any clothing it has on is my responsibility. I'm the one who strips you down. I'm the one who'll bring you pleasure." I step toward him. "I'll get on my knees for you." I sink to the floor. "I'll wring out every ounce of need, satisfy every whim, and give you everything I have."

Lemon runs a hand through my hair while I work on sliding his clothes off him. Inch by inch of smooth skin gets revealed, making my mouth water.

When I get him down to his underwear, I grip his cock over the top of his boxer briefs and stroke lightly.

There's a wet spot at his tip, and I lower my head to feel it on my tongue. Lemon moans, gripping my hair tight.

"Please give me all of your mouth."

He doesn't need to ask twice. I hook my fingers into the sides of his underwear and tug them down his legs. After lifting his hips to help me, he settles back on the bed, sitting on the end of the mattress, his legs wide, his cock standing tall, and his tight hole just off the edge of the bed.

Lemon might be desperate for release. He might want it so badly that it hurts. But like I told him, I need an entire day to draw this process out. By the time morning comes, he's going to be so wrung out he won't even be able to remember his problems, let alone dwell on them.

I kiss him on his inner thigh, flick my tongue against his smooth dancer legs that he shaves. He's patient, which is surprising, but when I lift my gaze up to his, I know without a doubt he's faking it.

He's holding back.

And his control is about to snap.

I kiss higher on his thigh and run my hands along the sides of his legs up to his ass and back down. On the second pass, when I grip his ass cheeks, I tug him gently toward me so more of his ass is hanging off the end of the bed.

Right where I am, right in this moment, I have Lemon bared to me. All of him.

I pin him in place and continue to move my way up closer to his cock without ever getting there. I nuzzle the spot where his leg and hip bone meet, kiss down his V, which isn't as prominent as mine but still sexy as fuck. I lick where he has shaved above his dick. He's the opposite of me, completely smooth chest, legs, groin, whereas I have hair everywhere.

I never knew the smooth look could do it for me, but on Lemon, I don't think I would care if he had no hair or was as hairy as a goddamn yeti.

He's getting desperate; I can feel it. It's in the way he tries to direct my head where to go, the way his hips keep bucking, trying to get me to put him out of his misery and suck his cock already.

He's going to have to wait for that, though. I move my head lower, sucking one of his balls into my mouth quickly before licking under them. Lower, even lower.

When my mouth reaches his hole, he sucks in a sharp breath. I work him open with my tongue, ignoring the rest of him that's screaming for attention.

It's the small whine that passes his lips that almost makes me cave, but I promised him an experience.

I'm attuned to his every needy action. His heavy breathing, his hips shifting, trying to take me deeper. He's an impatient little thing, and I love it. I love teasing him, driving him so crazy. I keep going, trying to get him to the edge, and just when he thinks he's going to fall, I pull back.

"Noooo," he complains. "Why are you being mean to me?"

"Mean?" I grip his cock hard but stroke slowly. "I'd say this is *nice* of me."

"You didn't let me come."

"That's because I'm nowhere near done with you." I stand and pull him up off the bed and lead him to my en suite with the giant clawed tub.

Lucky I didn't spend too much time eating him out because the bath is at the perfect level. I turn the water off and hold Lemon's hand as he climbs in.

I finally strip off my own clothes and then climb in behind Lemon and pull him back so he rests against my front. My hard cock digs into his back, and if I thought he wasn't going to pay me back for leaving him hanging, I was wrong. He continually shifts, dragging his skin against my aching dick to the point I have to hold him in place.

"Teasing is my job," I rumble in his ear.

"All's fair in love and sex."

I laugh. "That's not ... that's not the saying."

"It should be. Tit for tat. Or, in our case, blue balls for blue balls."

I kiss the top of his head. "Lie back. Relax."

He relaxes into my arms, and I trail my fingers all over his body, wherever I can reach. Up his thighs, down his chest, massaging into his shoulders.

Lemon becomes liquid in my hands, and that's when I amp things up again by wrapping my hand around his cock, stroking him from root to tip over and over again.

The bath is nice and hot, so Lemon's skin is flushed pink, but I can't tell if it's from the water or how turned on he is.

I tell him how amazing he is—how I want to turn him inside out—and then I kiss my way down his neck and suck on his shoulder while my grip on his hard length tightens.

He quivers in my arms and reaches behind him to cup the back of my head while his hips thrust forward, making the water slosh around us.

“I can’t wait to be inside you.”

“Engh, then why don’t you hurry this up?”

“I mean, if you want, I could make you come now.” I stroke faster.

He hums. “Yes.”

“Get inside you another time.”

“Noooo. I want it now.”

“I know you do,” I say. “So do I.”

He pulls out of my arms and stands. “Then let’s go.”

“I guess I’ve tortured you long enough.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

LEMON

FINALLY—FINALLY—I'M getting what I craved. What I've been imagining ever since Atlas carried me offstage and saved me from ... his boss. But at the time, I didn't know it was his boss, and the whole knight-in-shining-armor thing really did it for me. Even though I won't admit that out loud.

I'm a strong, independent twink who doesn't need no man. Except when it comes to Atlas, I'm more than that. I'm more than a stripper. I'm a man who deserves to be treated like a human being. He respects me, my choices, my life.

Which is why I've been dying for him to get inside me.

He has me on the bed, on all fours, still dripping wet because I towed off so fast I missed a couple of spots. All spots, really. His slick, lubed fingers work me open expertly, and I rock back on them, taking them deeper.

The sting is welcome, and it might not be his dick, but even this is more than I ever could've imagined. He pegs my prostate with his fingers, and warmth spreads throughout my body.

"I need you," I breathe.

"I know, baby, but you need to be ready for me."

"I am."

He adds a finger, and I tense.

"You were saying?" I can hear his fucking smirk.

So I relax and force myself to take deep breaths. He's been driving me wild for God knows how long, but it's felt like an eternity. He drives me closer and closer to the edge and then pulls back. With rimming me, then in the bath, and now this, he was right when he said he was going to need twenty-four hours to satisfy me, but I thought he meant twenty-four hours of multiple orgasms. Not drawing it out over and over again.

I don't think I've ever leaked this much precum in my life.

But what he's doing works. I'm so out of my mind, drunk on horniness, that the pile of rubble where the club used to stand is the furthest thing from my mind. My daunting future is a mere blip. Because all I can think about is

how this man owns me. I belong to him. Nothing else matters.

Not in this moment.

“You’re doing so good,” he encourages, and I nearly cry when he finally pulls his fingers free and lines up his sheathed cock.

I got too excited for him when he reached for the condom as soon as we got out of the bath. He had to go and calm me back down again, spouting some shit about patience.

We’ve both had enough patience now, and when he finally inches his giant cock inside me, splitting me open even more, the sigh that leaves my lips is relief, joy, and the feeling of being complete.

“I’m going to take care of you.”

I don’t think he means in the bedroom. My suspicions are confirmed when he keeps going.

“I’m going to be the man you can depend on. Your sturdy sidekick. The one you turn to when things are rough. I’ll be there for you through it all. I said I didn’t want to take this step because when I do, I’ll own you, but that was only half the truth. Lemon ... *Andrew* ... You own me. Wholly and truly.”

He thrusts inside me, and I’m totally going to blame the leaky eyes on the sting in my ass. Yep. The stretching. That’s the reason tears of joy stream down my face.

“I want to see your face,” I croak. I don’t want him to see me cry because who the fuck cries in the middle of sex? But this is too important. Too real.

I’ve never felt this way about anyone before, but more importantly, I’ve never been so overtly cared for that I feel safe. Secure. *Cherished*.

Atlas pulls out of me, and I flip over onto my back. I lift my legs, hoping he’ll slide right back inside me, but he doesn’t. “Am I hurting you?”

I huff a laugh. “The opposite. You’re making me whole.”

Apparently, that’s the right thing to say because playtime is over. He slams inside me, at the same time kissing me hard.

He takes my body roughly but still in a way that’s so *Atlas*. It’s somehow supportive yet consuming, frantic but controlled. I don’t know how he does it.

He makes me feel things that are so foreign to me but I’ve been unknowingly craving my whole life.

Someone to love me.

To care for me.

Someone who can be mine.

I've been starved for so long that now all I want to do is binge. I break our lips apart to throw my head back. My legs wrap around his waist as his thrusts become more rapid. He buries his head in my neck, his breath hot on my skin.

"Just so you know, you live here now." My words come out in between my panting. "Inside me. All the time."

"Deal," he grunts. "But I'm going to need you to come real soon because I can't hold out much longer. Fuck, baby. What you do to me. You're so perfect. I never ... I didn't ..." He swallows so hard I feel his Adam's apple bounce against my neck.

"I know exactly what you mean." I lift my ass off the mattress so Atlas can pound into me faster. Deeper.

I keep teetering on the edge, almost there but not quite. But when Atlas cries out, "No, wait," and then stiffens, unable to contain his orgasm, I let go.

He pulses inside me while I empty my load onto my stomach between us.

My tears have dried up, my muscles having given way to full and complete relaxation, and when we're both done coming our brains out, we fall into a pile of twisted limbs.

Atlas rolls onto his side next to me, his chest rising and falling rapidly. My eyes are closed, just enjoying the afterglow.

I've never had sex like that. Never been so connected. I want to keep touching him, stay in the moment. His hand remains on my hip, and I run my fingers up and down his arm.

Before I'm ready, he starts to pull away from me.

"No," I murmur. "No running away."

"I'm not running away. I'm not done taking care of you." He kisses the tip of my nose, and this time, I let him go.

I do open my eyes to watch his naked ass as he walks away. It's an amazing sight, but he's wrung me out, and my eyes shut again. I must pass out because the next thing I know, I'm being woken up by a warm cloth on my stomach and soft lips on my cheek.

I grin sleepily. "You really are taking care of me."

"Yep. And when you wake up from a nap, I'll feed you, hydrate you, and take care of you all over again."

“For the next twenty-four hours?”

He lowers his voice, and I almost miss it, but right before I go back to sleep, I hear, “For as long as you’ll have me.”

The word “forever” floats around in my brain, but even in the dreamy sleep state I’m in, I know it’s too soon to think something like that. I don’t even know what I’m going to do with my life now the club is gone, let alone who I’m going to spend it with.

But if it was going to be anyone, it would be Atlas.



“I think I can cross house boy off the list of possible futures for me.” I scrape burned omelet into the trash.

“Shame,” Atlas says, sitting at the dining table and drinking the coffee I made him.

At least I can manage coffee without fucking it up.

“I’m getting used to you being in my space.” Atlas stands and makes his way over to me. “Even if you could do with your own clothes.” He pulls on the knot I had to tie in a pair of his boxers to keep them up.

“I’ve been meaning to go back to my apartment, but I just ...” Haven’t.

“I like having you here.” Atlas kisses my bare shoulder.

We’re both shirtless, and his skin on my back warms me inside. “I like being here. No, I *love* being here.”

It’s been a week since Atlas took me to see what’s left of the club. A week where I haven’t known what to do. I’ve had nowhere to go, no one to help.

Romeo and Diamante are working at the Magic Mike wannabe club. Frenchie went home to Canada. Others aren’t returning my texts or calls. I’m still so damn angry. And sad. I’m devastated about the club, being betrayed by Callie, and I hate how everything played out and that he’s out there somewhere. Or buried under debris.

I want closure, while at the same time, I want to kill him.

All of this is exactly why I haven’t been home and why I’m wearing Atlas’s clothes, which are ginormous on me. Because I’m scared I might lose my shit if I go back to my apartment.

I might be holding it together on the outside, but underneath it all, I’m fucking hollow.

I'm lost.

I put the fry pan in the sink and turn to face Atlas, who's smiling down at me like the beacon of light that he is. He's the only light I have. The only thing keeping me out of the darkness.

"I really have to go to headquarters today," he says.

He's been saying that for days, and I'm starting to suspect he says it when he wants me to wrap myself around him because it's what I always do when he tries to leave.

On cue, I wrap my arms around his neck, my legs around his waist, and he chuckles against my neck.

"I like this new trick."

I pull back. "What you call me?"

"I mean whatever this Pavlovian response you have to me telling you I'm going in to work is." Atlas places me on the kitchen counter and runs his hands down my sides. He kisses me softly, but when I try to deepen it, he pulls back. "And as much as I love it, I really, really, *really* need to go in to work today."

"Uh-huh." I grip him tighter with my thighs.

"Lemon," he warns.

"Mmhmm?" I kiss my way up his neck.

He moans. "You're going to get me fired."

At least then we'll both be out of work, and maybe I won't feel so goddamn alone.

"Who needs money?" I keep kissing his skin, slowly working up to his mouth.

I swear I almost have him caving, but then the sound of about a billion cars arriving echoes through the house.

"And here comes the firing," Atlas mutters.

"Huh? Who is that?" I try to tell myself that Atlas isn't panicking, so I shouldn't be, but it's kind of hard to keep calm when, you know, you just survived your two bosses trying to kill you.

"The only people who would know how to get past my gate without buzzing are my guys. You should go put some clothes on." Atlas stalks toward the door leading to the courtyard, but I remain frozen. "Lemon?"

I shake off my stupor and go into Atlas's room, where my sweats are on the floor. Atlas has washed them a couple of times this week, so they'll be fine to wear because I've practically been naked the whole time, but it only

reiterates that I'll need to go home at some point. I'll need to face everything I'm hiding from eventually.

For right now, I can keep ignoring it.

When I walk back into Atlas's living room, about a million people fill the space. Exaggerating? Me? Never.

Atlas's head is above everyone else's except maybe Trav's. They're almost the same height, while everyone else is average. Still taller than me, but that's not difficult. Atlas spots me and parts the crowd with his big body, making his way over to me.

I notice Domino and that Zeus guy. There are a few other familiar faces I've seen around the club, but I don't think I've met any of them properly. If I did, I don't remember it.

Atlas wraps his arm around my shoulders. "Everyone who hasn't met him yet, this is—"

"Andrew," I blurt. With the club being gone, my identity as Lemon sounds childish and stupid to my ears.

Atlas's stare burns into me, but I keep looking at his colleagues and force the Lemon persona to stay in place. Tapping into the outgoing, bubbly side of me is usually easy, but today, it's a drain.

The group of Atlas's badasses breaks out into applause, cheers, and someone even puts his fingers in his mouth and whistles.

I lean in closer to Atlas and whisper, "Is that for me?"

"I think it's for being the only person since these guys have known me to interest me. You're my first boyfriend, according to them."

"Well, you are actually my first boyfriend, so ..."

One by one, they each come up to introduce themselves, each guy bigger than the next. They all have weird names, but hey, when you work with people called Frenchie, Diamante, and Romeo, nothing is a surprise.

Except for maybe the next person who steps up to introduce themselves. A smoking-hot—objectively speaking—woman with long black hair, glowing skin, and a whole Michelle Rodriguez vibe going on. Finally, someone my height.

She holds out her hand for me to shake. "I'm Angel."

"Andrew."

"What happened to Lemon?" she asks.

He's a little lost. I don't say that, though. "If I'd known how weird all your names were going to be, I probably would've kept it."

I think she's the first person to ask about me and not how I managed to catch Atlas's attention when no one in the history of people has managed to do it before.

It's easy to play the "I'm just that awesome" card, even if I don't feel it at the moment.

Once I've met everyone and promptly forgotten their names or the meanings behind them, Atlas gets everyone's attention. "Okay, I know you all didn't come here to meet L-Andrew, so out with it."

Domino and Trav share a look, and then both of them join us on our side of the room.

"I have an announcement," Domino says.

One of the smaller guys jumps up and down. "You met a man and realized being straight is for losers and dicks are awesome."

Domino smiles. "You're half right. Dicks are awesome. You, Iris, are definitely awesome."

I snort.

"I did actually meet someone," Domino says. "While helping with Eleven's security on their last tour."

"I know Eleven!" I scream. "Okay, well, no. I don't know Eleven. But I've stayed in Mason's house once. He wasn't there, but ..." I glance around at everyone staring at me. "I'm going to stop talking now. Continue."

Domino runs his hand through his hair. "I'm ... actually. Uh ... so—"

"Domino is leaving Mike Bravo to be with Maggie," Trav says for him and then pulls Domino to his side and wraps his arm around his shoulders, the same way Atlas is holding me.

"Y-you're ... quitting?" that Iris guy asks.

"Maggie has already lost someone to war. I don't want her to have to go through that again," Domino says.

"Wait ..." I cut in again. "Maggie, as in Eleven's Maggie? Mother of Ryder Kennedy's babies Maggie?" It's my turn to jump up and down.

Everyone blinks at me.

I shrug. "I follow celebrity news. Sue me."

"I could actually sue you if you told anyone," Domino says. "Eleven are all about those NDAs, but ... uh, yeah, that Maggie."

Zeus whistles. "Single mom? Is she a MIL—"

"Finish that sentence and I'll end you," Domino growls.

That makes everyone even more silent than when I fanboied over

Eleven.

“Damn,” one of the older guys says, and by older, I mean Domino and Trav’s age. I’ve already forgotten his name. “Domino is in ... a serious relationship? Is monogamy catching? Because if so, I’m out too.”

Trav rolls his eyes. “Decaf, if you ever find anyone who will put up with your caffeine-addicted, can’t quit drinking it or you’ll kill people attitude, you should marry him. And we’re happy for Domino. Even if he went behind my back, is abandoning us, and has decided to join Brix and his security team. You know, I recall telling Brix if he poached any of my men, I was allowed to kill him ...”

Domino shoves Trav away from him. “First, you wouldn’t kill Brix because he’s too nice. Secondly, I’m not abandoning you as my best friend and brother. I just won’t be your number two anymore.”

Trav grins. “I know. I’m giving you shit. For abandoning me. I’ve been abandoned!”

Domino slaps the back of Trav’s head. “Go complain to your boyfriend that you have no one now. See how he likes it.”

“No, thanks. I like my balls where they are. But speaking of balls, with this last job, Atlas has proved he has what it takes to fill Domino’s position after he leaves.” Trav glances over at Atlas. “Sure, the job ran long, and the end of it was a little messy—”

Zeus cuts in. “Love how almost dying is referred to as being *a little messy*.” He throws two thumbs up.

“Yeah, well, if you had been on the job, I’m sure the place would’ve burned down months earlier,” Trav says.

“Thanks, boss.” Zeus sounds legitimately proud.

“Which part of that sounded like a compliment?” Trav asks.

“That I would’ve gotten the same job done in half the time.”

Trav shakes his head. “I can’t with you. Okay, anyway, I give you your new second-in-command.” Trav holds out his hand for Atlas to shake, and the hoots and hollers with applause break out again.

“Time to celebrate,” Domino yells.

Oh. Cool. Guess we’re having a party.

I wonder how long I can keep the smile on my face without passing out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN MY team trying to get me to drink my weight in alcohol and congratulating me while consoling Domino, Lemon slips away.

It's getting to the point where I can no longer ignore his melancholy. I understand that he would feel displaced and grief. He's probably still having moments of adrenaline randomly kicking back up and then the crash that follows. He's restless when he sleeps, tossing and turning, flinching and twitching while he dreams of—I'm assuming—the fire and everything that went down.

But I'm starting to think it's more than that.

And now I can't find him.

I weave my way through my teammates, who have taken over my living room and kitchen and have even spilled out into the courtyard.

Lemon's not in my bedroom when I check there, but as I turn around to keep looking through the house, Iris blocks my path. Or, you know, tries to. His boyfriend, Saint, behind him does a better job of it.

"What's up?" I ask. "Have you seen Lemon? I'm looking for him."

Iris drunkenly points at me. "You knew."

I don't have time for this, but I humor him anyway because even if I'm starting to worry about Lemon, part of me is still rational enough to know he'll be around here somewhere. "I knew what?"

"That Dom was leaving."

"Guilty."

"Why didn't you tell me? I'm an awesome secret keeperer."

"Anyone whose name stands for 'I require intense supervision' is not someone to trust with a secret. Sorry."

"He's got you there," Saint says to Iris.

"But I'm precious."

I can practically hear Iris's pout, even though I can't see it because I'm on the move again.

"Sure you are," Saint says. "To me."

When I still can't find him after searching the rest of the house, that's when real panic begins to set in. I'd like to think if he was leaving, he'd tell me, but I'd rather he left of his own accord and not by anything sinister.

Callie wouldn't come for him, would he? Any of David or Lyle's other business associates? How would they even know Lemon was involved?

"Hey, number two boss," Zeus calls out and waves me over to him.

"Very funny, calling me a shit boss. Ha, ha. Have you seen Lemon?"

"Uh, I swear he was here a bit ago." Zeus turns in a circle. "I'm sure he's here somewhere, but he's just so little you can't see him."

He's not that little.

Domino appears in the doorway to the courtyard with wide eyes that somehow hold panic and sympathy. "Atlas. You need to come. Your man is ___"

He doesn't even finish the sentence before I'm out that door so fast.

"What happened?" I ask.

"We don't know. Trav and I found him in your guesthouse. He's having some kind of breakdown."

Fuck.

I rush inside the guesthouse and find Lemon on the floor, back against the couch, knees to his chest, and the coffee table wedging him in.

Trav's trying to get his attention, but Lemon's staring blankly at the succulents that sit in the middle of my coffee table and ignoring everything Trav's saying.

"Baby?" I sink to my knees.

I don't know if it's my voice, my presence, or what, but it's as if that breaks him out of whatever trance he's in, and his head swivels toward me.

"Fuck." Then he glances around the room. "No one was supposed to see me in here."

"What's going on, what's happening? You're freaking me out."

"You had us all worried," Trav says.

Lemon's eyes fill with guilt, and his mouth drops open. "Sorry. I ... I just needed a break. I'm good now. I promise." He goes to stand but then realizes he can't get up because of the coffee table he basically tried to hide under, and now that he doesn't have the same adrenaline-inducing panic happening, he can't push the thing off him.

Dom and Trav free him, and then Lemon moves on his knees directly over to me and sinks into my arms.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“We’ll leave you two to talk it out, but give us a shout if you need anything,” Trav says.

I nod toward them but don’t take my gaze off Lemon. Precious, shivering Lemon.

“Deep breath,” I soothe. “Tell me what’s going on so I can fix it.”

“There’s nothing to fix. I’m ... Fuck, I’m a mess.”

I knew he was down and out about the club, but I didn’t realize it was affecting him this much.

I hold him closer, cradle him any way I can. “Talk to me.”

We shift so I’m sitting on the floor, and Lemon’s across my lap with his arms around my neck.

“You’re going to think it’s silly. Or irrational. Or dumb.”

“No, I won’t. After what you went through, you have every right to be on edge. But I can’t help if you don’t tell me what’s making you feel this way.”

“You got a promotion,” he murmurs.

“I did.” I don’t know what that has to do with anything.

“With everyone here celebrating, having fun ... I started thinking about my future, what I’m going to do with my life now the club is gone, and everything became overwhelming. I started sweating and was dizzy, and I just ... want to run away.”

“Run from me?” I ask and hold my breath.

“No. Well, yes, but not away from you. I didn’t want to kill your high. I’m happy for you, I really am, but your passion for your job is something I no longer have. I loved working at the club, loved helping out the other dancers with their life problems, and now it’s all gone. I guess I’m ...”

“Grieving. It’s okay to take this time to find yourself and figure out what you want to do. Maybe another Peaches could open. Maybe the club Romeo and Diamante got jobs at will introduce a queer night. Maybe you could teach dance. Or those pole dancing classes.”

Lemon’s shoulders lose some of the tension. “That’s ... actually a really good idea. I could teach pole dancing. It won’t be helping people—”

“It will be helping them get fit,” I point out. “Fit people are less prone to heart disease, so you’d be saving lives. Practically a doctor.”

He huffs a sad laugh. “True.”

While he’s perked up a bit, I can’t help thinking he’s still not optimistic

about any of it. “Feel better?”

“Not entirely.” At least he’s telling the truth. “But it’s not so daunting anymore.”

I cup his cheek. “The important thing is for you to know that you don’t have to make any choices right away. I’ve got you until you can get back on your feet. You’ve got all the time in the world. I’m not going anywhere.”

“In that case ...” Lemon takes a deep breath. “Can you come with me back to my apartment to get some more clothes?”

“Of course I can do that. Is that why you haven’t wanted to go home?”

“It’s why I haven’t wanted to do anything. Because if I’m here with you, I can pretend the outside world doesn’t exist. I can ignore it. But personal hygiene is telling me I should maybe change my underwear more than I have been since staying with you.”

“I dunno. I like it when you wear no underwear.”

“I know you do.”

“Are you worried about going back to your apartment? In case Callie is —”

“I’m worried being in the space we shared not that long ago will make me angry all over again. And then worry. I want to hate him, but something doesn’t make sense.”

“What doesn’t?”

“After his dipshit boyfriend blew himself up, Callie let me go. He let me take his knife, and then he vanished. If I think about it too hard, I keep coming to the conclusion that what he did wasn’t voluntary.”

I had the exact same thoughts.

“What could that Stephen guy have to hold over Callie’s head? I guess he could’ve threatened his life, but he was on the bus. Why not keep going?”

The answer is so glaringly obvious I almost don’t want to say it, because it’s more straightforward and upsetting than anything else it could’ve been.

“Love,” I say.

Lemon pulls back and looks up into my eyes. “Love?”

“After Callie left the club to be with Stephen, he was expertly separated from you and those at the club who cared about him. It’s a textbook controlling move a lot of abusers do. If they have no one to turn to, they’ll come to the conclusion that the only person who’s looking out for them is the abuser.”

“Okay, no. I can’t think about that.”

“Why not?”

“Because if that’s true, that means I could’ve done something. I could’ve made more of an effort to keep in touch. I could have—”

“Listen to me. None of Stephen’s actions or Callie’s actions were your fault. Stephen was an asshole, and Callie ... I think he was a victim. He did a terrible thing. He almost got us killed. But in my head, when I think back on all the things he did, I only see a scared boy who did what he thought he had to so he could save himself.”

Lemon lets out a loud sigh. “Then I hope, wherever he is, that he finds himself and is strong enough to pull through on his own. I still kinda want to hate him a little, though.”

I kiss the top of his head. “You’re allowed to hate him a lot if you want.”

“Nah. I could never hate anyone a lot.”

It’s so true. “And that’s why I love you.”

Lemon’s entire body goes tense in my arms. “You ... what?”

“I don’t want to scare you, but—”

“You loving me isn’t scary,” he whispers. “I just needed to make sure I heard you right because ... I think I’m falling in love with you too, even if I don’t really know what that means.”

“That’s all you need to say for now. We have all the time in the world to work this out. You. Me. What you want from life. We can figure it all out together because I want everything with you. I want to share our lives, find a way to make them intertwine, and never look back.”

Tears spring to Lemon’s eyes. “I ... I’ve never had that before. I want it, but what if it all goes to shit? What if I lose you? What if—”

I kiss him to stop him from rambling. “Together. We’ll figure it all out together.”

He presses his lips into a thin line but then nods. “Together.”

EPILOGUE

LEMON

ONE YEAR LATER

ATLAS IS outside the dance studio when I leave for the day, even though I have my own car here.

I cock my head. “Not that I’m complaining about you showing up to my workplace unannounced, but I’ll see you at home in twenty minutes.”

I kinda moved in not long after everything happened, and I haven’t been back to my apartment since, even though I still pay rent on it and all my furniture is there. I’m going to get around to subletting it eventually, but I think part of me still believes this thing with Atlas isn’t going to last. Not because I don’t want it to or I don’t love him. Fuck, I want it to work out so bad, but just ... there haven’t been a lot of things in life I could count on other than myself, so it’ll be a while before I can really trust it.

And I want to trust it.

Trust him.

He’s the sweetest man I’ve ever met.

“I come bearing gifts.” He opens his arms wide.

“Are you the gift? Do I get to unwrap you here and now?”

“No, the hug is because I want one.” He takes me in his big arms. “The gift is on the way home.”

“Gimme.” I stomp my foot and smile up at him angelically.

“You’re such a child.”

“You can’t say gift and then say I have to wait for it.”

“I love how impatient you are.” He kisses the tip of my nose, and I fucking love when he does that. “I’m driving.” He moves to the driver’s seat of my car.

“You didn’t bring your car here?”

“I got dropped off by one of the guys.”

Okay, now I’m intrigued.

I get in the car and look up at the dance studio where I’m teaching. I hate it, but it brings in some money while I try to figure out what else I want

to do. Maybe if it had been a pole dancing class, I would enjoy it more, but all I could find in the entire dance teaching realm was a class for five-year-olds. So pole dancing was definitely out.

I like kids as much as the next person, but I don't want to make them my life.

It's temporary, I keep telling myself, even if a part of me is skeptical I'll get out at all.

Atlas drives in the direction of his house, which happens to go by the old lot where the club sat. Driving past it every day was too hard, so when another building started going up only a mere couple of weeks after the fire, I started taking an alternate route home.

There's probably a CVS or Best Buy there now. I don't want to know.

I try not to look at it as we drive past, but then Atlas slows. He signals. And the next thing I know, he's pulling into the parking lot of ... I glance up at the neon sign of a bright yellow lemon.

"What the fuck is happening?" I ask, and Atlas laughs.

"Get out and see."

As soon as I do, the door to the place opens, and Romeo, Diamante, Hunter, and Frenchie file out, followed by some of Atlas's crew.

"This place is yours," Atlas says.

"Mine? What?"

"I know you're not happy teaching those kids, and I also know that you were happiest at the club, doing what you love. I'd pretty much decided that day you had your meltdown over your future, but I didn't want you to feel pressured or get your hopes up if something happened with the contract on this place."

"You ... you bought me a club?"

"Mmhmm. Your very own place to do whatever you want to it. You could sell it if you wanted to; you could turn it into a dance studio to teach pole dancing. Hey, maybe you could start your Wayward Strippers fund or whatever it was you were talking about."

"I could help people who are down and out by giving them jobs—not stripping if they didn't want to do that. I could—"

"You can do whatever you want with it. Oh, except name it."

"What did you name it? Lemon's?"

"Even better." Atlas puts his fingers in his mouth and lets out a whistle.

Another sign lights up in bright pink, the writing going through the

middle of the lemon. *Juicy.*

My eyes well up. “I love it.”

“I thought you would. It reminds you of me, huh?”

“You’ll always be my Lemon Juicer.”

Atlas wraps his arms around my back and pulls me against him. “Still hate that name, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

This man ... He gives me everything without even trying. It’s not the club he bought me or the way he’s let me take my own time to decide what I want to do. It’s that he knows I’ve been struggling and that he wanted to help.

He knows me inside and out.

He’s there for me and anticipates what I need and when.

He loves me as if he’s never loved anyone before and that he was put on this earth to be mine.

I don’t know how I got so lucky to have Atlas as my partner, but he’s the best thing to ever happen to me.

“I love you more than anything in this world,” I say. “I hope you know that. I wish I could show you in the ways you show me, but—”

“You do.” He pulls me close. “You do it by being there. Always. You’re loyal, you actually put in effort when it comes to being in a relationship, and even though you were inexperienced in that department when I met you, you’ve thrown yourself into it with your whole heart. And now it belongs to me.”

I smile up at him. “Not just my heart. Every single part of me is yours.”

THANK YOU

Thank you for reading *Mike Bravo Ops: Atlas*.

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Eden Finley is an Amazon bestselling author who writes steamy MM contemporary romance. As a socially awkward mess, she likes to lose herself in the written word, reading and writing for pure escapism. Her books aren't supposed to be taken too seriously, and while they sometimes touch on heavy subjects, she will always have a HEA. Because the world needs more of them.

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