

A romantic close-up of a man and a woman about to kiss. The woman is on the left, and the man is on the right. Her hand is resting on his cheek. A purple rectangular box is overlaid in the center, containing the title and series information in white text.

be
MINE
forever

**THE BENNETT SERIES
BOOK 3**

KENNEDY RYAN

Be Mine Forever

Kennedy Ryan



New York Boston



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*I dedicate this book to all the boys
and girls for whom the imagined
horrors in this book are real.*

Acknowledgments

I suck at thank-yous a little bit. I will start with my family because to leave them off—not even conceivable. Especially my boys—my husband and son, who make up the center of my life. You are both so patient with me when I get in the tunnel where I write and lose myself in this whole process. Sam, you have modeled for me unconditional love and partnership. I am so glad our dreams are inextricably woven together for the rest of our lives. It is dangerous for me to name names of bloggers who have helped me because there are SO many of you and I'd hate to forget anyone, but you know who you are. Those of you who are ALWAYS ready to step up and help me get the word out. YOU are one of my favorite parts of this journey!

And I want to especially thank the strong women in my life who taught me so many things I poured into this heroine Jo Walsh and her aunt Kris. My mother, Aunt Evelyn, Aunt Joyce, my grandmother, Banny, Julie Arnold. Your wisdom, grace, and unwavering strength influence every step I take. You are the deep well I draw from. Thank you!

Chapter One

Cameron Mitchell had never been fond of bright lights. He squinted against the glare of the lighting kit poised above his head. The dark hid all his demons, and the brightness left him feeling like a cockroach when the lights come on without warning. So did the probing stare of the woman seated across from him.

“Cam, so glad to have you on the show today.” The interviewer, Shelby Jennings, offered him a grin she probably practiced in the mirror every morning.

“Glad to be here.” Cam waxed a smile onto his face, relaxing the muscles in his shoulders and shifting on the overstuffed couch of the studio set.

“You’re the first artist ever to make our Thirty Under Thirty List.”

She raised her ice-thin brows and smiled like she was waiting for a response. What did she expect him to do? Curtsy? Shit sunshine?

“Great.”

Cam saw her disappointment at his barely there response for only a moment before she slid her reporter’s face back into place. Just the right amount of curiosity and concern.

“Your street art in Paris made you a YouTube sensation. Tell us a little about that.”

“I was studying at the Sorbonne, which was amazing, and I met some graffiti artists. Paris has a rich street scene, and I was immediately drawn to it.”

“Did it take you back to your roots?”

Cam raised his own brows and cocked his head, determined to make her voice the condescension smeared all over her face.

“I mean...you know...in the...in the...”

With much effort, Cam pulled the smile fighting its way to the surface back under.

“I believe the word you’re searching for is ‘hood.’ I grew up in the hood.”

“No, I mean. I know, but I wasn’t—”

“It’s okay. That’s where I’m from. I’m not ashamed of it.” Cam shrugged, slouching another inch deeper into the cushions. “I discovered my talent for art in those streets. I grew up in Barfield projects, not too far from Durham, North Carolina. Bridges and the sides of buildings were the only canvases I knew back then. And a can of spray paint had to do.”

“So that’s why you were so drawn to the street scene?”

She said the word “street” so quickly, like it tasted rank in her mouth and she couldn’t wait to spit it out. She glanced at him with her Upper East Side suspicion. Like any moment he’d grab his crotch and start singing Drake’s “Started from the Bottom.”

“More or less. By then, of course, I’d studied art in college. Studied at the Sorbonne. I understood and could execute several art forms. I didn’t default to graffiti. I *ran* back to it. It’s the rawest, most organic art form I’ve ever experienced. Kind of my first love.”

“And the viral YouTube? How’d that happen?”

“I was painting in the streets of Paris one night, and some kid walked up behind me with a camera. Said he was making a documentary. Asked if he could follow me around while I painted.”

Cam paused a moment, still absorbing the incredible turn of events that had thrust him into a narrow, niched fame he hadn’t seen coming and that had landed him on this very list.

“That night turned into a few weeks. He uploaded the videos, and they went viral. He won at Sundance. The rest is history.”

“Now your art has been featured in several hip-hop videos and in two blockbuster movies. You’re a darling of the art world and on the cusp of your first exhibit. That’s some journey.”

Started from the bottom...

He could feel her eyes doing what everyone’s did. Assessing. Weighing. He was an ethnic enigma. Folks speculated—was he was Italian, Puerto Rican, Cuban? His olive skin and dark hair made some sense, and then they’d come to his eyes, which were like a flash of blue-gray lightning in his face. Scratching their heads. And when they gave up on staring and asked, well, how the hell was he supposed to know? His father was some john his mother probably fucked for twenty bucks. And when people got past his face and dug a little deeper, they were even less sure how to peg him.

Art had been his solace in Barfield projects from the shit storm at home. Running the streets at night, too young to be hanging with the older guys teaching him about graffiti. Dodging cops at nine years old. Darting through dangerous streets, spraying buildings and bridges. Coaxing beauty out of grime. Even when he’d learned about the use of light, used fine paints and expensive canvases, perfected a gift he wouldn’t have even known to ask for, there was nothing like those early days, when he’d stumbled onto his talent like a gold coin in a pile of shit.

He’d lived in the projects until he was twelve years old but just years later found himself vacationing in Vail with the Bennetts and Walshes, two of the country’s most prominent families. He was a little bit of everything people assumed he was, and everything they would never suspect.

Cam could practically hear Shelby’s lips smacking she was kissing his ass so hard. Blowing all kinds of smoke about him being the second coming for the art world. He nodded, keeping his mouth straight while he waited for the real questions to start. He knew she had them, and even though his

agent had assured him she wouldn't ask him about—

“About Walsh Bennett.” Her smile was a bear trap, spread open and waiting for him to stumble in. “This is truly one of the most fascinating aspects of your story. Walsh made our list two years ago. You and he were close at one time, correct?”

Cam stared back at her, his silence daring her to continue. To violate his express wishes not to discuss this topic.

“But he's married now to your ex-wife, Kerris. How does that work?”

Cam leaned forward, using the breadth of his shoulders and the warning of his eyes to eat up a few inches of her personal space. Not enough to frighten her, but just enough for her to wonder if it was her imagination or if he might actually be dangerous.

“I don't talk about that.”

“Well, who can blame you? I mean, your best friend and wife cheated—”

“They didn't actually cheat, and I don't talk about that.”

“Well, of course our viewers want to know, to understand how you get past something like that.”

“Your viewers can go fuck themselves.”

* * *

“Let me get this straight,” Walsh said from the other end of the line, sounding remarkably close for someone in Hong Kong. “You told the viewers to—”

“Fuck themselves, yeah.” Cam glanced around the clean, cold lines of the SoHo gallery his agent, Sebastian, had asked him to check out. “I guess that was bad, huh?”

“Well, not sure that's the mileage Bash was hoping you'd get out of this list.”

“How'd you sit across from that woman without vomiting? She's a Venus flytrap.”

Walsh's chuckle rumbled across the time zones.

"Shelby's not that bad."

"Maybe not to you, but your ex-wife isn't married to your best friend."

The words plopped into the silence now pooling over the phone.

Even with them both trying to get past all the drama of the last few years, some awkwardness—a lot of awkwardness—was impossible to avoid.

"Yeah, well"—Walsh drew and expelled a heavy breath—"I'm sorry you had to deal with that. That you *have* to deal with it. I know people are curious."

"People are curious about zoo animals." Cam leaned against the wall, pressing his shoulder blades back and crossing one booted ankle over the other. "They're fascinated by freak shows, and apparently that's what we are."

"I know it's tough."

It *had* been tough. It had driven Cam to Paris, but the Sorbonne wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Not when everyone he cared about was in the States. And he *did* care about Walsh. About Kerris. About...

"How's Jo?" Cam kept the phone between his ear and shoulder, sliding his hands into the front pockets of his battered jeans. Even with Walsh on another continent, Cam wanted to look casual when he asked this question.

"She's fine." Walsh paused before continuing. "You guys haven't talked?"

"Not much. Not since Christmas."

"Yeah, Christmas. Was it me or was there something...I don't know...going on between you two when you were at our house for the holidays?"

Dangerous territory, this. Part of being street smart was knowing when to play dumb.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Cam added just a dash of what-the-hell-are-you-talking-about for good measure. “Something going on?”

“Well, I guess... You kept looking at Jo’s ass.”

Cam didn’t catch the dark laugh before it crawled up his throat and spilled into the gallery, echoing off the nearly barren walls. The gallery owner emerged from his office, crossing the bland space to hover, impatience settling onto the man’s narrow face the longer Cam remained on the phone.

“Walsh, hold that thought.” Cam pressed the phone to his chest so he could get this good and settled. This gallery felt like the graveyard where good paintings went to die. Eh, no.

“No,” Cam said to the gallery owner, adding a quick shake of his head to underscore.

“No? But...but...” the little man with the sad comb-over stuttered, his words tripping and falling over his lips. “This is one of the most prestigious galleries in New York City. In the world! Surely—”

“It feels like a mausoleum. I’m sure that’s perfect for somebody’s art, but not mine.”

“Mr. Kelvin said—”

“Sebastian is my agent, not my boss. It’s what I say, and I say thanks but no thanks.”

“But, Mr. Mitchell, we were hoping—”

“I’m on the phone here.” He raised his brows and cocked his head for the send-off.

“Uh, well, I would think—”

“Uh-huh. Good-bye.”

Cam watched the man’s stick-up-his-ass gait as he headed back to the office, not resuming the conversation until he closed the door.

“Geesh, some people.”

“Where *are* you going to hold your first exhibit?” Walsh asked. “It’s a big deal.”

“Yeah.” Cam glanced around the tasteful starkness of the gallery Bash suggested he consider. “Not here. I want it to have more...I don’t know. More meaning than these art cemeteries Sebastian keeps sending me to.”

“You’ll find the right spot.” Walsh cleared his throat, and it sounded like gears shifting to Cam. “We were talking about Jo’s ass.”

“*Were* we?”

“Yeah, the fact that you couldn’t take your eyes off of it at Christmas.”

Only took Walsh fifteen years to notice. Cam had been looking at Jo’s ass for years. Or maybe he’d just been better at hiding it before. He was slipping.

“I know you’re her cousin and may not see it, but take my word for it. Jo’s got a great ass.”

The quiet between them absorbed the words Cam immediately regretted saying before Walsh spoke again.

“Yeah, but you...Well, I didn’t think you thought of her like that.”

“Dude, so I’m an ass man. Don’t make it a thing.”

“We’ve just both always protected Jo,” Walsh said, pausing before punctuating the thought. “Kept the pervs away.”

Walsh was always the proverbial dog with a bone when something didn’t add up, and whatever he had sensed at Christmas was the bone he wasn’t ready to relinquish.

“Look, I’m not perverting on Jo. I’m a red-blooded male. A great ass walks past, I’m gonna look. I don’t care if it’s Mother Teresa. Rest in peace, but if Mother Teresa had a great ass—”

“Dude, ew. Mother Teresa? That’s practically sacrilegious.”

“Never claimed to be religious.”

“Okay, well just checking. On Jo, I mean. Not Mother Teresa.”

“Hey, I’ve always known the deal with Jo. I’m not forgetting now.”

“What do you mean you’ve always known the deal with Jo?”

Dog. Bone.

“Never mind. I gotta go.”

Cam pushed off the wall and started toward the gallery exit, back onto the charming street, bustling with more hipsters than Cam had ever seen in one place. Like a flock of skinny jeans and man scarves had migrated to this one neighborhood.

“Hey! Before you go...” Walsh cleared his throat again, and it seemed even deeper and more shifty this time. “I have a favor to ask.”

“I’m not picking up your dry cleaning, Bennett.”

Cam grinned, enjoying that they could tease each other again. It wasn’t what it used to be, and maybe it never would be again, but it was closer than anything he had with anyone else. Sad when the only guy you’re close to steals your wife.

“Yeah, my assistant Karma can do that, I think.” The hesitation in Walsh’s voice stopped Cam in the street, a quick frown settling onto his face even while the summer day went on without him.

“What is it, Walsh?”

“It’s Kerris.”

Yeah, he’d had Christmas dinner at Walsh and Kerris’s house. He and Walsh talked a few times a month. They’d even done lunch a time or two when Walsh was in Paris. But they didn’t talk much about Kerris. It just made things easier. For Walsh to bring her up...

“Is she okay? The pregnancy going all right?”

“Things were fine when I left New York two days ago, but now I’m not so sure.”

“What’s up?”

“I called her and she just didn’t sound right. Something’s *not* right, but she didn’t want to worry me. I could tell.”

Emotions wrestled in Cam’s chest. Concern for Kerris and the twins she was carrying. But pinned to the mat was lingering resentment and pain that the family of his own he’d been so close to having now belonged to Walsh. Cam never knew from one moment to the next which emotion would come out on top.

“Can’t you have Trisha check on her?” Cam knew Walsh’s former assistant and Kerris were friends.

“Trish is in London. Her new position has her flying high and not home as much.”

“Sooooo...you want me to do what?”

Surely not...

“I know this is awkward, but my dad is still recovering from the heart attack, which is why I’m here in Hong Kong in the first place.”

“How’s he doing?”

“Better.” Walsh blew out a weary breath. “It was touch and go there for a while, but he’s out of the woods. Still, the doctors say it could be months before he’s back full steam.”

“I bet he hates that.” Walsh had inherited his locomotive drive from his father. Mr. Bennett would hate being hamstrung.

“I hate it, too, because I’m pulling double duty. I’m away from home even more. Not how I saw the last trimester of Kerris’s pregnancy going.”

Back to that...

“Cam, there’s no one else I’d trust in New York. Could you

—”

“Man, I don’t think so.”

At Christmas he hadn’t even known Kerris was pregnant. They’d revealed it later, after he was back in Paris. Thank God. That would have made awkward impossible. And to see Kerris pregnant again...like she’d been with his daughter Amalie before the car accident. Too much. That wound, even two years later, was still too fresh. Still barely staunched by the things Cam busied himself doing to stay sane. The most beautiful thing to ever enter the world, and he had killed her himself. As if with his own hands. If Kerris hadn’t been chasing him that rainy night, Amalie would be alive.

No, he couldn’t see Kerris pregnant.

“Cam, I need you to do this. Something is off.”

“Walsh—”

“Please.” Walsh couldn’t or didn’t hide the desperate concern in his voice. “I know it’s awkward, but she’s my wife. They’re my babies. Please.”

Well, damn.

How was he supposed to say no to this version of his best friend? Not the one who had secretly nurtured feelings for his wife from the day he laid eyes on her. Not the one who’d kissed her in Cam’s own house. Not the one he’d fought until they both lay bloody on the floor. But the Walsh he’d grown up with. The one he’d trusted his darkest secrets to. Well, most of them anyway.

How could he say no to the Walsh who needed him now?

“Okay.”

“Cam, I owe you.”

“Oh, I *know* that.”

“There’s a lockbox against the wall on the front porch with a spare key. My birthday is the code.”

Twenty minutes and one cab ride later, Cam was punching in the lockbox code and wanting to punch himself in the face. What the hell was he doing? This was stupid, even for him. Who does this? Who checks on his ex-wife who is carrying his best friend's babies?

He rang the doorbell three times. Waited. Rang again. Nothing.

"Maybe she's just not home." He spoke to the quiet cobbled street in their TriBeCa neighborhood, his back to the door. He didn't want to use the key burning a hole in his palm.

A silver BMW X5 parked out front caught Cam's eye. Unremarkable, really, except for the Walsh Foundation decal on the rear window. If Kerris's car was here, and she wasn't answering the door...He tried to ignore the anxious thoughts piling up in his head.

"Screw this." Cam unlocked the door, noting that the alarm didn't sound. Had Kerris forgotten to set it? Was she out for a walk?

Cam was about to call her name when he noticed two oranges just outside the entrance to the kitchen. Random. He knew from living with her that Kerris was a neat freak. Not a thing was ever out of place. He scooped the oranges up from the floor to put them in whatever dish or basket Kerris had designated for fruit. A small noise drew his attention to the floor.

Kerris lay on the floor in a puddle of water, groceries spilled all around her, arms wrapped around her swollen stomach, eyes squeezed tightly together, bottom lip between her teeth, tears running down her cheeks.

"Kerris!" Cam rushed over and squatted at her side.

She slitted her eyes open before closing them again.

"Cam." His name was just a breath in the quiet kitchen. "I...something is wrong. Water broke. My babies...too soon."

"What...I...okay." *Pull your shit together.* "I'll call nine-

one-one.”

Her tiny hand shot out and grabbed his wrist with surprising strength. She widened her eyes and forced the next words past trembling lips.

“Don’t call Walsh.”

“What? Ker, he sent me over here. He’s already worried. We’ve got to—”

“Just wait.” Pain twisted her body and she balled her hand into a fist on the hardwood floor, her mouth gaping open to pant through the contraction. “He can’t do anything from there and he’ll just hate himself for not being here.”

Cam kind of hated Walsh for not being here right now, too. He nodded, not sure he’d keep his word on that but needing to move forward. He called 911, noticing how still Kerris had become on the floor.

“Yes, I’ve got a woman in labor, but it’s too soon.”

He answered the 911 operator’s questions as best he could, glad the address was so fresh in his mind from the cab ride.

“We’ll be there in just a few minutes,” the operator said with that balance of indifference and concern you had to be trained to strike. “Stay on the line for me until they arrive.”

“Okay, but I’m putting you on speaker because I need to make another call.”

Cam grabbed the house phone, staring at it for a second, knowing he needed to make this next call but not wanting to. God, really not wanting to. He’d been avoiding this for months. He listened to the ring, bracing himself for an earful.

“Hey, cuz!” Jo said. “I forgot you even had a house line. What’s going on?”

“Jo, it’s me. It’s Cam.”

“Cam?” Jo’s voice skipped surprise and hopscotched straight to disbelief. Irritation. Anger.

“Jo, hey. Look, I need—”

“You lead with ‘I need’? Where the hell have you been? You haven’t returned my calls or text messages since Christmas. Christmas, Cam! And you lead with ‘I need’?”

“Jo, I need you to shut up.”

“What?” Steam was probably pouring out of her ears. “What did you just say to me?”

“I need you to listen to me. It’s Kerris.”

“What about her?” Jo’s voice softened like butter left out in the sun. “What are you doing at their house? Is she okay?”

“No.” Cam glanced at Kerris when a small moan slipped between her bite-marked lips. “Definitely no. She’s in labor.”

“No, it’s too soon. She’s only, like, seven months!”

“Walsh asked me to check on her. He’s in Hong Kong and just had a feeling. Good thing. Um, where are you?”

“I’m...I’m in Rivermont, but I—” Jo’s voice sounded farther way, like she’d turned her head. “Shaundra, did Daddy take the Walsh Foods jet? No? Can you get it ready for me? I need to get to New York, like now.”

“Thanks, Jo. See you soon.”

Cam settled on the floor beside Kerris, his back against the kitchen island. He pulled her head into his lap, not sure he should move her much more than that. Kerris’s hair clung to her forehead where sweat had dampened it. Cam pushed the hair back, jerking his hand away when Kerris’s eyes opened again.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her voice a tired rasp. “I know this is the worst—”

“Don’t.” Cam gripped the hand Kerris clutched over her belly. “Just don’t. Things happen the way they’re supposed to, I guess. Ambulance is on the way and so is Jo.”

“Thank God.” Kerris gave him a weary smile before letting

her eyelids fall again. “Jo’s always good to have in a crisis, huh?”

Cam just gave a nod. Yeah, Jo was good to have.

Chapter Two

Misterrrrrr”—the doctor glanced down at Kerris’s chart —“Bennett, your wife should be just fine.”

“I’m not—”

“He’s not—”

Cam and Kerris exchanged a look, both eager to correct the mistake.

“He’s not my husband,” Kerris said with so much composure you never would have known five minutes before she had been doubled over with a contraction. “Anymore. I mean, my husband’s away. He’s...um...Cam is...”

“I’m a family friend.”

The last thing either of them needed was to air their weirdness in the maternity ward.

“Where’s my doctor?” Kerris rubbed a hand over her belly, anxious eyes on the substitute physician.

“She’s on vacation.” The young doctor Cam couldn’t help but think of as Doogie Howser glanced at the chart in his hands. “I’m sure Dr. Edwards didn’t think you’d be delivering this early.”

“Am I?” Kerris bit her lip and swallowed before asking the question Cam was afraid he already knew the answer to. “Delivering, I mean? It’s early. Isn’t there any way we can delay this? Bed rest? Hang me upside down or something?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Bennett. These babies are coming today.”

“Will they be okay?” Kerris’s voice dropped to a frightened whisper.

Cam reached over and squeezed her hand. She looked up at him and squeezed back but couldn’t muster a smile. She tightened the soft line of her mouth, shut her eyes, and drew a

sharp breath in through her nose. Cam knew what was coming. Ever since he'd found her on the kitchen floor, the pain had come and subsided with ominous regularity.

"It's not uncommon for twins to come early." Doogie slipped his hands into the slits of his white coat. "And even though it's early, they are viable."

Cam's phone rang, and he stepped away from the bed to answer it as soon as he saw Walsh's name flash on-screen.

"Hey, Bennett."

"Cam, no!" Kerris whispered, her eyes begging even as she tried to control the pain squeezing her from the inside out.

"Cam, I'm going crazy here." Walsh's voice pulled tight and snapped on the other end. "Was Kerris home? It's been hours since we talked."

"Walsh, man." Cam glanced at Kerris, knowing she didn't want Walsh to worry but knowing he couldn't keep this from him. "Kerris is in labor."

A full five seconds of deafening silence before Walsh spoke. Panic threaded between his words.

"No, she can't be. It's...it's too early. Maybe just Braxton Hicks, or false labor?"

"We're at the hospital, and the twins are coming soon."

"I'm not there. How the hell am I halfway around the world when my kids are being born? God, I'm my dad."

"The hell you are."

Kerris made a strangled, subdued sound, her head turned into the pillow, the sheet clenched in her fist.

"I need to speak to Kerris," Walsh said.

"Uh...she's kind of in the middle of a contraction."

"Contraction." Walsh's voice spiked, stretching beyond panic and into another stratosphere. "She's in pain?"

"That's generally a part of labor, so yeah."

“Cam, don’t joke about this. Is she okay?”

Another muffled moan from the bed.

“No, but I don’t think she wants you to hear how much it hurts.”

“Fuck that. FaceTime me.”

“FaceTime? Dude.”

“Just do it.”

Cam did it.

He walked over to the bed and angled the phone so Walsh could see Kerris.

“Kerris.” Walsh had scrubbed his voice clean of the panic. No anxiety. Perfectly even and soothing. “Baby, I’m right here.”

Kerris opened her eyes, zoning in on Walsh’s image on the phone.

“Walsh?” Her voice wobbled and shook. Her face crumpled. All the strength she’d been marshaling dissipated right before Cam’s eyes. “I’m scared.”

“I know, but I’m right here. Baby, I’m so sorry I’m not there.”

“I know. I just wanted to get through this and have it all be over by the time you found out. Please don’t feel guilty.”

“I’m working on it. How are you?”

Kerris probably would have lied if a monster contraction hadn’t wrenched the truth from her in a scream that drowned the sound of the heart monitor and raised every fine hair on Cam’s body. That scream sounded like it had twisted around Kerris’s intestines before it bellowed in the room.

“Baby, breathe.” Walsh’s face on the small screen Cam held was amazingly, deliberately emotion-free. “You can do this.”

Doogie went to the edge of the bed and peered between Kerris’s knees. His head popped up, and anticipation raised his

brows and lit his eyes.

“It’s time to push.”

“Are they...?” Kerris gulped and squeezed her eyes shut again. “Are they okay?”

“They seem fine. Not breech, just ready to make their appearance a little earlier than we all thought. I’ll need some big pushes here soon.”

There was no way Cam would be angling the phone between Kerris’s legs so Walsh could see his babies being born. As it was, his breath kept chopping up in his chest. Sweat trickled down his neck. Nausea crept through his stomach until it watered his mouth. This was too much. Too close. The last time he’d been in a hospital, he’d held his dead baby girl in his arms and wept.

“Kerris, I...” Cam locked eyes with her, begging without words for her to understand this was as far as he could go. As much as he could help.

“I get it.” Kerris threw her head back against the pillow, her dark hair fanning out behind her. Her mouth pulled into a tight ring, tunneling panting breaths. “I know, Cam. You’ve done more than enough.”

“Cam, go.” Cam glanced at the screen, seeing Walsh’s anxiety this close, but helpless to do any more.

“I don’t want to leave you alone, Kerris.”

“She’s not alone.”

Cam turned toward the door, thanking God for Jo standing there, looking like a queen as usual.

“Cam, I’ve got it.” Jo walked up to him, grabbed the phone, and grinned down at the screen. “One day I’ll get tired of picking up after you, cuz.”

Walsh chuckled, relief splattered freely all over his face.

“Jo, you came. Thank you so much. Take care of my girl.”

“Of course, I will.” Cam watched the regal lines of Jo’s face soften in that way too few got to see. “What do you think I came here for?”

Chapter Three

No one could ever accuse Cam's eyes of being just blue or just gray. They were instead a mesmerizing intercourse of the two colors. A gorgeous, God-spun mixture of sea and clouds. At least that's how Jo Walsh had always thought of them. She couldn't see them right now with Cam's forehead pressed to the viewing window. Watching him unobserved for a moment was a privilege. The dark hair, always unruly, fell around his neck, undecided about whether to wave or curl. The broad shoulders pushed forward and his hands burrowed into the pockets of the jeans it had taken this long to look that good.

The *clack-clack* of her four-inch Manolos brought Cam's head swiveling in her direction. Jo drew in the bracing breath she always needed at the first sight of him after a long time. She kept thinking, kept hoping that one day Cam wouldn't affect her this way. That her heart wouldn't seize with disbelief that any man could be this beautiful in real life. That all the steel-reinforced walls she'd erected wouldn't topple when that blazing white smile flashed at her like lightning. She was never fully prepared for that smile, always a bolt to her unsuspecting system.

Only there was no smile tonight.

Sadness cloaked and slumped Cam's shoulders and turned down the corners of his mouth. He offered her those one-of-a-kind eyes for a few moments before considering the babies again without saying a word.

Jo slid damp palms across the soft material clinging to her hips. She had just gotten back to the office after a fund-raising luncheon when Cam called. She still wore the Kelly green dress outlining her every asset. Convenient. She hadn't had time to think about what she would wear or how she would style her hair or any of the nonsense she typically considered when she knew she'd see Cam. A lot of good it ever did her.

She stepped into the space beside him, turning her head to study his rugged profile.

“You doing okay?” Jo pressed the tips of her fingers to the glass separating them from the infants.

“You mean since we last talked or since I had to help Kerris and Walsh start their little family in the delivery room?”

Jo caught the wince before it made it to her face, but inside she ached for Cam. He’d fled to Paris after Amalie’s death. Stayed there while Walsh wooed Kerris. He had done so well for himself away from them, but she’d always known he’d be back. The thing Cam had wanted more than anything in the world was a family. Walsh’s mother, Kristeene Bennett, had treated Cam as a second son, and he’d loved her more than anyone on earth. With Aunt Kris gone, Jo, Walsh, even Kerris might be the closest he’d ever come to family. But to be drawn into the pulsing center of Kerris and Walsh’s new life together had to be hard. Had to resurrect feelings he might have thought settled.

“I’m sorry it happened like that, Cam.”

He finally looked away from the babies long enough to offer her one of those smiles that, without any real effort, punched a hole in her chest where her heart used to be before Cam stole it over fifteen years ago. Some days, she didn’t think she’d ever get it back. She didn’t really have much use for it anyway.

“It’s fine.” Cam drew his dark brows into a quick frown. “I mean, it’s shit, but it’s fine. *I’m* fine. How are Kerris and the girls?”

Even Jo couldn’t govern the joy that pressed its way past her impassive expression.

“Kerris is fine. The girls are gorgeous. In ICU, of course, but that’s pretty standard for preemies.”

“Names?”

“Brooklin and Harlim.” Jo snorted. “We’re lucky it’s not

Apple and Orange, I guess.”

Cam added a grin to the knowing look he slid over to her. They had always loved teasing Walsh about his “high life” in the city. Jo might never miss Fashion Week in New York, and she might make regular shopping pilgrimages to Paris, but Rivermont was home. Always had been. Always would be.

“How is Walsh?” Cam’s mouth dropped the smile it had managed to hold on to for a few seconds.

“As you would expect, going crazy because he can’t get here at the speed of light. Probably making everyone in a twenty-mile radius miserable.”

“That sounds right.” Cam turned to face her, shoulder to the glass. “I didn’t want to see them. The twins, I mean. Even now, I can’t see them. I don’t know when I’ll be able to.”

Jo ran a steady hand through the hair hanging around her shoulders so she wouldn’t reach for him.

“I know seeing Walsh and Kerris—”

“It’s not Walsh and Kerris.” Cam raised a thick fan of lashes to look at her, his eyes unshielded. “What if the twins look like Amalie?”

The thought hadn’t even occurred to Jo. Of course they could look like Amalie, the daughter Kerris and Cam had lost. Brooklin and Harlim shared half the DNA Amalie had died with.

“I’m so sorry, Cam.” What else was there to say?

“It’s like every time I think I can get past this...debacle... between the three of us, and I can maybe be in their lives on some terms, something pushes me back out. Maybe I’m just meant to be...”

Alone.

He didn’t say it, but Jo had always known, even when Cam would vacation with them, sleep over at the house, laugh and even cry with them, that some part of him was always alone.

Even she, closer to him than anyone else, knew there were places in Cam's life and in his heart not even she could go.

"They want you in their lives," Jo said, feeling like an idiot for saying it but knowing it was true.

"Yeah, well, we'll see. Some things just aren't worth the hurt." Cam whooshed air from his chest and pulled his lips into that smile he used to change the subject. "So, you staying here or what?"

"No, Kerris is asleep, resting. The nurses are with the girls. Mama Jess and Meredith just got here, actually. They're with Kerris." Jo glanced at the ALOR watch circling her wrist, glad Kerris's closest friends had arrived and she could collapse. "I'm done. Been in constant motion since four o'clock this morning. I'll come back tomorrow."

"Where you staying?"

"Walsh said I could stay at their place, of course."

"By yourself? Or you could stay with me. We could catch up."

Jo raised an imperious eyebrow and cocked her head.

"Oh, so now you want to catch up. Where have you been for the last six months? Why have you been ignoring me?"

"Jo, I've been busy."

"Don't do that." Some hybrid of a sigh and a laugh slipped past her lips. "Not to me."

He looked at her, his eyes hiding more from her than usual, before they dropped and slid down the length of her body, pausing at her breasts, caressing the line of her waist. She felt that look like a hand skimming over her and shuddered at even the thought of Cam's intimate touch. Something heated up between them, fogging her judgment. It felt like attraction. Felt like chemistry. Felt like something she had hoped for before with Cam but knew she'd never have.

Jo shook off the effects of that look, wondering if she was

going a little crazy. Maybe her feverish mind, always hot and usually bothered around Cam, had conjured that moment. It wouldn't be the first time she read too much into a look or a feeling with this man. For example, at Christmas, she had sensed...she had thought...she had hoped...but nothing had materialized. Cam had gone dark, and she hadn't heard from him until today.

She was just about to clear her throat, but he beat her to it.

"I'm staying at the Chevalier."

Wow. Jo knew that between the inheritance Aunt Kris had left him and the money his art had generated over the last year or so, Cam had to be sitting pretty, but hearing he was staying at the Chevalier still surprised her. People like Walsh wore wealth. Not as clothing, but as skin. As scent. It had been woven into the fibers of who they were since birth. Walsh could walk into a room naked and you'd assume he came from money. It was in his bearing. In the way he looked at the world like he owned most of it, because in some ways, he did. Jo knew this because she was the same.

Even though Jo, with her trained eye, recognized the fine Italian leather of the boots hiding under Cam's weathered jeans, she knew Cam didn't carry wealth the way she and Walsh did. He never seemed uneasy with it. More like he'd simply added it to all the other baggage he was carting around.

"The Chevalier, huh?" Jo turned down the corners of her mouth and offered a ladylike grunt. "I'm impressed."

"Don't be. A...uh...friend has a suite there, and she's letting me crash."

That was more like it. The sizzling moment she had imagined with Cam moments before fizzled into nothing. She'd watched a parade of women march through Cam's life for more than a decade. Not shocking that some woman was so enamored she'd offer him a suite at one of the most luxurious hotels in the world.

"You sure it's okay for me to stay?"

“Yeah, of course. She’s in Paris.” Cam pushed away from the glass, linked his arm through Jo’s, and started toward the elevators. “She’s not coming to the States until next week, and she wouldn’t mind anyway. There’s two bedrooms in the suite.”

“I’ll just call Pierce, Uncle Martin’s driver.” Jo pulled her phone from her bag. “He picked me up and has my things. We can bum a ride to the hotel if you want.”

“Sounds great.” Cam glanced once more over his shoulder at the infants behind the glass. “I need a drink. I didn’t see my day turning out like this.”

Seeing Cam after he’d ignored her for the last six months. Witnessing Walsh’s twin girls come into the world. The day had held more than one surprise. And she couldn’t prove it, but she felt like there might be more to come.

Chapter Four

Cam followed Jo down the silk-wallpapered passageway toward the Chevalier suite he'd occupied the last few days. How could he not notice the way her ass corrupted the straight and narrow line of the dress so beautifully, her body firm and curvaceous beneath the clinging fabric? Jo had never been a small woman. Five feet ten shoeless, and looking him right in the eye in her four-inch heels. Her breasts, just enough to overflow his palms. Her legs, infinite and sleekly muscled. Everything was tight and lean. But her ass? A lush anomaly. An exaggerated curve from the trim line of her back. You couldn't help but marvel at it. You would have thought it was Stonehenge the way his cock responded. Hard and ready and in awe.

It was torture and it was foolishness to ask her to stay with him tonight.

Not *with* him. In the suite. The *two-bedroom* suite.

He'd known this thing was stirring in him at Christmas. This compulsion to look and to wonder how things would be with Jo wasn't a new fight. He'd fought it at fifteen when Jo invited him to the Sadie Hawkins dance. When she'd suggested they attend senior prom together. When with every look she told him he had a chance. He wasn't oblivious to what Jo felt. He just knew better. Would it be good with her? Probably addictively good, but Jo had always been, besides Ms. Kris, the stalwart supporter in his life. The one he could count on to think the best of him, even at his worst.

Cam had a special talent for ruining beautiful things. Like the dark, beautiful images he painted on the sides of condemned buildings, destined for the wrecking ball. *He* was the wrecking ball. He had wrecked his marriage to Kerris. He had killed Amalie.

And so much more. So much more. Things he'd never

confessed but couldn't forget.

He wouldn't destroy the person who had embodied unconditional love to him. Jo was the one beautiful thing he'd spare.

"Which one is it?" Jo looked over her shoulder, just in time to see his eyes trained on that glorious derriere. Her raised brow asked the question she didn't have to voice.

"You have something right, um..." This was lame, but he dove deeper into the crap pile. "Right here on the back of your...dress."

Jo peered over her shoulder, down the line of her back, and then back up at him.

"A stain?"

"No, a, uh... He reached to pull some nonexistent fluff from her dress, flicking uselessly with his empty fingers. "Just lint."

"Lint." Skepticism dropped her chin into her neck, leaving her silvery eyes staring at him from beneath the dramatic arch of her dark brows. "Okaaaay. Do I need a compass or are you planning to tell me where we're going?"

"Sorry." He glanced ahead, nodding toward their destination. "There. Only a few suites on this floor. That's hers."

Jo leaned up against the wall while he opened the door, slim hand on the handle of her Louis Vuitton roll-on. She closed her eyes and dropped her head forward until her hair obscured her face. The color of the milkiest chocolate and streaked with caramel, it had grown past her shoulders. The thick, silky waves were the wildest thing about Jo. Cam had always marveled at her discipline. Her control. She was a woman of limits and boundaries. He was the kind of wicked guy who wanted to blur all her lines, kiss her until her inhibitions melted and her walls fell away. That wild hair tempted him to do it.

She looked up, blinking a few times when she realized he'd been staring. She raised both brows, quirking her wide, expressive mouth to one side.

“More lint?”

Touché.

Cam stared back for a moment. Jo had the steadiest eyes he'd ever seen. She'd been raised as the Walsh family princess and had grown into a queen. Her eyes held the kind of confidence most would never know or understand. But when Jo looked at him, Cam knew he was her loophole. He didn't want to be. He hated that moment when her shield slipped and he could see that he was the one thing that could shake her. The one thing she'd be weak for.

She didn't know what she was asking for. Angels don't choose devils. Jo wanted people to think she was hard, but she was an angel. Ms. Kris had raised her with a heart that always looked out for others. He might have been avoiding her since Christmas, but he always knew what she was up to. She had made it her mission to continue and expand all the programs Ms. Kris had championed before she'd lost her battle with cancer. Jo was a tough-minded, tenderhearted angel who deserved better than the likes of him.

Eyes soft, bottom lip pulled between her teeth, she looked beyond his shoulder into the room he was blocking.

“You gonna let me in?” she asked.

Not if I can help it.

“Sure.” Cam grabbed her bag and rolled it into the suite, throwing an arm out to encompass the opulence-on-steroids suite. “Her *casa es su casa.*”

Jo scanned the marble floor of the foyer beneath her feet; the Oriental rug, like a private island set on the gleaming hardwood floors in the living area; the fine art hanging on the walls. She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes, pointing to one of the first he'd painted in Paris, a gargoyle with diamond studs in his ears and a gold grill.

“Isn’t that one of yours?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

Jo gave him a long-suffering look. “I’d know your work a mile away.”

“It looks different in every form, though.” Cam considered the painting before looking back at Jo. “My graffiti stuff really looks nothing like anything else I do.”

“It’s not the style necessarily.” Jo walked over to the painting, running her fingers around the ebony frame, stark against the white wall. “It’s the oddity.”

“Oddity?”

“There is always something...not quite right, something off about everything you do.” Jo turned to him, a smile tugging at her full mouth, bare of lipstick and lush at the end of the day. “Even in the first picture you ever drew of me, I was wearing one polka-dot sock and one striped. It’s like you’re sneaking a middle finger at the world with every piece.”

Cam laughed because she was right. This girl knew him better than anyone else. Cam sobered, the laugh dying on his lips. But she didn’t know anything that really counted. If she did, she’d run in the other direction.

“You hungry?”

Jo opened and snapped her mouth closed. Yeah, he’d changed the subject. It felt too intimate, just the two of them. He needed to get Jo fed and to bed and out in the morning before he did something he’d regret. Jo looked between the painting and Cam one more time.

“Starving.”

“The suite actually has a kitchen, but would room service be okay tonight?”

“Of course, the quicker the better.”

Her words evoked an image of him pounding into Jo against the wall quicker and better and dirty with her go-on-

forever legs wrapped around his back. He shot that image down and rolled her suitcase through the discreetly lit dining room toward the bedroom where she'd sleep. He allowed himself a quick head-to-toe before returning to Jo's eyes, watching him watching her.

“Assuming you want to change.” He opened the door and pushed the luggage in. “Food shouldn't take long. They have a great bison burger.”

“Sounds good. Hold the—”

“Onions.”

“Yeah, and extra—”

“Pickles.”

“And for cheese, I'd like—”

“Gouda, if they have it.”

“I'm that predictable, huh?” Jo laughed, walking in and turning her back to Cam, pulling her mass of wavy hair over one shoulder.

“Could you help me with this zipper? I've been wearing this dress and these shoes so long I think they may have to be surgically removed.”

Cam swallowed, his mouth dry. He smelled her. Something floral and clean—half perfume, half just Jo. He grasped the zipper and slid it down to the base of her spine. A flash of black silk and lace banding her back and edging the curve of her ass left him as hard as diamonds behind his zipper. The skin of her back stretched fading-tan-gold and silky in front of him. He took a quick step back and turned, tossing a few words over his shoulder.

“There you go. Food should be here soon.”

Cam thanked the heavens above there was no lace or silk in sight when Jo emerged from the bedroom, freshly showered. That chocolaty fall of hair was wet and bundled on top of her head. She'd taken out her contacts and wore her cat-eye

tortoiseshell glasses, yoga pants, and a Walsh Foundation T-shirt.

“You look pretty much exactly like you did in college.”

Jo grimaced and took a bite of her bison burger, catching mayonnaise with one finger and sliding it in and out of her mouth.

Holy sexy condiments.

“Hmmm. College. It’s a blur of exams and tears. What possessed me to go Ivy League, I’ll never know.”

“I was glad when you transferred to Duke and came back home.”

“I loved the thought of Wellesley, but in the end, I didn’t want to be away from Daddy, the foundation, Aunt Kris.”

Jo trapped his eyes over the rim of her glass.

“And you.”

Cam cleared his throat and took a sip of his Peroni, leaving that comment and that look in the open, unaddressed.

“Remember that time in Cabo when we ordered all that room service on Mr. Bennett’s card?” The memory persuaded Cam’s mouth to smile.

Jo laughed around a bite of her burger.

“The man has a Black Card. He didn’t even notice.”

“And that was what Walsh wanted more than anything.” Cam stood and crossed over to the fridge for another Peroni. “For his dad to notice.”

“So...you and Walsh.”

Cam turned, pressing his back to the refrigerator and watching her with wary eyes.

“What about us?”

“I know things have been hard, but Walsh says you guys have been talking. How’s it been?”

Cam shrugged, grabbed a high-backed dining room chair, and flipped and straddled it. He crossed his arms on the back, resting his chin on his forearm.

“As well as can be expected, I guess.”

Jo pulled her long legs under her on the leather couch, crossing her arms over a throw pillow on her stomach. “Can I ask you something?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“If you don’t want to talk about it, then, yes, you have a choice.”

Cam wanted to avoid the potential that kept crackling in the air between them, but talking with Jo was like drawing a fresh breath after living in the stale room of phonies and opportunists who had been populating his life the last six months. He could always count on the truth from her, if from no one else.

“Do you still have feelings for Kerris?”

Wow, she went for the jugular.

“You know, I—”

“Don’t hedge.”

“I’m not going to. I’m just thinking of how to answer.”

“Try the truth.”

“Okay.” Cam contemplated the label circling his beer bottle. “I think over the last year or so, I’ve drawn some of the same conclusions Kerris did.”

“Meaning?”

“After the divorce, she said we never should have married.”

“To which you said, ‘Thank you, Captain Obvious.’”

They shared a grin. In their two-member club, sarcasm was like the secret handshake.

“No, at the time I just thought she wanted to make herself

feel better for her part in our breakup. Now I realize she was probably right.”

“Meaning?”

“As bad as it sounds, I think we settled for each other because we knew we were both so screwed up by our pasts. I guess we kind of thought only another person as damaged as we were could accept us...as we were.”

“So you were never in love with Kerris?”

“Well, I was attracted to her, of course. I cared about her.”

“But were you in *love* with her? Gun-to-the-head answer.”

“Gun to the head...probably not.”

“Gun to the head and I still can’t get a straight answer.”

“That’s as straight as it’s gonna get tonight.”

“So if that’s the case, doesn’t it clear the way some for you and Walsh?”

“In retrospect, I can see that we shouldn’t have married.” Cam took a quick swig of his beer, the muscles of his face tightening. “Doesn’t make the way things went down easy to accept or forget. Once I knew for sure how it was between them, what was there to fight for except...”

“Except Amalie?”

Cam looked down at his boots, feeling like something stuck to the bottom of them. “Yeah, except her.”

Hesitation was all over Jo’s face, an expression so rare for her that it caught his attention like a peacock in a blizzard. She wasn’t one to hesitate long. Sooner or later she’d spit it out.

“Cam, Kerris is in therapy for all she went through. From the abuse in her childhood, the divorce, Amalie, all the crap she’s endured. Have you talked to anyone about... everything?”

“About my feelings you mean?” Derision twisted Cam’s mouth. “I’ve lived with my...feelings...all my life. I’ll be

fine.”

“No, but this is different.” Jo swung her feet from beneath her, placing them flat on the floor and leaning forward. “You lost a child, and your marriage and your best friend. Not to mention everything else in your past you’ve probably never dealt with.”

Cam shot to his feet, gripping the neck of the beer bottle until he thought it might shatter.

“What the hell do you think you know about my past?”

“What do I know about your past?” Confusion muddied Jo’s crystalline eyes. “Um...everything?”

Cam turned his back on her, facing the small but shiny and well-appointed kitchen. He slammed the bottle on the marble countertop.

“You don’t know as much as you think you do, Jo. And if you knew...”

“Well, tell me.” He heard her feet padding across the Oriental rug toward him. Smelled her when she was right at his back. “Cam, what don’t I know?”

He dropped his head, pulling a damp palm across the pinched muscles of his neck. If she ever found out the secrets he planned to take to the grave, how would she look at him? Like poison. Like the devil he was.

“Just drop it, Jo.”

“No, I won’t drop it.” She stepped in front of him, reaching up to cup his chin, eyes hot and intense on his face like quicksilver. “Cam, I see how sad you are, how alone, and I don’t like it.”

Cam leaned forward a few inches until only a breath separated their mouths. He reached up to lace his fingers with hers against his face.

“And you wanna make it better, Jo? Huh? Is that it?”

Her fingers trembled between his. Her tongue made a

nervous swipe across her bottom lip, but she didn't blink. Didn't move her hand.

"If I can."

He wrapped his fingers around her fragile wrist, being gentle but firm when he pulled her hand down. Deliberately icing his eyes over when he stepped away.

"Well, you can't."

Her head dropped a few inches before she drew in a deep breath and adjusted her glasses.

"Well, someone needs to. A grief counselor or—"

"Stop pushing." Cam strode out of the kitchen and back into the living room, flopping onto the couch and covering his eyes with his arm. "Just let up."

"I won't, Cam." Her voice came closer until he knew she was standing right over him. "I can't."

He sat up, setting his elbows on his knees and cradling his sleep-deprived head in his hands.

"That's your problem. You don't know when to stop. It's too much. Just stop digging."

"Friends dig."

He looked up from the intricate design on the rug to narrow his eyes at her.

"So this is all in the name of friendship?"

Jo stared at him like she'd never seen him before, and to be honest she hadn't. None of them had. You could only fake humanity for so long. He'd gotten away with it, but the devil inside of him wanted, more every day, to peel back this mask and show the ugly, disfigured truth writhing under his skin.

A keycard swiping at the door broke their static-charged stare. A slim woman walked in, a bellhop trailing her with a luggage-laden cart. One side of her pink hair was shaved and the other just brushed her shoulder, the bangs not quite

covering the ring piercing her eyebrow.

“Just through there for my bags.” She pointed to the bedroom Cam had been using. “Cameron! Surprise!”

She sauntered over to him, throwing her tatted, silver-bangled arms around his neck, kissing his chin and cheeks and saving his mouth for last. She didn’t hold back, plunging her tongue between his lips and grabbing the back of his head before he could think to pull away.

“Etty,” he said against her lips, tugging her arms back down to her side. “I thought you weren’t back ’til next week.”

“It would not have been a surprise if I’d told you any differently.” Her French accent and warm smile wrapped around the words like a light, flaky croissant. “Eez fine, no?”

“No. I mean, yeah. Sure. It’s your suite. I just had a friend staying tonight.”

“Ooh la la.” She lifted her long lashes to dart naughty blue eyes between Cam and Jo. “A gift for me, yes? How you say...threesome? Ménage?”

“No! No, not a gift. Not a...” Cam cast a quick glance at Jo’s face, a frown cracking the line of her brow. Lips tightened and displeased. “She’s just a friend.”

“*Mais nous pourrions avoir beaucoup de plaisir.*” Her throaty voice dropped lower, smoking up with a memory Cam would rather forget. “*Rapelle, Amsterdam, Cameron.*”

Jo cleared her throat and took a step closer to Etty. “It’s actually really rude to have private conversations in French when someone doesn’t speak the language. And just useless and silly when they do,” Jo said...in perfect French.

Etty slapped Cam’s shoulder, a delighted laugh gurgling from her throat.

“I *like* this one.”

“Figures.” Cam rolled his eyes and gestured between the two women. “Jo Walsh, meet Etinette Chevalier.”

“This is my family’s hotel.” An impish grin stretched Etinette’s mouth from its usual pout.

“I gathered.” Jo tightened the knot of hair on her head. “I can go to Walsh’s place, Cam. Pierce can come get me.”

“No, please don’t leave.” Etty pressed a hand flat to Cam’s chest. “Cam and I are fine sharing a room.”

Jo swallowed and looked down at the black polish on her toes before looking up and buffing her smile to a high shine.

“Of course. Well, if you don’t mind, I’ll turn in.” Jo walked to her borrowed bedroom and turned at the door, looking from the hand Etty still laid on Cam’s chest to his face. “See you in the morning.”

“How about caramel French toast in the morning?” he asked.

Although he’d been pushing Jo away all night, the chasm stretching between them felt too wide. He could practically hear his own voice echoing back to him she felt so far away.

“I think I’ll get up and run in the morning.” Jo pulled open the door and walked through, giving him one more glance over her shoulder. “We’ll see about breakfast after. Good night, Cam. Um...Etinette.”

“All my friends call me Etty,” the petite French girl said, apparently oblivious to Jo’s *we’ll never be friends* vibe.

“How nice for you.” Jo offered a Sweet’N Low smile before closing the door.

“She is, how you say, a fryer cracker.”

“Etty, it’s firecracker.” Cam’s mouth turned up, his smile involuntary. Etty was a lusty piece of baggage he always had to fend off, but she was entertaining.

“Yes, well, she is that.”

A firecracker. Jo certainly was. But if he wasn’t careful, she was the one who would get burned.

Chapter Five

Wipe that foolish grin off your face.

Jo tried relaxing the muscles around her mouth, so practiced at disguising joy as dispassion. Sorrow as indifference. The muscles that flexed and pulled her lips into a straight line, yielding nothing, just would not obey this morning.

Jo turned down the music in her earphones, focusing on the way her body cut through the stillness of New York's early summer air. She focused on her feet pounding into the pavement of the park trail, every step stomping out her old nemesis.

Hope.

She had hoped the first time she wore a bikini in ninth grade and caught Cam eyeing her body all night at the pool party.

She had hoped when Cam punched Russell Carrolton for cheating on her in her junior year in college.

She had hoped on Cam's wedding day, up until the vows were said and gone, that he'd change his mind. Not marry Kerris after all.

She had hoped this morning when she emerged from the bedroom and seen Cam sleeping on the couch instead of in Etinette's bed.

She had hoped when she stepped close enough to see his lashes brushing his cheeks and her sneaker-clad foot disturbed sketches on the floor.

Sketches of Jo.

There's that foolish, shit-eating grin again.

This would not do. Hope was not her friend. Hope didn't give it to her straight but fed her the lie that one day Cam

might notice she was in love with him. Might love her back. The last fifteen years or so had taught her that hope was a sneaky bitch who sidled up to you, ingratiated her way into your good graces, only to shove a knife in your back when you least expected it.

But the sketches...

They had been sketches of her back, with her hair pulled over one shoulder and the zipper peeled away to reveal her bra and panties. Did a man sketch something like that if he wasn't interested?

How would she know anymore? It had been so long since she had a man in her bed. The good thing about sexual frustration? If you found a healthy outlet for it, say running your ass off—literally—it wasn't so bad.

Between running ten miles a day and knitting, Jo had avoided meaningless one-night stands and STDs.

Tone Loc's "Wild Thing," the ringtone Meredith had fittingly programmed for herself, interrupted Jo's running playlist. Jo answered, earphones still in as she slowed and walked into the Chevalier Hotel lobby.

"Hey, Mer." Jo offered the two staffers at the front desk a warm smile before boarding the elevator and heading up to the penthouse.

"G'morning. How the hell are ya?"

Jo hadn't had many "girlfriends" through the years, but she enjoyed the easy friendship she and Meredith had developed.

"I'm good. How are Kerris and the girls?"

"Awesome, but Kerris will be a lot better once Walsh is back."

"I can imagine. Walsh missing the birth...He would have given anything to be here."

"Seems like he's been missing a lot lately."

Jo frowned up at the ascending numbers in the elevator.

“What’s that mean?”

“Just that every time I’ve talked to Kerris lately, Walsh has been working or out of town. I just hope he’ll slow down long enough to enjoy his new babies.”

“Well, of course he will.” Jo’s hackles raised an inch or two in her cousin’s defense. “You *do* understand that Uncle Martin had a heart attack? Walsh is under tremendous pressure from the board to keep investors and shareholders confident Bennett Enterprises won’t skip a beat until his father returns.”

“Don’t get defensive.”

“I’m not, I just think it’s hard for you to grasp—”

“Rich people’s problems?” Meredith’s drawl dripped sarcasm. “So I’m poor *and* dumb?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth.” Jo took her time walking to Etinette’s suite door. “I’m just saying Walsh has a lot going on.”

“Is anything more important than those two baby girls? Than Kerris?”

“No, of course not.” Jo blew out a ragged breath, part frustration, part exertion from her run. “Just let up on Walsh. He’s trying his best.”

“You will always defend those guys ’til the end, won’t you?”

“Guys?”

“Walsh and Cam.” Meredith let out a little gasp on the other end. “Wait! You stayed at the hotel. You and Cam finally shared a bed last night?”

“We did *not* share a bed.” Jo rolled her eyes, leaning against the wall, in no hurry to see little Miss La Vie en Rose this early. “We didn’t even share a *bedroom*.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I...Well, I’m not.” Jo pushed away from the wall,

preferring Frenchie over Meredith's interrogation after all. "I'll see you in a couple of hours when I come to the hospital."

"Will you pay for my doctor's bill? You just gave me whiplash with that subject change. You can hide it from Cam, but you don't have to hide it from me. That's what friends are for."

"Oh, friends dole out advice loosely based on cheesy Dionne Warwick songs?"

"You can run, but you can't hide."

"I'm sure that's a song, too." Jo used the keycard Cam had left on the counter for her to open the door. "I'll talk to you later. Have something original to say."

"Once you and Cam do the nasty, I'll have lots original to say."

Jo caught herself from tripping over her own feet. Cam stood in the kitchen in hanging-low-on-the-hips sweats and a T-shirt with FRENCH ME stretched across the muscles of his chest. His grin reassured her Meredith's big-mouth voice hadn't carried.

"Gotta go. See you later at the hospital."

Cam dipped a thick slice of bread in the egg mixture and placed it on a sizzling skittle.

"Good run?" He kept one eye on the toast while he started whisking eggs.

Jo laid her cell and earphones on the counter, settling onto the leather stool.

"Pretty good. I love running in New York."

"What are you up to now?"

"About ten miles a day."

"Wow. Well, you look amazing." He didn't look away from the eggs he was salting and peppering. "I mean, you've always looked amazing. I can just tell—"

“I know what you mean.” She kept her eyes as careful as the slow sip she took of the steaming coffee he’d set in front of her. “Did you sleep well?”

He paused in his whisking but didn’t look up. He poured the eggs into the pan before answering.

“Yeah. I slept fine. I wanted to sketch some and didn’t want to disturb Etty, so I just took the couch.”

As badly as Jo wanted to ask him about the sketches of her she had seen, she didn’t. He held tension in his broad shoulders, as if braced for her next question.

“So how long are you here in New York, Cam?”

She watched, fascinated, as his shoulders lowered a few inches and the firm, beautiful line of his mouth relaxed.

“I’m not sure.” Cam plated her French toast, sliding it to her across the counter. “Sebastian wanted me to scope some galleries for my first official exhibit.”

“That’s great.” Jo said the words around the delicious caramel goodness dissolving in her mouth. “Also great? This French toast! Have you been cooking a lot while you’re here?”

“Nope. First time. Been eating out every day and night.”

Jo slowed her chewing, noting the makings of her favorite omelet on the counter. Shitake mushrooms, spinach, and turkey bacon. Those weren’t items you’d have just lying around in the fridge of a suite like this, even if it was more of an apartment than a hotel room. Especially if he hadn’t been cooking. Jo computed all the information and landed on a conclusion that raced straight from her brain to her never-does-learn heart.

“Did you get all this stuff just for me? This morning?”

Cam frowned, folding the omelet with much more concentration than it should require. He finally turned the burner off and looked at her, eyes guarded.

“It was nothing.”

“But did you have to go out? I could have ordered room service.”

“There’s a grocer up the street.” Cam slid the omelet onto a plate for her. “I wanted to at least give you a home-cooked breakfast.”

“Is that supposed to make up for six months of pretending I don’t exist?” Jo gave her usually checked irritation a little free rein.

“Don’t start.” Cam poured eggs for his own omelet into a bowl, glancing away from the bowl just long enough to narrow his eyes at her. “I told you I needed some space.”

“From me?”

“From everything. From Walsh, from Kerris, Amalie, Rivermont.” He stopped whisking and met her eyes, his still hiding something but more frank than they had been. “Yeah, you, too, a little. I needed to make my own way and live without all the drama for a little while.”

“So are you coming back to Rivermont now?” Jo stuffed her mouth with French toast so her rebel tongue wouldn’t beg him to consider coming home.

“Actually, I had an idea.” He settled his elbows on the counter and leaned forward to stab a square of French toast from her plate and placed it in his mouth. “Hmmm. That *is* good.”

Jo tried to focus on what he was saying instead of the maple syrup and caramel glistening sticky sweet on his full lips.

“What idea?”

“What would you think of me holding my first exhibit at Walsh House?”

Hosting his exhibit at the community center Aunt Kris had built for foster kids? The strain of resisting licking those lips and of keeping a safe distance disintegrated. Jo scurried around the counter and threw her arms around Cam’s neck, heedless of the tension that had been snapping between them.

“Cam, that is so perfect.” Jo blinked back tears against his neck before pulling away to look up at him. “Aunt Kris would have loved that.”

Her aunt had always considered Cam a second son and almost from the first day he’d shown up at the foundation’s camp for foster kids had treated him like family.

Cam grinned down at her, wearing the expression she’d seen him only give her aunt. A fusion of tenderness, reverence, and respect. She recognized that look because even growing up with Aunt Kris and seeing her just about every day of her life, she had felt the same.

Jo rested her hands against Cam’s chest, the thud of his heart pounding into her palms. Second by second, Jo became aware of Cam’s hand molding her back. Of the other hand gripping her hip. Of her softness melting into the hard lines of his body. He dipped his head, nose brushing behind her ear.

“I’m sweaty.” Her words floated out on a husky breath.

“You smell good.” His breath misted her neck and he ran one hand up and down her back in long, slow strokes. Coming closer and closer to her butt every time. She wanted to grab his hand and slide it inside the tiny running shorts that barely contained the generous curves of her backside. She wanted to hop onto the counter, drag him between her legs, jerk his zipper open, hold him in her hands, stroke him, and then...

“Am I interrupting?”

Etinette’s voice splashed and squelched the heated moment like a bucket of icy water. Cam stepped back quickly, cursing at the unattended omelet that had started sticking to the pan.

“No, not at all.” He pulled the pan off the flame, his voice as flat as a two-by-four. “We were just celebrating a great idea.”

Etinette walked into the kitchen, coming up behind Cam and looping her slim arms around his waist.

“What is the idea?” She laid her pink hair against his back.

“Smells good. Enough for me?”

“Of course.” Cam plated two slices of French toast and turned in Etinette’s arms. “You love my French toast. Here.”

“Ironic that *you* can cook French toast and I cannot.” Etinette tipped up to her toes and laid a lingering kiss on Cam’s lips. He pressed back, brushing a hand across her vibrant hair.

Jo’s body, so hot moments before, froze over like a pond in deep winter. All her emotions—hurt and hope, fear and disappointment—lay trapped beneath a thick layer of ice. Drowning.

She stood up and scraped most of her uneaten food into the garbage disposal. She loaded her plate and coffee mug into the small dishwasher without looking at the couple whispering to each other in French.

Cam’s hand lay at the base of Etinette’s spine, in almost the exact position he’d held Jo moments before. Jo swallowed around the emotion burning a hole in her throat. He had just transported her back to another time. She was fifteen years old. It had taken all of her courage, but she had asked Cam to the Sadie Hawkins dance. He’d turned her down, saying he was busy that night, but she had known it was a lie.

He has told you in every way imaginable this isn’t going to happen. Where’s your pride?

“I’m gonna go, guys.”

Cam glanced over Etinette’s shoulder, his handsome face an indifferent plane showing no emotion except polite interest.

“Should I call you a cab?”

“Cam, my driver could take her.” Etinette turned bright blue eyes Jo’s way. “I have a driver.”

“So do I.” Jo grabbed her phone and earphones from the counter. “Pierce will take me to the hospital.”

Jo met Cam’s eyes, new resolve squaring her shoulders and

straightening her spine. If Cam did want her and she wasn't imagining it, he didn't *want* to want her. And he didn't want to do anything about it. And apparently he was willing to hurt her so she would get the message.

Message received, buddy. Loud and clear.

Jo took her shower and offered a hasty good-bye to the lovebirds. She dared her tears to fall on the ride to the hospital. Posture erect, she sat in the backseat of the limo, watching the city in flashes through the window. She folded her hands in her lap and crossed her ankles. She swaddled herself in composure and blinked until the tears in her eyes got the message and dried up.

She visited with her family, making sure Meredith and Mama Jess were providing everything Walsh and Kerris needed. And then she hopped on the Walsh Foods jet and headed back to Rivermont. She never looked back. And promised herself she never would again.

Chapter Six

Cam stood at the open refrigerator door, staring at the empty shelves. Mayonnaise and a block of multicolored government cheese. Mama hadn't shopped for groceries...again. The only thing in his hungry stomach was a growl. He tried to remember the last thing he had eaten. Dried out pizza, one lousy fruit cup, and a pile of mashed potatoes at the cafeteria yesterday. He'd eaten everything on his plate and anything his friends had left because he'd known what was coming.

The weekend.

Weekends were the worst. At least Monday through Friday he could count on free lunch at school, even if dinner was never guaranteed. If it was a good night and Mama had customers...well, after they were done, there would be a little cash. Mama would send him out for McDonald's or whatever was cheap and open. He didn't know how to feel about those nights. Was a Big Mac worth it? Worth the sounds the men made when they screwed Mama? She told him not to say "fuck," even though some of his friends already said it. Mama didn't make much sense sometimes. He couldn't say fuck, but she could do it for money with men she didn't know. Even at ten years old, Cam knew there was something wrong with that.

Cam noticed a bag of Wonder Bread on the counter. He hoped there wasn't anything furry and blue or green on the bread. All the slices had mold, except for two. Cam fist pumped because that was all he needed. He made the most pitiful lunch ever, a mayonnaise sandwich. It wasn't his first and probably wouldn't be his last. If you were hungry, a mayonnaise sandwich tasted as good as the cubed steak they got sometimes on Thursdays at the school cafeteria.

The apartment wasn't much bigger than one of their food stamps, so when the door opened, there was nowhere to hide. The living room and kitchen crawled on top of each other in the cramped space, and there was no way someone could enter

the place and not be seen. So Cam saw the big man as soon as he walked in, infecting the room with the sweet, musky blend of nasty cologne and his BO.

Cockroaches and rats didn't pay rent, but they sure lived here. Sometimes Mama would say they had just as much right to be here as Cam since he didn't pay any more rent than they did. So he knew about rat's eyes, and the man blocking the way out had rat's eyes. Black and cold, round and hard like the marbles Cam had lifted from Family Dollar on a dare. The first day Mama brought Ron MacKenzie home, it had been hot enough to turn on the fire hydrants outside, but Cam had been cold and shivered when this man walked through the door. Under those rat eyes, he was cold now.

"Your mama home?" Mac must have shoved most of the room's air into the hall because when he closed that door, Cam couldn't breathe.

"Uh, no. She'll be home soon."

"How you know she'll be home soon?"

"She's always home soon." She fucked here. She smoked here. This was home. Where else would she be for very long?

He always thought if Mac ever had the chance, he would hurt him like he hurt Mama sometimes. Cam was scared this was his chance.

"Your mama's a slob." Mac picked up the Styrofoam cup off the coffee table, looking at the bite marks Cam had left around the rim before tossing it on the floor. "And a ho."

Cam bit the inside of his cheek, sinking his teeth into the words he wanted to throw back at Mac. His mama might be a ho, but she kept this place kind of decent. When she wasn't on that pipe or busy fucking customers, she wasn't a slob. He felt like he should defend her just that little bit, but he'd seen rats gnaw through shoes. And he'd seen Mac beat Mama, so he kept quiet.

"You one of them pretty boys, huh?"

It wasn't the first time Cam had heard that. In Barfield projects, the lines were drawn in black and brown, so anybody in between stood out. And he was definitely in between. Not black, not white, not brown, but some crazy swirl of all three that made him stand out like a sore, mixed-up thumb. He didn't look like any of his friends. He used to get beat up all the time because people thought his curly hair made him softer than them, but Cam had fought more than one of Mama's customers off. Losing a time or two had toughened him up quick. His outside might be pretty, but his inside already knew what ugly was all about.

Mac took the few steps separating him from the front door and the kitchen. Cam looked away from him, focused on pulling the crust off his sandwich. Even looking away, he still saw Mac. He was as big as the Hulk, but instead of being green, his skin was the color of pennies, red and brown at the same time. Even his hair was the color of red mud. It only made his eyes seem blacker. Even as dark as his eyes were, you could still make out the mean in them. Not that Cam needed to look into his eyes to know how cruel Mac was. The real cruelty wasn't that he beat Mama if she didn't bring in enough money lying down for customers. It was that when she did good, he gave her the drugs.

Mac stood right behind Cam, like a big red oak tree. Cam gripped the handle of the butter knife he'd used to spread the mayonnaise on his sandwich. Fear swelled up in his bladder, and Cam thought he might piss his pants. He ran the streets sometimes with the older boys. Painting bridges and alley walls with spray cans and sneaking into the skating rink. The older boys taught him useful things, and they had told him he should never be alone with Mac because he liked boys. Cam wished now he had asked questions because he didn't really know what that meant, but he didn't want to seem like a little kid. Right now, he knew that's exactly what he was.

Mac startled him when he touched the hair hanging almost to his shoulders. He'd told Mama he needed a haircut, but she had waved her hand and said she'd get around to it. Now

Mac's thick fingers had something to grab him by. Cam tried to pull away, but Mac tugged until Cam's back was pressed right to Mac's front.

"You gonna be a good boy for me?" Mac's words slithered into the quiet like a black snake. "You gonna make me proud?"

Cam bit his bottom lip, not sure what to say, so he just nodded his head in jerks.

"Good. Good." Mac ran his fingers down Cam's neck and inside his Ninja Turtles T-shirt, brushing over his chest.

Cam jerked away and crossed the few feet to the refrigerator, pressing his back to the door.

"Mama'll be home soon." The tremble in his voice made him sound like a little boy, but he couldn't help it.

"Your mama does what I say." Mac spread his thick lips wide over crooked teeth the color of margarine, his smile like an alligator's. "You will, too."

Mac moved faster than a man that big should. He was at the refrigerator before Cam could draw his next shaky breath. Cam didn't have time to think, only respond. He jabbed the butter knife into the thick wall of fat around Mac's waist. The knife wasn't sharp, but it did a little damage. Mac paused, patting his shirt where a small bud of blood blossomed through his white T-shirt.

"You little shit!" Mac looked from the blood on his fingers to the knife Cam still clutched. "I was gonna go easy on you, but not now."

Cam took off toward the door. The apartment had always seemed no bigger than a matchbox, but that door seemed a hundred feet away right now. His hand was on the knob when Mac's fist pounded into his temple. The room flashed and strobed like the lights at the skating rink, and the pain in his head made him slump to the ground. Mac grabbed him by the collar and dragged him back into the kitchen.

“You gon’ get this now.” One of Mac’s meaty hands pressed Cam’s neck into the rough wood of the rickety kitchen table. The other was at his belt. Cam heard the jangle of the buckle loosening. He strained against that heavy hand, panic making him twitch and squirm like the snails they salted on the playground. Mac slammed Cam’s forehead into the table, and the world went black for a moment. That black felt so good, but it didn’t last long enough. He woke up to pain in that tiny hole he’d only ever used for one thing. So much dirty pain. He screamed for his mama, but she didn’t come. The neighbors didn’t come. He whimpered and he begged, but there was no letting up. Mac laughed and grunted behind him, and Cam just knew that the pain would soon split him in two, but it didn’t. No one busted through the door to save the day like on the cartoons. The bad guy won.

Mac liked little boys. Now Cam understood what the older boys meant, and it was too late.

Cam fled the nightmare, jackknifing in his bed. Terror chased the blood through his veins. He ran shaky hands through his hair, damp and tangled from the hell between his sheets. He patted his arms and chest, hoping the feel of his own strength, of the defined muscle would reassure him. He wasn’t some snot-nosed little kid who couldn’t defend himself against the neighborhood monster. He was a man. He was grown, but fear still wound up his legs and weakened his knees. There was only one thing that ever evened the ragged breath in his chest and slowed his heartbeat.

He reached under his bed and felt nothing but empty space. He fumbled to untangle himself from the sweat-drenched sheets, kneeling by the bed and running his hand over the hardwood floor until he knocked against the cold, hard comfort his hands always frantically sought beneath the bed.

Aaaahh.

His breathing slowed, going from gasps to a steadied stream of air slipping past his lips. Relief slowly oozed through the tightness in his chest, loosening his body cell by

cell until he was solvent. Liquid and loose, the only thing solid was the cold, sleek metal at rest in his hand.

Chapter Seven

Jo glanced at the time displayed in the corner of the iPad in its docking station. Only a few tiny stacks of paper dared to clutter her glass-topped desk, with pictures of her family sprinkled in between. Images of Daddy, Aunt Kris, Walsh and Kerris, and now the beautiful babies, Brooklin and Harlim, filled the frames. The girls had about another month before they could come home, but Walsh, Meredith, and Mama Jess kept the pictures coming from the hospital. Jo made a note to ask her assistant Shaundra to clear her schedule so she could go back. She had made three brief visits since Kerris delivered a month ago, but it still didn't feel like enough. Thank God Mama Jess was staying up there to help Kerris for as long as she needed. Kerris had reunited with her former foster mother while she'd been pregnant with Amalie, and Mama Jess helped Kerris through the hard times after the baby died. And now she was there for Kerris again.

Maybe she should add pictures of Mama Jess and Meredith. The two women had come to feel like family. She'd made one exception for the family-only rule, but she could make another. Jo's eyes drifted to her one exception. The picture of Cam at the river one summer. The Walsh Foundation T-shirt strained across his strong chest while he hoisted two strings of fish he had caught. The wide, white smile against his tan would dazzle a susceptible female, but Jo no longer considered herself susceptible. She turned the photo facedown, tired of submitting herself to the torture of that smile.

Jo pressed the intercom on the phone just within reach.

"Shaundra, Cam Mitchell flies in tonight, right?"

"Yes, he flies in from New York, I believe. We're meeting later this week to discuss his exhibit."

Jo didn't respond, too focused on the arrhythmic slam of her heart. She hadn't seen Cam since that morning in New

York, leaving the preliminary exhibit discussions to Shaundra. He hadn't called Jo. She hadn't called him. She'd finally gotten the message, and when she saw him, there would be none of the heart-fluttering, mouth-watering-then-drying-out, palm-moistening, breath-hitching behavior that usually accompanied an encounter with Cam.

Ruthless.

That's what Jo had to be with her feelings. Like a weed in her garden that needed to be tugged and sprayed until its roots were pulled free of the ground and its body poisoned to nothing.

"Jo, did you hear me?" Shaundra stood at the open office door, her greenish-gray eyes narrowed in concern. "I said he'll be here tonight."

"I heard you." Jo scanned her spotless desk for something to toss out or straighten.

"You didn't answer."

"I got distracted."

Shaundra stepped farther into the room and settled into the sea-foam-green leather seat across from Jo's desk. Calming colors for a passionate nature. That's what Shaundra had said when she decorated the spare, elegant office where Jo got so much work done.

"Seems like you've been distracted all morning." Shaundra toyed with the end of one golden brown dreadlock spilling over her shoulder.

"There's a lot going on." Jo pulled up an email on her iPad, her fingers zipping across the wireless keyboard. She knew it was rude, but she didn't want to talk about why she seemed distracted.

"Shaundra, could you give me a few minutes to catch up before my next meeting?" Jo shifted her glance away from the iPad screen long enough to crinkle her eyes in an almost-smile but didn't give her assistant time to respond. "Thanks."

Shaundra unfolded her softly rounded figure from the seat and made her way to the door.

“Jo, if you need—”

“I will, Shaundra.” Jo trained her eyes on the cursor flashing its impatience, waiting for her to type the next line.

“You need coffee or...anything?”

Shaundra wasn't a worrier, but there was one wrinkle on the whole of her creamy-coffee-colored face. And Jo knew that small line between her brows was for her. She pulled her hands away from the keyboard and let them fall to her lap, giving her assistant and friend her full attention for the few seconds she could afford.

“I'm fine, Shaun. Really.”

“It's just that ever since you got back from New York that first time, you've been—”

“Busy,” Jo cut in, raising her brows to underscore that the conversation was coming to a close. “And I still am. Like I said, I need a little time to catch up.”

Jo felt Shaundra's eyes on her for a few more seconds but resumed typing, putting on her *I'm concentrating so hard right now* face to deter any more probes.

When Shaundra headed back to the outer office, Jo flopped back in her ivory leather chair. The lean, clean lines were deceptive. The chair might look hard, unyielding, uncomfortable, but it was practically squishy and enveloped the often-tense muscles of Jo's back like a marshmallow. Jo let her shoulders drop and pushed cool, calming air across her lips. She pulled her iPad off the docking station and laid it in her lap, pulling up a familiar album of photos.

Her heart squeezed around an emotion she didn't even have a name for when she flipped to the photo she pulled up at least once a day. An epic spread of white teeth nearly overtook the small face the color of cocoa beans. A smile so big and bright everyone around the little girl seemed to fade away, at least to

Jo. A wild, rough cloud of hair haloed the too-thin face. The child's clothes were simple and clean but would soon be raggedy. Never enough food. Disease-infested water. No parents. No home.

What do you have to smile about, little girl?

And yet it was that defiant joy that watered Jo's eyes and made her heart swell up in her chest like the freaking Grinch who stole Christmas.

"Everyone loves Tiki," a deep voice said from just above her shoulder.

Jo jumped in her seat, nearly dropping the iPad. She navigated back to her home page and redocked the tablet on her desk. She looked up at the tall man who had entered her office without sound enough to pull her attention from the picture.

"Peter, you startled me." Jo laid a hand over her heart, which pounded through the thin silk of her dress. "I was just looking at the first group of kids up for adoption."

"Can you believe it's finally happening?" Peter perched on the edge of her desk, his body broad but trim. His blue eyes swept over Jo's face, feature by feature until her cheeks warmed up. When was the last time she had blushed? But under Peter's affectionate focus, she did.

"How can I help you?" Jo leaned back and crossed one leg over the other.

Peter's eyes immediately dropped to the smooth line of calf and thigh on display when her dress, the tease, fell away. Jo willed herself not to fidget or shift. She wasn't some innocent girl unused to men's attention. She didn't typically seek it, but it never made her nervous. Men had been eyeing her body since she was fifteen years old. She barely noticed it anymore.

"Two things." Peter held up his middle and index fingers, a smile teasing the line of his lips above his neatly trimmed, dark blond goatee. "One, Camille and Josiah are coming to visit, probably early next year. I just got off the phone with her

assistant.”

“That’s great.”

Jo’s mouth took over her mood and smiled before she realized it. Camille Jameson, widow of the man murdered right in front of Walsh when he’d been kidnapped in Haiti, was a remarkable woman. Not only was Camille raising her son Josiah alone, but she also didn’t hesitate when Jo approached her about assuming a significant role in the foundation’s latest venture.

“She was the perfect choice to head up our private adoption efforts in Haiti.” Peter picked up a photo of the twins, grinning before setting it back down on the desk.

“Her visit could be perfect timing. Cam Mitchell has decided to hold his first art exhibit at Walsh House.” Jo studied her nude-colored manicure. “Considering how much attention he’s gained lately, might be some good publicity for our private adoption launch if we link the two. Maybe have Camille say a few words while all the cameras are there, if her visit coincides.”

“That’s a great idea.” Peter picked up the photo Jo had turned flat. “This is him, right? Cam?”

Jo didn’t even glance at the photo but kept her eyes on Peter’s handsome face and nodded.

“I’d heard he was close to your family, but to have his first exhibit here? Quite the coup.”

“He’s not just close to my family. He *is* family. I can’t think of a better place to introduce the private adoption launch than at his exhibit. Aunt Kris would be bursting with pride.”

“I’m not much of a tabloid guy, but I think I just saw him on the cover of one.”

“Really?” Jo measured out just enough casual and poured it all over her tone. “Interesting.”

“Yeah, apparently he’s seeing some French hotel heiress. Effie, Ellie, or—”

“Etty. Etinette Chevalier.” Jo uncrossed her legs and sandwiched her hands between her thighs and the leather seat. Sitting on her hands so she wouldn’t curl them into claws at the thought of Cam with that...girl. That spoiled, pink-haired...celebre-heiress...

“So you’ve heard the rumors?” Peter leaned forward a conspiratorial inch. “I heard she tattoos her lovers’ names on her body.”

“Aren’t you the gossipy busybody?” Jo teased Peter with her eyes for a moment before adding a smile. “I actually met her in New York. Cam was staying in her personal suite at the Chevalier.”

Peter whistled, low and suggestive.

“Guess the rumors are true.”

“I can’t confirm or deny anything because I don’t know—or much care, for that matter.”

Liar!

Jo fluffed the teal-patterned skirt of her Tracy Reese dress. “You said two things.”

“Huh?”

“You said you needed to discuss two things.” Jo perched an elbow on the back of her seat and slipped her feet out of the slingbacks she’d worn an hour beyond comfortable.

“Oh yes. The second thing.” Peter extended an arm, laying his hand flat on the desk for support. His blue eyes brightened even though his expression didn’t change. “I have tickets for the ballet tonight.”

“Score.” Jo reached down to massage the chafed spot just above her heel. “I didn’t know you liked ballet.”

“I don’t, but I heard you do.”

And there it was. The closest Peter had ever come to articulating the heat in his eyes when he watched her. The way he always conveniently ended up seated beside her in

meetings. The way he lingered in her office after they'd said all they needed to say.

“Peter, I—”

“Now, before you say no—”

“Yes.” Jo couldn't help but grin when Peter's face abandoned all the bluster he'd been working up to convince her. “I'd be delighted to go.”

“You'll go with me to the ballet tonight? Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“I expected...I don't know, to have to persuade you.”

“Why is that?” Jo tilted her head, toying with the fishtailed braid she had tamed her wild hair into today. “Aren't you one of Rivermont's most eligible?”

He really was. Like her, he came from a ridiculously wealthy family. Wealthy enough that he could indulge his philanthropic notions instead of training to run his father's lumber empire. Not to mention his Nordic good looks. Any other girl would have noticed long ago. Jo wasn't any other girl. And she hadn't been interested in anyone except...Her eyes strayed to Cam's picture, facedown again but still drawing her attention like a neon sign.

Peter leaned forward until only inches and breaths separated them.

“Not sure how eligible I am, but you weren't impressed. I've been watching you.” He chuckled, his minty breath reaching her lips. “There's no shortage of interested males, but you always manage to elude them.”

“And yet you waited until the day of the ballet to ask me. That was a pretty confident move.”

“A woman like you only responds to confidence, I think.”

Jo didn't blink but held his blue eyes with little effort.

Peter's hand wandered from her shoulder up her neck until

his thumb could stroke the line of her jaw.

“I’ll pick you up at six.” Peter dropped a quick kiss on her temple before striding out of the office.

Jo stood in the middle of her office long after Peter had gone. She couldn’t help but think it was exactly what she’d done for the last fifteen years. Stood still waiting for something that would never happen with Cam. She might not ever fully understand why, but did it really matter? Whatever she had imagined between them at Christmas, it could be diced and chucked along with all the other half-truths, innuendos, and veiled promises she’d misinterpreted through the years. It was time to move on. To forget the almost-thing they had practically been that one time or two...if she wasn’t mistaken. Yes, it was time to move on, and maybe Peter was her next move.

Chapter Eight

Peter, I had an amazing time tonight.” Jo clutched her clutch, tracing the raised *YSL* with her index finger.

“So did I, and I hate the ballet.”

Jo gave in to a grin, something she had been doing all night. Peter’s sense of humor held just the right amount of bite to be clever, but never cruel. He opened her car door, pulled out her chair, and actually listened when she soapboxed about foreign policy and human trafficking. He spoke the same languages she did. Belonged to the same clubs. Even drove the same freaking Land Rover. He was perfect for her. He made sense. He wanted her, and wasn’t afraid to show it.

“Would you like some coffee?” Jo thumbed at the door behind her. “Want to come in?”

“I’d like that very much.”

Peter’s eyes roamed down the gold shantung cocktail dress sheathing Jo’s curves from shoulder to knee, before making their way back up to her eyes.

Vera Wang, thank you vera much.

“Have I told you how absolutely beautiful you look in that dress?”

“Maybe four, five times, yes.” Jo loved that he didn’t flinch or even look embarrassed but shared a small smile with her. She pulled the key from her bag as she formulated her next words. “Peter, when I ask you in for coffee, it’s not a euphemism for anything else. It’s literally coffee.”

“I like my coffee literal. And I wouldn’t expect anything more.” He gave his own pause for effect. “Not on the first date, at least.”

Jo raised wide eyes but caught the little smirk giving him away. She slapped his arm with her clutch, laughing and

turning to open the door.

“You had me going there for a minute,” she said, ushering him into the foyer.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” His straight face just made her laugh more. “Now please point the way toward this literal coffee. It sounds delicious.”

“Jo, is that you?” her father called from the sitting room.

“Didn’t think Daddy would still be up.” She linked her elbow through Peter’s and pulled him with her. “Come see him.”

“Daddy, you remember Peter, he—”

Jo didn’t finish her sentence. She hadn’t expected to see Cam sitting across from her father, poised to steal his queen. Chess had always been their thing. You could never get Walsh to sit down long enough for a game of chess. Cam, though, despite the raw energy that snapped, crackled, and popped around him, especially when he was painting, could be downright restive. He and Daddy would play sometimes for hours. Maybe they were just getting started. She didn’t want to stick around long enough to find out.

“Sorry, Daddy. Didn’t realize you had someone with you.” She skidded her glance over Cam, making sure not to linger on the too-long hair tousled by his own fingers. A sure sign he and Daddy had been at it for a while. “Cam, welcome home. Shaundra thought you weren’t flying in until tomorrow.”

“She must have gotten the dates mixed up.” Cam’s eyes shifted between Jo and Peter. He bent his lips into a smile that would have fooled anyone else. Jo, though, knew every smile that had ever graced Cam’s face. This was his three-dollar-bill smile. He couldn’t pass it off on her as the real thing.

“Cam, this is Peter Halstead, director of our international adoption program.” Jo gestured between the two men. “Peter, Cam Mitchell. Cam’s like a...like a brother to me.”

Jo let the words settle in her mouth, weighing and testing

them. As a woman who valued truth above all else, the lie felt foreign and heavy on her tongue. But this lie was a necessary evil. The sooner she accepted that Cam would never be more than a brother to her, the better. And why not start with Peter and the ballet.

“I’ve seen your work. It’s brilliant.” Peter walked deeper into the room, extending his hand to Cam. “We’re all excited you’ll have your exhibit at the Walsh House.”

Cam eyed Peter as if he were a nail and Cam the hammer. He and Walsh always played Big Bad Brother with the men she dated. She’d once fooled herself into believing it was more for Cam. Maybe jealousy, but he’d quickly disabused her of that notion by sleeping with some girl from her dorm. Cam glanced from Peter’s hand back to the affable expression on his even features before, a mere hairsbreadth shy of rudeness, he accepted and shook.

“Thank you.” Cam glanced at Jo again, his dark brows lifted in a question. “Adoption program? You didn’t tell me you were branching out into adoptions.”

“We haven’t really spoken much lately, though, have we?” Jo tapped her clutch against her hip, shaping her face into indifference and holding Cam’s stare.

“True.” Cam nodded before turning back to Daddy, who had snatched yet another pawn. “So how was the ballet?”

Peter answered before Jo could.

“It was as astoundingly boring as I had anticipated.” Peter dropped amused eyes to Jo’s face. “And I got exactly what I wanted. A night with this beautiful woman, which made it completely worth it.”

Jo had pulled her mouth into a hard line as soon as she saw Cam sitting with her father. She could feel her mouth relaxing. Feel it yielding to a smile. Feel all that was held tight loosening a little. She *needed* to fall for this guy. It was as obvious as the sun in the morning and the moon at night. And yet her body and everything inside her was tuned to the dark-

haired man watching them when he wasn't watching the board.

"You're sweet, Peter." She tugged his elbow, giving him a grin for free. "Next time we'll do something you like."

"I like spending time with you, so that's a sure bet." He ran a finger down her cheek and dropped a kiss on her hair, pulling her hand to his and linking their fingers. "You mind if I pass on that literal coffee? Just realized we have an *early* conference call with the folks in Kenya."

"Oh, that's right," Jo said. "Forgot about that."

"Taking over the world again, sweetheart?" Her father asked the question without lifting his eyes from the chessboard, but the fond smile on his face was for her. She walked over to perch on the arm of his leather chair and gave him a quick kiss on his cheek.

"You know once we have Haiti up and running, we want to start with Kenya." She reached over her father and made a few deft moves, castling Cam's king without glancing his way once. "We've got the first kids in Haiti waiting."

Cam leaned back in the leather armchair, lacing his fingers over his chest, never looking up but considering his next move. She and Cam were the only ones who'd ever been able to match her father and Aunt Kris. She loved playing with him but wouldn't be indulging that anytime soon. He made a brilliant maneuver, looking up at her with "your move" sketched between his raised brows. Tempting as it was to engage with him, she stood and walked away, ignoring the unspoken invitation.

"I'll let you know how the Kenya call goes, Daddy," she said over her shoulder, relooping her elbow through Peter's. "The call is...what time again, Peter?"

"Seven o'clock."

"Oh, you *do* need to get home." She walked him back out of the study. "Night, gentlemen. I'm walking Peter out and then off to bed."

* * *

“He’s like a brother to me.”

Exactly the words Cam needed Jo to believe, but they had filleted him when she’d made the comment to the Ken doll fingering her face moments before. All Cam’s bodily functions had ground to a halt, completely immobilized by the sight of someone touching Jo intimately. Peter Halstead touched Jo like it was just the beginning. Like him stroking her face was merely a prelude to everything else he wanted to do to her. He’d pulled her close. He’d kissed her hair. He’d been subtly possessive.

“Head not in the game anymore?”

Cam wrenched his eyes from the doorway Peter and Jo had just gone through, forcing his attention back to the board, where his bishop was now imperiled.

“How...When...?”

“While you were distracted by my daughter and her date,” said James Walsh, or Unc as Cam and Walsh had always called him.

Cam ignored that. He was *so* not having this conversation. He considered his vulnerable bishop.

“I can still salvage this.”

“Yes, if you move fast, but Peter seems pretty determined to get the girl.”

Cam abandoned his focus face and narrowed his eyes at Jo’s father, who was conspicuously concentrating on the board between them.

“I meant the game.”

“I told you at Christmas what you should do.”

“And I told you then you were an awful father for pawning your daughter off on someone like me.”

“I’m an excellent father with a proven track record of

brilliance.” He shook his rook at Cam. “She’s dated worse.”

Cam didn’t have any response to that. He and Walsh had always guarded Jo like the family jewels. Not much trash had gotten past the front door, but once in a while, a prick or two had slipped in. Always quickly dealt with and dispatched.

“She deserves better than me.” Cam forced out the words he knew he needed to say. “She deserves someone like him.”

“You mean Peter?” Unc finally looked up from the board, his eyes, so uniquely silver like Jo’s, shrewd and knowing. “He’d be an excellent match for my daughter.”

Cam pressed his back teeth together, swallowed a snarl, and nodded.

“Too bad he’s not the one she wants.”

Cam rested his elbows on his knees and pushed his fingers through his hair. This dude...

“You saw what happened with Kerris. You know my history with women.” Cam opened and closed his fist. “Why, for the love of all that’s holy, would you keep encouraging me to pursue your daughter?”

“Because you’d never hurt her.”

“I bet Kerris thought I’d never hurt her, too.”

“I bet you thought Kerris would never hurt *you*.”

Touché to that. Cam *had* believed he and Kerris would be safe with each other. Two truly damaged, broken people who might not have the greatest love of all but would take care of each other. Maybe heal each other. But they’d emerged from that marriage with more scars than they had taken in.

“Things would be different with you and Jo. You wouldn’t hurt her. Not if you could help it.”

Unc’s voice was irrationally certain. Impossibly, mistakenly sure. That was the problem. Cam *couldn’t* help but hurt Jo. His control over everything seemed held together with Elmer’s glue and paper clips these days. Jo would be walking into a

powder keg if she got involved with him. He couldn't be that selfish. Not with Jo.

“Cam, what happened with Kerris was a comedy of errors, if you ask me. Jo has always been special to you. I thought this would have happened a long time ago.”

“What would have happened a long time ago?”

“That you'd stop fighting it.”

“I haven't stopped...there's nothing to fight.”

Unc used his eyes to connect the dots between Cam's clenched fist on his knee and his granite-hard jaw.

“Sorry. I must have been mistaken.”

They both went silent when the front door opened and closed. Jo coming in off the porch. She'd been out there for a long time. Images of her outside dry humping Peter against a porch rail buzzed around Cam's head like flies. He swatted at them, but they wouldn't leave him alone.

Unc stood and stretched, the Harvard T-shirt he wore with his khakis straining over his still-firm torso.

“I think I'll head on up.”

“And just check out of the game?”

“Oh, *I'm* checked out?” Unc leaned forward, moving a couple of pieces on the board. “Checkmate.”

“Wait. That's impossible.”

“You should have seen that coming three moves ago. Don't worry. I get it. You were...distracted.” He leaned back, peering into the hall. “Jo, glad you enjoyed your evening.”

Jo reappeared at the door, high heels hooked over her fingers.

“It was really nice.” She studied the shoes in her hand, a small smile playing around her full lips. “Peter's really nice.”

“He's a promising young man, that's for sure.” Unc crossed the room, stopping in front of Jo and giving her a quick kiss on

the cheek. “We’re lucky to have him working with us.”

Jo nodded, meeting Cam’s eyes for a millisecond before looking up at her father.

“You headed to bed? You guys done already?”

“Young Cameron wasn’t very focused. I felt awful taking him down, but there was nothing to be done for it.”

Cam offered a disgruntled snort from the comfort of his armchair.

“Tomorrow’s another day,” Unc said, heading toward the staircase.

“I’m not coming back tomorrow, old man.”

“That’s what you said yesterday.” His voice drifted back to Cam, fainter now that he was halfway up the stairs.

Jo stood there for a moment, like a beam of sunlight in her gold dress, hair crowning her head in some elaborate arrangement, and diamond studs sparkling in her ears. Her expression searched for some missing piece of the puzzle.

“You were here yesterday? I thought you’d just gotten in from New York.”

Because he had wanted her to think that.

“Yeah. Like I said, Shaundra must have gotten the dates mixed up.”

“I didn’t see you here at the house.”

“You were at work.”

He didn’t add he’d been coming just about every day this week while she was at the office. Unc was conveniently “working from home.” Tonight revealed that he was probably onto Cam’s avoid-Jo-at-all-costs strategy.

Jo nodded, one hand gripping her shoes and the other alternating between toying with the pins holding her hair precariously high and twisting the earrings in her ear.

“Aren’t those the earrings Ms. Kris gave you for your

seventeenth birthday?”

Jo’s face scrunched a little, her mouth making a small, plush O before snapping shut.

“I can’t believe you remember that.”

“I have a great memory.”

“No, you don’t.”

“You’re right. I don’t.” He didn’t leave space for her to ponder that admission or consider its implications. That maybe he remembered everything about her. “So you had a good time, huh?”

Jo caressed the gold leather of her shoe and trapped her bottom lip between her teeth for a moment before looking back at him.

“It was probably one of the best dates I’ve ever had.”

You asked, masochistic bastard.

“So you like this guy?”

“I like this guy a lot.”

Cam had no right to feel like a froth-mouthed rabid dog at the thought of some other man having Jo. He’d spent the last decade and a half doing everything in his power to convince her, without words, that they would never work.

Looked like she finally believed him.

And it was a stiletto twisting in his gut. Cutting through his good intentions. Slicing through flesh, tendon, sinew—until it reached the evil, selfish bone. He wanted to cut the gold confection right off Jo’s lean, curvy body. Snip it away from her lush ass and splay her on the desk. Spread her, eat her, consume her until she didn’t even know her name. Couldn’t even speak because pleasure stole her words, stole her breath, stole her reason. Show her what it really felt like to be possessed by a man who couldn’t keep his eyes off her, as hard as he’d always tried.

Who cared enough about her to keep his damn hands to himself.

It was much harder watching Jo ride off into the sunset with some other guy than he had thought it would be. Even one so obviously perfect for her. So obviously much better for her than *he* would be.

Cam stood and walked toward Jo, stopping just shy of her immediate orbit. The truth and a lie wrestled in his mouth until they both escaped through tight lips, sounding exactly the same.

“I’m glad.”

“He asked me out again tomorrow.” She tilted her head, considering him like a misbehaving theorem. “Should I go?”

Cam refused his face what it wanted—to frown, scowl, furrow, *squeeze* his displeasure out through each feature. Instead he freeze-dried all his emotions for later and blanked his expression.

“I can’t tell you what to do.”

Jo searched his face with those eyes, the color of the moon and as omniscient. So like Ms. Kris’s eyes. Not the color or the shape, but gifted with true sight. *Insight*. In her wisdom, surely Ms. Kris had seen the darkness that even now threatened to swallow Cam whole, but she had loved him in spite of it. And Jo had those eyes, too, only something had changed since he had so deliberately hurt her in New York with ETTY. Something in Jo’s heart was dying a slow but certain death. Probably the misplaced affection she’d held on to for years. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to place a pillow over its head or give it mouth-to-mouth. Kill or save. Alive or dead, it threatened his peace of mind.

He walked past her to the door and onto the sprawling front porch, not stopping when he heard her bare feet crossing the foyer behind him. He pointed to the bank of buildings adjacent to the house.

“My motorcycle’s in the garage.”

“You’ll be home for a while?”

Home? Was this still home? He’d come here hoping to recapture some feeling. The safeness, the rightness he’d experienced here once upon a time. But nothing felt right. If anything, the dreams had gotten worse and the nights longer since he returned.

It didn’t feel right. It didn’t feel safe. It didn’t feel like home.

“For the most part until the exhibit. I’ll see you when...I see you.”

“Will you? See me, I mean.”

Her words at his back pulled him around to face her. Jo tucked one foot against her ankle, leaning a shoulder against a sturdy column, arms folded across her chest.

“Seems to me,” she continued, “you didn’t see me for six months after Christmas. Then another month since New York. No telling how long it will be this time. You used to like me.”

“I’ve got an idea.” Cam took a few steps backward in the direction of the garage, his motorcycle, and escape. “Why don’t we pretend this conversation never started?”

“Why would we do that?”

“Because of how pointless it would be.”

“Are we going to ever have an honest conversation, Cam?”

“We’re always honest with each other.”

“I used to think so, but lately...”

Jo dropped her eyes to her feet, shaking her head and dislodging one rebel curl, which broke free from the rest. Cam walked back up, stopping one step below Jo so they were eye level. He lifted her chin, trusting himself with only that much of her.

“Jo, I know things have been...strange between us lately.”

He waited for her nod. She met his eyes, and he hated

seeing her tears. He slid his fingers from her chin to cup her jaw. He'd only seen Jo cry a few times in all the years he had known her. Didn't she know by now he wasn't worth it?

He thumbed the wetness at the corner of her eye.

"Jo, don't. Things will get back to normal soon."

Her fingers caged his hand against her face. She raised tear-spiky lashes, and he wished she'd kept this vulnerability to herself.

"What if I don't want things to go back to normal?"

Cam stepped back down the steps until her hand had no choice but to let him go. He found his keys in his pocket and tossed them in the air, catching them a few times, taking care with his answer.

"Peter seems like a good guy. You *should* go on that date."

She drew a sharp breath like his words had slid between her ribs, before expelling it in a long exhale. She blanched like a white flag. Surrender and resolve settled like sediment on her face, layer by layer until her thoughts were completely buried alive, and he had no idea what she was thinking. Was left only with what she said.

"You're right. Peter is perfect for me. I don't know why I even hesitated."

"Well, as sappy as it sounds, sometimes we don't know our hearts, I guess."

"Oh, I know my heart. Now I just know better."

He barely recognized her face, covered with this sparkling new indifference. He had put distance between them. Deliberately. Cruelly. Mercifully. It had taken him hours to undo damage the light flirtation with Etty in front of Jo had done. That girl had clung for a week, and he'd barely convinced her he still wanted only friendship, but it had been worth the trouble. If it convinced Jo once and for all that he was a triple-A asshole, then it was worth it. He should get out of here before she lost that. He walked toward his bike like the

devil had a warrant for his arrest. This time, she didn't try to stop him.

Chapter Nine

Jo spread peanut butter on white bread. Her eating was all shot to hell. And she'd skipped her run this morning.

That ass won't keep itself in check.

Ignoring her inner fit bitch, she sliced up bananas and laid them across her not-wheat bread and her full-fat peanut butter. Cam had introduced them to peanut butter and banana sandwiches the first time he'd spent the night. She and Walsh had devoured them, going through an entire loaf of bread in one sitting. Cam had a whole list of sandwiches he'd used to survive in Barfield projects.

Ah, the good old days. When things were slightly less complicated. As she had expected, she hadn't heard from nor seen Cam since her first date with Peter two weeks ago. Shaundra was coordinating everything with Cam's agent Sebastian for now, leaving Cam to "create."

Meredith's "Wild Thing" ringtone made Jo grin, as usual. She answered, using Bluetooth to keep her hands free.

"Hey, Mer. What's up?"

"I should ask you that," Meredith said, her words slightly distorted by whatever food she'd shoved in her mouth. "You're the one with a new boyfriend."

"You mean Peter?" Jo paused in slicing her banana, allowing herself a small frown. "He's not my boyfriend. He's just a friend."

"But you say he's just a friend!" Meredith sang the Biz Markie classic before continuing in her usual deceptively light voice. "A friend who takes you to the ballet, to the opera, to concerts, fancy dinners."

"Peter's a great guy, but I've been very clear that I need to take things really slowly."

“You might wanna tell your libido that before you Forrest Gump yourself into a size zero.”

“Excuse me?” Jo abandoned the sandwich altogether, plopping onto the leather stool and leaning her elbows on the marble island countertop.

“You think I don’t know you run like a million miles a day to keep that sex drive under control?”

Well, damn. It had taken Jo months to make the connection.

“Barking up the wrong tree, Mer. I just like to run.”

“Oh, yeah, right. And all that knitting.” Meredith smacked her lips together, clearly disgusted. “If I get one more scarf, hat, or glove from you in the middle of July, I swear!”

Jo couldn’t help but laugh, even though her cheeks heated up. So she needed hobbies to keep herself from combusting.

“Knitting is a very constructive and satisfying pastime. I will share the fruit of my labor with someone more appreciative.”

“Look, unless you are a helluva lot kinkier than I thought, a knitting needle won’t satisfy you.”

“Gross, Mer.” Even alone in the house, Jo buried her head in her folded arms on the counter to hide her face. “Just...no.”

“All I’m saying is you’re dating this strapping Viking. He’s obviously got it bad for you. He wants to screw you. You need to be screwed. Badda-bing, badda-bang.”

“No badda-banging. I like Peter a lot, but I’m not ready for that, and he knows it.”

“To me, it’s simple, sexy math. Your one plus his one equals you less horny and knitting me fewer muffs.”

There wasn’t anything *simple* about the situation Jo found herself in. Did she find Peter attractive, witty, considerate, intelligent? The perfect package?

Absolutely.

Could she make herself forget the brooding man who seemed determined to push her away at every turn and make her life a living hell of unrequited torture?

So far, no.

“It’s been a long day, Mer. Can I go now?”

“Oh, because you have soooo much to do tonight. Your daddy’s out of town. So you’re home alone. Unless Mrs. Quentin is there and prepared a gourmet meal for you?”

Jo glanced at the pitiful sandwich on a paper towel in front of her. Her taste buds weren’t thirteen anymore, and they weren’t impressed.

“Q is actually out of town, too.” Jo pulled the crust off her bread and glanced around the kitchen to see if there was a casserole or a loaf of something she had overlooked. “Her aunt in Arkansas died, and she’s attending the funeral.”

“Poor little rich girl home alone. Get some rest, then.”

“We running in the morning?”

“Six o’freakin’ clock again?” Meredith moaned. “You know things happen once the sun is up, too.”

“Meet me at the park, or I’ll come get you.”

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re bossy?”

“Yeah, I told them to shut up or I’d fire them.”

“Must be nice.”

“It is rather.” Jo swiveled on the stool, tugging at the shorts that kept inching up. “Guess what I’m wearing.”

“Don’t you have a Neiman Marcus in your bedroom? How am I supposed to guess what you have on? It could be anything.”

“But it’s not. It’s your Christmas gift to me.”

“That’s my girl. Of course you would wear them when nobody’s home.”

“No one will *ever* see me in these shorts.”

“I have a matching pair, you know. Maybe I should wear them out tonight.”

“Okay, but don’t call me to bail you out of jail or a brothel or wherever those shorts land you.”

“Did you just say the word *brothel*? There are words from this century at your disposal.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. I bid you adieu.”

“Also, there’s English.”

“Bye, Mer.”

Jo found herself smiling after they hung up. Meredith might be brash and crazy, but they were friends. Jo hadn’t had many of those. Genuine friends who wanted to know her for herself. Who liked her not because of the Walsh name and fortune, but just as herself. Especially not girlfriends. She, Cam, and Walsh had been the Three Musketeers once. Now...

Jo glanced around the empty kitchen, hearing nothing but her own sighs and the hum of the industrial refrigerator. Maybe she’d binge-watch all the *Vikings* episodes piling up in her DVR. She could knit while she watched, even though she probably wouldn’t make it through one episode without falling asleep. Waking up at four o’clock this morning was kicking her quickly spreading butt.

Just as she was about to force herself to her feet to watch television in the home theater, a key turned in the back door off the kitchen. Daddy and Mrs. Quentin were out of town. Walsh was in New York. The only other person with a key to the house was...

“Cam, what are you doing here?” Jo adjusted the thin strap of the camisole that kept sliding down her shoulder.

Cam walked in, wearing his standard uniform of battered jeans, Chuck Taylors, and inappropriate T-shirt. Today’s message: THAT’S WHAT SHE SAID. The dark hair fell around his ears, even longer than the last time she had seen him. Her

stupid heart executed a perfect-ten somersault at the sight of him.

He placed a white bag on the island and leaned back against the countertop, crossing one arm over the other. Did he even realize his eyes wandered up and down her body, leaving lava-grade heat in their wake? Over the legs left bare by her micro-shorts. Over her collarbones and shoulders. Lingering on her braless breasts under the camisole. She was dressed to be home alone, not for company.

“Unc and I are supposed to grill tonight and play some chess.” Cam glanced at the watch strapped to his wrist. “He said seven o’clock. He’s not home yet?”

“He’s not home...at all.” Jo crossed her legs, intrigued to see Cam follow the movement closely before fixing his eyes back on his shoes. “There must have been some mix-up. Daddy’s in Chicago for a Walsh Foods emergency board meeting. He must’ve forgotten to tell you or something.”

Cam rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“Or something.”

“Well, he’s not here, so I guess you can be on your way.”

Her very pores absorbed him like water, but she refused to ask him to stay. Refused to tell him she had missed him.

He nodded toward her little-sandwich-that-could on the paper towel.

“You in the poorhouse? That the best you can do?”

“It’s been a long day, and Q is out of town at a funeral.”

The quiet pressed against Jo’s ears until she thought her head would burst. She and Cam had literally talked until the sun came up more than once. And now...all they had was this weirdness. Even though only a few feet separated them, it may as well have been a continent. Jo squeezed her fist around the stiffening bread crust, desperate to hold on to anything when everything else seemed to be slipping away.

“It’s kind of silly for you to eat that pathetic sandwich when I have fresh steaks from the butcher.”

“I don’t really feel like grilling. I’m exhausted.”

“Well, I had planned to do the grilling for me and Unc.” Cam focused on some point over her shoulder. “I could grill the steaks and you could rest.”

“You’d do that for me?”

Cam shifted his eyes from over her shoulder to stare at her for a few silent seconds. He looked down at the terra-cotta tile beneath his feet.

“You used to know I’d do anything for you, Jo.”

Jo wanted to leap across the space separating them and claw Cam’s eyes out. To knee him in the groin like he’d taught her to do. She refused to decode his mixed messages and read tea leaves in every conversation. She would take him at face value. Anything else would just make things more complicated and leave her confused and paralyzed.

“Steak would be great. I’m going to my room to lie down for a few minutes.”

She didn’t even acknowledge his last statement. Just stood up and headed toward the back stairs that led to the next level. His indrawn breath drew her curiosity. His wide eyes were pinned to her bottom.

Oh, crap! She’d forgotten about the scandalous shorts Meredith had given her for Christmas. BACK DOOR ACTION stretched across her rear end. Jo swung around to face him, cupping her butt, one cheek in each hand, mouth falling open.

“Um...I can explain.”

“No need.” Cam’s voice, rough as a Brillo pad, scratched at the air around Jo. “But maybe you could change for dinner?”

The muscle in Cam’s jaw flexed and contracted each time he grit his teeth. He ran one hand over his face and around the back of his neck. He dug around in his pockets. All signs that

her attire might be disturbing him.

Well, let him be rattled.

Jo, calm as a breeze, turned around and added some sway to her walk. Let him stew. He'd been mangling her emotions all these years. If arousing him with a pair of illegal-in-some-states shorts was her only revenge, so be it. She took each step slowly, feeling his eyes on her all the way.

“Change?” Jo wondered aloud for his benefit. “But this is so comfortable. I'll think about it.”

Chapter Ten

Cam placed the steaks on plates, accessorizing the perfectly grilled meat with a rainbow of grilled vegetables. Unc had taught him well. If painting didn't work out, there was a future for him in grilling. Hopefully, Jo would agree.

He'd called her a few minutes ago on the intercom and gotten no answer. As much as he dreaded it, he would have to go to her room and wake her up. He still needed a cold shower after seeing those stripper shorts she'd worn earlier. He pleaded with the patron saint of erections that she had changed clothes. He wasn't sure how much more he could "down boy" his cock before things got embarrassing.

How many times had he entered her bedroom without a thought? Now he'd rather perform a root canal *on himself* than open this door. He knocked, leaving his hand on the doorknob while he waited.

No answer.

Well, damn.

Cam opened the door a centimeter at a time and padded across the huge area rug. Jo's suite included an elegant sitting room, decorated in clean, modern lines with the cool colors she favored. Pictures of him and her family topped the surfaces and graced the walls. He paused in front of the fireplace where a photo of Jo and Ms. Kris hung. The two faces, so much alike, outshone the sun setting into the river behind them. If there was a God, and sometimes Cam believed there had to be, He had loaned these two angels to the earth.

To him.

He'd already lost one, and Jo's light in his life dimmed more every time he shoved her away.

He could see into her bedroom through the open door. She lay curled into a scantily clad knot on the huge bed. Her hair

rioted around her, like hot chocolate spilled against the cool green of the divan. He glanced around at the personal minutia of her space. The dress she'd apparently worn to work today lay on the gray-green leather love seat, and a pair of strappy heels stood at attention on the floor.

He made his way into her room and just watched her for a few moments. She must be exhausted to sleep through the intercom, his knock on the door, and him walking around. She worked too hard. He suspected everyone had shoved her feet into Ms. Kris's impossibly large designer shoes, expecting her to take up where her aunt had left off. With more competence and grace than even she had probably known she possessed, Jo had stepped into those shoes and impressed everyone. Expanding programs Ms. Kris had started. Venturing into vistas the board hadn't even considered. Jo handled things. She took care of people. And for the first time, Cam admitted to himself how much *he* wanted to take care of *her*. To be a person, a place where she could relax and refuel and receive the unconditional acceptance she had always extended to him.

Cam shut his eyes, castigating himself for even the thought. He kept leaving that gate open. The gate locking away his emotions, his thoughts...his dreams about Jo. He'd known since he'd first met her at camp all those years ago that someone like Jo needed a guy he could never be. And he'd been stuffing these damned urges away ever since. He'd dated other girls, fucked other girls. Hell, even married one. But this had never really gone away, as much as he'd hidden it from everyone.

Most of the time, hidden it from himself.

But things kept slipping. Not only the guard he'd kept on his feelings for Jo, but also the horrors of his childhood visited him now every night. That monster, that demon, had been consigned to hell, but he somehow kept slithering into Cam's dreams.

Yeah, things kept slipping. No way could he give in to these feelings when his hold on...things...on himself was this shaky.

Jo stirred, drowsiness clearing from her eyes. She didn't realize he was there yet. She sat up and the strap of her camisole slipped down her arm. She bundled the wild hair tumbling around her shoulders into a fist. Glancing to the right, she jumped and yelped a little when she saw him.

“Cam, good grief! You scared me. Geesh.”

“Sorry.” He took a cautious step in her direction. “I called you on the intercom and I knocked. Guess you were pretty tired.”

“Yeah.” She threw her legs over the side of the bed, feeling around with her bare feet for something. “The time difference in Kenya is killing me. We had another really early call.”

Cam spotted a pair of leather flip-flops under the love seat. He grabbed them and squatted in front of Jo, slipping them onto her feet. His fingers skimmed the smooth skin of her ankle, lingered at her soft heel before he stood back up. Her eyes, wide with surprise, locked with his.

“I'm sorry.” He took another step back. “I just realized you were looking for your shoes and I...”

You knelt at her feet like a servant and put her shoes on for her. And then you copped a foot-feel. Perv.

“It's um...it's fine.” Jo pushed off the bed, tugging at the shorts, which couldn't be much longer than her panties. If she could even wear panties with those.

Please change clothes. Please change clothes. Please change clothes.

He wouldn't ask again. That would alert her to how turned on he was.

Like your dick at half-mast won't send that memo.

He turned toward the door, crossed the sitting room, and tossed words back to her.

“Dinner's ready.” He paused at the threshold into the hall. “It's cooled off outside some. Thought it'd be nice to eat in the

gazebo by the river.”

Silence answered him. That had been Ms. Kris’s favorite way to eat dinner, especially on summer evenings.

“I haven’t eaten down there since Aunt Kris got sick.” Jo’s voice barely cleared a whisper. “I’d like that a lot.”

* * *

If he had hoped perfectly grilled red meat, crisp summer vegetables, and the quaint setting would ease things between them, he had been wrong. The fairy lights decked the gazebo in twinkles, but nothing about their conversation sparkled. Clanking dishes. Chewing and swallowing. Sipping. Those were the only sounds. The gazebo was a lovely cell and awkwardness their warden.

Jo finally laid down her steak knife, pushed her plate away, and took one more sip of her cabernet before standing and moving over to the gazebo bench. She folded her legs up, wrapped her arms around them, and laid her forehead against her knees.

“I’m tired of this, Cam.” Jo’s words were smashed against her knees, but the message was still clear. “So tired.”

“Of what?” He was coward enough to hold on to these last few seconds before she forced him to make hard choices. To say hard things.

“Of this thing that we almost are, never were.” She turned until her back was against the gazebo wall and she faced him, feet flat on the floor. Eyes pinned to him. “That we could be, if you’d let us.”

“Jo, that can’t happen.”

She blinked a few times in quick succession. Maybe she hadn’t expected him to face it head-on. Couldn’t blame her when he’d been running from this conversation, from this moment for months. Maybe for years. He had to stop running long enough to let her go. To really let her go so she would realize he wasn’t for her.

“Why not?”

The fairy lights teased out the caramel streaks in the dark hair falling past her shoulders. Her posture, always so straight, bent toward him. Begging him to bend, too, like a displaced goddess asking a mere mortal for permission. For direction. He couldn't stand it.

“I'd hurt you, Jo.” He swallowed, throat and mouth dry despite the wine he still tasted.

“You mean...sexually? Like you're into kinky stuff?”

An ill-timed laugh slipped past his lips. With her flushed cheeks, licked-wet lips, and want-wide eyes, Jo looked like she might be up for that.

“No. Well, maybe sometimes, but that's not what I meant.” He caressed the blade of his steak knife, contemplating how much he should say. “There is a lot you don't know about me, Jo.”

“I know you.” She leaned her elbows on her knees, her face so earnest and sure. “I've known you over half our lives. We've known each other since we were little more than children.”

Cam hadn't been a child by the time he'd met Jo. He'd mimicked innocence. He'd domesticated himself to fit in, but he had always known a full-grown beast lurked just beneath the surface. And lately, that beast had been scratching at the lining of his belly. Clawing to get out. Famished. Feral. Furious.

On a leash that kept slipping.

He had hoped to keep Jo. To have her on his terms. Friendship. Relegating her to the edges of his life. To a safe periphery, but she kept coming. Kept pushing. Kept *loving* him. He knew that. He could admit to himself that he knew. That it frightened and thrilled him equally.

He got up and walked over to the gazebo bench, squatting in front of her. Taking her hands between his. He looked into

her watching, waiting eyes.

“Jo, you want something I can’t ever give you.”

Pain tweaked her features, making her mouth tremble and her eyebrows bunch up.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You son of a bitch. What the hell do you think you’ve been doing all these years?” Jo stood up, charging to the far side of the gazebo and swinging around to face him. “You think it didn’t hurt when you turned me down for the Sadie Hawkins dance? When you screwed one of my dorm mates? When I planned your *wedding* because I thought Kerris would make you happy?”

Cam had no words. It had all happened. It had all hurt. It was all true. He waited for more vitriol. More fire and fury, but like an invisible hand had swiped all the emotion from her face, Jo’s expression smoothed and hardened into a resin of resolve.

“You know what, you’re right.” She shook her head, hands retracted into tight fists at her side. “Get out of my life. We’ll do this exhibit and then have no contact. None whatsoever.”

He knew it was for the best, but having her *evict* him from her life stung like a wasp.

“And you know what I’m gonna do, Cam?” She held one finger in the air, a fake *Eureka!* all over her face. “I’m going to date Peter. I’m going to fuck Peter. I’m going to marry Peter. Would that make you happy?”

No. No. No.

Cam sprang to his feet, but stopped himself from walking to her. He just looked at her, allowing her the privilege of ripping more holes in him with her sharp words.

“But before you go, you’re going to do one thing for me.” The resolve slid around on her face for a moment before she locked it back into place. “You’re going to tell me something real.”

Something real might break him. The emotions, the urges, the desires under these protective layers would change everything. And if Jo scented any of it, she'd never let it go.

“Jo, I got nothing.”

“Well, let me tell you something real, you coward.” Jo's words squeezed around his neck like a choking hand. “I would have done anything for you. I *have* done anything for you. I wanted you to be my first date. My first kiss. My first lover. And you could have been. *We* could have been, if you'd had the balls to take me. But you didn't want me.”

“Jo, I'm sorry.”

“You know what I'm sorry about?” The anger in her voice slumped into a sob. A sniffle. A broken cry that wrecked her face. “I'm sorry I didn't kick you out of my life sooner. I'm done with you. Done with this game you keep playing. You make me feel foolish. Like some idiot girl with a crush. I am *not* that girl. And you reduce me to that.”

“I don't mean to.” The urge to hold her, to touch her, scalded his hands until his fingers twitched. He dropped his eyes to the gazebo floor. “I don't want that.”

“I'm not doing this anymore.” Tears wet her words and broke his heart. “Just go. I finally got the message. You don't want me.”

Her last words fell apart as the tears took over. Cam glanced up, and what he saw ripped his heart right down the blackened middle. Jo stood, shoulders shaking, lips clamped together imprisoning a sob, a hand covering her eyes like she couldn't stand to watch him walk away. His heart and his will had been circling one another for so long over this girl, now a woman. His will had ruled, barely, pulling his heart into line. Cam felt the shift in power, and there was nothing he could do to stop this act of sedition. The weariness that sets in when you forget what you're fighting for, or when surrender looks too sweet, was his undoing.

His heart rebelled and he turned and walked over to Jo. He

stopped just inches from her, both hands taking hold of her face, hot with her tears. He dipped his head until his lips rested right next to her ear. He pushed one hand into her hair and slid the other down her arm, lacing their fingers.

“Not want you?” He inhaled the scent buried beneath her hair. “I fight myself not to take you.”

Jo stiffened, uncovering her eyes and blinking up at him, uncertain surprise flitting across her face. She pulled her lips into her mouth. She reached up, pushing a chunk of hair behind his ear, tracing a finger over his eyebrows before touching his mouth.

She rose on her toes, straining up until her breath, her words misted his lips:

“Stop fighting and kiss me.”

“I can’t.” Even as he said it, his hands, vagabonds wandering from her arms to her waist and her hips, cupped her butt, drawing her so close she wouldn’t be able to escape how hard he was. “I’m not good, Jo. There are things you need to know that I’m not ready to tell you.” Cam dropped his head to the velvety skin between her neck and shoulder. He feathered kisses up to her ear and whispered, “Be sure.”

Jo pulled back, gripping his face between her hands, resting her elbows against his chest, and holding his eyes captive with hers.

“I am.”

He ignored his conscience, that voice that had told him from day one he could never be good enough for someone like Jo, and he did it.

He kissed her.

Chapter Eleven

At thirteen years old, Jo had fantasized about her first kiss. In her mind, it would be with Cam. She had practiced on her pillow and French-kissed her hand. She had positioned herself just so during Spin the Bottle, but Cam's bottle had never landed on her. He'd never even hinted that he'd wanted to kiss her, that he fantasized about her, too. So all she'd had were daydreams. And in those daydreams, Cam nibbled at her lips. Slipped his tongue into her mouth, shy as she was. He was gentle and careful.

This was not that kiss.

This kiss was made of sweet smoke and embers. It sizzled on her lips and seared her senses until she could only feel and taste and touch and see him. The whole universe whittled down to this man completely possessing her with a kiss. Sucking her tongue into his mouth. Pulling her lips between his teeth for tantalizing bites.

Cam walked them backward with slow, measured steps until he eased onto the bench, never leaving space between their mouths. He pulled her bare legs to either side of his hips, pressing against her back until her breasts were crushed against his chest. He lowered his head, nudging the straps of her camisole aside with his lips and sucking on her naked shoulder. Jo moaned, tipping her head back until her hair rained between her shoulder blades. Cam pushed the camisole down around her waist and pulled her breast into his greedy mouth. With every pull of his lips and tongue, she rolled her hips against him, a steady, sensual syncopation that shoved Jo over the edge. She took shelter against his chest, gripping his neck, huffing hot air into the collar of his shirt. Her thighs tightened around his hips, and her body released in shivers and whimpers and shudders.

She stilled little by little, falling against him, limp and pliant. Cam pushed her hair behind her shoulders, raining

kisses over her collarbones and nipples until they peaked and begged for his mouth again. He suckled at her, sliding his hands inside her shorts, squeezing her butt and urging her against him.

“Cam, I just—”

“I know.” He looked up, anointing her nipples with his words. “It was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I want it again and again and again.”

Joy pooled at the bottom of her soul and bubbled up until she couldn’t contain it. It spiraled through her chest and erupted from her lips. She slid her fingers into Cam’s hair, holding him still while *she* possessed *him*. Licking into his mouth, kissing down his chin, sucking at his neck. Marking him as hers.

“Let me stay tonight.” His voice, dark and husky, settled around them in the gazebo, harmonizing with the quiet swoosh of the river just beyond the bank.

“I’d like that.” She kissed down his neck, brushing his hair behind his ears. “Just so you know, I’ve never, um...it usually takes more than that for me to...well, let’s just say I’ve never been that responsive.”

Cam’s chuckle vibrated into her chest. He pulled up the straps of her camisole, leaving a chaste kiss on each shoulder.

“Good to know.”

“Cam, I’m serious. I’ve never...What *was* that?”

“*That* is what I was afraid of.” Cam brushed his fingers down her cheek, across her lips, down her arm. He lifted her wrist to his lips. “I knew it would be like that for us.”

Jo slapped his chest, causing him to rear back, wearing his *what-was-that-for* face.

“And you wait seventeen years to give me *that*?”

Cam grinned, passing his hands up and down her arms.

“I suspected it would be intense for us, but I didn’t ever

plan to find out for sure.”

“Cam, why?” Jo scooted off his lap, landing beside him on the bench, grabbing his hand and studying his profile. “Why waste so much time?”

Cam looked down at their joined hands, stroking Jo’s thumb with his.

“I have a lot to tell you.” He looked up, the plea forming on his face before he voiced it. “But not tonight. It can wait. I just want us to enjoy tonight.”

After that little episode, so did Jo. She hadn’t dry humped anyone in a long time, and it had never been like that. She stood to her feet, eager to clear the dishes and get Cam in her long-too-cold-and-lonely bed. He stood and grabbed around her waist from behind.

“I’m staying tonight, but I want us to take things slow.” He kissed behind her ear. “I mean...with sex.”

Jo turned in his arms, tucking away her disappointment.

“Of course. What’s the rush?”

“Don’t you want to ask why I want to take it slow? I mean, after what just happened? And considering how it’s always been for me...I mean, with women.”

“You’ll tell me when you’re ready, right?” Jo traced the lettering on his T-shirt with her index finger.

“Sex is complicated for me. There are times when I can take it or leave it and times when I have to have it or I think I’ll die.”

“Um...extreme, but okay.”

“It’s not about the sex itself, or even the person. It’s usually connected to something I’m running from. Or hiding from. It comes from the wrong place. With you, I just want it to be...right. And the frame of mind I’m in now, I’m not sure what it would be about.”

He wrapped his fingers around the back of her neck and

stretched his thumb up to trace her eyebrow and stroke across her cheekbone.

“And I just want it to be about you. To be...pure. Does that sound crazy?”

It sounded perfect and so sweet. In her fantasies of them together, it had been nothing like this. Hot, yes. But this tender, no. The way Cam looked at her like she might break. The way he pressed his hand to the small of her back when they went down the gazebo steps. And peeled her camisole and shorts off her without even copping a feel. Just pulled her nightie down over her naked curves and pulled her to the bed. And *spooned* her, his sinewy arms wrapping around her and his chin tucked between her head and her shoulder. He was sweeter and more tender than even she had suspected or known.

And it made her wonder—was Cam right about her not really knowing him? What else didn't she know?

Chapter Twelve

Cam massaged his temples, seated on the floor with his back to the love seat in Jo's suite, elbows to knees and head in his still-trembling hands. It had been so real. Like it was happening all over again. The cheap, pungent cologne trapped in his nostrils. The big, calloused hand pressing his neck into the weathered wood of the table beneath his cheek. The steady scratch of the table legs scraping across the linoleum floor with each violent movement, all the more vile because of the sun shining through the kitchen window. In broad daylight.

And the pain.

God, the pain, splintering up his back and puncturing him from behind.

Cam curled his bare toes into the plush area rug. He knotted his fists at the base of his neck, rubbing the tight muscles there, and brushed the sweat from his face.

He had to pull it together before Jo got back from her run with Meredith. If he was going to be with Jo, he had to fix this. Figure out how to get rid of these damn dreams. He sniffed at his T-shirt. Did he smell like him? Was it his imagination that the nasty, cloying scent had somehow crossed space and time and infected the fibers of his clothing again? Cam ripped the shirt over his head and tossed it across the room. He strode to the bathroom, shedding his jeans and stepping into Jo's gargantuan shower.

The water wasn't hot enough. Nothing could wash away the filth. Those hands on his shoulders. Sweat dripping from above into his hair. Spittle on his face. God, he couldn't get clean. He barely noticed his chest and arms reddening under the scalding water and the vigorous scraping of his nails. He sank to the shower's stone bench, pulling one knee up and enfolding it with his arm. The hot water wasn't nearly as scorching as the shame these memories burned into him every

time they paid him a nocturnal visit.

“Cam!” Jo’s voice, bordering on urgent, already concerned. “Are you here?”

Cam swallowed over his aching vocal cords. He’d awakened with screams running up his throat and fleeing his mouth. He turned off the shower, stepped out, and grabbed a towel from the hook by the door, knotting it around his hips.

“I’m in here. In the bathroom.” He prayed he sounded normal, even though he didn’t feel it yet. Couldn’t reach it yet.

Jo waved at the thick-as-soup steam filling the room.

“Good grief. Was the water set on hot as hell?” She stopped in her tracks, her eyes resting on his bare torso. “What happened to you?”

“Huh?” He looked down at himself. His arms and chest glowed red, angry lines striping him where his nails had dug in. “Oh, I guess I was...the water must have been too hot.”

“I have some ointment we can—”

“It’s fine, Jo. Leave it.”

“No, really.” Jo walked over to open the medicine cabinet. “I know I have some.”

“I said drop it.” Cam’s sharp voice sliced through the steam.

Jo looked over her shoulder, still facing the medicine cabinet.

“Jo, I didn’t mean to snap at you. It’s just...Leave it, okay?”

Jo faced him, leaning against the bathroom counter. She pulled her headband off and the elastic holding her hair hostage. She fiddled with them both before wrapping them around her wrists and looking him in the eye.

“Did you...did you scratch yourself like that, Cam?”

Jo would never understand not feeling clean. Like in-your-

bones, under-your-skin dirty. Beyond-scalding-water dirty. One day in and he was already giving her reason to regret taking a chance on him. She'd think he was crazy if he told her he smelled that monster's cologne on his shirt, on his skin, in his hair. The man was dead.

“Maybe I'm having some allergic reaction.”

He walked over to her, tightening the knot on his towel as he went, until he stood directly in front of her. He swept her mass of hair over one shoulder, leaning down to kiss behind her ear.

“Good morning.” He smiled when she shivered from his breath in her ear. His responsive girl. “Did you have a good run?”

“Yeah. It was fine.” Her words sounded light and airy.

He took a step closer until the water from his chest dampened the fabric of her running top. He ran his finger along his new favorite body part, Jo's collarbone. So delicate, like elegant dashes just under her skin.

“And now I'm getting you”—he kissed her ear and brushed his hand over her bottom, down her thigh, and gently gripped —“all wet.”

She lowered her long, curly lashes until they rested on her cheeks.

“Are you trying to distract me with that beautiful body, Cameron Mitchell?”

Wow, the full name. And, yes, he had been, but he'd forgotten Jo wasn't one of these girls he could bat his lashes at and turn her mind to mush.

“Me?” He touched the chest riveting Jo's eyes. “I distract you?”

He stepped back, turned on his heel, and walked toward the bathroom door.

“Good to know,” he said, giving her a wicked grin over his

shoulder. “I’m going to cook breakfast. You should probably shower. Don’t you have a meeting?”

Jo just looked at him for a moment through the steam still floating in the bathroom. Without a word, she pulled her top over her head and did a slow peel of her running shorts over her hips and legs. Cam’s mouth fell open. That was the last thing he’d expected her to do. She stood tall and naked and absolutely perfect, the steam curling lovingly around her long, lean body and clinging to the lush curves, concealing as much as it showed.

“Now who’s distracted?”

She walked over to the shower, turned the water on, got in, grabbed a sponge, and started soaping her body in long swipes.

“I don’t need much in the way of breakfast, but there is some Walsh Foods turkey bacon in the fridge. And maybe just some fruit.”

Cam didn’t even realize his feet were taking him toward the shower until Jo snapped her fingers at him, borrowing his wicked grin.

“Don’t get *distracted*. And I thought you wanted to take it slow?” Jo closed the shower door. “My breakfast, please.”

Cam backed out of the bathroom with slow steps, relishing the opaque flashes of Jo’s body through the glass. Slow was overrated. He might want to sort things out in his mind before making love to Jo, but his body was ready *now*. He wasn’t sure how much longer he’d be able to convince his body to wait until he was sure it was safe.

Chapter Thirteen

Jo fell back, starfishing on the bed, letting the mattress envelop her tired body. She didn't even bother taking off her dress and heels. What a day. She had been in meetings, taking calls, and plowing through paperwork all day to get things settled for the first Haitian adoptions. And Kenya wasn't far behind.

“Am I doing good, Aunt Kris?”

Not that she ever expected an answer, but sometimes it made Jo feel closer to speak aloud. Made her feel like Aunt Kris watched and cared from heaven. That one spot no one would ever occupy again flooded with loneliness and overflowed Jo's eyes. Just a few tears. Fewer every time. It had been nearly three years, and Jo still sometimes forgot she and Aunt Kris wouldn't be headed for Paris to shop. Or planning the annual Christmas benefit. Or doing any of the many things that had drawn them closer than blood. That had made them friends. That had always made Aunt Kris feel more like Jo's mother than the mother she had never known.

“I'm trying my best,” Jo whispered, her throat swollen with tears. “You always told me that's all you expected from me.”

Seemed everyone else had other expectations of Jo and had no trouble making them known. The board expected bigger donations, more fund-raisers, a quicker pace on the adoption project. And what about the domestic front? Let's not neglect home for foreign soil. Daddy was chairman of the board and had brilliantly positioned the foundation as one of the country's most respected nonprofits, but Aunt Kris had been the heart, drive, and soul behind it. Aunt Kris was irreplaceable, and Jo had to replace her.

Thank God for Peter. Little had she known when the board hired him that he'd be such a godsend. Maybe he was just passing through. Hell, he had his family's lumber empire

waiting for him, but Jo would enjoy the help and support while she had him. And his friendship, even though he so obviously wanted more. Now that Cam had finally shown her how he actually felt, she knew she would have to talk with Peter. He had asked her to an outdoor concert tonight, and she'd pled exhaustion. Valid, but still a delay tactic. If Cam hadn't stolen her heart long ago, Peter would have been the perfect match.

Even though she and Cam hadn't made formal plans before she'd left after breakfast, he said he would see her after work. Daddy and Q were both still out of town. Jo closed her eyes and smiled. Maybe she could persuade him to stay again. She shivered a little, anticipating a repeat of the night before. Maybe more.

"You look like you're thinking naughty thoughts."

Cam stood over her, his grin wide and open. He looked happier than she had seen him in years. Had she done that?

"Cam, you have got to stop sneaking up on me."

He lay down beside her and gathered her into a hug, pulling her into the crook of his shoulder.

"Sorry." He kissed her temple, laced their fingers together, and rested them on his chest. "Hi."

"Hi." She scooted closer and threw one leg over both of his. "Hmmm. I waited all day for this, you know."

"Hard day?"

"Long day." Jo tugged the dark hair flopping over his eyes. "This is getting really long."

"You don't like it?" He frowned into her palm.

"I like everything about you, mister."

His body stiffened against her and he sat up, legs over the side of the bed, giving her only the breadth of his back.

"You don't know everything."

Jo scooted behind him, skirt scrunched up her legs on either

side of him, and laid her head against his back.

“I know everything I need to know to lo...I know everything I need to know.”

Surely Cam knew she loved him? But it didn't take Einstein to figure out it wasn't just the sex he wanted to take slowly. They had been together not quite twenty-four hours. That L-word would have to wait, but Jo wanted to send an intergalactic memo so the whole world would know.

“Do you take classes to learn to walk in these things?”

Jo laughed, turning her ankles in the snakeskin Stuart Weitzman stilettos she'd worn all day. Cam undid the buckle and pulled them off. He wrapped his long fingers around the arch of her foot, squeezing and massaging. He worked his way up from her heel to the tips of her toes. She fell back onto the bed again, feeling like she could die happy right now.

“That feels good?”

A moan-sigh was all she could manage. Consciousness slipped away. The muscles of her face slackened and her breath deepened. And then bliss and then nothing.

“Hey.” Cam hovered over her, a knee on either side of her hips. “Wakey, wakey. I have plans.”

Jo creaked one eye open to peer up at Cam from her puffy, perfect bed.

“Plans that involve me getting up?”

“We could just stay here.” Cam stood and leaned against the bedpost at the foot of her bed. “I thought we could have our first date, but if you—”

“I'm up! I'm up!” Jo bounded off the bed and stood in front of him, unable to restrain the grin that broke its leash and landed on her face. “What should I wear?”

“Oh, I get to decide?” Cam spanned her waist with his hands and pulled her close.

Jo took his hand and led him to her closet. She faced him

and spread her arms wide to encompass the small village that was her wardrobe.

“Take your pick.”

An hour later, they parked just off the Rivermont Square. Cam turned in his seat, eyes appraising his handiwork—the mist-colored sundress Jo had never worn.

“I must say, I chose well.”

Jo glanced down at the dress she had forgotten she owned. Even now that he had money himself, Cam’s eyes had sauced at the two-thousand-dollar price tag.

“Yes, you did. It’s a great dress.”

“I wasn’t talking about the dress.”

Jo turned in her seat, leaning her back against the window, settling in for whatever Cam had to say. He could read the phone book. Recite the Bill of Rights. She really didn’t care, as long as he was talking to her and not running in the other direction.

“If not the dress, then what?”

“I chose well last night.” Cam reached across the console to stroke each finger one by one. “In the gazebo.”

“It took you long enough.”

Jo laughed when his face told her he wasn’t sure if she was joking. She could joke now that he was hers. And he was. Whatever defense he had built up against her before had completely fallen. He might still have some secrets to share, but his heart...it was in every glance, in every touch, in every kiss. His mind might still be figuring things out, but his body told her in every way it could that he knew he was hers.

Cam opened the passenger door for her, helping her out of the car. He trapped her between his body and the Land Rover Aunt Kris had left him. He bent the few inches until their mouths were close, but not touching. His words humid and sweet on her lips.

“I’m sorry it took me so long to choose you, Jo.” His eyes, beautiful cloud and stormy sea, softened. “It’s not because I never wanted you. I didn’t think I *should* have you. That I deserved you. I still don’t. I just can’t fight it anymore. Do you get that?”

Jo didn’t respond. Her elation that he wanted to be with her had risen to the top, but just beneath lay a heap of rejection and hurt, accumulated and nursed for years. Watching him choose everyone else with not even a sign that he would ever choose her—yeah, that was like a splinter she was still coaxing out from under her nail.

“I assume food is part of this first date.” Jo pressed her hand to his chest, her smile sweeping away some of the painful residue.

“Of course.” He led her to the cluster of restaurants bordering the square, stopping in front of Stream, a seafood spot she had been wanting to try.

“This okay?” He gestured to a strip of bistro tables dotting the sidewalk just beyond the restaurant sign. “We could go somewhere else. I didn’t think you’d want anything formal after such a long day, but if you want, we can—”

“It’s fine. It’s perfect. You know I love eating outside.”

Jo reached up to kiss him on his stubbly cheek, loving that he had left some bristles for her on the strong line of his jaw. Cam had cleaned up. None of the usual paint under his nails. Hair tamed into dark half waves, half curls past his ears and just shy of his shoulders. Dark jeans and a well-tailored chambray shirt. Even out of his brash T-shirts and battered jeans, there was still something provocative and exotic about him. Something that drew and wouldn’t relinquish your focus. Jo braced herself for the inevitable attention that came with Cam. It had taken her this long to get him. She certainly wasn’t sharing him now, but she could be civil to any women wanting to express their admiration. Like their server, who couldn’t seem to look anywhere but at Cam. He didn’t even notice.

“And with the Chilean sea bass”—Cam glanced up from the menu—“you think the pinot grigio, Jo?”

Jo bit her lip. She hated bass. She should have been paying attention instead of glaring at the girl salivating over Cam.

“Sorry.” She ran her eyes down the menu. “Could I have the Maryland crab cakes instead?”

“I thought the sea bass might get your attention.”

“So you’re not ordering sea bass?”

“I am, but I remembered *you* hate it. Figured that would jerk you out of wherever you went in your head.”

Jo grinned, returning her menu to their server. He knew her as well as she knew him, and yet he carried so much mystery. His eyes harbored it. And she knew, even though he hadn’t shared yet, that his dreams kept his secrets.

It was only when Jo was with Cam that she realized how much more she enjoyed him than anyone else. They didn’t have to talk, to stuff every quiet moment with chatter to feel comfortable with each other. And, yet, sometimes she couldn’t get the words out fast enough. All the things she had hoarded all day that she only wanted to share with him.

After they’d finished eating, Cam gave the server his credit card and looked back to Jo, expectation on his face.

“You want to know what’s next?”

“So now you have your own Black Card, huh?” Jo nodded to the invitation-only card she had pocketed for years.

Cam just smiled and pulled her to her feet.

“Do you or do you not want to know what’s next?” He pushed one hand up under the hair at her nape and curled his arm around her waist, pulling her close enough to feel body heat through his clothes. “Or do I choose for you?”

“Are you going to be a bossy boyfriend?”

Something shifted on his face, and Jo realized she had

called him her boyfriend for the first time. She refused to take it back. She had lived for years on a diet of imagination and ambiguity. She had no problem defining this relationship. If he did, she needed to know that. Now.

“Am I your boyfriend, Jo?” An almost-smile crinkled the corners of his eyes, and he settled their linked hands on his chest.

“Do you want to be?”

Cam opened his mouth, about to answer, when someone jostled Jo from behind. She turned, keeping one of Cam’s hands, ready to apologize for taking up half the sidewalk.

“I’m sorry, we—” She stopped, spotting Peter and two other blond guys, all carrying greasy bags. “Peter, hey.”

Peter looked from her face to her hand linked with Cam’s. His expression pinched, and he just stood there like he was at a loss.

“Hey, Jo.” Peter cleared his throat and took the few steps separating him from her and Cam. “I didn’t expect to see you.”

He didn’t say it, but she heard what he left in parenthesis. (*You know. Since you turned me down because you were so exhausted.*)

Peter gestured toward the two blond giants standing by and clutching their dinner.

“Jo Walsh, these are my cousins in town from college, Hans and Chad.” Peter glanced at Cam. “And this is Cam Mitchell.” Peter gave Jo a deliberate look. “Cam’s like a brother to Jo.”

Cam’s fingers tightened around Jo’s hand. Hans and Chad dove into the tiny slice of awkward silence left in the wake of Peter’s comment, making the appropriate noises and shaking hands. They shuffled their feet and looked up the sidewalk, obviously sensing the undercurrents but unable to find a polite escape.

Jo shot a glance Cam’s way. His face was a rocky plain and his eyes flinty. She willed him to look at her, but his eyes

never left Peter's face. Intense emotion came off Peter in waves. Jo stood trapped between Cam's belligerence and some mixture of anger, hurt, and disappointment that Peter kept stirring.

"I know it's bad to bring up business when you guys are here to have fun." Jo injected a fake apology into her voice and the look she offered the cousins. "But I need Peter for just a second."

Peter spared her a glance and nodded.

"Guys, I'll meet you at that spot by the river we scoped out."

The two cousins offered a short chorus of "nice to meet you" before walking off.

Now for the hard part.

"Cam, I'd love some ice cream." Jo glanced up at him, waiting for him to take his eyes off Peter. He finally gave her a *you've got to be kidding me* look.

"Please." *Please give me a few minutes to make this right.*

She didn't bother saying that out loud but sent Cam mental Morse code she hoped he could read. His eyes gave her the concession she needed and he dropped her hand.

"Mocha chocolate chip?"

"Perfect."

She waited for Cam to walk off before turning to face Peter, an explanation fully formed on her lips. He stole her chance by speaking first.

"I see you found your second wind."

Jo closed her eyes against the accusation in Peter's eyes. She assured herself that she had not misled him and opened her eyes with that certainty.

"Peter, I'm sorry it happened this way, but I told you from the beginning, and along the way, that I was only looking for

friendship right now.”

“You didn’t have to lie to me about the concert tonight.”

“I didn’t lie.”

“Don’t parse words with me.”

“You asked if I wanted to go to the concert with you and I said I was tired. That was true. When I got home, Cam had planned dinner for us.”

“So it’s just dinner.” His eyes lit a little and he reached for her hand. “I thought—”

“You thought right.” Jo squeezed his hand, making her eyes frank and sure. “I’m in love with Cam. I have been for years.”

Hope sagged and disappeared from Peter’s expression. His mouth attempted a halfhearted, one-sided grin.

“Why do the good girls always fall for the bad boys?”

“Cam’s not a bad boy. He won’t hurt me.”

Jo tugged at the hand Peter still gripped, but he didn’t let go. He pulled her close until mere inches separated them. He grabbed her other hand and pulled them both to his chest. He squatted the few inches it took for them to be eye level.

“I’ve never met another woman like you, Jo.” Eyes earnest, he caressed her hand. “I care about you. If things don’t work out with Cam...”

His words trailed off and he slipped a hand to the back of her head, lowering his head and brushing his lips over hers. Jo jerked back, firmly pulling her hands away.

“Peter, no.”

“Jo, if you’d just consider—”

“She said no.”

Cam’s voice behind them jerked her around. The ice in his eyes sent a chill across Jo’s bare arms.

“Cam, you’re back.” Jo took a small step away from Peter.

He nodded, pulling her to his side and dropping a quick kiss in her hair, but remaining silent.

She looked at the hand holding hers, no ice cream in sight.

“Mocha chip?”

“We have ice cream at home.”

Peter glanced down at the ground, slid his hands into his pockets, and rocked back on his heels. He twisted his mouth into the closest he could probably come to an affable smile.

“Well, the guys are waiting for me. I’ll see you in the morning, Jo.” He looked at Cam, nodding toward Jo. “You’ve got an amazing woman here.”

Cam tilted his head and narrowed his eyes, pouring his tension into the tight line of his lips. Jo had seen him look at her boyfriends that way in the past, but this time there seemed to be an extra layer of lethal.

“Peter, I’ll see you in the morning.” Her eyes pleaded with him to go and let her deal with Cam’s obvious displeasure.

He hesitated, glancing at Cam’s hand linked with hers.

“Okay. Yeah.” He nodded, his face softening by degrees. “See you in the morning.”

Peter turned and walked away.

And now for the fun part.

“Cam, I—”

“Don’t.” Cam looked toward the square where people were setting up chairs and blankets on the grass for the concert. “Let’s just go.”

Jo couldn’t take the silence in the car and eventually turned on the radio, closing her eyes and allowing Adele’s epic voice to wash over her, but it did little to calm her nerves.

They entered the house, and Jo stood in the foyer, unsure of what would happen next. Would Cam march back out to his car and drive home, leaving her here alone? Would he drag her

upstairs and make love to her until she could barely walk? If he was taking suggestions, that was hers.

“Come on.” Cam headed toward the kitchen, turning his head just enough for her to hear his words. “You wanted ice cream.”

“We really do have ice cream, huh?”

“I said we did, didn’t I?”

Jo followed, steps lagging behind, mind racing ahead. Cam, already in the kitchen, took out two spoons and a carton of unopened mocha chip ice cream. Jo sat on the stool and followed their time-honored tradition of digging right into the carton with her spoon. Cam sat on the stool beside hers but didn’t look up from the counter.

“Why are you mad at me?” Jo asked when the silence got to be too much.

“I’m not mad.” Cam rolled his eyes and then met hers. “Okay, I’m irritated.”

“I didn’t know Peter would be there.”

“Did you know he’d kiss you?”

“Cam, listen—”

“You like him.” Cam studied her face as if her expression might tell him something she might withhold, but she had nothing to hide.

“Yeah, I do.”

“A lot.”

“Yeah, a lot.”

“He’s kissed you before?”

“You know we’ve been on several dates the last few weeks.”

“Don’t hedge. Isn’t that what you always tell me?”

Jo turned the spoon to cup her tongue, knowing her answer

would displease him but wanting to be honest.

“We’ve kissed.”

“You liked it?”

Now Jo rolled her eyes, setting the spoon on the counter with a clatter.

“This isn’t fair.”

“Have you slept with him?”

“What if I have?” Jo gave in to the indignation she had barely checked since Cam went all cold and prickly on the sidewalk. “You and I have been together all of a day, and you have the nerve to question me about what I did before? After what you’ve put me through?”

“I wasn’t judging you.”

“Good, because you don’t get to.”

“I was just asking—”

“If I’d slept with Peter. I heard you.”

Jo dipped her spoon back into the carton, teasing the mocha chips out of the ice cream.

“What if I have? Would that make a difference?”

Cam looked away, gripping his spoon until she thought it would bend. He put the spoon down, still not giving her his eyes. He swiveled on the stool, resting his elbows on the counter and his feet on the stool rung.

“It wouldn’t make me want you less, if that’s what you mean.” Bits of shrapnel lodged in his deep voice. “But it would make it harder for me with the two of you working so closely.”

Jo slipped from her stool and stood in front of him, sliding her hands under the sleeves of his shirt, skidding her palms over taut skin and hard muscle. He drew in a sharp breath, finally looking up to meet her eyes.

“I didn’t sleep with Peter.”

Only when his shoulders dropped, releasing tension, did she realize how much her answer mattered to him. He rested his palms on her lower back and drew her between his thighs. His lips journeyed up her neck until he reached her ear.

“I’m glad.”

Jo fought off the little imps stealing all her sanity with every kiss he feathered over her skin. She drew back and met his eyes.

“And what about you?”

“I haven’t slept with Peter, either.”

“Come on, I’m serious. If you get to ask me who I’ve slept with, it’s only fair that I get to ask you.”

“Ask me anything.”

“Etinette. How many times have you slept with her?”

“Never.”

“Don’t lie to me, Cam.”

“I’m not lying. Never. I used her to throw you off the trail some, but those kisses you saw in New York were as far as it ever went.”

Jo pressed her nose into his neck, inhaling him and twining her arms around his back. She nuzzled beneath the collar of his shirt, pressing a kiss to the warm skin there.

“Promise?”

He pulled back, brushing the hair behind her ears and cupping her face, caressing her cheekbones with his thumbs.

“I promise.” He bent to tuck his chin between her neck and shoulder. “And I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want you.”

“Then why...?” The unfinished question was a Rubik’s Cube she kept twisting and turning, examining from every angle and still unable to solve.

If he wanted her so much, why didn’t he just take her? He

had to know she would fully cooperate. And why had it taken so long for them to get here?

Cam set her gently aside and covered the ice cream, putting it away and coming back to grab her hand. He brushed his fingers across the skin beneath her eyes and held her face.

“You’re exhausted, baby.”

She smiled into the palm of his hand and kissed it.

“You called me baby.”

“Because you are. My baby, I mean.” He kissed her forehead. “And I won’t hesitate to fuck Peter up if he forgets.”

“Cam, for God’s sake.”

“And he knows it.”

“When did you become all caveman?”

Even though no one was in the house but them, he leaned in to whisper in her ear like it was a secret.

“Last night in the gazebo, you came when I kissed you. Somewhere around then.”

Her cheeks must be the color of beets.

“Will I never live that down? I told you that’s never happened before.”

“Aw, you saved that for me.” He ran a thumb across her bottom lip. “Now to bed.”

“You’re coming with?”

For a moment, the fight going on inside of him showed on his face. Then he relaxed, steered her to the back steps. He gave her a subtle nudge, pulling her into his side and resting his hand on her hip.

“I’m coming with.”

He paused halfway up the steps and pressed her against the wall. He kissed her, licking into the wet heat of her mouth, sliding his hands down to palm her butt. He pulled her up onto

her toes, feeding her the words she'd been hungry for. For years.

“And, Jo, the answer is yes. I do want to be your boyfriend.”

Chapter Fourteen

Only a few kisses.

Jo hasn't slept with him.

They're just friends.

Cam rolled the words around, but they pinged off the jealous walls of his mind like spiked marbles. Seeing Jo standing in the empty conference room so close to Peter drew his hands into fists at his sides. Wrapped barbed wire around his chest. Drove nails into his eyes until they bled red.

If it was just Jo he had to worry about, he wouldn't be worried at all. But there was Peter. Kind, compassionate, dependable Peter, with his gentle hand on Jo's shoulder. A concerned look on his face. And love in his eyes every time he looked at Jo.

Peter might have accepted defeat gracefully on the sidewalk last night, but Cam didn't buy it. Peter wasn't giving up. He was probably just biding his time. Probably thinking Jo would wise up and get over Cam. Probably thinking a guy like Cam would inevitably screw up a good thing with a good girl like Jo.

He was probably right.

Peter's blue eyes, always soft when they rested on Jo, hardened and held when they spotted Cam in the doorway. If this was a stare-off, Peter was in trouble. Cam had lost his flinch reflex long ago. He learned as a kid how to look with a steady stare on the heinous. A pair of baby blue eyes wouldn't undo him.

"Hey, Cam." Peter gave Jo's shoulder one last squeeze before stepping away.

Jo turned toward the door where Cam stood, her face telling him all he needed to know. Peter might make sense to anyone

looking in. He might be Jo's perfect match on paper, but he didn't put that look on her face. Like the universe had coalesced into one man—like the galaxy was in front of her and was hers to explore. How could *he* put that look on her face? In her eyes? Cam's own mother had treated him like yesterday's garbage, but *this* woman looked at him like that? Life had beaten him down more than once trying to dislodge his pride and capsize his dignity. But that look in Jo's eyes—that humbled him.

And even humbled, he still had something to prove. He could have walked over to them, drawn Jo close to his side, and rubbed his right to hold her all up in Peter's face. Instead, he did something he knew Peter would understand. He held his ground at the door and waited for the pull between him and Jo to work on her. Sometimes he wished he couldn't read people so well, that his childhood hadn't taught him to live on high alert and to use the clues on people's faces to survive, but it had, and right now it served him well. He watched need gather in Jo's eyes and want soften her mouth. And she came to him. Left Peter and came to him, hand already stretched in his direction.

"Hey." She wove her fingers between his and stepped so close their chests touched. "I didn't expect to see you here."

He snared Peter's eyes over Jo's head to make sure he'd gotten the message. *She's mine. Touch her and I'll fuck you up.*

Peter watched Jo with Cam, then blinked and dropped his gaze to the floor. His shoulders slumped an inch, and Cam almost felt sorry for the guy. Almost.

He knew what it was like to be second choice. Hell, he'd been his own *wife's* second choice, but he had always been first with Jo.

"I had a meeting with Bash and Shaundra." His hand claimed the curve of her waist and he kissed her forehead. "Just stuff for the exhibit."

"It's going well?" Jo ran a thumb over his wrist, a caress

more subtle than the one in her eyes.

Jo's eyes belied the banal words she was saying. Her eyes told him she didn't want to talk. She wanted to kiss him, but not in front of Peter. Need slammed Cam's heart against his chest. He needed to kiss her, too. To enfold her. To consume her and be consumed, and if Peter didn't leave soon, he would get more than he'd bargained for.

"Yeah, so far." Cam looked past the desire on her face and saw the strain. "Tough meeting?"

He ran his thumb across one high cheekbone. She closed her eyes and pressed into his palm, simply nodding.

"Yeah. Some board members don't understand why we're matching funds for middle- and lower-income couples. Adoption is expensive, and it would take forever for some of those families to get that kind of money. Shockingly, I wasn't exactly patient with the board." She turned in Peter's direction, a small smile working its way onto her tired face. "Peter kept me calm and convinced them. Thanks again."

Peter slid his iPad under one arm and pushed the other hand into the pocket of his slacks, looking debonair. Cam didn't do debonair or man-about-town. He knew he was a wild animal who had escaped his cage, and he was enjoying the freedom while it lasted. Cam wanted no part of debonair.

"Teamwork." Peter took the few steps that carried him to the door, looking back at the two of them. "I'll see you in the morning, then."

Peter turned at the door, eyes lingering on Jo in that way that was starting to corrode Cam's patience like battery acid.

"See ya." Jo smiled and waved before turning back to Cam with a smile. "Hi, you. I wasn't expecting to see you until tonight."

Cam couldn't wait another second. He had watched her lips moving long enough without tasting them, without feeling them move under his. He wrapped his fingers around the back of her neck and lowered his mouth to hers, eating up whatever

she'd been about to say. She opened for him, her mouth hot and slick inside. The slide of their tongues together was a wordless conversation he'd wanted to have with her all day. He skated his hands under the loose silk of her dress, gripping the muscles in her long legs.

"These legs." He pressed the words against her lips, into her smile before she pulled back to peer up at him. She traced a nail over the buttons of his shirt.

"The first time I noticed you noticing me was at that pool party when I was fifteen." Her steady stare faltered like she was afraid she'd made it up. "Do you remember?"

"You wore a bright red bikini with pink daisies."

Relief flashed on her face for a moment before she covered it up with an easy smile.

"Yeah. That was it."

"I couldn't take my eyes off you all night." Cam slid his hands from her legs to cup her ass under the dress, bare save the thong. "This right here had every guy at the pool hard as a rock."

Jo's eyes drifted down his chest and to the floor, a smile toying with the corners of her lips.

"You like my butt?"

"I like mangos in my salsa." He splayed his fingers over the cheeks in his hands, stroking his pinky finger over that lucky strip of flesh between her butt and her thighs. "I'm infatuated with your ass."

Her eyes dragged back up his chest until they reached his face. There was the kind of confidence Jo wore like her decadent lingerie, under her clothes, laying against her skin and girding her. Hidden, private. And then there was the confidence a woman gained from knowing her man desired her above all others. That she wore like an accessory. A piece of jewelry to flash, something jangling around her wrists and making noise. He wanted to see that on Jo. After all the years

he'd held back with her, he wanted her to be sure of him.

“Just my ass?”

Cam looked around her back at his hands conspicuously under her dress.

“I'd say that's plenty.”

“Why, you—”

A throat clearing at the door cut off Jo's laugh and whatever she'd been about to say. She stepped out of his arms and turned her back to him. Cam tried his best not to grin at the discomfort on Shaundra's face.

“Um...” Shaundra finally looked up, meeting his eyes and not Jo's. “I just wanted to let you know I was able to do what you asked, Cam.”

Jo looked up and over her shoulder at him.

“What *you* asked? What'd you ask my assistant to do?”

“Thanks, Shaundra. You can go now.”

“Shaun, wait.” Jo turned to face him. “What's going on?”

“I asked Shaundra to clear your schedule for the rest of the day.”

“But it's only three o'clock.” Jo faced her assistant. “What about Ms. Jennings from the Arts Society?”

“Canceled.” Shaundra shifted her eyes between Cam and Jo like she wasn't sure who to focus on.

“And the preliminary meeting with the caterer for next month's brunch at four-thirty?”

“Canceled.”

“Call them back. We have to—”

“Bye, Shaundra. Close the door behind you.” Cam turned Jo around by her shoulders to face him. “Jo, not one of those appointments is urgent. I wouldn't have had Shaundra cancel if she hadn't told me that.”

“But I can’t get behind. Those appointments will just get shifted to next week, and next week is even busier than this week.”

“And this week is busier than last week.” Cam ran a finger under her eyes. “You’re tired, baby. You need rest and you need some fun.”

“But—”

“There’s no *but*.” Cam reached behind her again, grabbing her ass and drawing her close. “Unless you count this one.”

Her lips twitched, but her eyes held on to the case she was building.

“Cam, I can’t let up right now. We just need to push these first adoptions through, and then I’ll rest.”

“No, you’ll rest *while* you push these first adoptions through, Jo.” He ducked his head, capturing her eyes. “Meeting with that caterer or the arts lady what’s her name will not slow down the adoption process.”

Jo nodded, bit her lip, and glanced at the laptop on the conference room table.

“You’re going home to rest.” Cam nodded his head toward the laptop. “And that is not coming with us.”

“Us?” Jo raised one dark brow. “So you’re coming home with me?”

“Actually, I thought you could come home with me.”

“With you?”

“Who else is going to take care of you? Make sure you get some sleep?”

“Oh, the irony. Will *you* sleep?”

Cam loosened his fingers on Jo’s legs, but she gripped his arms. Just as he was letting go, she pulled him close.

“You want to take care of me?” Jo leaned up and left a kiss on his mouth. “Well, then I want to take care of you, too.”

Cam touched her shoulders, frowning at the muscles knotted beneath the thin silk of her dress. He was too worried about her to be concerned that she was digging into his complicated insomnia.

“You first, baby.” He wrapped his arms back around her waist and felt her slump against him. “You first.”

Chapter Fifteen

Wheels?” Jo read the sign with the giant rotating roller skate. “You brought me to a roller-skating rink for our second date? Stay classy, Rivermont.”

Cam pulled into a parking spot and turned to face her, a grin breaking up the monotony of concern on his face ever since they had left the office.

“We can do classy anytime.” He leaned one elbow on the steering wheel. “Tonight you need fun.”

“And roller-skating is your idea of fun?”

“It used to be. You’ve been roller-skating before, right?”

“Not exactly.”

“Does ‘not exactly’ actually mean no?”

“In this case, yes. I mean, it means no.”

Cam shook his head, got out of the car, and came around to open Jo’s door, pressing her into the passenger door, a habit he was forming.

“So you’ve been skiing in the Alps, but you’ve never been roller-skating?” He curled a warm hand around her waist, his thumb ghosting the side of her breast, sending her thoughts and good sense on a scavenger hunt. “The gaps in your education.”

Jo leaned forward until the last inch between her breasts and his chest disappeared. She looked at him through her lashes and rasped her voice to a whisper. “Are you going to close all my gaps, Cam?”

Want slow-boiled in the look Cam draped over her body, and if it was up to Jo, there would be no skating tonight. Foggy windows and a rocking Land Rover...yes.

“You make it sound really dirty, which is fine with me.”

Cam turned that look down to a simmer Jo hoped would hold for the rest of the night. He raised her hand to his lips and nipped her wrist with his teeth. “Now stop trying to seduce me in the parking lot and come on.”

Jo drew a deep, mind-clearing breath, reminding her nether parts that she was a lady and mounting her new boyfriend in broad daylight would be frowned upon. She had no idea what to expect of this run-down skating rink, with grass growing through the cracks in the parking lot and missing bulbs in the neon sign. It looked basically like an '80s time capsule, garish colors and all. Cyndi Lauper might come rolling out on wheels any moment singing “Girls Just Want to Have Fun.” And this somehow inspired the anticipation all over Cam’s face and humming from his body the closer they got to the dilapidated building.

“I take it you’ve been here before?” Jo stood beside him in line for rental skates.

“Countless times.” Cam walked backward toward the desk, blessing her with his rakish grin. “A couple of times I even paid.”

Before Jo could respond to that glimpse into Cam’s delinquent youth, they reached the front of the line.

Cam leaned forward, peering past the teenaged employee with the braids and oversized hoop earrings. “There used to be a manager here years ago named Lashaun. She lived in the neighborhood. You know her?” he asked her.

“I know her. She don’t work here no more, though.” The girl—Brandee, according to her peeling name tag—eyed Cam like he was a box of the Whoppers shelved behind her. “You want me to take your number in case I see her?”

Cam aimed that devastating arrangement of lips and teeth at Brandee.

“Nah. Thanks, though.” Cam’s face sobered a little. “You know if she’s doing okay?”

“Oh, yeah. She just works at Target now.” Brandee twirled

a braid and popped her gum. “The new one off MLK. She might be in tonight, though, ’cause it’s Grown and Sexy Night.”

“Fridays used to be called Old School Night,” Cam said.

“Not for a long time.” Brandee’s eyes made quick work of Cam’s casual but well-cut clothes. “You from around here? I ain’t seen you before.”

“It’s been years since I’ve been back.” The slight smile Cam wore faded until there was nothing left of it. He pointed to the shelves behind Brandee. “We need skates.”

A few minutes later, Jo settled on the bench beside Cam, casting a discreet glance at the people around them lacing up skates, buying snacks, and rushing on wheels around the rink. She bent another inch trying to tie the laces on her skates.

“Could you have found jeans any tighter?” She gave up on tying the laces and plopped her foot in Cam’s lap.

He laughed and finished the laces for her, tugging on her leg until she was flush against him.

“I packed your bag for the weekend in a hurry.” He ran his fingers over one thigh, his touch burning through the denim and searing her skin. “Just grabbed the first pair of jeans I saw.”

“You’re getting a little too comfortable rifling through my underwear drawer.”

“A family could go camping in your closet.”

“Glamping maybe.”

Jo stood, aware that the fitted cotton shirt he’d chosen barely reached her waistband, not covering any of her considerable assets in the tight jeans. Cam’s eyes weren’t the only ones glued to her ass, but his were the only ones she cared about.

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to skate in these jeans.”

Jo watched Cam’s lips twitch, fighting back a grin.

“Are they tight?” Cam wrapped one hand around her thigh, squeezing and steadying her on her wobbly skates. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“I think tight jeans will be the least of my problems. Falling and busting my ass is more of a concern.”

“Lucky for you the Barfield projects junior roller-skating champ is teaching you everything you need to know.”

“Is that a real thing?”

“Okay, so there wasn’t a trophy or an actual contest, but if there *had* been, I *would* have been the junior champion.”

Jo laughed when her ankle turned over and she almost fell. “I’m not sure I can trust you.”

Cam steadied her, hands at her hips, his eyes ditching the laughter and tracing her face, feature by feature.

“You can. Trust me, I mean.”

The teasing, the laughter had evaporated, and even with dozens of people skating, strobe lights flashing, and Madonna’s “Holiday” blaring through the sound system, intimacy curled around just the two of them, insulating them from everyone but the other.

Cam stood, one hand at the small of her back and one under her elbow. He cleared his throat, dispersing the intimate mist gathering between them.

“Come on,” he said. “The floor will only get more crowded, and I need some space to teach you all my moves.”

Jo nodded and followed his lead, taking a careful, shaky step onto the slick floor and out of the private space they’d made for themselves in the middle of the crowd.

“Let’s just start with walking.”

“I know how to walk, Cam. I need to learn how to skate.”

“Will you just listen? Let somebody else be in charge for once?”

“Are you saying I have control issues?”

“Are you saying you don’t?”

Of course she did. Jo drew a huffy breath and took the small steps forward like Cam instructed. After the first walking steps, learning the “T” position and the basics of forward and backward, Jo felt confident she was ready. Maybe not for the trophy, but at least for once around the rink.

“I’m ready.”

“Jo, let’s walk a little more.”

“I *do* have actual trophies for skiing, so I think I can manage once around a roller-skating rink.”

“Okay, just hold my hand.”

“I can do this on my own.”

Cam’s brows crept up and a small smile pulled at the corners of his lips. He threw his hands up, literally and figuratively, scooting back and gesturing for Jo to skate ahead. Jo moved forward, pushing one foot in front of the other. One minute she stood, semi-confident and fully vertical. Before she could draw her next breath, she landed horizontal in an undignified spill, all the breath knocked out of her lungs. For a second, she considered ignoring the hand Cam extended to help her up, but she wasn’t sure she’d be able to stand on her own.

As soon as she was on her feet, Cam pulled her tight against his body and tucked his face into her neck. She might end up with a few bruises from the fall, but she was fine. Jo was about to reassure him when she realized Cam’s body was vibrating against hers.

“Are you...are you laughing at me, Cameron Mitchell?”

Cam pulled back completely and bent over, hands on knees, broad shoulders shaking. He covered his mouth but couldn’t catch the laugh fast enough.

“You should have seen—”

Gasping. Pointing.

“And you just—” Cam threw his arms out and reenacted her flailing from moments ago.

“And then you...bahahaha.”

Jo took advantage of the guard he'd left down and quickly kicked her skate behind his, sending him sprawling to the floor. She straddled him before he could recover, settling her butt onto the wheels and her knees alongside his hips, ignoring the strange looks from skaters whizzing around them.

“Now who's laughing?” Jo poked his shoulder, shaking with the laughter he couldn't seem to stop.

“Still me, baby.” He reached up and pushed a chunk of unruly hair over her shoulder, the laughter dying down to a grin. “I told you to let me teach you.”

“I will forgive you for laughing at me.” Jo balled her fist up at him in warning. “If you teach me how to do that.”

She pointed to a guy across the ring skating backward at top speed.

“You always were an overachiever.” Cam sat up until their chests touched, resting his hands at her hips. “Baby steps. For real this time. Follow my lead and you'll spend more time on the skates and less time on the floor.”

Jo had always known there was a patient man in there somewhere, but she'd never imagined he'd make an appearance for her. Over the next thirty minutes, Cam taught her the basics, picked her up when she toppled over, and went slowly when he probably wanted to speed, making sure she felt confident and managed to enjoy herself.

“How did I not know skating was so much fun?” Jo kept pace with Cam beside her, holding his hand less for support and more because she wanted to feel any part of him she could wrap around her.

“It was the only fun I had sometimes.” Cam shrugged, looking around the now-crowded rink. “This and painting in

the streets.”

Jo tried to reconstruct a past where Cam ran free in the streets as a ten-year-old. Where he snuck into skating rinks, unsupervised and alone at such a young age. A beautiful dark-haired boy on wheels, trying to outrun his life at home, here among the crowd on a Friday night, skating to songs written before he was even born. As Jo glanced around, she realized something for the first time.

“Cam, did you notice we’re the only white people here?”

“Baby, *you’re* the only white people here.”

Even knowing Cam’s heritage, she’d never thought of him any differently than Walsh or any of the other guys in her life. Had she been mistaken? Insensitive? Somehow racist?

“If you’re not white, what do you consider yourself?”

“Me? A chameleon.” Cam shrugged. “Instead of thinking I never quite fit, I guess I thought more that I could fit just about anywhere. I was born into this. I didn’t have to fake it. A guy who looks like me won’t make it in the projects if he doesn’t figure things out fast.”

“And when you came to us? What did you have to figure out?”

“Everything.” Cam guided them to one of the few empty benches on the sidelines, sitting and pulling her down beside him. “In some ways, it was much harder coming into your world than it was living in this one.”

“How?”

“I didn’t have to fake it here. My hair, my skin, my eyes might be different, but I grew up just like them. Your world? Another planet. The way you talked. The clothes you wore. The things you just knew that I had no clue about.”

“You didn’t have to fake those things for us.”

“I figured that out pretty quickly.” A rueful smile softened his face. “Ms. Kris picked up on it and demanded that I be

nothing but myself.”

“That’s because she had that capacity for unconditional love so few people actually have.”

“You have it.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you. Besides Ms. Kris, you’re the only person I’ve ever felt that kind of acceptance from. That’s why I didn’t ever...”

Cam crossed one ankle over his knee, pulling at the laces and allowing the noise-filled air around them to absorb the words he said and the thoughts he didn’t bother voicing.

“Didn’t ever what?”

Jo put a hand on either side of his face, forcing him to look into her eyes. He reached up to touch her wrist before turning his head and kissing the sensitive skin there, setting a small fire where his lips had been.

“Didn’t ever what, Cam?”

Before Jo could press for the rest of that thought, a voice came over the intercom, popping the tight, hot bubble they’d blown around themselves.

“Couples skate! Couples report to the dance floor.”

Cam pulled Jo to her skates and started toward the rink.

“We’re doing this.”

“I most certainly am not.” Jo dug her heels into the ragged carpet, ineffective really when your heels are on wheels. “I’ll fall.”

“All you have to do is follow my lead.”

“You’ve been saying that a lot tonight.”

“And, shocker, you’ve been doing it. See how much better your life has been for the last hour with me in charge?”

“Cam, I am not going out there under that big spotlight

with those semi-professional skater couples and making a fool of myself.”

“Baby, I have you.” He stepped back onto the floor, hand waiting.

She must really love this man.

Duh. Seventeen-year news flash.

She stepped down and let him guide her in front of him, her back to his chest.

“You’ll be right here.” Cam settled his hands at her hips. “Just lean back into me and relax. I’ll keep us up.”

Jo leaned into his chest, jumping a little to feel his erection at her butt.

“Whoa. Seems like one of us is already up.”

“Watching you in those jeans all night. Just ignore the hard-on. I do.”

Jo laughed and leaned back on his shoulder, turning her head to catch his eyes in the flash of light created by the strobes.

“I think I’ll choose to enjoy it instead of ignore it.”

Cam propelled them forward, circling one arm around her waist and linking their fingers with his other hand.

“Enjoy what exactly?”

“Knowing that I affect you. For a long time I didn’t think I could.”

“Ironic since for a long time you have.” Cam snuggled into a needy spot between her neck and ear, his breath misting the skin with the words.

Jo would have pinched herself if she hadn’t been death-gripping Cam’s forearm to stay upright. This day, the weeks, the month had been grueling and had wrung so much energy from her, she hadn’t been able to fully appreciate what had happened over the last few days. For nearly seventeen years,

the man, now hard at her back, now nibbling at her neck, now caressing fire across the strip of skin between her jeans and her shirt, had been her unrequited love. This beautiful man, who had no idea how incredible he was, was taking care of her. Her. Jo, who had always taken care of everyone else. And she loved surrendering to his care. It was like bungee jumping off the moon with Cam as her cord.

Jo forgot that she could barely skate. Ignored the fear of falling and possibly spraining a limb, and submerged herself in this moment. Sunk into the strong arms surrounding her, drawing huge, gulping breaths of this dream.

“What’s this song?” When she released his arm, she slid her hand with slow caution, lest she collapse, over his shoulder and up into his hair. “I’ve heard it before.”

“Of course you have. It’s a classic. Marvin Gaye. ‘I Want You.’”

Marvin dripped sex over every lyric, his voice reaching and stretching and breaking into an orgasm of sound that left Jo hot and wet and melting into Cam’s chest. Every word seemed to echo her story, the heartbreak of a one-way love. Every word followed their past to this second where her fantasy had crystallized into this improbable reality of a relationship with Cam. Finally.

A stealthy wetness crept from the corners of her eyes. The sweetness, the about-damn-time rightness of being pressed into him, rattled the gate Jo always locked over her composure. In the middle of a skating rink, surrounded by couples dancing and dipping and whizzing, she was coming undone. She sniffed, determined to hold on to as much of her dignity as she could.

“Hey.” Cam twisted his fingers around hers more tightly, his hand squeezing her waist. “You okay?”

Jo nodded, words trapped between the walls of her throat, squirming to escape.

Cam skated around to face her, stopping them in the middle

of the rink. He lifted her chin, inspecting her features in the dim, multicolored light.

“You’re tired and probably hungry. Enough for one day. Ready for some food?”

Jo nodded, hungrier for him than for food. She let him pull her along to the edge of the rink, being careful when he told her to. Watching her step when he took her elbow. Is this what she had been missing running the show all these years? This feeling of being cherished by a man, swaddling all her weariness? But who was she kidding? It wasn’t just any man. It was Cam. “Any man” would have his balls between his eyes by now for presuming to take control and dictate anything to her. Cam knew her too well and cared about her too much to abuse what she was giving him.

“If we do this again, I need to bring my own skates.” Jo pulled the skates off and ran her hands across the wheels. “I don’t share shoes, even the wheelie kind.”

Cam laughed, grabbing both their skates and heading toward the rental counter while Jo slipped on her flats. She walked up behind him and noticed Brandee pointing an attractive woman in Cam’s direction. The woman stood petite and curvy. Her sandy hair lay close against her scalp, a lovely contrast to her almond-colored skin. In a few swift strides, she reached Cam’s side and ran appreciative eyes up and down his tall frame.

“Brandee said you were looking for me.” She leaned one rounded hip against the counter Cam had set their skates on. “I’m Lashaun, and you are?”

“You probably don’t remember me,” Cam said to the woman. “I was only like eleven years old the last time you saw me, but it’s—”

“Little Cameron?” The woman’s eyes rounded and widened. “Damn, you grew up fine.”

The low rumble of Cam’s laugh reached Jo’s ears.

“I haven’t been back here since I left years ago, but I

wanted to thank you.”

“For what?” Lashaun raised penciled brows. “Sneaking you in all those times?”

“Yeah. There weren’t a lot of people doing me favors back then. It meant a lot.”

“I was only twenty-two years old.” Lashaun moved an inch closer. “Ten years ain’t nothing now. You ever wanna get up, just let me know.”

Okay. Enough memory lane. Jo didn’t care if the woman had slipped Cam food and water in solitary confinement, if she got any closer, Jo would shove those talon-like nails up her nose.

“Uh.” To say Cam looked unsure of how to respond would be to grossly underrate the *What do I do now?* that was all over his face.

“You ready, Cam?” Jo slipped her arm through his and microwaved her smile before serving it to Lashaun. “How are you?”

“Fine.” Lashaun started her inspection with Jo’s toes and made a slow journey up to the top of her head. “You Cam’s girl?”

“Yeah,” Cam said before Jo could respond. “This is my girlfriend, Jo.”

It would never get old. Hearing him claim her that way with that word, it might always feel like Christmas and the lottery all rolled up and tied into one Cam-shaped bow.

“My girl’s hungry, so we’re gonna get out of here.” Cam brushed a few strands of hair behind Jo’s ear before giving Lashaun one more smile. “Thanks again.”

A few minutes later, Jo glanced at Cam’s strong profile in the dimly lit car. Same high cheekbones. Same lips, sculpted and full. Same will-they-ever-end lashes. He looked like her Cam, but she couldn’t help but feel like she had lost a part of him over the last few hours in that skating rink. Or more

accurately, realized that she'd never had him at all.

"Was it *that* bad?" Cam spared her a glance, merging onto the interstate that would take them to the cottage. "I thought it'd be fun. Next time we can do something else. Your choice."

"It *was* fun." Jo turned her body toward him as much as the seat belt would allow.

"If this is how you respond to fun, I'd hate to see you after the dentist."

"Sorry. I'm just thinking."

"An occupational hazard of being brilliant, I hear. Wanna share?"

"It's ironic that you'd say that since I wondered the same thing about you. Do *you* want to share?"

"Should I be following you? Like actually know what you're talking about?"

"Tonight was...eye-opening."

"Because I finally found something you suck at?"

"Cam, I'm serious. Tonight I realized just how much you've held back from us. From me."

Cam puckered his brows until they almost touched in a grumpy kiss on his forehead.

"What do you mean?"

"It's like you appeared at twelve years old, and I didn't bother to ask where you'd been or what your life had been like before. I just took it all at face value and dragged you into our life."

"We were twelve, Jo. I didn't expect you to psychoanalyze me."

"Even later, I didn't probe. Maybe I was just so glad to have you, I didn't ask about your past."

"And maybe I was so glad to leave my past behind, I didn't want to talk about it."

“I didn’t even know you could skate like that. You thanked Lashaun like she’d been this important person to you at one time, and I’d never heard of her. I thought you were white.”

Cam laughed, sending a half-exasperated glance her way.

“I *am* white. I’m just also black, Puerto Rican, and no telling what else. I don’t really think about it.”

“I should know these things.”

“I don’t know every detail of your life. No one does.”

“These are not details, Cam. These are essentials. I want your essentials.”

Though his eyes remained straight ahead, she felt like he was exposing something to her he’d been holding back.

“What’s essential is that I want to be with you. Now.”

Jo allowed the words to settle onto her heart. To water the seeds of security they’d been planting over the last few days. Years of rejection didn’t disappear in two days, but Cam’s openness was helping.

And yet, being *herself*, she had to press for more. It was in her blood.

“Just now?”

“Jo, we’ve been together a grand total of two days. Give this thing time to unfold a little. Don’t just snap it open like some dollar store fan.”

Jo let her head drop back against the headrest. She was handling this all wrong. She’d hidden so much behind this careful mask for years, and at the first sign that she might get somewhere with him, she spilled her feelings everywhere.

“I didn’t mean to pressure you or to be all ‘define the relationship’ already.”

“I don’t mind defining the relationship. I want to be with you.” Cam shifted his eyes from the road long enough to meet hers, steady and sure. “Period.”

So much for holding back. That look, that moment, snapped the restraints Jo had imposed on herself.

“In that case, you should know that I want to give you everything. I know we’ve only been together for two days, but you know I’ve had...feelings for you for a long time. I’ve spent over half my life holding them back. I’m ready to spill them all over you.”

Cam left one hand on the steering wheel and grabbed her hand with the other.

“Spilling is good. I want all of that. I love it when you’re open about how you feel.” Cam drew a deep breath and blew it out. “I just want to reciprocate, and it’s tough. I told you there were things we still need to talk about. Things you don’t know yet.”

“Do you want this, Cam? You really want me?” Jo held her breath, waiting for his response.

Cam pulled into the cottage driveway and turned off the car. He turned to her, linking their fingers and pressing their hands to his chest.

“Let me put it like this.” He took her eyes hostage, mesmerizing her with a look. “All those times you wondered if I might care, I did. All the times you thought you imagined I wanted you, I wanted you. And all those times you wondered if I might one day feel the same way, well, I do.”

If hope were a bitch, then Jo would just have to watch her back, because now they were best friends.

Chapter Sixteen

It should probably be obvious, but will you get mad if I ask what you're doing?"

Jo looked up from the eggish concoction she was laboring over, hoping Cam didn't notice the small tornado that had torn through his kitchen. When she woke up, she'd been alone again. Cam had been outside painting, so Jo decided to get her cook on. She *may* have bitten off more than she could chew.

"Whisking?" She paused mid-whisk. "I thought I'd make you breakfast."

Cam walked up beside her at the kitchen island, bare chested, wearing only beleaguered jeans, holding on by threads to his lean hips. The ridged plane of muscle and sinew climbing out of the waistband of his jeans distracted Jo momentarily from her task. Seemingly oblivious to the way her body was responding to the mouthwatering sight of him, he eyed the bag of flour spilled across the granite surface, the butchered peppers and onions, the clumps of ham she had "diced."

He slid her a glance, lips twitching.

"Are you making...are you *trying* to make a quiche?"

"Don't you laugh at me." Jo reined her body in long enough to aim her egg-covered whisk at his head. "I am *trying* here."

"Why try?" He leaned away when she jabbed the whisk at him. "I can cook breakfast for us."

"I know, but I wanted to do it for you. I can do girl things."

He leaned in, dipping his head to kiss across her cheeks until he reached her lips.

"Show me your girl things."

Cam grabbed her wrists, lowering the whisk to the counter and waiting for her to drop it. He pulled her into his arms and

slid his hands under the shirt she'd worn to sleep in his bed, palms gliding over her butt in the boy shorts.

"You're wearing my shirt." He lowered his head until their lips lined up, running his tongue over the bow of her mouth. "I love my clothes on you."

"I love your smell on me." She darted her tongue out to capture his, pushing into his mouth and sliding her hands up over his shoulders and into the dark hair falling around his ears.

He groaned and licked deeper into the kiss, stroking his tongue over the roof of her mouth. One hand cupped her butt and the other wandered up to the front of the shirt. Mouth never leaving hers, he worked the top two buttons loose and slid his hand inside to knead her breast. He twisted a nipple between his fingers, and her breath clogged in her throat.

"Please." Her plea floated between them, a word held together only by her breath.

Cam moved away from her mouth and over to her ear.

"Please what, baby? What do you want?"

"Your mouth."

"Where?"

"My...my nipples."

"I'm really glad you said that."

Cam pushed the unused food processor to the side and lifted Jo onto the counter, spreading her thighs and planting himself between them. Eyes locked on hers, he pushed the shirt off her shoulders until she was naked from the waist up. Jo wanted to close her eyes so badly, to abandon every sense except what she captured through her skin, to concentrate on the rough pads of his fingers sliding across her nipples. But he wouldn't let her eyes go. His mouth hovered over her breast, his breath floating over the needy flesh. He started with just the tip of his tongue, familiarizing himself with the areola until her nipples strained toward the promise of his lips and teeth.

“Like that?” He raised his eyes, lips basting her nipples with the question. “That’s what you wanted, right?”

Jo wet her dry lips, sorting through the rubble he had made of her thoughts until she retrieved one word.

“Suck.”

Cam lifted his head, damn him.

“Sorry. I don’t want to get this wrong. Suck what?”

“Suck...suck my nipples.”

His lips immediately took one hostage, torturing the hard, tight bud between his teeth. He pulled back, dropping kisses across one breast and then the other.

“Enough?”

“More.” Her dignity lay in ruins, but she couldn’t focus on anything but the core-melting tug of his lips. “God, more.”

He lavished both breasts that way, a dance of lips, teeth, and tongue that dissolved her muscles until she couldn’t stay upright. She lay back on the island, heedless of the chopped vegetables pressing into her naked back. Cam pushed her legs wide and sucked at the sensitive skin lining the inside of her thighs, drawing blood to the surface. His fingers persuaded the boy shorts down her legs.

The cool air reminded Jo just how exposed she was to him like this. She’d known Cam most of her life, but they’d only been *together* a few days. Him seeing her this way, in broad daylight, in the kitchen, on food—too much. She tried to close her legs and sit up, but he used one hand between her breasts to press her back into the cool granite surface and the other hand to push one leg farther out.

“Cam, could we wait until—”

“No. Now.”

Those were the last words her brain caught and held. He ate her like the first meal of the day. Like he’d slept on an empty stomach and woke up ravenous. He alternated tender licks and

kisses and nips with the near-rough pressure of his lips and the ruthless thrust of his tongue, all the while massaging and pinching and rubbing her breasts. Any self-consciousness Jo had melted into a puddle along with her thoughts, pooling around the hips she pushed into his lapping mouth. She grunted and screamed and hissed through the torturous pleasure of him feasting between her legs until a prism combusted behind her eyes, exploding in shards of color. She dug her fingers into the dense muscles sculpting his shoulder. She scraped her nails across his scalp, pulling his hair and pressing her knees into his head while she shattered into his hungry mouth.

Lucid thoughts filtered back into her mind like pinpricks of light. Bits of food clung to her naked back. Her boy shorts dangled from an ankle. She had one handful of Cam's dark hair, and in the other hand she clutched the whisk. Had she actually just had oral sex on food? For a moment, all she could think of was Clorox wipes, and then Cam stood up. His hair curled and waved around his face where her fingers had rioted through it. His eyes were still smoked up and he glanced between her legs like he wanted seconds. He licked his wet lips, closing his eyes like he was savoring her taste.

So much for lucidity.

Jo sat up and slid her hands to the front of his jeans, gripping him through the denim.

"I'm so ready, Cam." She spread herself a few inches wider, inviting him in. "Can we do this?"

He grabbed her wrist, pushing her fist up and down on him for a few seconds, biting his bottom lip before stepping away. He walked over to the sink, leaning back and forcing his hands through the dark hair all over his head, drawing and releasing a heavy breath.

"Not yet."

Everything hot and melted inside Jo cooled and congealed into a solid block of rejection and embarrassment, settling at

the bottom of her belly like a bag of stones. She brushed vegetables from her back and pulled the sleeves of Cam's shirt over her arms and shoulders, not bothering to button up. She crossed the shirt panels over her breasts and hopped off the counter, pulling up her underwear as soon as her feet hit the hardwood floor. She wiggled her toes to loosen the flour from between them and turned to make a hasty-as-hell retreat from this kitchen. She had almost reached the door when Cam's arms wrapped around her waist from behind, pressing her back into his chest. She tried to shake him loose, but he tightened around her.

"I'm sorry." He whispered the words into her neck. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You never do."

Jo elbowed him in his six-pack and turned on him, anger bubbling up from a dark cave in her chest and forcing angry words into the light.

"You son of a bitch." She balled her fists on her hips and narrowed her eyes up at him. "I have raw veggies in bad places, and you have the nerve to turn me down? Again?"

Were his lips twitching? Oh, he thought this was funny? The hurt, the years of rejection and confusion and mixed signals? That was funny to him? Jo charged back over to the center island and grabbed the bag of flour. Before Cam could anticipate what she planned, she dumped it all over his head.

"Laugh now, Cam."

And of course he did. He clutched his stomach and leaned against the wall, flour dusting the dark, silky hair and covering his broad shoulders.

"Peppers!" he managed to say, gasping between laughs.

This was not funny. Or maybe it was a little, but Jo refused to let him lighten this moment. Even when the corners of her mouth pulled up without her permission, she refused to gut bust laugh. Even when a giggle poked through her tight lips, she managed to hold it together.

“Flour!” Cam pointed to his head and slapped a knee. Literally slapped a knee. He could be so broody and secretive that when he laughed like this, free and silly, she could never resist him. Who was she kidding? She couldn’t resist him dark and broody either. Was there a state she could resist Cam in? It hadn’t been discovered.

So she grinned. She rolled her eyes, but her grin green-lit him to approach her again, albeit with his *I come in peace* arms up. He wrapped himself around her and shook his floury head over her like a wet dog, sending snowy particles all over her head and shoulders.

“Cam!” She laughed and slipped her arms around his waist, giving in to the irresistible force he exerted on her without even trying. “I need a shower.”

“We both do.” He pushed a flour-coated tendril back from her face, the laughter slowly leaking from his face. “I’m sorry if that came out wrong a few minutes ago.”

“It wasn’t the way you said it, Cam.” She brushed a little more flour from his hair, resting her elbows on his shoulders. “It’s the fact that you keep saying it. This isn’t about me being horny.”

Although there was a stack of crocheted muffs and a knitting needle in her bedroom that might beg to differ. Even so...

“This is about you trusting me with whatever is holding you back. Not just sexually. You’ve corded off all these parts of your life, of your past, that you don’t want me to access or to know about.”

“I’m trying, Jo.”

“No. Trying is talking. Trying is trusting me.”

Cam nodded, resolve taking full possession of his face, inch by inch.

“Can we just enjoy the day before we talk about my screwed up past? I promised you fun and rest this weekend.”

Jo nodded, leaning up on her toes to press her lips to his, freezing at the musky sweetness lingering on his lips. She jerked back, but Cam pressed his lips into hers again.

“You’ve never tasted yourself?”

“What...when...no. Of course not.”

“This is me and you. Taste us.” He eased his tongue into her mouth, tracing the silky lining inside her cheeks before pulling back. “See how good we are together?”

“Not yet.” She gave him a wicked grin and a wink before heading toward the door and her shower to wash the veggies off. “But I will soon.”

Chapter Seventeen

Jo had lived so long with pressures, with deadlines, with demands that she sometimes forgot weightless moments like these existed. Stretched out on a blanket in the middle of a field, no one in sight. She observed the languorous trajectory of a bee a few feet away, zigzagging from flower to flower. She raised her head to catch the rare August breeze in her hair and drew the smell of nearby honeysuckle in through her nose. She could be dozing at any point in history—medieval England or Revolutionary France or Rivermont during the Civil War. A field was a field was a field. No social media. No iPad. She'd even left her cell phone at home.

So this was a lazy day. It was all coming back to her. Long summer days she, Walsh, and Cam had spent at the river, fishing, tubing, swimming. Soaring in an old tire swing across the water, nothing more exhilarating than the possibility of falling.

That's what she felt every time she was with the man asleep beside her. The lovely threat of falling. The gorgeous certainty of gravity. What comes up, must come down. Wasn't love inherently law-defying? Trusting that the feeling, the connection, the promise between you and another would never come down? Would never drop you and split your heart wide open?

Cam stirred beside her on the blanket. She swatted at the bee buzzing around his head, disturbing the little bit of sleep he'd probably get. They'd only spent a few nights together, but there was a pattern. He painted at night while she slept. She'd fall asleep in his arms and wake up in an empty bed. There were demons in his dreams, and she wanted more than anything to charge in with crosses and holy water, but Cam wouldn't let her in. If there was an exorcism, he'd have to do it himself.

Cam jerked on the blanket, straining away in his sleep, like

a cattle prod poked his back. A frown pinched the skin between his brows. His lashes almost disappeared his eyes squeezed so tightly together. Something that was a half cry, half growl, a bastard of fear and fury, broke past his lips. A muscle strained in his jaw like it might punch through the stubbled skin.

He mumbled something that sounded like “stop” and “no.” She should wake him. He wouldn’t want her to hear or see any of this. Cam’s face was usually a fortress, guarding his emotions and thoughts. Right now the gate was down and there was no hiding, no protection from the turmoil he wrestled with in his sleep. He ran a frantic hand over the blanket in the space between them, as if searching for something.

Jo touched his shoulder, a gentle pressure. His hand manacled her wrist in a grip so painful her fingers went a little numb.

“Ouch.”

His eyes snapped open when she cried out. Terror stretched his pupils until they almost swallowed the blue and gray, like brimstone filling the sky.

“What did...What...?” Cam noticed his hand caging the narrow bones of her wrist. “God, baby, I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?”

He loosened his fingers but left bright red impressions on her skin. He touched her wrist, his eyes latched onto the angry marks already forming.

“It’s okay.” She brushed back a patch of tangled hair from his forehead, damp with the heat of the day and the hell of his nightmare. “You were having a dream, I think.”

The door slammed shut over his face, sequestering his emotions again.

“Did I say anything? Or do anything, besides almost crush your wrist?”

“Crush my...Cam, it’ll just bruise a little.” She held back the question for a few seconds before she couldn’t hold it anymore. “What were you dreaming about?”

Cam pulled himself to his feet, brushing nonexistent grass from his jeans, and extended his hand to her.

“You ready to go? I thought we could grab some peaches from that roadside fruit stand on the way back.”

“It won’t work.” She accepted his hand up, tugging at the tiny denim cutoffs he had packed for her. “Ignoring it, I mean.”

“It has so far.”

She gestured toward the blanket where his nightmare had just leaked out into the open.

“You call that working? Cam, you should talk to someone, even if it isn’t me.”

Cam didn’t bother with words but just folded up the blanket and walked off toward his Ducati. She remembered the day he had gotten his Harley while they were still in college. She had given him a cigar as a gag gift because he acted so much like a new father. Flashier bike. Expensive clothes. Black card. So many upgrades in his life, but he was still the guy who knew exactly which buttons to push to make her laugh and loosen. He was still her best friend, and he knew how to unravel her in the best possible ways. Why wouldn’t he let her repay the favor? What was holding him back?

She would try again tonight. For now, she relished straddling a monster of growling metal between her legs and gripping Cam’s hard-as-rock abs from behind. Did it get better than this?

* * *

“Here you are.” Jo placed a bowl of peaches on the table and set the basket she carried onto the patio flagstones. “I wondered where you’d gone.”

Cam looked up from scribbling in his sketchbook. There

were miles between the smile on his face and the look in his eyes.

“Sorry I disappeared after dinner. I just needed...” His words left a trail in the quiet Jo couldn’t follow. He rolled his charcoal pencils on the patio table.

“No problem.” She passed him a cream-covered peach slice. “Great idea stopping by that fruit stand, by the way. These are so fresh. You like peaches and cream?”

“Never had them together, actually.” He popped one in his mouth, licking at the cream lingering in the corner. “Hmm. Good.”

He rested his elbow on the patio table and watched her for a moment before reaching for another cream-slathered slice.

“Is this the moment of truth?” He passed a grin to her across the space separating them, the muted fairy lights leaving his hair and eyes inky. “You softening me up with fresh fruit?”

“And cream.” She popped a peach slice into her mouth, talking around the sweet juiciness. “Don’t forget the cream.”

Cam’s grin, halfhearted at best, fell into a somber curve, finally catching up with his eyes. He knew the time had come. She couldn’t let him go into one more night like the others. She needed to understand this hell-induced insomnia of his. They could only go so far with his secrets wedged between them. Not go so far just sexually, though she *had* reached for her knitting needles today.

Hor-ny.

But she hadn’t waited seventeen years to sleep with Cam. She had waited seventeen years to *be* with him. To peel away all the layers and lay naked with him, not just skin to skin, but heart to heart. Soul to soul. She needed him to bare everything, but she would go first.

“So the peaches aren’t the only treat.” She reached down into the basket by her feet, bringing out two lidded mason jars.

“Ta-da!”

Cam sketched a silent question between his raised brows.

“Remember when Aunt Kris used to give us these?” She handed him a jar.

“To catch fireflies.” Cam smiled, twisting the hole-punched lid off and laying it on the table. “You always caught twice as many as me and Walsh.”

“That’s because I knew the secret.”

“Which was?” His eyes followed her body rising from her seat.

“Let them come to you.”

She held out her jar and waited for a firefly to come near and then swiveled the jar to capture it. She replaced the lid and turned to Cam, giving him a *now you try* look.

For the next few minutes they both tried, wandering past the patio border and down to the river where the bugs clustered into small clumps of flitting light. They may have been seventeen years older, but to Jo’s ears, their laughs sounded the same as when they were kids. Careless. Light. Free. Breaking through the night, accompanied only by the sound of the restive river, falling asleep for the night.

Jo flung herself onto the grassy bank, carefully placing her jar on the ground beside her. With the fireflies flaring against the glass, it was like a living lamp. Between her jar and Cam’s, she could just make out the outline of his face, much more relaxed than before. She hated to steal that, but there was actually a point to all of this.

“You remember what Aunt Kris told us about the fireflies?”

Cam stretched out beside her on his side, elbow bent and head propped in his hand.

“No, enlighten me,” he said with a straight face.

“Was that a pun?”

“I can be clever.” He raised her hands to his lips, drawing her pinky finger into his mouth.

She stared at her finger in his mouth. Desire built sweet and taut between them. She hated to squelch it but pulled her hand away.

“She said the light was how they communicated with one another.”

She watched the masonry of his changing expression, saw him build a wall brick by brick until his face showed nothing of what he was thinking. But she knew.

He sat up, facing the river, elbows on his knees and the jar of light at his back. She couldn't see his face anymore and wondered if that would help or hurt this conversation.

“That's what I want for us, Cam.” She scooted up beside him, bringing her jar with her to provide a little light. “Your past, your secrets, your hurts—you're storing them all in the dark, and they're having their way with you every night. I think the light will make it better.”

Cam drove his fingers through his hair, cupping his forehead in his hands and aiming his eyes toward the ground. Jo cleared her throat and prayed her plan would work. Time would tell if this was a brilliant move or a bumbling mess.

“I'd like to go first.” Jo wrapped her arms around her bare knees. “We both know your past was harder than mine. Darker than mine, so I won't try to compare battle scars.”

Cam snorted, the only indication he still heard her.

“But I will share some of the most embarrassing, pitiful moments of my life to even the playing field some.”

Cam's body was stiff and still. Not a smile. Not a twitch. Not a shift of his feet. Maybe he had gills under his T-shirt because he didn't even seem to be breathing. Jo figured this first one would relieve some of the tension at least.

“Low point number one. This one is kind of funny, even to me, and I am the butt of this joke.” She poked a finger in his

face. “No big butt jokes. This is not the time.”

Despite the somber expression on Cam’s face, his lips twitched just the way she had hoped.

“I was in high school and refused to go all the way with my first boyfriend.”

“Mark Ballow.” Cam turned his head, giving her his undivided attention. “I hated that guy.”

“So did Walsh. So did Daddy. So did Aunt Kris.” Jo chuckled and plucked at a patch of grass. “That’s probably why I stayed with him as long as I did.”

“Walsh and I wanted to end him several times.”

“I remember. I can’t believe I ever had a date, as protective as you guys were.”

“Yeah, well, hopefully it spared you a few broken hearts.”

“Oh, they weren’t the ones breaking my heart.”

Cam winced, mouth wry.

“Point taken. Go on. Give me the low point.”

“Sadist.” She reached over to kiss behind his ear. “Well, he wanted to go all the way, and I didn’t, so we compromised.”

“Compromised how?”

“We agreed on a blow job. My first, in fact.”

Cam turned his body to face her fully for the first time, more in the light than he had been since they’d sat by the river.

“You blew Mark Ballow? I would have choked him if Walsh didn’t scalp him first.”

“Correction. I *tried* to blow him, but I...um, ran into a little difficulty.”

“What kind of difficulty?”

“I threw up.”

Cam’s lips clamped and his cheeks puffed up with the laugh

bomb exploding inside his mouth.

“You...like on his dick?”

“On his dick. On his jeans. On his new sneakers. It was a gag reflex thing.” Jo wondered if her cheeks glowed brightly enough to provide more light than the fireflies. “You guys always wondered why we broke up—well, that was the straw that blew the camel’s back, so to speak. Mark drew the line at vomit in his boxers.”

Cam fell back on the grass, shoulders lifting and shaking. He bit his lip, but laughter kept sneaking out.

“It may be funny now, but—”

“Oh, God, it would have been even funnier then,” Cam said. “Wait ’til I tell Walsh.”

Jo leaned over Cam, pressing one palm to his windpipe and the other into the grass beside his head.

“Breathe one word of that to anyone and I will end you, Mitchell.”

“What are you gonna do, bully?” Cam reached up to stroke a finger down her nose. “Take my milk money?”

Jo laughed, laying her head against his chest and willing her heartbeat to match his. Willing them to be in accord as they got closer and closer to the ash-covered secrets he kept.

“Okay, next low moment.” She sat up and grabbed her glowing jar, insinuating her fingernail into a hole in the lid as far as it would go.

“I could listen to these all day.” Cam lifted and dropped strands of the hair falling between her shoulder blades.

“When I was fifteen, I had a massive crush on this boy.” Jo looked over her shoulder, meeting Cam’s eyes in the dim firefly light.

She’d harbored a crush on one boy, and he was sitting beside her on the riverbank. Cam knew it and so did she.

“He was way out of my league,” Jo said. “I had glasses and braces and was ninety-five pounds wet.”

“He wasn’t out of your league.” Cam sat up beside her, his eyes sober and sorry in the dim light. “Trust me. You were out of his.”

“It didn’t feel that way to me. He was the most...um, the most beautiful boy I had ever seen.”

Cam looked at the ground like the truth in her eyes was too much for him to hold.

“I met him a few years before, but it took me that long to work up the courage and ask him to the Sadie Hawkins dance.”

“I’m sorry, Jo.”

“And he told me no,” Jo pressed on, ignoring his apology. “I knew he would. I mean, even at fifteen, he could have any girl he wanted.”

“Unless he wanted a girl who was too good for him.”

Ignoring that again.

“It wasn’t that he turned me down. I’d been ready for that, but he told me he already had plans with his friends.”

“I was a jerk, Jo. I know that.”

“But you know what? I skipped out of the dance and went to drown my sorrows in a Chunky Monkey sundae at that old ice-cream shop on Fifth. And there he was.”

Cam closed his eyes and ran a hand over the back of his neck.

“With another girl. Not the guys.” The laugh in her throat rattled, and it felt like she was back in that ice-cream shop staring at Cam and some girl who had more than a few cup sizes on Jo. “He could have just told me. We were friends.”

“I wanted us to stay friends,” Cam said. “By the time I was fifteen I was already fucking everything that blinked, and I

wouldn't have changed for you or anyone else.”

“I wouldn't have asked you to change for me.” Jo licked her lips and tasted bitterness. “I just wanted one night.”

“Baby, I'm so sorry.”

“That was years ago, Cam.” Jo reached for his hand, squeezing to reassure him that reliving that moment hadn't damaged what they had started building over the last few days. “It was a low moment, but here we are.”

She held on to his stare, not letting him look away. They needed to acknowledge that she had spent half her life in love with him, and he had run from it, avoided it, ignored it. For whatever reason. Maybe she'd find out tonight, but before they went any further, she wanted him to know she forgave him.

“Cam, it's okay. You were not responsible for how I felt.”

“I could have dealt with things better. Explained things better. How I was feeling.”

“How did you feel?”

“The way I feel now.” He looked down at their hands clasped together. “Like you deserve better.”

“Why?” Jo dipped her head, trying to catch the eyes he had shifted. “Why did I deserve better?”

Cam gave a quick shake of his head, releasing her hand to pick up his jar with its flickering lights and roll it between his hands.

“Last one, I promise.” She swallowed her trepidation. “This is current. Real time. Not even a week ago.”

Cam's fingers slowed on the jar and he looked at her. The fireflies strobed the concern on his face.

“What happened?”

“I know Aunt Kris's death has been hard for everyone.” Jo pulled a clump of grass from the ground. “Especially you and Walsh and Daddy, but it's been a little different for me.”

How to put this? Jo had never tried to articulate how Aunt Kris's death had leveled her.

"It was like losing my mom again. That's what she was to me, but she was also my bestie. My partner in crime. My mentor. She prepared me in every way she could to do the things she did."

Jo had been afraid to voice this to anyone else in case they thought she couldn't handle the responsibility. Wasn't ready. Wasn't capable. Wasn't enough.

"But I'm not her, and some days it is so obvious to me that I never will be. And I know everyone else knows it, too. And kids all over the world depend on the foundation. On me. They're the ones I don't want to let down."

Jo paused, glancing back at Cam so there was nothing hiding the rare vulnerability she wanted to gift to him.

"And sometimes I feel the weight of it, and it's like I'm having an anxiety attack but nobody knows, so nobody helps. From the outside, it looks like I'm breathing and smiling and in control, but inside my head is spinning and I can't breathe. And I just want to scream. I want someone to know that it's too much, but there's no one to tell."

Cam reached around and set his hands on either side of her face.

"Tell me. You are brilliant and ambitious in all the right ways and passionate about what you do. Don't let other people convince you what you do isn't enough."

"Some days it's other people, and some days it's just...well, it's just me." Jo pulled away, hunching forward until her chest touched her knees. "And when it's too much, I do the stupidest thing, but it makes me feel a little better."

She let the quiet simmer for a few seconds before he gave her side a gentle finger poke.

"What do you do?"

"I know this seems unrelated, but follow me for a minute.

On my sixteenth birthday, Aunt Kris and I went to—”

“Paris.” She couldn’t see him, but she heard Cam’s grin.

“Yeah, Paris. We flew on the Walsh Foods jet for the weekend. We went to the Louboutin flagship store and sipped champagne. I was so adult.”

“Walsh and I were mad you guys didn’t take us with you.”

Jo jerked around, rolling her eyes in the dark.

“Like we wanted to hear you complaining while we shopped.”

“Oh, we would have gone our separate ways for sure.”

Jo narrowed her eyes at him even though he probably couldn’t see her.

“I just bet we’d have gone our separate ways. You two would have been in some strip club.”

“That’s neither here nor there.” Cam cleared a laugh from his throat and pulled her head down to his shoulder. “You were saying.”

“So Aunt Kris told me to choose my first pair of Louboutins. Any shoes in the whole store, and I chose chartreuse glittery crazy red bottoms that I have worn only once or twice in my whole life in public. They were the price of a small island, but Aunt Kris didn’t mind.”

“I’ll have to look for those the next time I nose around in your closet.”

“I don’t actually keep them there anymore.” Jo paused to make room for her next words. “They’re in Aunt Kris’s closet.”

She felt his eyes on her face.

“When my days suck balls, like a lot of them have lately working on this adoption initiative, I go into Aunt Kris’s closet and put on those shoes, and I talk to her.”

Jo laughed, leaning deeper into Cam’s warmth and strength.

“I know she won’t answer, and I’m not sure she can hear me, but I feel closer to her. Closer to her wisdom and guidance. And I need that so bad. It’s kind of the only place I allow myself to be hurt and angry and scared. I don’t know if it’s a magical closet or what, but it always works. When I come out of there, things are better.”

Cam pulled her into his lap, tracing a soothing line over her bent knee with a finger and pushing the hair back over her shoulder.

“Maybe the next time you feel that way, you can come to me.” He used his index finger to turn her chin until their eyes met. “Maybe I can be your closet.”

“I’d like that.” Jo covered his hand on her knee, entwining their fingers. “And maybe I can be yours.”

When he didn’t respond with anything other than the tension stiffening his body, Jo cupped the strength of his jaw, feeling the muscles go rigid beneath her palm.

“Cam, look at me.”

He did look at her, but the door she had so carefully pushed open over the last few minutes slammed in her face. Padlocked. The guard was back up, every feature protecting his mysteries and secreting away his thoughts.

“I know that nothing I shared with you could even match whatever it is you don’t want to tell me.” Jo bit her lip, refusing to indulge the uncertainty urging her to let this go. “I haven’t had a rough life. I’ve had it made in so many ways most people only dream of.”

“Jo, I—”

“And I know. I’m privileged and spoiled, and you probably think I can’t relate to whatever you have gone through.”

“It’s not that—”

“And no matter what it is, you have to know the way I feel is never going to change. Not when I saw you in that ice-cream shop. Not when you chose those other girls over me.”

Jo looked down at their hands joined in her lap. “Not on your wedding day.”

“Baby.” His breath misted her ear and she felt his lips in her hair. “God, I really don’t deserve you, Jo.”

“You have me.” She turned her head, locking their eyes together, making this moment a conduit for all the acceptance and forgiveness, and though he wasn’t ready to hear it, all the love she had for him. “You’ve always had all of me. Please, please, please don’t ask me to settle for less than all of you.”

He dropped his eyes, the flickering fireflies in the nearby jar showing the struggle on his face in flashes of light. Jo leaned in, pushing her fingers into the silky hair at the base of his neck and fluttering kisses across the sharply defined cheekbones.

“You have me,” she whispered across his lips.

He angled his head until their foreheads met, cupping the back of her neck. He gave a small shake of his head.

“You have me,” she repeated insistently. “Nothing will change that. Not what you tell me or what you choose to hold back, but please don’t hold back because I want to know everything.”

“Jo, everything in me wants to keep this from you. Has *always* wanted to keep this from you.”

“Why? You can trust me.”

“Of course I trust you. Trust isn’t the issue.”

“Then just say it.” Jo rubbed her hand up and down his arm, pulling him inches closer. “Once it leaves your mouth, it’s in the light. It’s not just yours. It’s ours. I want to help.”

“You can’t help, Jo. Don’t try to fix this. This can’t be fixed.” Cam pulled back and looked at her. “I don’t want your pity. I don’t want to be some project or some freak. Or worse, some victim.”

“Victim?” Jo squinted into the dim light, straining not just

against the dark, but also against the shade he'd just pulled over his eyes. "Why would I think of you as a victim?"

Cam pulled in a breath that seemed to start at his feet and crawled up his long frame before making its way heavily past his lips. She silently begged him not to hide from her. She wasn't sure if he'd been shielding her or himself, but whatever had been between them, she wanted it gone. And in an instant, like her heart had tugged on his, like her soul had whispered to his and it heard and obeyed, the shade lifted. And what she saw in his eyes sent icy tendrils across her skin. Was it bitterness or hatred, terror or regret? Or some conspiracy of horrors? Whatever emotions converged in his eyes, it looked like hell. Hell in his eyes. And then she had to know. She had to press. She had to help. Oh, God, she had to help.

"Cam, why would I think of you as a victim?"

Everything about him seemed to drop, and Jo's mind went back to that field earlier today where nothing weighed anything. Where on a lazy day with an audience of bees and flowers she contemplated love and gravity. Right before her eyes, the one she loved most was falling. His eyes fell to their hands. His shoulders slumped. His mouth turned down at the corners. Before he spoke the words, she somehow knew it was much too late to catch him because Cam had fallen long ago.

"Jo, I was molested."

Chapter Eighteen

Cam had dragged those words out, and they'd left behind a sunken wake, a heavy trail as deep as a ditch. He had known this moment would come, that Jo would dig until she hit the truth at the very bottom of him. She must feel now like she had fallen into a dark, empty well with no way out.

Okay, maybe that was just him.

He wanted to escape. He wanted to run from the pity and the disgust he expected in her eyes, but he couldn't move. The fireflies bumping against the mason jar hypnotized him, mesmerizing in the summer night. What was so great about light? Light exposed. It hurt your eyes. It showed your flaws.

And your scars.

"Cam, what'd you say?" Jo's eyebrows snapped together. Shock pulled her mouth open. "I thought you said you were ___"

"Molested." Cam almost had to stick his finger down his throat to get the word to come back up, a shameful regurgitation.

"But...when? I don't...I don't understand."

"Before I met you."

"Before you met me? But I...I would have known."

"Not if I didn't tell you."

"What happened?"

"I can't go through everything tonight, Jo."

Cam's heart pummeled his chest like a punching bag. The night had cooled some, but sweat gathered on the back of his neck, on his forehead, on his scalp, dampening his hair. It was like waking up from one of his nightmares, but with Jo standing by the bed, a witness to his pathetic fear.

“No, you don’t have to tell me everything, but who did it?”

“A guy in my old neighborhood. My mom’s pimp.”

“Did she know? Your mom, did she find out?”

Cam remembered that day when Mama had finally come home to find him on the kitchen floor, pants still around his ankles, blood on his thighs. Mac only had to smack her around a little and give her that rock to make her turn a blind eye. That day and the days that followed.

“Yeah, she knew.”

“But how could she let it happen? Did she report it? Did anyone intervene? How long did this go on?”

Jo’s questions whizzed past his head like a flurry of bullets.

“I can’t do this.”

Cam stood up, grabbing his jar of fireflies and using it to guide him back up the riverbank. He heard Jo following with swift steps, but he deliberately used his longer stride to pull ahead. When he reached the patio, he unscrewed the mason jar lid and watched the fireflies go free, dispersing splotches of brightness in the dense night. He envied their freedom. He envied their light.

When he reached the patio door, the motion sensor light triggered, illuminating Jo a few feet away, staring at her jar. She met his eyes, and there was no disgust. No pity. Just questions and sadness painfully interlocked like a barbed wire fence.

Cam grabbed the bowl of neglected peaches and headed back into the house, covering the fruit and putting them in the refrigerator. He pulled their dinner dishes off the counter and started rinsing them. Anything to occupy him, to block out the quiet woman waiting at his back.

Slim arms wrapped around his chest from behind, stilling his motions. Jo laid her head against his shoulder. Her scent, the stroke of her fingers across his abs under his T-shirt, the sweet kisses she feathered across the back of his neck—all

coaxed each wound-tight muscle to go lax. He covered her hands with his, dropped his head forward, and sank back into her softness.

“Talk to me,” she whispered, stroking his hand with her thumbs.

“I can’t.” *I don’t want to.*

When he’d escaped that hell, he had promised himself he’d never be that weak, helpless prey again. That victim. Having Jo in the same room as those memories made him feel like a fraction of himself. Made him feel even less worthy of her than he usually did.

Jo left his back and squeezed into the small space between his body and the kitchen sink. She hooked her elbows under his arms and pressed their chests together, holding his eyes captive.

“Cam, we don’t have a shot if you won’t talk to me, and I want this.”

She laid her palm against his chest, a defibrillator jolting his heart, stuttering its rhythm. Did she know she did that to him with her touch? With her smile? Walking into a room? Probably not, and he wasn’t sure he should tell her. If Jo ever knew how much she really meant to him, she’d never let him get away. And one day he might need to get away, for her sake.

“I want this so badly.” She pressed her lips against her teeth, like there was more she could say. “I have for a long time, and I had given up all hope of it ever happening. If you won’t open up, we don’t stand a chance. So I repeat, do you want this?”

The warm, damp air by the river had caused a chaos of curls and waves around Jo’s pretty face and down past her shoulders. Despite the rest he’d forced on her over the last two days, weariness still painted shadows under her eyes. She hadn’t bothered with makeup, and Cam was grateful. He loved seeing her naked skin. Taut and golden and healthy and sleek.

Her bare lips were pouty and the exact hue of pink in the sunrise he painted this morning. Did he want this? With her? More than anything. In this moment and before he had even admitted it to himself, more than anything.

So what was he going to do about it?

“Let’s talk.” He tucked as much of the crazy hair as would fit behind her ears.

Relief lit her eyes before she narrowed them.

“That isn’t a direct answer to a direct question.” She leaned up on her toes until their eyes were almost on level. “Do you want this?”

She was so badass. Even on the threshold of such a pivotal conversation, she was determined to get her way. It always made him want to break her down, to muddle her. She brought these things on herself really.

He reached out and tipped up her chin, holding her head still and snaring her eyes with his. He ran his tongue around her lips, never letting her eyes go. She moaned, and he licked into her mouth, eating the crumbs of that sound. Wanting to catch the last of it. God, she was sweet. Between the peaches and cream and whatever drug laced the inside of Jo’s mouth, Cam couldn’t stop if he’d wanted to. And he didn’t want to.

Both of his hands came up on either side of her face, his thumbs tugging at her chin, opening her mouth that much more so his tongue could delve that much deeper. Her hands dug into his hair, pulling him into the heated nectar of her mouth. She sucked on his lips and ran a hand down his back and cupped his butt. If he didn’t put a stop to this, he’d pop his load in his pants and they’d never talk. And he’d never get to answer her question properly.

He pulled back, filling the space between them with panting breath. Jo blinked several times, and he could see the passion ebb as she remembered the gravity of their conversation. He almost wished he hadn’t stopped. He’d much rather fuck Jo against the kitchen sink than talk about his past.

“Do you want this?” she asked, her breathing as unsteady as his.

“I want *you*, Jo.” He dropped that guard he’d conditioned himself to pull over his eyes so she could see how much he wanted her. “I’ll do anything to prove that to you, even talk about my screwed-up childhood.”

Jo stepped back, putting enough distance between them to cool off their bodies.

“Then let’s talk.”

“I think we’ll need a third party.”

“A third party?” Jo frowned. “Like a mediator? At this time of night?”

“My guy’s on standby.” Cam reached over their heads to the cabinet, pulling down a bottle of liquor. “Meet my third party. Dr. Jack Daniel’s.”

Chapter Nineteen

Jo folded her legs beneath her on the leather couch in Cam's living room, still shaken by that kiss and the secret Cam had finally shared.

Molested.

It had never occurred to her. What were the signs? She had no idea, but she didn't think he'd exhibited any that would have alerted her. Cam had a more-than-healthy sexual appetite. He'd been angry and belligerent when he'd first come to their camp, but a lot of the foster kids had been. He'd quickly adapted, and it hadn't taken long for his naturally wicked, twisted sense of humor to emerge. He'd kept them all laughing and had been the life of the party most of the time. Sure, he had his broody moments, and she had realized there were things in his past he'd never discussed, but this?

Glass slamming on the coffee table snapped Jo back into the moment. Cam was about to pour himself another glass of whiskey, but she leaned forward, hand covering his on the bottle.

"Hey, let's give Dr. Daniel's a rest." She raised her eyebrows, nodding toward the glass on the table. "And you need a coaster for that."

She knew she had calculated correctly when he grinned, sliding the bottle away and leaning back on the couch. He pulled her bare feet into his lap and massaged some secret, knotted places in the arch of her foot.

"As heavenly as that feels, you will not distract me, Cameron Mitchell, from the subject at hand."

"I'm worried about your feet, not your hands, baby."

"Cam." She pulled her feet away and scooted over until she could tuck her shoulder under his arm. "Talk to me."

She was close enough to hear him swallow. Close enough to hear the *thump thump thumping* cadence of his heartbeat. Close enough to feel his muscles go tight against her.

“Maybe you could ask me questions, because I’m not sure where to start with all this crap.”

She leaned her head back to look up at him. One arm was over her shoulder, and he was toying with one of the many errant curls swelling around her shoulders from the humidity. The other hand lay in his lap, and he was tapping some rhythm with his fingers against his palm. His knee bounced like Mexican jumping beans had hatched in his pants.

Of course he was nervous.

“Okay.” She touched his knee, stilling the frenetic bounce. “I’ll ask questions.”

She settled herself against him, stroking her hand up and down his forearm. Cam’s chest rose with a deep breath like he was going underwater.

“The man who did it, is he dead yet?” Jo had never used her family’s power for evil, but she had never felt the black rage enveloping her at the sound of that man’s name, and she knew that she would if that man was still alive.

“Yeah, he’s dead.”

“How’d he die?”

“He’s just dead.”

“Okay.” Mental note to revisit later. “When did this happen?”

“Off and on from the time I was ten ’til I was eleven. Maybe a year or so.” He pressed his eyes closed, long lashes brushing his cheeks. “I can’t do details, Jo, so don’t ask me.”

“I don’t want to know details.” Jo pulled away from the warmth of his body, sitting forward with her elbows on her knees. “How does what happened affect you now? Did you ever get help?”

“I don’t need help.”

She allowed a slow push of breath through her nostrils before looking at him over her shoulder.

“Is this what your nightmares are about? Is this why you don’t sleep?”

Cam dragged his eyes away from hers, fixing them on the empty fireplace, dormant in the summer heat. He nodded.

“For a long time, I thought I had gotten away scot-free.” He swallowed. “A lot of people talk about how after something like this, they can’t have sex or feel conflicted about their sexuality. Fear of sexual contact. I didn’t have any of that. I liked girls and I loved sex.”

“I do recall.” She offered him a wry grin.

“You remember when I was eighteen and I got word that my mom had died in prison?” Cam reached for his glass of Jack, knocking back the last little bit. “I had my first nightmare that night.”

“What do you dream about?” Jo didn’t know why she whispered, but it suddenly felt like they weren’t alone anymore. Like some evil presence lurked and listened in the shadowy corners.

“Him.” Cam’s fingers tightened around the glass until the color ebbed away under his skin. “The things he did to me.”

Cam’s expression was an open wound she couldn’t make herself probe. Even though he had asked for questions, she sensed it was time for her to be quiet.

“It was like...it *is* like...it’s happening again. It’s so real I smell him. I hear him.” Cam’s fingers dug deep trails in his wild hair. “I feel him like it’s happening again, and I’m just as helpless as I was then.”

“Have you considered talking to anyone about it?” She knew it was one of those questions she already knew the answer to. “I think talking to someone might help.”

Cam's brows jerked together, and Jo almost wanted to pull the words back between her lips. Except they needed to be said.

"I've got this, Jo. It's under control."

"Under control?" Jo willed her voice to remain even, though her whole body felt like a hiccup. "We've spent every night together this week, and you're gone every morning when I wake up."

"I'm an early riser." Cam stood and walked over to the fireplace, knocking his shoe against the stacked stone. "I like to paint in the morning. All that natural light."

"You said you wanted questions...well, here's one for you." Jo approached the next words like a kamikaze mission. "Is this why you won't make love to me?"

Cam stroked the poker by the fireplace, and Jo knew if he could run that poker through this conversation and put it out of its misery, he would. His shoulders stiffened and then fell. He faced her, leaning his back against the mantel.

"It's more complicated than that."

"Well, untangle it for me, Cam." Jo sat cross-legged on the couch, tucking her hands under her thighs.

Cam looked down at his feet, crossed at the ankles.

"I started having the dreams a lot more a few years ago, after Kerris and I got married." Cam shrugged and shook his head. "Not that it was her fault. That's just when they started more regularly. Still not every night, just more frequent than they had ever been."

"And now?" Jo held her breath while she waited to hear about what she only suspected.

He lifted his eyes from the floor, but it was like he peered through blinds, letting out tiny bits of information through the slats.

"Now it's every night." Cam sat down on the stone hearth.

“And I feel unstable.”

“What do you mean, unstable?”

“It’s like all my emotions are right there at the surface, and I sometimes feel like I’m this spark that could turn into an inferno if I’m not careful.”

He loaded the look he gave her with meaning.

“And I don’t feel very careful when I have sex.” He stretched his legs out in front of him, rubbing the denim covering his thighs. “So I haven’t in a while.”

“What’s a while?”

“The last time was in Paris a few months ago.” Cam hung his head and ran his hand over the back of his neck. “She said I was rough.”

The word “rough” abraded Jo’s nerves and commanded the hairs on her arms to attention. Fear built a bridge to fantasy in her mind and she started running across it right away. Rough sex with Cam sounded like a heavenly spiked dream.

“Rough how?”

“I don’t know.” Cam shrugged. “It’s not that I blacked out or anything, but I kind of lost myself for a few minutes.”

“I think that’s pretty typical.”

“She had marks on her I didn’t remember leaving, Jo.”

“What kind of marks?”

“Bruises where I gripped her thighs too hard. Bites on her...” Cam swallowed and Jo could have sworn she saw red creep under his olive skin. “Bite marks on her ass. Scratches on her back.”

Jo popped to her feet and lifted the hair off her neck. She fanned her face.

“I think I need some air.”

She walked out to the front porch and sat on the swing, dropping her head into her hands. Good God, was it too dark

to run? Did she have her knitting kit? She was so wet and hot between her legs, like a kerosene fire. Bite marks on the ass? Was it so wrong that all she could think was, “Yes, please”?

Cam walked out onto the porch, leaning against one of its beams.

“I knew I shouldn’t have told you.” He walked over to sit beside her on the swing, taking her hand between his. “If you want out, tell me now. I don’t blame you for being scared. I don’t even know what I’m capable of. I’d kill myself before I’d hurt you, Jo. Even if we don’t go any further, you have to believe that.”

She could pretend that it was fear that had run her out of the cottage, or she could own up to the steamy truth that him bruising and scratching her basically left her sopping wet.

“Cam, I don’t want out.” She covered her eyes with her hand, even as her words gave up the truth. “I want way in.”

Cam pulled her hand down, forcing her to let him see. The porch light highlighted the confusion on his face.

“So hearing that didn’t scare you off?”

“After all these years, you think that is what will finally rid you of me?”

Cam pulled her onto his lap and set the swing in motion with one foot.

“Does it look like I’m trying to get rid of you?” Cam kissed the top of her head and laced their fingers together. “So you’re not scared I might bite you? Like lose control and hurt you if we...”

“*When* we, buddy. I’ll overheat like a radiator if we don’t soon.” She smiled when his chuckle rumbled through her back. “And I’m the opposite of scared.” She hid her face in the crook of his neck. “I hightailed it out of there because I was so turned on by the thought of you biting my ass.”

Cam pulled back so fast she almost fell off the swing.

“Are you shitting me?” His eyes widened, his mouth hanging open a bit. “Jo, we are a dangerous combination.”

“Let’s live on the edge together, then.”

“You’re into knife play, too? That’s a relief. I thought it’d be a problem.”

Jo went stiff and glanced by increments until she reached his face. Geesh. Knives!

The laugh he apparently couldn’t hold back bounced off the trees in the quiet around them.

“I’m just kidding, baby. I’m not into knives.”

Breath deflated Jo’s chest.

“What *are* you into?”

He cocked his head to the side, running a finger over her cheekbone.

“You.”

“Are you trying to distract me from the conversation we were having by being irresistible?”

“Pretty much.”

“Cam!”

“There’s nothing more to talk about. Now you know what happened. The nightmares. The fact that I’m afraid I’ll lose control and scar you when we finally do it.”

“Did you just say ‘do it’?” Jo laughed and wrinkled her nose. “Are we in high school? Should we also neck in your car or meet under the bleachers?”

“What *should* I say?” He leaned forward until the words misted her lips. “When I fuck you? Is that what you want me to say?”

“Is that what you’re going to do to me?”

Say yes. Say yes. Say yes.

The humor seeped from his eyes but didn’t leave them

empty. Something Jo recognized as tenderness filled up those eyes that could undo her between blinks without much effort at all.

“I think that what I’m going to do to you, I’ve never done to anyone else. I fully expect to worship you, Jo.”

“I don’t want to be worshipped.”

“Too bad.”

Chapter Twenty

Pretty impressive, huh?”

Cam looked away from the infinity pool and back to his agent Sebastian. You’d seen one pool drop over the edge, you’d seen them all.

“Sure. Yeah.” Cam studied the Malibu mansion grounds of the producer who had flown them in almost a week ago now. “Is this meeting gonna happen or what? We’ve been here a week and I haven’t met this producer yet.”

“We’ve gotten a lot done.” Sebastian’s fingers hovered over his perfectly pomaded hair but never quite touched it. “You scoped locations for the painting. And met the production team.”

“Yeah, I know. We found some good bridges, but I’d like to know more about the story before I start going too far down any path in my head.”

Cam’s art had been used before for music videos and even a couple of films, but this was the first time he was being commissioned to paint specifically for the story line, instead of pulling from pieces he had already created.

“I want to get this over with so we can head back home.” Cam coughed to hide his smile. Thinking about Jo did that to his mouth. So despite having to leave before they’d gotten to cover any more of his past—and, hey, no complaints from him on that score—he was smiling a lot more than he had planned to on this trip.

“You know, you’ve been a real spoilsport ever since we left Rivermont.”

“Dude, did you just say ‘spoilsport’?” Cam offered his open palm. “Give it. Right now.”

“What?” Sebastian furrowed his brow. (*That really was the*

only way to describe it. A real life furrow.) “Give what?”

“Your man card. No guy says ‘spoilsport’ and gets away with it.” Cam chuckled when Sebastian just rolled his eyes and adjusted his lightweight linen jacket. “And did you come as Sonny Crockett? Did someone forget to tell me it was National *Miami Vice* Day?”

Sebastian allowed his stiff mouth to loosen just enough to crack a smile.

“Oh, and you’re such a clotheshorse.” He gestured to Cam’s battered jeans, Walsh Foundation T-shirt, and Chucks.

“Clotheshorse?” Cam shook his head. “If you weren’t already out of man cards, I’d have to take it for that one, too. You gotta stop watching BBC, Bash.”

“You know I love *Sherlock* and *Downton*.”

“To each his own.” Cam pulled out his phone, checking for the fifty millionth time to see if he had a text or voice mail from Jo.

Nope. Cam slumped in the teak patio chair. God, he missed her.

“You expecting a call?” Sebastian reached for the fruity appetizers that had been left out for them while they waited for this producer to finally show. “You keep checking your phone.”

“Was hoping for a call from my girl, but she’s in meetings all afternoon.”

With damn Peter.

Cam gripped the phone a little tighter. He knew Jo was all his, but being married to someone who’d hidden from her feelings for another man for years? Especially when that man was your best friend? Yeah, that chafed.

Chafed? He was worse than Bash.

“You have a girl?”

Cam looked up from his phone a little at a time until he encountered Sebastian's curious stare.

"You didn't think I could get a girl, or something?"

"Obviously you could. You have." Bash gave him an envy-sprinkled grin. "Quite a lot of them actually. I just didn't think you had *a* girl. Like one."

"Well, you're my agent, not my BFF, so maybe there's stuff you don't know."

"Who is she?"

Cam cracked his neck. He didn't have time for this. He looked back toward the house, willing Producer Man to walk through the door any minute now. He wasn't sure why he was so reluctant to talk about his relationship with Jo. Probably because anyone who knew her would wonder the same thing he did: What the hell was she thinking? Didn't she know she could do better?

"Is this guy coming, or what, Bash?"

"Tell me who she is." Now Sebastian was just enjoying himself. Cam had seen that glint in his eye once before. "Somebody I know?"

"Yeah, I guess you know her."

Who didn't?

"That hotel heiress?"

Cam had forgotten Bash and Etty met in Paris.

"No, Etty and I are just friends. Always. I'm not getting on that crazy train."

"That art student you took home that night? She was American, right?" Sebastian wiggled his eyebrows. He was probably going for suggestive, but it just looked like a creepy Garfield.

"No. We just had that one night." *And apparently I was too rough for her.* "That was more than enough."

“What’s with all the guessing?” Sebastian’s impatience elbowed out the curiosity in his tone.

“It’s Jo.”

A moment of silence for the death of all Sebastian’s preconceived notions.

“Jo as in Jo Walsh?” Sebastian’s eyebrows almost disappeared into the small patch of hair he left hanging over his forehead to appear less uptight. “She’s not dating that guy Peter?”

“No, she’s not dating damn Peter.” The anger was irrational. Cam knew that, but he couldn’t stem the flow of it through his veins and out of his mouth. “Where’d you hear that?”

Sebastian raised his hands like Cam’s words were a stickup.

“I just saw them out a few times weeks ago. Must have been before the two of you were a thing. Easy.”

There was nothing “easy” about this. Waiting for this guy to show when he really just wanted to be back in Rivermont, sorting things out with Jo so they could move on.

Move on? Like to what was next? Like next level? Like take the relationship to the next level? Like intimacy? Like sharing and trusting and getting serious next level? Did he want that enough to risk hurting her? To keep himself in check so he *didn’t* ever hurt her?

A menagerie of images from the last few weeks flashed through his mind. As vivid and real as if he were painting them himself in the air. Jo at the hotel, looking more like a college student than the all-grown-up philanthropic titan she was becoming. Pushing him to trust her. Jo crying in the gazebo, saying she was ready to let him go but still fighting with her last breath to hold on. Jo at a run-down skating rink, slumming with him. Laughing and falling and dancing and making a trip back to his old neighborhood less hellish than usual. Jo by the river, laying out her hurts like diary entries she’d never shared with anyone.

What an honor. Jo, who guarded everything so closely and trusted so few, was always offering him everything. Consistently, systematically, she had peeled away all the armor she usually wrapped so closely around herself. For him. He realized it now. Saw it clearly.

Just as he turned toward the house, ready to leave and hop on the next plane back to Rivermont, a middle-aged man walked through the glass doors, paunch first.

“Sorry to keep you gentlemen waiting.” He gestured toward the infinity pool. “Hope you’ve been enjoying the view.”

Seriously? Keep us waiting for days and we’re supposed to be placated by a freaking you-seen-one-you-seen-them-all domesticated waterfall? Cam checked his impatience. Sebastian really wanted this deal to happen, so he settled into his seat and pushed his lips into a smile for the producer’s benefit. He’d cooperate. He’d play nice. The sooner this was over, the sooner he could get home to Jo.

That really did have a nice ring to it.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jo settled into her bed, pulling the down comforter up over her legs. She shuffled her knitting kit on her knees and dug around in the bed for the remote control. Maybe TV would distract her from thoughts of Cam. He was still out in California meeting about doing graffiti art for a romantic comedy.

She pulled her hair into a sloppy bun on top of her head and thought of the pampering she had planned for tomorrow. A keratin treatment for this wild bush hair. Mani-pedi. And tending her lady garden. She planned to get lucky pretty soon, and hair down there was not to be tolerated. She'd have everything done by the time she picked Cam up from the airport tomorrow.

Jo plumped the pillows at her back and patted around in the bed to rediscover her knitting kit. She pulled up the pattern she had downloaded to her phone from knitpick.com. These tiny sweaters would be adorable for Brooklin and Harlim. Jo grabbed her glass of white wine from the nightstand, taking a sip before scrolling through the many neglected episodes of *Vikings* on her DVR.

“Come on, Lagertha. If you can hold battle formation in the morning and satisfy Ragnar at night, surely I can figure out a way to get Cam trusting me and into my bed.”

And past all those defenses. Yes, she was grooming herself like a prize mare tomorrow in ever-hoping preparation for some actual screwing, but it really wasn't about that. She wanted to be as intimate with Cam as possible. On every level and in every way.

Sex was complicated for him? She was running ten miles a day and knitting in her nonexistent free time to manage this libido responsibly. It was complicated for her, too. She wanted, no needed, them to face all the complexities, all the secrets, all

the fears together. Sex was basically her gateway drug to Cam's trust. She crossed her legs in her yoga pants. She had dredged a shirt out of Cam's hamper. So what if she was wearing his dirty T-shirt?

"I know I have some gum up here," Jo mumbled halfway through the episode. The blackened salmon salad with fresh fruit Q left waiting for her had been delicious, but she still tasted it.

She paused mid-bloody battle scene to get up and brush her teeth. A few brushing, flossing, rinsing minutes later, she walked back into her bedroom, almost losing her dinner when she spotted Cam under her covers, holding the tiny, almost-done sweater up in the air.

"Cameron Mitchell, you have got to stop." Jo clutched her chest through his T-shirt, stopping to stand at the edge of the bed. "What are you doing here? You're not due until tomorrow. I'm picking you up."

Cam reached one muscled forearm out, pulling her into the downy depths of the bed. He flipped her under him until one knee rested between her legs and the other was on the side. He slipped his nose into the nook between her neck and her ear.

"Yes." He drew in a deep breath. "This smell right here. That's the one I missed. I finished up a day early. Wanted to surprise you."

As much as Jo's heart stuttered in her chest at the sight of his camouflage shorts, fitted black T-shirt with a huge middle finger on the front, and his dark hair caressing his neck and ears, the sight of how good he looked only served to remind her of the pending morning grooming session.

"Cam, no." Her hand went to the messy topknot on her head. "I had a plan."

"What kind of plan?" He dipped his head and slow-pushed his tongue into her mouth, groaning and thrusting between her legs. "God, baby. Being away from you has been torture."

Jo's hips, with a mind of their own, pushed back into the

hardness only getting harder at the juncture of her thighs. She wrapped her legs, ancient yoga pants and all, around the back of his calves and sent one hand up his shirt, stroking the naked muscles of his back.

“That feels so good, Jo.” Cam pulled her chin between his lips, reaching up to dislodge the scrunchie holding her hair up.

Scrunchie! Her limp, wild hair spilled everywhere. Her breath was just shy of salmon, thanks to the quick brush. She wore a T-shirt from Cam’s dirty clothes hamper.

“Is that my T-shirt?” He lifted enough to stare down at the word *Sorbonne* written across her chest.

“I ran out of clean clothes?”

Cam’s chuckle tickled her chest.

“Somehow I doubt that. I— Ouch! What the hell was that?”

Jo slid from under him, standing to rifle through the fluffy covers until she found her knitting needles.

“This.” She held up a needle for him to see before setting it on the bedside table. “Sorry. I was knitting sweaters for the girls.”

“You knit?” Cam jerked his brows together, but his full lips pulled into a smile. “That’s kind of hot old lady. Will you knit me something?”

He came up on his knees, drawing her closer until her knees touched the mattress. He slipped one hand into her yoga pants, cupping her butt. His other hand seduced her scalp, massaging into the hair at the back of her neck. He tugged until their lips met, but not in a kiss. Just delectable contact. The promise of ravishment.

“I fell asleep on the plane.” Cam pulled her top lip between his and sucked and groaned, pulling her back up on the bed until she faced him, both of them on their knees. “And I dreamed about your ass.”

Jo laughed against his mouth, drawing his bottom lip

between hers, repaying a luscious favor.

“You dreamt about my butt?”

“You don’t get it.” Cam smiled into their kiss, running his hands over her braless back under the T-shirt. “I’ve always hated falling asleep on planes. Who knew what I would say or do in my sleep? It was embarrassing tonight because I woke up with my hand wrapped around my dick, but that’s better than swinging and screaming.”

Jo smiled for a moment but couldn’t hold on to it at the thought of him swinging and screaming in his sleep.

“Oh, Cam.” She pushed the hair off his forehead and behind his ears. “Baby.”

“But I didn’t wake up that way. I’ve been sleeping better since we talked.”

“No nightmares?” Hope pulled at the corners of her mouth and lightened her voice.

Cam’s face tried to close off, but she could almost see the effort he made to keep himself open to her. He was really trying.

“I can’t say none, but it hasn’t been every night.” He moved his fingers from her butt to her front, slipping his hand between her legs. “Now you, I dreamt about every night.”

He slipped two fingers inside of her with so much confidence, like he was already intimately acquainted with the lips his fingers were caressing. Like he owned that needy, wet spot.

And maybe he did. Maybe he always had. Maybe that was why Jo had never felt urgent for anyone else. Even at the heights with other men, she’d never felt the fire Cam was stoking with just the barest, most subtle movements inside of her with his fingers.

“I want this.” He withdrew his fingers, palming her, pressing into her with his whole hand. “I want us tonight.”

The edges of Jo's sanity peeled off like paper burning in a flame. She held on just enough to pull away. *Remember the lady garden.*

"Cam, not tonight. Baby, please, not tonight."

Cam's hand went still and he pulled back, a frown over his eyes.

"You don't want...Are you scared?" He scooted back an inch or two on the bed, still on his knees. "I get it. A few less nightmares doesn't make me safe. I'm not safe. You're right. I don't even trust myself." He bounded off the bed, walking over to the mantel and gathering his keys. "I'm sorry. I assumed...I shouldn't have."

"Cam, what...Are you leaving?" Jo couldn't have disguised the dismay and disappointment in her voice if she'd tried. "I've missed you. I want to be with you."

"I'm sorry, baby." He tossed his keys back onto the mantel, sliding his hands into his pockets. "I just...I guess there's been all this lead-up to us being together. And I felt like on this trip, I got there. You know?"

Jo climbed off the bed and crossed over to him. She chased after the hands in his pockets, palming his clenched fists.

"Got where? Tell me."

His eyes, stormy with all the emotions she could see roiling beneath the surface, grew a little calmer every second he looked at her. And she loved that because the simple contact of holding his hand, of sharing his air again after the time they'd been apart, was doing that for her, too. She stepped closer, until their bodies were flush.

"Tell me," she whispered against his neck.

He pulled their hands from his pockets so he could rub sparks along the sides of her thighs through the yoga pants.

"I kept replaying our conversation by the river before I left. How you laid all these weak moments out for me."

“Cam, they were nothing compared to what you’ve been living with.” Jo dipped her head, crossing one chipped-nail-polished toe over the other. “I can’t believe I even thought mine were anything like yours.”

“Everybody’s shit is just that, babe.” He lifted her chin, forcing a collision between their eyes. “Theirs. It takes a lot for you to show your weaknesses.”

Jo nodded. There were more fingers on her hand than people alive she’d be vulnerable with.

“But you’ve always been that with me. Open. Ready.” He pushed her wild hair back. “I want to be open and ready for you. I’m gonna fuck up. I’m warning you now. I’m hardwired to ruin things.”

“Don’t say that.” Jo traced her fingers over his lips, rubbing away the harsh words.

“It’s true.” He grabbed her fingers on his mouth, kissing each one. “It’s why I never pursued you, even when I suspected...how you felt.”

“Suspected?” Jo maneuvered her lips into a wry twist. “You damn well knew how I felt. I was the sure thing you never wanted.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Jo. I’ve wanted you for a long time, but the girls I messed with knew the score. If I had hurt you, and believe me, especially back then, I would have...It was too much to risk.”

He enfolded her face with his hands, caressing the wide bow of her mouth.

“I’d never been accepted just for me. Loved just for me. Not even by my own mother, Jo. You can’t understand what that’s like.”

He was right. Sometimes people called her the Walsh princess, and she had been. She’d lived at the adored, privileged center of a wealthy, loving family her entire life. Cam had been born on the opposite pole and had frozen there

alone the first years of his life.

“Ms. Kris gave me that for the first time, and maybe because she raised you, you had that same capacity almost from the beginning. To see past the fights and the anger and the shitheadedness. Somehow, you saw past all that. Saw something worth letting into your life. You think I’d jeopardize that just so I could screw you? Never.”

Cam swallowed, his thumbs making loving trails under her eyes and across her cheekbones.

“I’m still afraid I’ll hurt you.” He silenced her with a look and a quick shake of his head when she started to protest. “Not intentionally. I could never do that and I would kill anyone who hurt you. I’ve always been that way about you, and you know it.”

She nodded, leaning into the gentle touch of his roughened palm.

“I’m afraid of what I’ll do to you when I’m there.” He looked down at the floor. “With him. In my dreams. Out of my head. Or when I lose control.”

“You won’t lose control. I’ll help you.”

“Jo, if it’s the way I think it’ll be between us, you’ll be the last person to help me stay in control.”

His words started a shudder in her belly that spread to her fingertips, leaving them tingling, trembling.

“I used to think he was chasing me.” That same terror and hatred Jo had seen when he first told his story crowded out the tenderness in his eyes. “That he would catch me again, even though he’s dead. But now I don’t feel him chasing me. It’s more like one night in my sleep, he already caught me.”

Cam’s eyes were unfocused, fixed over her shoulder, on nothing visible to the naked eye.

“Like he caught me and possessed me without my permission. Without my knowledge, and he’s just waiting for my guard to be down enough to leap out and hurt the people I

care about the most.”

He returned his eyes to her, and they softened by degrees.

“That’s you, by the way. There’s no one left on this earth who means more to me than you, Jo. I don’t know how you want to label that. I don’t need to. I just know that is the space in my heart you own.”

He dusted kisses across her lips and cheeks until he reached her ear.

“You have for a while.”

Jo wasn’t sure how long the tears had been streaking down her cheeks, but she’d just started tasting them in the corners of her mouth. All the words she had been longing to hear from Cam since she was a girl suddenly filled the room. Watering her heart. Breathing life into dead dreams and dusty hopes.

“I’m not afraid of you.” She forced the words past her quivering lips, past the wetness of her tears. “I’ve never been afraid of you, and I’m certainly not now that I know how that monster hurt you.”

“So if it wasn’t fear that had you put a stop to things over there”—he nodded toward the bed where they had been busy combusting when she pressed the brakes—“what was it?”

Jo dropped her forehead to his shoulder, groaning. He had all her other low moments. Why not this one? She swiped the tears from her face.

“My lady garden.”

Cam pulled away, peering down at her, a smile and a frown making peace on his face.

“Your...I’m sorry. Your what garden?”

“I wanted to be perfect for you. For our first time. I was going to get...well, a fresh wax down there. And a keratin treatment to make my hair straight.” She held up her tic-tac toenails, with all the empty spaces where color should be. “Get my nails done. With all that’s been going on at work, I’ve

neglected my grooming.”

“Jo, please, stop.” Cam put his fingers over her lips. “Just stop talking because I’m going to laugh, like gut bust laugh if you keep talking. Then you’ll get mad and punch me. And I’ll laugh more because you hit like a girl. It’ll be a whole thing. I promise you.”

Jo’s lips twitched, but she held her ground.

“I wasn’t being vain or ridiculous. I’ve waited like seventeen years for this, and I wanted my—”

“Your lady garden?”

“Yes, my lady garden to be all—”

“Freshly waxed. Yeah, you mentioned that.” Cam’s hand wandered down her side and into her yoga pants, into her panties. With no prelude, no warning, his fingers thrust inside her again. “I like your lady garden just the way it is right now.”

Jo’s breath hitched, getting trapped in her lungs and refusing to come out. Her mouth throbbed under his hungry stare, like he was already tasting her, already possessing her in a dimension they just hadn’t reached yet.

“Remember I said I was going to worship you?” He slid his fingers in and out, adding a third, using his thumb to brush across the bundle of nerves swelling and begging for his touch.

Jo just nodded, her mind and mouth already emptied of words by the steady, sensual pull and push of his fingers. Of his hand coated with the evidence of just how ready she was for this to happen.

“I was wrong. I think this first time, I’m gonna have to fuck you.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Take this slowly.

Cam said the words to himself, a silent mantra in his head that his hands and cock seemed determined to ignore. God, he was finally going to have Jo. He had wanted her, maybe a secret he even kept from himself, ever since she'd shown up at that pool party with daisies on her bikini and an ass no one had suspected was under the loose clothes she'd worn up until that night.

His mind said *slow*, but his legs and feet maneuvered her to the bed with urgency. His eager hands pulled the T-shirt over her head, pushing the hair behind her shoulders so his eyes could devour her nipples, like rubies floating in milk. And these yoga pants—they were in the way. He pushed them down her slim hips and over the gorgeous exaggeration of her ass. Oh, that would be his soon, too. He wanted to crawl into every hole, wanted to lick every crevice, wanted to claim every inch of this perfect body. To erase every trace of any man who had had the nerve to come before him. He was fucking feral about this woman, and she had no idea.

Jo stood before him completely naked and he barely remembered shedding her clothes along the way. This passion was a blur. This was the danger, that he'd get so caught up in these feelings, these urges, these compulsions to possess her that he'd lose control. He'd stanchied this for so long. Now that he'd decided it was time and he was ready, it was like emotional hemophilia. He was a free bleeder. Even the barest nick could send him gushing, and he couldn't have that. It would be messy. It would be dangerous for him to lose control that way, especially with Jo.

She looked at him with so much trust, like she was waiting for his next move, and whichever way he led, she would follow. He'd never seen her this pliant. This...submitted? That wasn't a word anyone who knew Jo would ever associate with

her, but it kept encroaching on his mind. This sense that she wanted his pleasure even more than his. He recognized it because he felt the same way. He coveted the sounds she'd make when she came. The way her body would weep during orgasm. He hadn't even thought about how it would feel to be buried inside her. All the sensual entropy he was drowning in was about her. All her.

"I choose worship." He kissed down her neck until he could lavish one nipple between his lips.

"I thought you chose fucking." Her words rode on a breath to reach his ears. Whatever he wanted. It was imprinted in her eyes, in the arms down at her side, waiting.

"We have all night. We can do a little of both." He squeezed one bare butt cheek, his mouth already watering at the thought of sinking his teeth into that perfect roundness. "Maybe a lot of both."

"You're messing up my plans, Mitchell."

"Is this the lady garden again?" Cam laughed, but it faded fast like a winter sunset. "I don't care about that, or if your hair is straight, or if your nails are done. It's going to be perfect because it's you and me. Finally, it's you and me."

* * *

So much heat. So much need. Cam radiated it and Jo absorbed it, letting it warm and fill her. She had waited half her life for this moment, and her hair and nails were a mess. Nothing was the way she'd envisioned it.

Take that back.

The way Cam looked at her—that was just as she'd hoped it would be. His lips scattering kisses across her arms, breasts, feet—perfect. Oh, good Lord, his mouth between her legs, licking and nipping and sucking—absolute nirvana. Watching his mouth hollow around her, seeing the flex of lean muscle in his chest and arms as he hovered over her. He was the kind of man you never expected to see in real life, and he was in her bed making love to her in centimeters and seconds,

immeasurably drawing out the pleasure until she ached and burned with the need to reciprocate.

“I want to touch you, too.” Her mouth surrendered the words in pants. One of his hands caged her wrists above her head while he suckled gently at her breasts.

“Not yet.” He pulled her earlobe between his teeth, nibbling the soft flesh like an appetizer. “You first.”

Oh, she was first. Over and over again, the pleasure broke through her and inside her until she lay quivering and jerking and twitching, her body a coda of shivers. She was at his mercy, inhibitions scattered on the floor with the clothes he’d peeled from her body. Her hips thrusting into his mouth, into his fingers, seeking satisfaction.

“It’s good?” He dipped his tongue into her belly button, then moved back down, curving his big hand under her butt, pulling her deeper into the heat of his mouth.

“You know it is.” Jo grappled for control, loosened and unraveled by every gentle touch. By the kisses he drizzled across her neck and down her body and between her legs. “I need you. Inside me. Please don’t make me wait anymore.”

He pulled her up, sprawling her over his thighs, one leg on either side of him, his fingers spreading her to take him. One hand lifted her, still gentle but with undisguised anticipation and strength.

“I will remember this moment for the rest of my life.” Cam tangled his fingers in her hair, holding her head still, arresting her eyes with the hot urgency of his. “When I was closer to you than I’ve ever been to anyone. I want to fuck your soul.”

When he lowered her onto him, she dropped her head to his shoulder. She would wait another lifetime if it meant having this moment. This joining, where their flesh merged, passion hyphenating their bodies. The emotions flashing between them like the conversation of thunder and lightning. She lifted her head and stared into his eyes. There was no doubt in her mind it was the same for him.

He dropped his head back, closing his eyes and groaning, one arm pressed against her naked back, fingers twisted into her hair. The other hand claimed her thigh and guided her, pacing the syncopation of their hips rocking into one another. She could see his control slipping like a rope through his fingers. The clenched jaw. His full mouth tightened across his teeth. She had left control far behind, and she wanted to undo him.

“I need you deeper.” She dropped the words into his ear, loving the tension knifing through him at the raspy words. “Harder, Cam.”

“Baby, I don’t want to hurt you.” His eyes entreated her not to press him, not to stretch him beyond the limits he’d set.

“I’m not afraid of you. If you’re rough, I’ll like it.” She tongued his Adam’s apple and licked down his neck. “I promise you I’ll like it.”

With a growl, he pressed her back into the mattress, fanning her hair out over the pillow. He pulled her legs up over his shoulders until her bottom was flush with his hips.

“Tell me if it hurts.”

“It won’t. You won’t.” She squirmed closer, her body greedy for every inch of him. “Take it.”

And he did. He braced his hand against the wall over her, his beautiful features twisting with the agony of every thrust. He gripped her leg over his shoulder, turning his head to suck the skin above her ankle. He drilled into her for an eternity and it still wasn’t enough. He pulled her legs down and flipped her until her shoulders pressed into the bed and her butt was in the air. He spread her knees with his, taking her from behind without warning or a word. His body commanded hers with every downstroke. He sank his teeth into her shoulder and toyed with her breasts until she clenched around him. She pulled the pillow to her face to absorb the scream ripping from her throat, but he tossed it to the floor.

“Let me hear you.” He dripped sweat onto her back, his

love an exertion that wrenched his body over hers. “That sound you’re making, that’s mine. I want it.”

He pounded into her, smudging the fine lines between rapture and pain until she didn’t have words for the exchange they made. The healing for the wounds, the tenderness for the hurt. A wail of lust and love rent the air between them until he swallowed that sound. Captured it in a kiss and overtook her. His body subdued hers, but in the end, as he shuddered into her, gripping her like air in his starved lungs, he was at her mercy. It was over too soon and it was endless.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Cam pretended to read the *Wall Street Journal* on Jo's iPad while she prepared coffee. He glanced at his phone to check the weather—for show. His eyes kept wandering to her tall, slim form moving around her kitchen in a paisley patterned silk robe. He could tell it cost the earth, but it could have been burlap for all he cared. Jo completely naked under the silk—priceless.

During the night, they'd lain like spoons in a drawer. He'd resisted her silky nakedness as long as he could before he had to lift one long leg and plunge back in from behind, making her breath hitch. She'd barely been awake before she was climaxing around him. And this morning, he'd had her again in the shower, a primitive mating against the wall, spiraling them into a wet, consuming heat. Their sounds of base pleasure bouncing off the tiles.

He'd known it would be like this. He had addict in his blood. He'd watched his mother twitch and scratch and foam at the mouth for her next high. And as disgusted as he had been by her incessant need, he'd always figured he had that capacity inside him. So he'd stayed away from drugs. Usually drank in moderation. He had never wanted to need something so badly he couldn't set it aside if he had to.

Until now.

There was no setting Jo aside, and if he had to walk away, he'd be no better than his mother. Fiending and twitching, want and need burning through sense and good intentions. Last night, he'd taken a beautiful, dangerous step with Jo, and even if there was a way back, he didn't want it. He'd known sex with her would be the best he'd ever had. She was too fiery, too much of a challenge to be less than his equal. He hadn't anticipated their intimacy would swallow him whole, that he'd lose unrecoverable bits of his soul to her, not just while he pounded into her like a raging bull, but when she fell

asleep naked in his arms. When he'd fallen asleep in hers.

He hadn't escaped the nightly hell his dreams always delivered, but when he woke up, frantic and searching for the cold steel comfort under the bed, he'd found Jo instead. She'd snuggled into his side, mumbling in her sleep, thrown one leg over his hip, and sighed. There was no room for demons in her bed. Cam had lain awake for another hour, letting the steady rhythm of her breathing lull him back to sleep.

She smiled at him, setting coffee and a bagel on the table.

"It's not a hot breakfast like you made for me," she said, forgoing the chair across the table from him and perching herself on his knee. "But the bagels are pretty fresh. Q picked them up from the bakery yesterday."

"They're fine." Cam took a bite, not tasting it, already forecasting when he could be inside her again. "What are your plans for the day?"

"Well, I still have my lady garden appointment at ten o'clock." She took the coffee mug from his hands, sipping before giving it back to him.

"Your lady garden was fine to me." He set the coffee on the table and pulled her back against his chest. He parted the robe, sending his hand up her bare leg.

"And..." She paused, pulling his hand away and giving him a pointed look. She knew him so well. "Mani-pedi and hair appointment."

Cam frowned, reaching up to pull a clump of her wild hair into his fist.

"What are you doing to your hair?"

"I was going to get it treated to make it straight and easier to manage."

"I like it this way. Kind of wild and untamed."

Her eyes whispered their secret. The secret of just how wild and untamed she'd been last night. Cam had been afraid he'd

be too rough for Jo, but he had a row of scratches down his back and a constellation of bite marks to prove she gave as good as she got.

“Consider it canceled, then, but the others I’m keeping.” She leaned in to kiss him lightly, pushing her fingers into his hair. “There’s a board meeting this afternoon, by the way, so Daddy will be home later. Peter and I have a presentation we need to get ready for.”

Cam fought the sudden urge to hurl his coffee against the wall.

“What?” Jo turned to the side, resting her forehead against his. “What just made you go all tense on me?”

He considered not telling her. Did he really want her to know what a jealous, insecure idiot he was when it came to that guy?

“Peter.” He dropped the name in the quiet of the kitchen and waited for her response.

“Baby.” She brushed her hand over his bed-rumpled hair. “We’ve been over this.”

Cam turned her until her legs slid out from beneath the silk robe, hanging on either side of his thighs. He wrapped his hands around her tiny waist. Did she know most women would give their left arm to have her dimensions?

“I don’t want him.” She nuzzled into his neck, drifting her fingers down to toy with his nipple. He was shirtless and wearing only boxers. His growing erection would be inescapable.

Focus.

“But he does want you.” Cam pulled away from her curious hands, cupping her jaw and tilting her head to meet his eyes. “He’s in love with you, Jo.”

She dropped her eyes to the floor where her toes brushed the stone tile.

“He does have feelings for me, yes.”

“And you? What do you feel for him?” Cam’s spine went ramrod straight, braced for her answer no matter what it was.

“We’ve been through this.”

“Tell me again.” He kissed the spot behind her ear that smelled like her shampoo and body wash and hope. “I need it.”

She peered at him through the long, curly length of her lashes.

“I like him as a friend. I do find him attractive. That’s not a crime, is it? To recognize that someone is attractive?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t talk about crime and Peter in the same sentence because I want to strangle him every time I catch him looking at you.”

He closed the inches between their mouths, sucking her full lips between his. His hands glided over her slender back, across the slight flare of her hips, and down to cup the luscious curves of her ass. She started a subtle thrust against him, and before he knew it, he was thrusting back. He shoved an urgent hand into the silky hair falling around her face. He pushed the robe off her shoulders, letting the lapels fall open until their hearts beat against each other through their skin.

The kitchen door opened behind them, and Cam jerked the robe back up around her shoulders, clenching the lapels together. Walsh and Unc filled the entryway. Jo looked over her shoulder, clutching Cam’s naked arm for support.

“Shit.” Jo mixed the curse with a husky laugh, seemingly undisturbed to be caught half naked in the kitchen by her father and cousin. “Hey, Daddy. Walsh.”

Jo was the only one with any composure, flipping around on Cam’s knee before standing to face them. Walsh’s and Unc’s mouths both hung open before they recovered.

“Hey, baby girl.” Unc walked over to them, raising his eyebrows at Cam, clad in just boxers in his kitchen. He leaned

down and kissed Jo's hair. "You've been a good girl, I hope."

Jo looked back at Cam and quirked her lips.

"I think I was very good, Daddy."

Shameless.

"What the hell is going on?" Walsh demanded, anger snapping his brows together. "Am I in the freaking Twilight Zone? Unc, is it every day you come home to your daughter straddling Cam in the kitchen?"

Unc walked over to the coffeepot and poured himself a cup. He looked at Walsh over the rim, sipping and taking his time responding.

"She's a grown woman, Walsh, and Cam's a grown man."

"This is not okay." Walsh turned turbulent eyes on Cam. "How could you do this? To Jo?"

Cam was just about to speak, not knowing what would come out of his mouth, when Jo turned on Walsh with hands on her hips.

Oh, hell. Here we go.

"How dare *he*?" Jo popped the words across the kitchen at Walsh like a rubber band. "How dare *you* come in here high and mighty and inserting yourself into a situation you know nothing about?"

"Oh, I don't know?" Walsh folded his arms over his chest. "I think I do. I've seen this before more than once. It won't end well, cuz. You know that."

"What I know is that this is none of your damn business." Jo narrowed her eyes at Walsh, gesturing toward Unc casually leaning against the counter and sipping his coffee. "If my own father is fine with my relationship—"

"Relationship?" Walsh cut his eyes between Cam and Jo before landing on Cam like a stack of bricks. "How long has this been going on? What the hell, Cam? This is Jo we're talking about."

Cam stood, ignoring Walsh's eye roll and heavy sigh at the sight of him in only boxers.

"It's not what you think." Cam scratched at the back of his neck. Searching for words to reassure Walsh about something he barely trusted himself.

Jo turned her head, eyes welling with hurt. Her bravado cracked and her bottom lip trembled. Shit. Did she think he was going to deny her? He reached for her hand, pulling her against him and dropping a kiss on her hair, still damp from their shower.

"What I mean is that you probably think I'm going to just"—Cam glanced at Unc, uncomfortable with what he needed to say in front of Jo's father but determined to put it all out there—"just hit it and quit it."

"You must admit there's a bit of a precedent." Walsh relaxed his mouth, shaking his head and allowing his disappointment to press past the anger. "We've always protected her, both of us. I thought she was off-limits."

"I'm standing right here." Jo sliced her hand through the tension-thickened air. "I'm not a child, Walsh."

"I know that, Jo. Of course I know that." Walsh toggled a glance between Jo's and Cam's obviously less-than-dressed figures. "I only want what's best for you."

"Spare me your misplaced paternalism, cuz." Jo rolled her eyes and cocked one hip even farther out. "You have no say in my love life. You've always thought you could dictate to me, but you can't."

"I'm not trying to," Walsh said. "I just think...I'm concerned about your happiness."

"And his happiness?" Jo waved between the two men. "Were you concerned about that?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Walsh, we're all ecstatic for you and for Kerris and for the girls, but your happiness came at a price. And in many ways,

Cam paid a lot of it.”

Walsh met Cam’s eyes, and all the awkward guilt and hurt they’d spent the last year and a half chipping away at rose between them.

“And yet, he was at your house at Christmas. Trying,” Jo continued. “You call him and ask him to check on his ex-wife, pregnant with your twins, and he’s there. He had to watch Kerris in labor with your girls. Do you think that made him think about the baby girl he lost? Maybe just a little bit?”

Walsh’s eyes, resting on Cam, clouded with all the things they’d put behind them.

“Man, I didn’t even think about—”

“My point is, he deserves to be happy, too. And I know you find it hard to believe, but I make him happy.”

“Of course. I don’t find that hard to believe. I—”

“And he makes me happy.” Jo firmed her mouth and pointed a finger in Walsh’s direction. “You will not ruin this for me with your irrational overprotectiveness. I’ve put up with your cock-blocking half my life.”

Was anyone else uncomfortable with Jo’s father hearing this? Maybe that was just Cam...

“If you think I’m going to tolerate—”

“Jo.” Cam kept his voice quiet and even, despite the battle royal of emotions warring inside. “Stop.”

Mouth still open, the next set-down stymied on her tongue, she turned to him.

“Don’t let him ruin us.” She said it so softly he wasn’t sure anyone else heard it, but tears stood in her eyes.

This was difficult for him, yes. Facing Walsh’s displeasure and her father catching them grinding on each other in the kitchen—it was uncomfortable, all of it, but she was worth it. She needed to know that.

“Hey, why don’t you go get dressed? I don’t want you to miss your pampering today. Mani-pedi,” he leaned down to whisper, letting her feel his lips curve against her ear. “The lady garden.”

She rewarded him with a shy smile and pink cheeks, so at odds with the virago attacking Walsh moments before.

“Okay. You’re right.” She nodded, pulling the robe a little tighter around her before tipping up on her toes and kissing his cheek, heedless of the mini-growl that escaped Walsh’s lips behind them. “I have meetings all afternoon. Will I see you tonight?”

“Of course.” He turned her by one silk-covered shoulder toward the back staircase. “You go on up. I want to talk with Walsh for a little bit.”

Jo shot one more glance Walsh’s way, a warning and a defense. She parted her lips like she was ready to unleash on him again, but Cam pressed one finger over her mouth and pointed to the staircase. Without another word she went upstairs.

Cam turned his attention to the two men standing in the kitchen. Their mouths hung open again, just like when they’d walked in minutes before. If anything, they looked more shocked now than then.

“What?” Cam grabbed his coffee, wishing he had Dr. Jack Daniel’s to make this scene easier.

“You just managed Jo,” Unc said, a smile overtaking the shock on his face. “I don’t even want to know how you did it, but I feel like I just witnessed a solar eclipse. No telling when we’ll see that again.”

“I did not *manage* her.” Cam frowned, not liking to think in those terms. He loved Jo’s independence and fire. He was the last person who wanted to squelch it. “I reasoned with her. You should try it. Unless you wanted to hear about Walsh cock-blocking your daughter some more?”

“No, I think I’ve had enough of that.” Unc dumped his

coffee in the sink, rinsed out the mug, and placed it in the dishwasher. “Actually, I’ve had enough of all of this. I’m jet-lagged. Going to catch a nap before this meeting.”

“Unc, that’s all you have to say?” Walsh asked.

“Walsh, I’ve watched my daughter set her own hopes and desires aside for years helping others and taking care of everyone else. It has been apparent to me for a long time that she has feelings for Cam. I, for one, just want to see her happy.” Unc looked over at Cam, giving him a lopsided smile. “And believe it or not, I trust him.”

Cam swallowed, humbled that one of the few men who’d seen his potential trusted him with his greatest prize—his beautiful daughter.

“Now, are you ready for this board meeting this afternoon? You’ve been out of the loop lately.” Unc raised imperious brows when Walsh shook his head. “Then I suggest you focus more on preparing for this meeting and less on Cam and Jo.”

“Yes, sir.” Walsh firmed his mouth into a line of grudging acceptance.

“And you.” Unc turned eyes the exact shade of moonlit silver as Jo’s in Cam’s direction. “I might trust you, but we still need to talk about this. Later.”

“Yes, sir.” Cam hid his unrepentant grin behind a sip of coffee.

Unc went up the back steps from the kitchen, leaving the room to Cam and Walsh.

“I asked you about this months ago,” Walsh said, his voice quiet and disappointed.

“I know.”

“And you brushed me off like I was crazy. Like I imagined something between the two of you at Christmas when all along —”

“No, not all along.” Cam shook his head, wishing his

boxers had pockets to shove his hands into. “I mean, yes, I’ve had feelings for Jo for a long time. Even back in high school, but—”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Walsh disrupted his perfectly cut hair with a fitful hand. “You never gave any sign of that. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Think about the cock fest my life was in high school. You would have punched me in the face.”

“I still might.” Walsh didn’t smile and neither did he. They endured the tight silence between them for a few seconds before Cam spoke.

“I knew I wasn’t good enough for Jo then.” Cam huffed a helpless breath across his lips. “Who am I kidding? I’m still not good enough for her.”

“Well, in our minds, no one was ever good enough,” Walsh said. “I’m serious about you not hurting her.”

“Not as serious as I am. I’d walk away before I’d hurt her.”

“Don’t you think that would hurt her, too?” Walsh let out a heavy sigh. “Just don’t screw this up. You remember what we always told the guys she dated?”

“We always said, ‘You hurt her. We hurt you.’”

“Yeah, well, you hurt her, I hurt you.” Walsh paused, studying the floor before glancing back up at Cam. “Look, Jo was right. My happiness did cost you yours in a lot of ways.”

“Dude, Kerris and I would never have been happy anyway, even without you in the mix.”

“Yeah, but sometimes I still feel guilty over how things rolled out. I can’t let that guilt cloud my judgment about Jo, though.”

“Oh, so you’re judging me?” The irritation Cam had carefully checked ever since Walsh rushed in and started warning Jo off bucked a little.

“I’m not judging you. I’m *asking* you not to hurt her.”

“I won’t.” Cam ran his hand over the back of his neck, not wanting to discuss this with Walsh. Not even a little bit. “I care about her.”

“I’m going to hold you to that, Cam. Not because I don’t love you like a brother. You know I do. And after all we’ve been through, for us to still have what we have is a testament to a once-in-a-lifetime kind of friendship. But Jo’s like a sister to me. I have to protect her.”

Cam nodded. “Are we done here? I have to meet Bash in an hour.”

“Yeah, please go put some clothes on.” Walsh gestured to the lean, well-muscled frame Cam knew the ladies liked. “No one wants to see all that.”

Cam laughed and walked over to the sink to dump the remnants of his coffee. The strangled sound Walsh made behind him drew a look over his shoulder.

“What the hell happened to your back?” Walsh pointed to the trio of scratches Cam knew were there. He hadn’t seen them, but he’d felt Jo scratching and clawing at him, both of them losing their minds in the steam as they’d gone at each other against the shower wall.

“What can I say?” Cam offered Walsh a shrug and a grin he knew might get him punched if he wasn’t careful. “Your cousin’s a wildcat.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Cam walked through the front door, tossing his backpack onto the couch. Relief slumped his shoulders when he realized he was the only one in the apartment. Mama hadn't come home last night. He'd forgotten how to worry when she didn't come in. She always popped up after a few days, and he sometimes wondered if it wouldn't be better if she wasn't here at all. Only problem was social services would come for him eventually. He'd learned a thing or two, and from what he'd heard about foster care, it wasn't much better than what he had now. Even fewer guarantees. At least here he knew what to expect. Mama would always be on that pipe. She'd always fuck her customers. She wouldn't buy groceries.

And she'd still be his mother.

Most of the time he hated Mama now. She knew the nasty things Mac did to him, but she never made him stop. As long as she had that pipe, she didn't seem to care much what happened to Cam. As much as he wanted to hate Mama one hundred percent, he couldn't. And Mac knew it. Somehow Mac knew it. He had promised Cam that if he ever ran, he'd kill Mama. Mac might not be a good man, but he kept his promises. The only thing holding Cam here was the life Mama was smoking away.

They'd learned the word for that in English class today.

Irony.

Cam walked over to the refrigerator, knowing what was there but going through the motions anyway. Spoiled milk. He didn't like to steal, knew it wasn't right, but the rumble in his stomach outtalked his good intentions. He'd be lifting some beef jerky and Pringles from the corner store for dinner. Right was like the hundred-dollar sneakers some of the kids wore to school. One more thing he couldn't afford.

The door swung open, banging against the wall. Cam didn't

even jump. He was never startled anymore. Some kids at school talked about A Nightmare on Elm Street. Freddy Krueger had nothing on the monster at Cam's door, and he didn't startle Cam because Cam always knew he was coming.

"Your mama home?" Mac took the few steps from the door to the kitchen.

"No." Cam hated that his voice still sounded like a little boy's. He wasn't a little boy anymore, even though he was still not quite eleven. He wasn't a man either. He was some pitiful thing in between.

"You gon' be a good boy for me?" Mac reached out to touch Cam's hair, but Cam jerked away. Mac just grinned, caressing the buckle of his belt, his rat eyes never leaving Cam's face.

Cam started for the door, knowing it was no use, but still trying every time. Running every time. He at least had to run, even though he'd never gotten away. He had to believe that someday he would. Mac grabbed the back of Cam's T-shirt, choking him with the collar. Cam stood still, knowing what was coming but refusing to take off his pants. He fought Mac every time. He'd never won, but the only pride he had left was that he always fought.

"Get on your knees." Mac's voice slithered into Cam's ears.

Cam frowned, confused and a little hopeful. Maybe Mac wasn't going to do it this time. Maybe he'd just slap him around like he did Mama sometimes. Cam sank to his knees, closing his eyes and bracing for a punch. The hiss of a zipper jerked Cam's eyes open. He stumbled back, falling on his backside.

Mac gestured to the space in front of him.

Cam hadn't eaten much for lunch, but what little was in his belly rose up and watered his mouth with nausea. He scurried toward the door, but Mac grabbed him by the hair, making needles of pain pierce Cam's scalp.

Cam shook his head, clamping his lips shut, squirming away. Mac could beat him until he was blue and purple; there was no way he was doing this. Just as Cam prepared for the beating of his life, Mac pulled out a knife and pressed it to Cam's neck, just below his ear. A tiny trickle of blood oozed from the soft spot and into Cam's collar.

"Cut me," Cam said, shoving the tremor out of his voice. "I don't care."

"Oh, you brave now, huh?" The sound Mac made shouldn't have been called a laugh it was so dark and scary. "You don't care if I cut you, but what about your mama?"

Cam's eyes flew to Mac's face. He knew. Mac knew that Cam had a weak spot for Mama, even though she didn't have one for him. Mama was a druggie, but she somehow still managed to be pretty. Even bony as a skeleton and with her caramel skin blotched and ashy, she was pretty. Cam imagined deep cuts across her face or worse, a stab wound in her chest. He swallowed back tears, but not because Mac pressed the knife deeper into his neck. He would get away one day, but it wouldn't be today.

"Cam!"

Cam met Jo's eyes in the mirror, slowly coming back to present, blinking away the nightmare of his past.

"Baby, you cut yourself." Jo leaned up, rubbing her thumb across the scarlet blossoming in the shaving cream on his neck, like a rose in the snow.

Cam dropped the razor, letting it clatter in the sink. His sleep had gotten better, but it was like the past no longer waited for the night. It intruded throughout the day, puncturing the fragile membrane separating the past from the present, dream from reality. Time was permeable, memories passing through with ease to mock his false sense of safety.

"Are you okay?" Jo put down her makeup brush, reaching for a hand towel to wipe the blood and shaving cream from his jaw. "You kind of drifted off there for a second."

Cam nodded, shivering despite the steam from the recent shower permeating the bathroom.

“Just got lost in thought.” He drew Jo close, burying his nose in the wild, scented cloud of her hair.

He couldn't shake the feeling that the monster had found out. A woman was still Cam's weakness. It wasn't Mama anymore, but just like then, Cam would do anything to protect the one he loved.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Jo used her key to open the cottage door, balancing her purse, her iPad, and the bag of Indian takeout she had picked up after work. Even after the door swung open, she lingered on the porch for a few moments, enjoying the October evening. It wasn't late enough in the season for dark to shoo off daylight too early, but the nights were so much cooler. Maybe she and Cam could eat out on the patio tonight, wrapped in sweaters and each other. Or by the river. Jo had been in the office since seven o'clock this morning, literally cloistered in that building for almost twelve hours. Tomorrow promised to be more of the same. She needed all the outdoors she could get.

She dumped everything on the kitchen island, grabbed a container of momos, the dumplings she and Cam loved, and kicked off her shoes, padding back to the studio where Cam was sure to be painting. Over the last few weeks, she'd been amazed at how incredibly focused he'd been, painting long after she'd turned in to sleep. She woke up one morning to find an entire wall of his bedroom painted with an almost exact replica of the big oak tree from her backyard. Rope tree swing and all. Only difference, he'd added a carved heart to his tree with their names. She came home from work one day to find a riverbank painted on the opposite wall, two jars of fireflies resting in the grass.

This was the bad boy Walsh warned her about? This sweet, creative, gifted thoughtful man who usually had a bath run for her when she walked through the door?

"I'll take the bad boy any day, then," she told the empty room, feeling the goofy grin on her face only Cam could put there.

She'd grinned and laughed and sighed more in the two months they'd been together than maybe in her whole life. She'd always had a good life, but to put it simply, Cam made it better, and she was pretty sure she did the same for him. Even

when things were as hectic as they had been for them both. Between him preparing for his first exhibit and creating protocols for that romantic comedy, and her finalizing things for the Haitian adoptions, they only saw each other a few hours a day.

But boy did they make the most of the time they had.

Not just the sex, though Jo hadn't even known sex like this existed, with so many layers of tenderness and heat and trust rolled into an intimacy that cocooned her every night...and morning...and the occasional afternoon. It was every minute they spent together. They'd always gotten along; always enjoyed one another's company. Even when Cam was married to Kerris, Jo would come over to play cards or enjoy a meal with them. It never seemed strange that Kerris often drifted off, leaving Jo and Cam alone.

Jo had always felt there was a part of Cam that belonged solely to her, corners of his heart that no one, not even his wife, could possess. Guess that was only fair considering the connection Kerris had with Walsh even while married to Cam. They were one twisted quadrilateral, but somehow it was working. Walsh had apologized after the showdown in the kitchen and told her he supported her decision, but that he'd kill Cam if he hurt her.

Of course he would.

Kerris, on the other hand, had texted and called and emailed, using all the technology at her disposal to find out exactly what was finally happening between Jo and Cam. Jo's heart dipped a little when she thought of her last Skype call with her cousin-in-law. Kerris had asked about Cam's nightmares.

Was Jo fooling herself that Cam was getting better? He still had nightmares, but they seemed fewer and farther between. He'd reach for her, trembling, sweating, sometimes moaning. She'd dust kisses across his face, his shoulders, stroke his hair until he relaxed. Until he slept. She hadn't pressed him again about getting help, hadn't wanted to disrupt this Utopia with

that argument, but she would have to circle back around to it eventually. She dreaded it, but she knew it.

For now, she'd focus on tonight. Maybe if Cam felt good about what he'd gotten done today, they could eat good Indian food and she could whip his butt in a game of chess.

"Babe, I got takeout." Jo walked into the studio with one of the momos halfway in her mouth.

She stopped in her barefoot tracks when she realized Cam wasn't alone.

"Hi, Bash." Jo set the small carton of appetizers on the worktable. "Sorry. I didn't realize Cam had company."

"Hey, baby." Cam grinned at her over one bare shoulder. He was hanging a large square of sheet metal on the wall, spreading his arms and shoulders into a wide, muscled horizon.

He eyed the panel of metal, making sure it was level, before walking over to grab Jo by the waist, pulling her into him and kissing across her cheeks before licking the seam of her lips. She opened for him, losing herself in the vertigo their mouths made together. A world-tipping, belly-flipping swirl of a kiss that made her forget Bash altogether until Cam addressed him.

"You still here, Bash?" Cam opened one eye to look at his agent. "You don't take hints very well, do you?"

Jo laughed against Cam's lips, pulling back to offer Sebastian a smile in lieu of an apology.

Sebastian grabbed the sports jacket hanging on a nearby chair.

"Maybe you should do less hinting and more painting."

Jo turned in Cam's arms, pressing her back to his bare chest, folding her hand across the forearm wrapped around her waist.

"What do you mean *more* painting?" Jo asked. "He's already painting morning, noon, and night."

Sebastian cast a significant glance between the two of them standing, twisted around each other.

“Somehow I don’t believe Cam’s nights are filled with painting lately.” He gathered his laptop case, headed for the door, and tossed the parting words over his shoulder. “Remember what I said. The director wants to see that protocol.”

Jo twisted a look up at Cam, countering his grin with a frown.

“Am I distracting you? Are you behind?”

“Ignore him.” Cam turned her into him, sliding his palms down her waist and over her hips. “I missed you today.”

“I missed you, too.” Jo reached up to kiss him quickly, pulling back when he tried to go deeper. “Don’t redirect me. Are you behind?”

Cam closed his eyes and dropped his forehead to hers. He pressed a kiss to her temple before walking over to the worktable and picking up a momo.

“Maybe a little behind.” He took a bite. “Sauce?”

“In the kitchen.” Jo loosened the belt of her dress. In meetings all day she’d felt like the belt was cutting off her air supply.

“Is this a striptease?” Cam leaned against the worktable, folding one arm under the other, eyes never leaving the belt in her hands.

“Talk to me, Cam.” Jo ignored the hot-as-hell picture he made bare-chested and obviously wanting her in the same state. “I don’t want to distract you from your work, baby, because you certainly aren’t distracting me from mine.”

“I’m just stuck and need some inspiration.” The glance Cam flicked over her doused her body with gasoline. “I think I know what could unstick me.”

“What?” Jo laced the query with caution.

“A completely different medium. A new subject.” He chewed the last of his momo and linked his hands behind his head, causing the muscles in his arms to flex. “Let me paint you.”

Jo’s hands clenched around the belt in her hands.

“What, like...like now?”

Cam’s eyes simmered with something hot and mysterious.

“Strip.”

The word lashed her libido like a whip. She had a feeling if she stripped, not much painting would get done.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“I need it.” Cam’s eyes sobered and pled and she lost that battle. “Just painting. I promise. Please.”

Jo tossed the belt to the floor, undoing the few buttons holding her dress closed. She let the sleeves slide down her arms and the fabric pool around her feet. She didn’t look up but could feel heat from Cam’s eyes crawling over each bare limb she exposed. She wasn’t sure how far he wanted to take this.

“Um...”

“The bra and panties.” Cam’s voice had dipped and deepened, roughened. “Take them off, too.”

Jo’s fingers trembled over the front closure of her bra. She unsnapped the center, her breasts spilling free of the fragile cups. She tossed the costly scrap of silk and lace into the pile at her feet. She slid her thumbs under the strips of lace hugging her hips, rocking a little to shimmy the thong down her legs until it landed in wispy circles around her ankles.

She finally looked up. Cam’s eyes seemed to be everywhere at once, like he couldn’t linger on any one part of her but couldn’t look away for a moment. He met her eyes, and the air between them thickened so much Jo couldn’t swallow. The caged breath in her lungs rattled her chest.

“So, what’s the medium?” The question barely made it from her mouth she had so little air to support it. “Charcoal? Oil?”

Cam walked over to her, twisting their fingers together.

“You,” he whispered across her lips, licking into the corner of her mouth. “You’re the medium.”

He strode to the storage closet where he kept paints and supplies, returning with a tarp and several tubes of paint.

“Step on the tarp. This could get messy.” He slid his eyes down the length of her, spreading confidence over every inch of her body with the certainty that she pleased him. “I wish everyone could see how gorgeous you are like this, but I’d have to kill them.”

She grinned, reaching around his neck to bring him in for a kiss, but he pulled back, shaking his head.

“No. I said I wanted to paint you and I will.” He dropped a dirty whisper in her ear. “And then I hope you can clear your calendar because I’ll probably fuck you into next week.”

Ten minutes later, Jo wasn’t sure this was going to be as sexy as she had anticipated. When he was painting, Cam was very different from when he was horny. Apparently, he could subjugate the horny when it was time to paint. He laid out the rainbow of colored tubes, sat back on his heels, and rubbed his stubby chin. Gone was the lust she was used to when she stood before him naked. She could have been a lump of clay, a block of ice, a waiting canvas.

And then he rubbed a cool dollop of paint onto her feet, and all the sexy came rushing back at the first touch of his hands. He covered her feet in blue and started sketching in the paint with his fingers. She glanced down, a grin taking over her face when she saw him looping laces on top of her feet and sketching a swoosh on each side.

“Running shoes.” He looked up at her from the floor, his eyes laughing and the wide mouth curling into a smile.

“And”—he moved his fingers in circles around her knees —“knee pads for the next time we go skating.”

He smoothed the cool blue paint onto her legs and up her thighs, painting long lines down the sides.

“Stilts for these long-as-forever legs. You never thought to model? You could have.”

Jo didn't catch the grunt before it left her mouth.

“Nothing wrong with modeling. More power to them, but there's too much to do for me to stand around and have my picture taken all day.” She smacked her own butt. “Besides, I've got too much junk in my trunk.”

“Ah, that ass.” He doled out a lascivious grin, turning her around until she faced away from him. She felt his fingers writing on both cheeks. He traced “M” and “I” on the left cheek, and “N” and “E” on the right.

“Yours, huh?” She laughed, but her heart squeezed around the possessive gesture. He usually marked her with bites and scratches and places tender from how fiercely he had gripped her, secret reminders she carried under her clothes all day of the tempest they were together. That word scrawled across her bottom was an erotic ownership she wished she could show the world.

Cam squeezed more paint onto her back, smoothing it across her shoulders. She felt his fingers playing down her spine.

“What are you drawing?”

“Your backbone.” Squatting behind her, he heated the small of her back with his laugh. “Cause you're the strongest person I know.”

“Yeah, right.” She rolled her eyes, but pleasure bloomed in the smile on her face.

“It's true. I don't even think you realize how much you're like Ms. Kris.” Cam stood behind her, sketching over her shoulder blades.

“And what’s that?”

For a moment he didn’t answer. Not with words. Not with a laugh. Maybe he was so absorbed he hadn’t heard her question.

“Cam, what’s that you’re drawing on my back?”

“Wings.” Something deep and sweet lingered in his voice even after he cleared his throat. “You and Ms. Kris are my angels. She’s up there looking out for me. She left you on duty down here.”

Jo couldn’t *not* face him then. She turned, reaching for him, but he stepped back, holding up his blue-covered hands.

“Let me finish. You’ll ruin my masterpiece.” He smiled, stepping close enough to touch her stomach. “And here, we’ll do something fun.”

Jo pressed her chin into her neck, trying to see what he was drawing across her stomach.

“Idiot,” she breathed, laughing at the six-pack of Heineken he sketched across the collection of subtle muscles in her stomach.

He squatted again, bringing himself level with her hips, and his eyes smoked up with heat and humor. He smoothed paint across the tops of her legs and drew lines in an up and down pattern, bracketing the juncture of her thighs.

The dark hair curling around his head drew her fingers in, but he only allowed the caress for a moment before pulling back to inspect his handiwork with a devilish grin.

“And what is that?” she asked, scared to hear his answer.

“That is a privacy fence for your lady garden so no one can see.” He singed her with a glance up her body until their eyes collided, want steaming up the room. “No one but me, of course.”

“Are we almost done with this?” Jo couldn’t hide how much she wanted him. He had to know this was a slow torture.

His face sobered and he reached for the tube of paint. Moments before, he'd met the passion in her eyes head-on, but now he seemed to be looking everywhere but at her.

“Almost done. Just hang in there.”

He grabbed her hands and drew a heart in each palm. His throat worked for a few seconds, like the words were stuck there. After a moment, he glanced up at her, the confession in his eyes before it left his lips.

“My heart is in your hands.”

Before she had time to respond to that, he spread the paint over her chest, his fingers being extra tender around her nipples. Her chest heaved waiting for him to touch her and take her, but he didn't. He finally met her eyes, not even looking away while he wrote across her heart with his index finger. Jo closed her eyes, focusing through just her skin on the letters he engraved there.

First came the *I*.

Jo's heart raced from zero to a hundred.

Then the word *LOVE*.

The hope swelling up inside could only escape as a gasp through her lips.

He took his time writing the last word, slowing the motions of his fingers until she wasn't sure he'd ever finish those three letters.

YOU

Jo gripped Cam's shoulder, afraid her weak knees would buckle. The force of those words etched onto her chest with his love almost made her stumble. She opened her eyes, and it was what she saw in his face that shook her. Even if he hadn't just written it there over her heart, she would have known from that look alone.

“I love you, Jo.” Cam's voice dropped to a reverent whisper, and you would have thought he was in a church

instead of standing in front of a naked woman. “I’ve been running from that for a long time.”

“Cam—”

“Baby, let me get this out.” He looked down at the words scrawled across her chest and gulped. “I didn’t want to love you.”

Jo tried not to hurt when he said it.

“Let me explain.” He reassured her with a look, with a finger drawing a heart over hers. “You are the best thing that ever happened to me, but I’m afraid I’ll be the worst thing for you. There are still things I haven’t told you.”

His eyes bore holes in the tarp under their feet.

“Dark things that I wish you’d never have to know, but one day I’ll have to tell you.”

He looked back up at her.

“If I hurt you, Jo, it will drive me out of my mind. Sometimes I already feel like I’m losing it. While I’m in my right mind, here with you, I am going to do something really selfish. I’m going to ask you not to give up on me. Sometimes I run, and if I think I’m a danger to you, I know I’ll run. Don’t give up on me.”

“I won’t.” Tears made her voice shake. “I promise.”

“I grew up in hell, and I’ve lived my whole life...not quite sure. You are the safest place I’ve ever known.”

Jo couldn’t take any more. She had spent half her life searching for the edges of this love, but she couldn’t ever find where it began or where it ended. This love was everywhere. She pressed a finger over his mouth, knowing she would explode if she didn’t expel these words running over from her heart.

“I have waited so long.” She had to stop because emotion strangled the words in her throat. The tears blurred his face in front of her. He grabbed her hands so she couldn’t cover her

face. She couldn't hide any of it from him. She didn't have to anymore.

"I have waited so long for you to love me back." The tears coursed down her face freely, smearing into the blue paint around her neck.

"No more waiting," Cam whispered, standing and pressing his lips to hers, kissing her with tender ferocity.

Jo pressed into him. He laughed against her lips, pulling away to wipe the tears from her face with his thumbs. He reached into his back pocket for his phone.

"Let me capture this." He aimed his phone at her, a tender smile on his face. "I have a feeling we are about to ruin all my hard work."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Jo scooped up a handful of bubbles, blowing them in the air like a child. That's how light her heart felt. How free. She still maintained the same grueling schedule at the foundation. Still carried the weight of so many children's futures on her shoulders. Still felt saddled with people's impossibly high expectations, but here? With Cam? The moments she spent with him seemed insulated from all the burdens beyond the bliss waiting here for her every day.

Cam leaned against the doorjamb, arms folded over his chest. Affection softened the rugged beauty of his face. She blew him an air kiss, laughing when he grimaced but rolled his eyes and caught it. He stuffed the imaginary kiss into the pocket of his jeans before coming to sit on the edge of the tub.

"Hey, you." He leaned down, brushing his lips over hers. "Feeling better?"

It had been a hard day. Two of the couples committed to adopting had reneged. One couple had just filed for divorce; the other had been trying to have a baby the old-fashioned way for a long time and had just found out they were pregnant. Jo was happy for them, but that left her with just a few weeks to find replacements. With some members of the board holding on to their reservations, the last thing she needed now was to lose parents.

"How could I not be better?" Jo leaned back, resting her neck against the bath pillow, stretching her arms above her head. "A bath waiting at home for me. I smell a delicious steak dinner, if I'm not mistaken. My beautiful man can't take his eyes off me."

Cam lifted his eyes from her suds-tipped nipples to the grin waiting for him on her face.

"Sorry. I got distracted."

“It’s okay.” Her eyes strayed over his strong, lean body. “I get distracted sometimes myself. *Is that steak I smell?*”

“Maybe.” Cam lifted his girls-would-kill-for lashes and laughed, crossing the room to rub at a blue spot on her arm. “The paint didn’t all come off?”

Jo smacked the water, sending a tiny wave into his face. He reared back, falling onto his butt and pulling his knees up, shaking water from his hair.

“No, it didn’t all come off.” Jo pushed back the suds covering her stomach, pointing to the faint traces of the Heineken six-pack he’d drawn there. “I walked around with a beer gut all day thanks to you.”

“As long as you keep running ten miles a day, I don’t think you have to worry about a beer gut.” His eyes remained on her stomach, and something soft and curious replaced the laughter.

“What are you thinking about right now?” Jo laid her forearms on the lip of the tub, resting her chin on top. “Gun-to-the-head answer.”

A microscopic smile barely curved his lips. He shook his head, a dismissal of his thoughts.

“Let’s see.” Jo tilted her head on her arms, biting her bottom lip. “You were staring at my stomach, so...”

She couldn’t bring herself to voice the thought persisting in her mind. What if she was wrong? How embarrassing that would be.

“Never mind.” She sat back in the tub, gathering suds to cover her stomach and breasts.

Cam crawled across the small space to the tub and stood on his knees beside her. He pushed the bubbles away again, exposing the lean muscles of her stomach, tracing a finger down the center, lingering at her belly button.

“I was wondering how you’d look pregnant.”

Even though that had been her guess, hearing him say it

aloud set windmills spinning in her chest.

“And this imaginary pregnancy, where I get fat and unsightly.” Jo captured the finger tracing her stomach, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Is the baby yours?”

Cam intertwined their fingers across her belly, tracing the wet skin with his thumb.

“You’d go half in on a kid with me, Jo?” Cam’s voice was deliberately light, but the question weighed so much it took both of them to hold it, and she didn’t hesitate with her response.

“I’d throw my pills out tonight if you asked me to.”

Cam hauled himself over in the water with her, fully clothed, boots and all. He settled his chest on hers, pushing the damp hair away from her face. The water sloshed over the side of the tub, but Jo didn’t care and Cam didn’t seem aware of anything but her.

“When the time is right, then.” Cam rubbed his lips across her collarbone, nipping the skin of her neck gently between his teeth. “Can’t remember. Did I mention that I’m in love with you?”

“It came up last night, yes.” Jo laughed, resting her elbows on his shoulders and scooping suds into his dark hair.

“If I don’t get out of this tub, that won’t be the only thing that comes up.” Cam thrust between her hips and leered playfully.

“Since when is that a bad thing?” Jo pouted, tugging on his hair to keep him in place when he tried to leave the tub.

“Since I’m behind on my deadline for this protocol. I really do need to get unstuck.” He dropped a kiss on her cheek and hoisted himself out of the tub. “Creatively, I mean.”

Jo enjoyed the show as Cam peeled his wet T-shirt over his head and discarded the jeans and boxers, standing without self-consciousness in nothing but the glorious olive-hued skin God gave him.

Oh, mercy, mercy me. After dating Cam for a few months, she could quote Marvin Gaye backward and forward, and looking at the lean muscles of Cam's arms and chest, the sharp cut at his hips, the well-defined abs—that lyric said it better than she ever could.

He left the bathroom for a few moments, coming back unfortunately dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt.

“You're going to be pickled if you don't get out of there soon.” He rubbed a towel across his water-darkened hair. “And your steak is getting cold.”

“I knew it.” Jo fist pumped and climbed out of the tub. “You're not eating with me?”

Cam's emotions went into hiding. He turned away from her, but Jo noted the tighter shoulders and tenser tone of voice.

“No, I think I'm going back to my old neighborhood. Find a bridge or an alley to paint. Graffiti does it for me sometimes. Unsticks me. Inspires me.”

From what she could tell, his old neighborhood had been hell for him. If Cam was venturing back into hell, she was going with him.

“Can I come?”

“No way.” Cam shook his head and headed back into the bedroom. “I'll see you when I get back.”

Jo speed-walked into the closet where she'd transferred a good quarter of her wardrobe from home, scrambling to find a pair of skinny jeans and a cropped hoodie. She threw on some flats, twisted her hair up into a knot on her head, and zipped to the studio. Cam was loading paints and spray cans into a saddlebag. He glanced up, a frown settling on his brow.

“You're not coming with me, babe.”

Jo had never thought of herself as having feminine wiles, but she also hadn't lived twenty-nine years as the Walsh “princess” without learning a thing or two about getting her way.

“I just...” Jo paused, leaning against the table and looking down at the floor, biting her lip.

“I just missed you today, and with the adoptions falling through...” Jo sighed, shrugged, blinked quickly as if she might cry. “I kind of need you right now is all.”

She kept her eyes stuck to the floor but noted Cam’s motions slowing until he stopped altogether and stared at her. He crossed the room, saddlebag slung over his shoulder. He tipped her chin up, searching her eyes. It really had been a hard day. She focused all her energy on looking like she was at the end of herself.

“It’s not the best place, baby.” Cam rolled his thumb over her cheekbone.

“But I’d be with you, so I’d be okay, right?”

She didn’t exactly flutter her lashes because that would tip Cam off right away, but she did this slow blink thing that she hoped might have a similar effect.

“Well...” Cam chewed the corner of his mouth and then blew a breath out. “Okay, I guess you can come.”

She followed him back into the living room, promising herself she would never underestimate the power of long lashes again.

“Great. Just let me grab my purse.” Jo scooped up the Birkin bag she’d carried to work that day.

“We should probably leave that here.” Cam plucked the bag from her hands, setting it back onto the couch. “Nothing says steal me like a seven-thousand-dollar purse.”

Jo wouldn’t correct him, but good luck finding an ostrich-skin shooting star Birkin for seven thousand dollars. Now that *would* be a steal.

* * *

An hour later, Jo assessed the neighborhood they rode through. So this was Barfield projects. The first thing she noted was the

almost complete absence of green. No trees. No plants. No flowers. No *life*. Not even daylight would improve this neighborhood much.

Cam drove deeper in, weaving through streets and side alleys like he'd only been here yesterday. After a few minutes, he pulled alongside a building that looked like it literally might fall over any minute. If buildings had legs, this one would be on its last.

"It's condemned." Cam threw one leg over the seat and unstrapped his helmet.

"Looks the part."

Cam turned to her, tipping his mouth up at a corner. With gentle hands, he pulled off her helmet and brushed his fingers through the loose waves spilling around her shoulders. Jo climbed off the back of Cam's Harley (*he'd looked at her like she should be committed when she asked if they were taking his Ducati*).

"You sure you won't get bored? We won't stay long. I just need to get some of what's in my head on a wall."

"No, I'll be fine." Jo climbed off and dug into his saddlebag, pulling out her knitting kit. "See, I brought something to do."

Cam looked from the knitting needles to Jo's face, maybe four times before a laugh barged past his lips.

"Babe, you brought your knitting to Barfield projects? That's what you're going to do while I paint?"

"What did you think I was going to do? A crossword puzzle?"

"I don't know. Candy Crush?" Cam pulled out spray cans and started setting them on the ground close to the building. "It goes without saying that you are never to come around here by yourself, right?"

Jo observed the trash cans, the sole occupants of the alleyway. Her eyes drifted to the package store, just beyond

the street, and the surreptitious hooker working that corner. Don't come back alone? He didn't have to tell her twice.

Cam found her a crate to sit on, propping it along the wall facing his stone canvas. There wasn't much light, just what the streetlight provided a few feet away. She pulled up the pattern on her phone, determined to finish this scarf for her father. Knitting Harvard's coat of arms was no easy task and required her complete focus. She concentrated so hard on getting it right, an hour had gone by before she realized it.

She glanced up, doing a double take at the colors and shapes overtaking the wall. How did he do that? Transform a slab of cement mediocrity into a Technicolor marvel? He'd painted a jungle war zone but occupied by demons and angels instead of wild animals. He'd depicted a battle, but the combatants wielded fruit and vegetables instead of weapons—hand-to-hand combat with bananas. An angel pulling the key on a pineapple grenade. A corn cob held execution style to the head of a demon on his knees. It was a vivid courtship of whimsy and violence, so typical of Cam's trademark style.

Only there was nothing typical about him. An imagination this rich. A gift this rare, and he barely acknowledged it.

He was shaking an orange can when he noticed she had stopped knitting and was gaping at the wall. The first time Cam had ever shown her one of his drawings on a napkin he'd worn the same look on his face as he did right now. Uncertain, vulnerable.

“So...what do you think?”

If she gushed, he wouldn't believe it, so she tempered her awe, put down her knitting, and crossed over to the wall he'd transformed into an aerosol opus. She tilted her head as if considering. It was brilliant. It was museum-worthy. It was breathtaking.

“I like it.”

Those three words, not even a fraction of what she felt, wiped the anxiety from Cam's face. He relaxed into a smile,

stepping back to assess his work as if for the first time.

“You do?” He shook the can of paint but made no move to spray.

“What does it mean?” Jo scooted a few inches closer, linking their pinky fingers and laying her head on his shoulder.

“I guess it’s a commentary on how ridiculous and senseless most violence is.” Cam narrowed his eyes on the images he had sprayed on the wall. “A contrast between the foolishness of ego and agenda and all the twisted things that lead to wars and the actual cost of it. The lives. Growing up here, it was nothing to see someone shot for the sneakers they’re wearing or the jersey on their back. Sometimes I don’t think our world leaders are much more sophisticated than that when they make choices that cost people’s lives.”

Could she love him any more? Probably not, but she wanted to spend the rest of her life trying.

Jo turned her head in the direction of approaching footsteps. The alleyway sheathed the person in darkness. The closer the steps came, the tighter Cam’s hand wrapped around hers. He subtly positioned himself in front of her.

The streetlight carved the person’s features out of the dark until he was fully revealed. A man about their age or younger, wearing a Charlotte Bobcats jersey—Jo wasn’t sure which player’s—under a leather jacket. His jeans slouched dangerously low around his hips, the belt barely earning its keep. The brim of a Bobcats hat partially obscured his brown face.

“Whassup.” He flipped his chin at Cam, but his eyes inspected Jo’s curves in the skinny jeans and cropped hoodie. “Damn, girl. You ever want some dark meat, let *me* know.”

He reached out and touched her hair, which had been blown loose during the motorcycle ride.

Jo gripped Cam’s hand, stopping him from lunging at the man.

“And if you ever want your balls in a jar,” Cam said, the words barely making it through his clenched teeth, “touch her again.”

Jo had never heard Cam’s voice so low and deadly. Only moments before he had philosophized on the futility of war and violence but now looked ready to snap the stranger’s neck like a fistful of spaghetti.

“And who you s’posed to be?” Bobcats took a step even closer to them, setting off hydraulics in Jo’s heart.

Menace circled them for the first time that night. Had it been this close all along? Just around the corner, one word, one encounter away?

Before either she or Cam could respond, another man walked into the light.

“We got a problem?”

The man’s slow drawl was at odds with the energy crackling around him like a magnetic field. His golden brown skin lay taut over sharp, high cheekbones. His eyelids seemed to droop a little, and Jo couldn’t help but think of that as a trick of nature, a defense mechanism to deceive his enemies into believing there was anything slow or lax about this man. Dreadlocks hung past the bulging muscles of his arms, like living things snaking around him every time he moved his head. His tawny eyes made a rapid assessment of the scene.

Bobcats shattered the brittle silence with a chuckle.

“I was just about to—”

“Cam?” The new stranger’s eyes narrowed and then widened, a younger man’s smile splitting his lips to reveal a white smile, studded with one gold tooth. “Well I’ll be damned.”

Cam watched the man for an extra second before an almost identical smile took over his face.

“Deuce.” Cam moved forward, grabbing the other man’s hand in that guy handshake Jo never quite got. “Man, it’s been

a minute.”

Deuce looked Cam in the eye, and something passed between the two men, an understanding. A mystery that Jo immediately wanted to solve. He pulled Cam into a tight embrace. This man, who carried himself like the top of the food chain, held Cam like a brother. He pulled away, eyes straying over Cam’s shoulder to rest on Jo. His stare like a radioactive wave. Like she might need a hazmat suit to emerge uncontaminated.

“This yours?” He nodded to Jo.

He might remind her of a scorpion, poised to sting, but nobody talked to her—or about her—like that. Jo raised *oh hell no* eyebrows, waiting for Cam’s response.

“She’s standing right there.” Cam caught her eyes, his smile telling her he already knew what she was thinking. “Ask her.”

Deuce turned to her. “You his?”

Jo swung her eyes back to Cam, and even in this dark alley, where danger felt like breath on her neck, she couldn’t help but smile at him.

“Why don’t you ask him if he’s mine?” Jo didn’t look away from Cam even though she directed the question to Deuce.

“Ho ho ho!” Deuce stomped his foot three times and slapped Cam’s shoulder. “I heard *that*. So you hers, Cam?”

Cam’s good-natured grin held, but his eyes narrowed on her.

“Yeah, I’m hers.”

Jo smiled and pulled the hoodie up over her hair to ward off the dropping temperature. “Then I’m his.”

“Aw, she’s a keeper, man.”

“Don’t I know it.” Cam grinned at her, his eyes promising complete and total possession later tonight.

“This fool giving you trouble?” Deuce jerked his head

toward the other man, who had watched everything unfold without saying another word.

“See, what happened was...well, I didn’t know you knew him, Deuce.” Bobcat’s tongue tangled with the words.

“Cam’s like family.” Deuced hooked an elbow around Cam’s neck. “Go check the corner off Third and Boulevard.”

Cam was like family? He’d never mentioned anyone named Deuce. He’d never spoken about anyone from Barfield with the affection his eyes held as he and Deuce continued their conversation.

“I haven’t been back much,” Cam said. “Sorry ’bout that.”

“I’m not sorry.” Deuce’s tawny eyes darkened, hard as bars of gold, shielding emotions and thoughts Jo knew she’d never uncover. “That was the point of you getting out, right?”

Cam nodded, one side of his tiny smile bitter, the other side sweet.

“I guess so.”

“I been keeping up with you, though.” Deuce’s grin poked surprising dimples into his lean cheeks. “You doing big things. Real big things. Movies, videos. All that shit.”

“I got lucky.” Cam looked at his fingers, smeared with paint.

“This”—Deuce pointed to the scene on the wall behind them—“ain’t luck. You always had talent, and I knew it would take you far. Far from here.”

“You ever want to get far from here?” Cam’s voice traveled the distance between the two men.

“Now why would I want to do that?” Deuce slipped a guard over his smile, his eyes becoming wary.

“Because you aren’t the only one who hears things.” Cam shook his head, scowling at Deuce in the dim light. “You’re deeper in than you’ve ever been. It’s not an old man’s game.”

“Who said I wanted to live to be an old man?”

“That’s not funny.”

“Wasn’t trying to be. Who would want to live here forever anyway?”

“Then get out.” Low and earnest, Cam’s words reached Jo’s ears.

“And do what?” Deuce’s voice turned rocky. “Work at McDonald’s? Walmart? Give me rich and short over poor and long any day.”

“Just get out. I’ll help you.”

“What, tit for tat? I helped you and you want to help me?”

For the first time since they’d started talking, Cam’s eyes flicked to Jo. He looked back to Deuce before Jo could read him.

“I know you think it’s too late, Deuce, but it’s not.”

“Man, this ain’t no after-school special.” Deuce firmed his lips, and all signs of affability vanished. He was the scorpion again. “We’re different.”

“We just made different choices.”

“Oh, you wanna talk about choices?” Deuce flashed a barbed smile. “Should I tell your girlfriend here about the choices that got you out of this hellhole?”

The look Cam gave Deuce was a loaded pistol. He started packing his paints into the saddlebag, movements controlled, but Jo knew him. A cyclone whipped around inside him. And she, fool that she was, instead of taking shelter, stepped into the eye of the storm. She walked over to Cam, taking his hand, asking him if everything was okay with just a glance. He hesitated, nodding, eyes clearing the longer he looked at her.

“Let’s go,” he said, hand at the small of her back and walking her over to the Harley.

“I’m sorry.” Deuce’s voice held no contrition, but the fact

that he hadn't unleashed any of the dark power at his disposal onto them in his anger said a lot.

Cam settled the helmet on Jo's head and helped her onto the back of the bike before he faced Deuce.

"She's off-limits." Cam's eyes sliced through the thick air separating the two men like a knife. "You don't use her to threaten me. You don't know her name, and I don't want you to. Forget you met her."

"I said I'm sorry. I crossed a line."

"You sure as hell did." Cam pointed to Jo. "That's my line. Any of your shit ever touches her, I don't care if you're the biggest player in the game, I'll find a way to make you pay."

Deuce swiped a big hand over his eyes, shaking his head.

"I'm an asshole."

"Yeah, you are." Cam picked up his helmet, tucking it under his arm. He ran a hand over his wild hair, sucking his teeth in exasperation, a softer form of anger. "But it was good to see you."

Deuce's face lightened with a tentative smile.

"So we good?"

Cam held on to the last bits and pieces of the tension between them for a few more moments before relinquishing a small grin.

"We're good."

"So when you gon' paint me?"

Cam climbed onto the bike, crossing his hand over the hand Jo placed on his stomach.

"Paint you? Like you'd want that."

Deuce somehow married cynicism and wistfulness in a laugh.

"You said yourself it's not an old man's game. Your painting may be the only thing to remember me by."

Cam started the bike and revved the engine, foot pressing to the gas.

“It’s not inevitable, Deuce.”

“Oh, we back to choices, huh.” Deuce looked around the alley, fixing his eyes on the cartoon violence Cam had animated on the wall in paint. “Sometimes your life chooses you.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The pillow beneath Cam's head was no longer cool. He scooted to the edge of the bed, not wanting to wake Jo with his fitful twisting. She'd been exhausted by the time they got home and had gone right to sleep. She'd actually looked surprised when he let her drift off without making love. That was a first. He was surprised she could walk some mornings. That's how hard they went at it.

He loved it. He'd met his match, in bed and out. She was sassy, fierce, compassionate, proud, loyal. What the *hell* was she doing with someone like him? If she figured out she was getting the raw end of it, too bad. He couldn't give her up now. The only person who would separate the two of them would be him. And then only to protect her.

Heat licked up his neck when he thought of that guy stroking her hair tonight in the alley. Presuming to touch her. That hour in the alley was what had him awake even now. He couldn't shake the conversation he'd had with Deuce. Hell, just seeing Deuce after all these years. It had been good, but it had only reinforced the sense that the past and the present were working together to drive him out of his mind. Where did memory end and nightmare begin when it was all the same?

Jo sighed in her sleep, a small frown drawing her neat brows together. Cam leaned over, pushing the hair back from her face, rubbing the soft strands between his fingers. Even in her sleep Jo might be trying to solve the world's problems, one child at a time. What he wouldn't have given to have someone like her in his corner when he was a kid. To protect him from scum that preyed on the weak and the young.

"She sure is pretty."

The room temperature plunged, turning the room into a morgue, and icicles trickled into Cam's blood, sharp and frozen. He looked at the foot of the bed, drawing a deep breath

and scooting back to the headboard. Not frantically, but calmly as if he faced the cleaning lady who came once a week, not a demon on leave from hell. Cam refused the fear that wanted out. Wanted to leak into his voice, into a whimper, into a moan.

“You’re not real.”

“Oh, I’m very real.” Mac leaned one arm against the bedpost, spreading his full lips wide into his alligator smile. “You and me have a rendezvous every night. I’m more real to you than she is.”

“You can’t hurt me.”

A chuckle billowed from Mac’s lips like black smoke.

“I’m not here to hurt you.” Mac’s eyes slid like a reptile’s over to Jo, sprawled beside Cam, bare shoulders visible above the covers. “I’m here for her.”

“The hell you are.” Fear was a tundra covering his heart, but Cam sat up, forced his back from the headboard. “I’ll kill you.”

“Like that works.” Mac walked around to Jo’s side of the bed, his hand hovering over her hair. “That mouth. Gor-geous! Just think how those lips will look wrapped around my dick. You remember that, right?”

“No.” Cam shook his head even as the fear infiltrated his fingertips and laid siege to his lungs. “I won’t let you.”

“Oh, same way you didn’t let me hurt your mama? Or you?” Mac curled his lips around the poisoned words, sucking at them like venom. “You’re pathetic. Still. You ain’t gon’ do nothing.”

He was so wrong. Cam *could* do something. This time he’d get it right and deal with this regenerating evil once and for all. Somehow he had messed it up, but he wouldn’t this time. Not with so much at stake. Keeping his eyes fixed on Mac, he leaned toward the floor and ran his hand under the bed until he found the gun. Tonight, it wasn’t cold. It burned his hand,

spreading fire through his body and melting the fear away. He pulled himself up on his knees, reached across the bed, and grabbed the back of Mac's head, pressing the barrel to his forehead.

“I'll kill you this time. You're going back to hell.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.” Jo was afraid to even swallow, but she couldn’t keep that prayer from slipping past her lips. “Baby, wake up.”

Cam’s eyes, frozen over with sleep and hate looked right through her. One hand tightened around her skull and the other around the gun. He pressed the barrel deeper into her forehead. He had wrenched her from sleep, pulling her to her knees in the middle of the bed and told her she was going to hell.

The man she loved holding a gun to her head in the middle of the night—she was already in hell. One false move and he might pull that trigger.

“Cam, wake up.”

“You’re not real, but I’ll kill you anyway.”

“I am real.” Salty tears flooded the sides of her mouth. Tiny droplets of sweat crawled down her naked spine. Fear was a wet blanket covering her from head to toe. “I love you.”

“No.” He shook his head, and Jo saw a crack in the ice. “No.”

“I love you.” Jo steeled her voice, and for the first time she realized that he might hold the gun, but she held the power. “I do. I love you more than anything in this world. I always have. You know that. Cam, I need you to wake up for me, baby.”

Deeper, deeper, harder, harder—the barrel pressed into her until she knew the skin would bruise or break.

“You’re not real.” His voice cracked but didn’t break. “I won’t let you hurt her.”

Her? In his dream, was Cam protecting *her*? From who?

“Cam, wake up.”

She reached for him; even when he flinched from her

touch, she reached for him. She stroked her hand up his arm until she gripped his hand holding the gun. Slowly, so slowly, she moved it by increments into the air away from her head. He still held the gun but seemed lost somewhere between the dream and the nightmare he was about to wake up in. She forced herself to his chest. Gulped back the fear and wrapped her arms around him, pressing her face into his throat, kissing his jaw, waking him up with her love.

His breath jerked into his chest. The gun fell to the bed.

“Jo?” Her name on his lips blossomed with knowing dread. “Did I...?”

Cam peeled her away from him, his eyes on her face like a searchlight in the dimly lit room. There was no mistaking the horror in his eyes. He smoothed the sore spot on her forehead with his thumb before jerking back. He ran his hands up and down her arms.

“Did I hurt you?” Pain and terror and disgust brawled on his beautiful face. “Oh God, what did I do?”

“I’m okay.”

“I just held a gun to your head. That’s not okay.”

“You were dreaming, baby.” Jo swiped the tears from her face, falling back from her knees to settle her bottom on her legs and feet. “Just tell me what you were dreaming about.”

“I...I need a minute.”

Cam fled the bed, the sight of his naked body for once the least of her concerns. He slammed the bathroom door. The sound of the lock turning hit her ears like a warning shot. Every moment he stayed on the other side of that door, she was losing him, but she couldn’t bring herself to drag him out. She sank to the floor, pressed her back to the bed, heedless of her naked butt on the cold hardwood.

The shock was setting in. The gun was gone, but she could still feel the unrelenting, deadly pressure of the barrel at her head. Terror still coated her tongue. A scream lay curled at the

base of her throat, begging to unfurl. She gripped her knees to stop her hands from trembling. A sob climbed her throat, but she stuffed it down ruthlessly. Cam would not come out of that bathroom and find some sniveling girl on the floor crying and weak. Afraid of him.

The door opened, the bathroom light etching his silhouette from the darkness. His camouflage shorts must have been in the bathroom because they clung to his lean hips now. She lost the minutes as he stood there, silent and studying the floor. Goose bumps sprouted on her arms, reminding her she was naked. They always slept naked, and she had fooled herself that their hearts lay bare in this bed, but she'd been wrong. All these nights, he'd slept with a gun beneath them and she had never known. He'd hidden so much when she had given him everything.

He squatted in front of her and pulled her to her feet. She barely registered him slipping her silk robe up her arms and onto her shoulders. He tied the belt at her waist and freed her hair from the neck of the robe. He cupped her face and pressed his forehead to hers.

"I am so..." Cam's deep voice gave up and she heard him swallow in the eerie quiet of the room. "Baby, I don't even know where to start."

Jo knew that the only weapon she had in this battle was her love for him. It was unconditional, even in this crucible where fear and confusion threatened to consume everything. This was a test she could pass.

"I love you." She wrapped her fingers around the back of his neck, kissing his jaw and trapping his hand against her face. "Everything starts and ends there."

"I was dreaming, but it was like it was happening." He eyed her like he thought she might think he was crazy. "He was in this room."

"Who was?"

"Mac. He's supposed to be dead, but it's like he's not. He's

alive and in my dreams.” Cam dropped his hands away from her face, clenching them at his sides. “And he was going to hurt you the way he hurt me, and I had to stop him.”

“I know you don’t want to do details, but I need to know what we’re dealing with.”

“I thought it was taken care of. I thought it was over, but it’s not.” Cam shook his head, eyes fixed on the floor. “He’s dead, but he’s not.”

Jo recalled the way Cam had rushed past the details of Mac’s death before. She had to demand the truth, no matter how ugly and difficult.

“Cam, how did Mac die?”

He pushed a shaky breath past his lips and ran one hand through his hair. He gestured toward the bed he’d abandoned.

“I guess it’s time I tell you.”

Past time.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Cam sat in the dark. It wasn't that late, but the power was off, so their tiny apartment borrowed light from the street. Mama hadn't paid the power bill. Any money she got went straight to that pipe. No lights. No TV. He could have gone to his friend's house to watch Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, but ever since Mac did what he did, Cam felt different around his friends. Like they could look at him and tell. Or they would smell Mac's musty cologne. That somehow they would know.

So he sat in the dark, eating malt balls Lashaun slipped him at the skating rink a couple of nights ago. Tomorrow was Old School Night. His friends thought he was crazy for liking all the old songs. At school and on the corners they played Jay-Z and Nas and Pac, but sometimes Mama would listen to the radio, and it was always Marvin Gaye, Otis Redding, Smokey Robinson. Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On," Bill Withers singing about the sun not shining when she's gone—hard to hear, but he couldn't help listening. He couldn't help but think Marvin and Bill had somewhere to put the hurt, and Cam could hear it. He could feel it in every song. Only he couldn't sing or play any instrument, so his hurt had nowhere to go. And sometimes it puffed up inside of him and leaked onto his pillow at night. He couldn't tell the guys any of that.

A sound out back behind the apartment, a small pop muffled by the noise of the street, caught his attention. One of the guys got a BB gun for Christmas. It kind of sounded like that. That would be better than eating malt balls in the dark, so Cam went out back.

It wasn't a BB gun.

And that wasn't fake blood like in the movies spreading through Mac's pants. He sat on the ground, back to the wall, long legs stretched out in front of him. Someone's broad back hid part of Mac's face, but Cam would know every part of him anywhere. He must have made a sound because the man with

the broad back turned, and for the first time in his life, Cam stared down the barrel of a gun.

“Get on back upstairs, if you know what’s good for you,” the stranger said.

The man’s lips barely moved, but his words were like pellets, hitting Cam in the face. Cam was numb to threats now. One too many made good on would do that to you. He just looked back at the man with the gun. A hoodie pulled over his head hid his face, but Cam could see he was tall and muscular. He wore a baggy T-shirt, tan work boots, and a thick gold chain around his neck.

“I said get back in, kid.”

Feet nailed to the ground, Cam looked past the stranger to Mac bleeding on the ground. His rat eyes remained alert, sliding from the gun to the man. Cam knew how Mac looked right before he pounced.

“He’s moving!” Cam said, knowing the man with the gun couldn’t be more evil than Mac.

The stranger turned and didn’t ask questions, just shot Mac in his other thigh. Mac howled like a coyote, and despite the fear shaking like Jell-O in his belly, Cam laughed, leaned against the wall and pointed laughing. The stranger looked over his shoulder at Cam.

“Who you, kid?”

Mac’s eyes rolled in his head with the pain, but he managed to focus long enough to give Cam a dirty smile. That made Cam stop laughing. Mac might be shot up and on the ground, but that didn’t change nothing.

“He’s my mama’s pimp.”

“Well, he gon’ be a dead pimp tonight.”

Cam didn’t flinch. His heart lifted in his chest like a feather floating from under a stone.

“Good.” Cam trained his eyes on Mac, not quite believing

relief was this close. He'd believe it when he saw it. And he planned to see it. "Do it."

The man flipped his hood back, and Cam knew it was going to happen. It was Deuce Williams. Even Cam knew him. He'd dropped out of high school and he wasn't big-time, just dime bags and no real weight, but he was mean and he was hungry. Everybody knew he was a hustler and he was dangerous. He'd pull that trigger.

"He ever touch you?"

The question stabbed Cam in the throat. Mama knew, but she didn't care. No one else had ever asked. No one else had ever cared. Only the rats and roaches had seen what Mac did. Cam saw one time on a TV show they told the man to blink twice for yes. His voice had left him, so he blinked twice, but Deuce didn't seem to get it.

"He touched my little brother, Rollo." Deuced growled like a pit bull. "Took him in the back of the corner store."

Cam knew Rollo. The kids called him special and slow because he never talked. Even though he was older than Cam, sometimes the kids called him a big baby. He was weird, but he didn't ever bother nobody. Had Mac done the same nasty things to him?

"He thought my brother couldn't talk, but he can a little." Deuce turned back to where Mac lay in an oozy, bleeding mess behind him. "He talks to me, and he told me what you did, you nasty son of a bitch."

Deuce looked back at Cam, running his eyes over him piece by piece. He shoved the gun just inches from Cam's face.

"You do it."

Cam looked at the gun. And then he looked at Mac. The pain had a hold on him. Shot in both thighs, he looked like he wanted death.

And Cam wanted to give it to him.

Deuce placed the gun in Cam's outstretched palm. It

seemed to vibrate against his skin. It wasn't heavy. You'd think something that could kill would weigh more than this.

"I never shot a gun before."

Deuce grinned like it was no more than playing jacks.

"Aim and shoot. There's two bullets in there if you miss the first time."

Cam looked past Deuce, saw Mac on the ground, bleeding and whimpering, and he wasn't sure he could do it.

"Head or heart?" Deuce asked. "You're close enough that you won't miss."

Fear and shame and all the hurt had been packed into this gun. Rolled into these bullets. Cam stared at Mac and it all came back. That first time, waking up with Mac like a cannon behind him. Nights on his knees. Mac's hand knotted in his hair and his sweat dripping onto Cam's shoulders. He could see it all in Mac's rat eyes. And then he noticed Mac's lips moving, barely, just barely, but saying the same thing over and over.

"Make me proud."

This man had beaten Cam's mama. Kept her on drugs and on her back. He'd ignored Cam's begging, crying, praying every time. Head or heart? Those lips curled into the devil's smile. Mac didn't have a heart.

So Cam shot him in the head.

"You killed him."

Jo sat with Cam on the bedroom floor, their backs to the bed, knees up.

"Yup." Cam flopped his head back onto the mattress, eyes on the ceiling. "Like an animal in the street, and I felt nothing but relief. At eleven years old, I shot a man and felt nothing but relief. What does that say about me?"

"He was a monster." Jo slid around on her knees to face him. "You weren't the only one he hurt. Nothing would have

stopped him from hurting other boys.”

“I always tell myself that, but something still feels wrong about it. At first I worried that someone would find out, but in my neighborhood the cops weren’t exactly falling all over themselves to figure out who murdered some pimp. Deuce is the only one who knows.”

“So that’s your connection to Deuce.”

“After that he kind of looked after me. I’d come home and there would be a bag of groceries at the door. Or money in the mail slot, or whatever. He helped me until my mom got arrested and social services stepped in.”

“And that’s when you came to me.” Jo grabbed his hands hanging limply from the wrists draped over his knees.

Cam disentangled his hand from hers, then got up and walked to the wall where he had replicated her backyard. He propped himself against the painted tree, eclipsing the heart embossed with their initials.

“I held a gun to your head.”

“Cam, it’s okay.”

“Do not say it’s fucking okay, Jo.” Cam dug his fingers into the sides of his hair. Guilt mushroomed over him like an atomic cloud. “That is the same gun I used to kill him, and there is still one bullet.”

She hadn’t even processed that. You wake up with a gun held to your head, you almost wet your pants. Cam confirming the threat had been that real only made it worse, and she hadn’t thought it could get worse.

“You wouldn’t have shot me.”

“Not awake, but the line isn’t there anymore. It feels so real. He’s fought his way from hell and back into my life, and I won’t have him anywhere near you.”

“Do you hear yourself? How ridiculous this all sounds? The man is dead, baby. He can’t hurt you.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about.” Cam banged his head against the wall. “I knew I shouldn’t have...”

His eyes picked up the trail his words left hanging. The regret there took a sledgehammer to her heart.

“You shouldn’t have what?” Jo made herself ask, even though she already knew.

“I shouldn’t have started this with you, Jo.” Cam traced his fingers over the tree behind him, shaking his head. “I was weak and gave in, and now...Damn.”

“Wow. I wait seventeen years to be with you and you have the nerve to regret me?”

“I was never going to be the right man for you, but now...”

“Now what?”

“When I came out of the bathroom, you were on the floor, shaking. Your pupils were dilated. You were scared shitless.”

“Cut me some slack. It was...I wasn’t expecting—”

“To wake up with your boyfriend holding a gun to your head? Yeah, I can see how that would be a shock.”

“What do you want me to say?”

Cam deprived her of his expression, dropping his head until the dark hair eclipsed his face completely. Directing his words to his feet.

“I want you to admit you’re afraid of me, because you should be, Jo.”

“I won’t say that because it’s not true. What scares me is that you’ll give up on us. That you’ll run.”

His silence gnawed at her peace of mind. A gun to her head she could handle. But she couldn’t consider Cam leaving. Jo pulled herself from the floor and onto the bed, dragging the covers around her shoulders. Naked under the robe, she shivered. Was it from cold? Or the fear that still penetrated her bones? Still rattled her composure. Cold fingers dug their nails

into Jo's heart, scraping across the muscle and leaving trails of dread.

Cam didn't move away from the wall, but it was like he'd already left the room. Left the house. Left this conversation. Like someone was standing in proxy for him, entertaining her but already mentally out the door. And she couldn't bear the distance. Feet became miles and seconds became eons the longer he was over there and she was over here. She gathered the covers around her shoulders and shuffled over to him, until she stood close enough to tempt his touch. Until he would have to smell her. Have to feel the heat from her body. Have to remember how absolutely perfect they had finally been together, before all of this.

He only touched her with his eyes, and she wanted his hands. Wanted his kisses. The need for him stamped an ancient, urgent rhythm in her chest.

"I need you to hold me, Cam."

"I...I can't." His hands made it halfway to her arms before falling away. "I want to protect you."

"From you?" Jo stepped an inch closer, even though a stretch as vast and dry as the Sahara still lay between them. "I don't need protection from you."

Jo reached her arms around his neck before he had time to pull away, allowing the comforter to fall from her shoulders and onto the floor. She ached while she waited for him to respond. He stood like a corpse in her arms for a few seconds, but she could feel his resistance weakening. Felt it topple like a game of Jenga. He needed this as much as she did. She pressed closer, wanting to slide beneath his skin and cuddle up to his bones and marrow. Wanting to course through his blood and head toward his heart. His arms inched around her waist, and his big hands that could bring nightmare and heaven to life on canvas sketched comfort into her back through the silk robe.

"There is only one bullet in that gun." Cam pushed the hair

away from her face, licking his lips to prime them for his next words. “But if I had pulled that trigger, I would have found another one for myself. I couldn’t stay here without you.”

From someone else it might have been melodrama, hyperbole, but she read the truth mingling with the torture in his eyes. She was more frightened for him than she was for herself because she knew Cam loved her. Sometimes she wasn’t sure how he felt about himself.

She feathered kisses over his jaw, soothing him with her trust. She licked at the seam of his firm lips, but his mouth was a line she couldn’t cross.

“Please don’t shut me out.” She left the words as offerings on his lips, waiting for him to accept them.

“Baby, I can’t—”

Jo didn’t waste time; she pushed her way in, her tongue seeking out the sweet, tangy spaces inside his mouth. He opened, moving his mouth over hers, groaning when their tongues found each other.

“I can’t make love to you, Jo. I can’t trust myself.” He squeezed his eyes closed. “It still feels violent.”

“I’ll make you forget.” Jo untied the robe, letting the sides fall open. She hijacked his hands, brushing his palms across her nipples, the flesh blossoming under his touch. “Please don’t shut me out. I need this. *We* need this.”

Cam traced her rib cage, wrapped his hand around her hip, mapping her naked curves beneath the robe. He slid both hands under her thighs, lifting and turning her until her back met the wall. She reached down between them, unzipping his shorts and pushing them down with shaking fingers.

“I need to feel you, baby.” A moan broke free from her throat. “I need to—”

He plunged into her like she was the ocean and he was seeking the ocean floor, diving for the bottom. Drilling into her like he wondered where she ended, but she had no end.

She was fathomless, depthless for him. She had no boundaries. She was as open as the sky for this man and as endless. She gripped his shoulders and locked her ankles around his back.

They were always wild together, but this was an atavism. It was the first man who had ever fucked the first woman. Ever felt her tighten and tremble around him. Ever felt her fall apart in his arms. And his love was the first heartbeat. The first time a man's eyes met a woman's. The first time one half ever found the other. The relentless pace of Cam's body slamming into hers created fire, stoked to a flame so high it consumed her. Burned away fear and left only need. In those stolen seconds, only need.

Jo's orgasm was an earthquake, a seismic wave dividing her into tectonic faults. Her head tossed against the wall, restless. One of Cam's arms held beneath her butt. He slammed his other hand to the wall and dropped his head beside her.

"God, yes, Jo." His breath came hot in her ear. "Shit, so... Fuck."

He was hot and stiff, a desperate, wet slide in and out. He shuddered against her, trembling through her like a ripple across water. Their breaths came heavy and fast, slowing with their heartbeats. He let her legs fall to the floor, brushing his hands over the muscles in her thighs. His hands wandered up her body until they reached her face, cupping it. Lifting her lips to meet his.

"You are the best thing I've ever had." He set his forehead against hers, the muscles of his throat working against the emotion roughening his voice. "Please don't forget I love you."

"Keep telling me." Jo slid her hand into his hair, scraping her nails across his scalp. "We can do this. Just let me help."

Cam looked at her, neither confirming nor denying. He led her to the bathroom. In the shower, he didn't leave an inch of her unattended. The last traces of the blue paint slid off her skin and down the drain. Jo wanted to chase the color. She

wanted to wear his love as a stain over her skin, over her heart.

“Are you cold?” Cam asked, going to the drawers he’d cleared for the nightgowns she never wore.

“No, I don’t want anything between us.” She ran her eyes over the sculpted lines of his lean body. “Just us.”

He nodded, pulling back the covers and climbing in, opening his arms. She snuggled close, relishing the feel of his warm flesh. She placed her hand over his heart.

“Is this still mine? Is your heart still in my hands?”

“Don’t doubt it.” They’d turned off the lamps, and he left it to the moon to show her the truth on his face. “No matter what happens, promise me you won’t doubt it.”

She tried to stay awake, not wanting to lose a minute with him and afraid the demons in his dreams would return. She fought fatigue as long as she could, waiting for his breath to even into sleep. It never did, but she fell asleep in his arms, and she felt safe.

Chapter Thirty

Sometimes the heart knows first. Before the mind can formulate thoughts or the senses grasp, the heart immediately apprehends. A senseless intuition. Jo woke up the next morning with an ache in her chest. It wasn't unusual to wake up alone. If anything, waking up with Cam hard and warm at her back was rare. This felt different. An electric storm crackled around Cam. His energy, sometimes dark and sometimes bright, but always inexorable, drew you in. They had magnetized each other, and when she awoke, she knew something was missing. Someone was missing.

She took her time sitting up in bed, her senses poking around in the quiet of the cottage for any signs of him. Cam was often painting by the time she woke up, so she slipped on her robe and padded barefoot to the studio. No sign of him. Sometimes he'd catch the sunrise by the river, taking photos he'd use later. Jo headed out to the patio, eyeing the patch of riverbank Cam usually claimed, but it stood empty. Even in his artistic throes, he would always have a pot of coffee brewed for her by the time she woke up, but no aroma drifted from the kitchen.

The October mornings were just getting cool, but a slow freeze started in Jo's belly and circulated through her veins, sludging toward her heart. She stepped into the kitchen like it was a cemetery, heart heavy, feet tentative. Almost immediately she spotted the folded note propped against the coffeepot. With shaking hands she opened it, and with panic suffusing every cell, she read.

Jo,

You know I have to go. I'm haunted by a dead man in my dreams every night, but he's not my greatest fear. My greatest fear is hurting you. Last night was too close. I know you trust me, but I don't trust myself with you right now. Not after what happened. I won't risk you. This isn't

up for debate or negotiation, because you're better at both of those than I am. You've wanted me to talk to someone, to get help—well, you're getting your wish. I've never wanted to talk about what happened, but if there's a chance it will help me make some kind of peace, I'll do it. And it may not feel like it right now, but I love you too much to stay.

I don't know how long it will be before I come back, but I hope when I do, I'll be better. I hope when I do, you're still here. If I were selfless, I'd tell you not to wait for me. But I'm not selfless, and I'm telling you that if you move on, it will gut me. I know you've waited years. Can you give me a little more time? I want to love you in the light, without the shadow of a monster hovering over us. Let me do this.

Don't doubt my love.

Cam

The paper fluttered to the floor, falling from Jo's numb fingers. For a moment, she felt unmoored. Uncertain, but then her natural instincts kicked in. He wasn't thinking clearly. He thought this was best, but he was wrong. She would track him down and convince him. Jo was already plotting her next steps. Bennett Enterprises had a private investigator on retainer. She'd call Walsh and check all the flights. If Cam had left the country, he would have used his passport. That was a red flag she could track right away. She had pulled on yoga pants and her Duke sweatshirt, ready to start the manhunt when the doorbell rang. Maybe it was the cleaning lady.

"Daddy?" Jo stepped back, pulling the door open wider and pushing her surprise aside. "Come on in."

Her father stepped into the living room, dressed casually in one of his Harvard sweatshirts and jeans.

"I didn't even know you were in town." She pointed a thumb toward the kitchen. "Want some coffee?"

"I just got in from Boston an hour ago." Her father settled onto the leather couch, leaning his elbows on his knees and glancing up at her. "I flew back early to check on you."

“On me? Why would you...?”

That dirty, rotten, low-down lover of hers.

“Cam called you, didn’t he?” Jo perched on the arm of the nearby love seat. “He told you he’s gone.”

“He told me everything, Jo.” Concern weighted her father’s brows. “He asked me to make sure you don’t try to find him.”

“Of course I’ll find him.” Jo bounced her foot, so ready to be done with this and under way. “Can we talk about this later, Daddy? I need to get on this.”

“You will not.” Jo had heard that kind of iron in her father’s voice before, but rarely directed at her.

Jo stood up and placed her hands on her hips, a stance the men in her family knew meant not to mess with her.

“You said yourself I’m a grown woman.”

“Yes, you are, so act like it.”

The words stung like a slap.

“Excuse me?”

“Jo, this is serious. Cam held a loaded gun to your head last night.”

“It’s not how it sounds. I can explain.”

“Cam already explained. I know what happened, and I support his decision to get help and to keep you safe.”

“This doesn’t feel like support to me. It feels like you giving up on him because of a little bump in the road.”

“A bump in the— Jo, a loaded gun held to your head is a detour, not a bump.”

“So you’re really giving up on him.” Jo slipped some iron of her own into the next words. “What would your sister do if she were alive? Would Aunt Kris just abandon Cam when he’s at his lowest?”

“That’s not fair. It’s not the same.”

“The answer is no, she wouldn’t. She never gave up on him, and neither will I.”

“Allowing him some space is not giving up. He’s not some toy you can throw a tantrum about not having when you want him.”

“I can’t believe you just said that to me.”

“Believe it. He doesn’t need to be ‘had’ right now. He needs to wrestle with some issues that have been chasing him for years.” His voice and face softened in synch. “Let him, honey.”

It started at her mouth with just a wobble, a tremble of her lips. Then her hands joined in, fingers shaking until she had to cram the emotion into her fists. She was imploding, but everything wanted out. Curses, screams, sobs. Every expression of this hurt was trapped inside her body and wanted out, but she could only allow herself tears.

“Aw, honey.”

Daddy crossed over and pulled her close, her folded arms between them. She went limp like she had as a little girl. Maybe she was being a spoiled brat, but it did feel a little bit like she’d waited all year and gotten what she wanted for Christmas, only to have it taken. Cam was the only man she had ever loved. Ever really wanted. She had sampled others and found them wanting.

“I’ve just waited so long for him, Daddy.” Jo sniffed and stifled the all-out sob that tried to burst from her chest. “What if he doesn’t come back?”

Her father put enough space between them to peer down at her, a small smile on his face.

“He didn’t leave until I landed, so I saw him before he left, Jo. I’ve only ever seen Cam in a state like that once before, and that was when Amalie died. He loves you. He’ll be back.”

“But what if—”

Her phone ringing from the bedroom cut into the arguments

she had readied.

“Be right back.” She rushed to the bedroom in case it was Cam.

God, please let it be Cam.

She glanced at the screen. Peter. She cleared as much of the tear-hoarseness from her throat as she could.

“Hey, Peter.”

“Morning, Jo. You on your way?”

“Um...” Jo glanced down at her silk robe and bare feet.
“Sure.”

“Good. I’ll see you in about an hour.”

“Ahhhh, Peter, I need a little info here. Where, who, why, when kinda thing would help.”

Peter’s deep, indulgent laugh washed over her frayed nerves across the phone lines.

“Breakfast at The Club. Remember you wanted to meet the parents who might be able to step in for one of the couples who pulled out?”

“Darn it.” Jo tossed her robe onto the bed and stood there naked for a second or two. “I’ll be there. Thanks for checking.”

“It’s nothing.” Peter’s pause sat there like he wanted to say more, and then he did. “You know there’s not much I wouldn’t do for you, Jo.”

Jo squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth against another sob. This amazing guy who was on-paper-perfect was in love with her, and she couldn’t even care. Couldn’t respond. Even being naked while she was on the phone with him felt wrong.

“Peter, I can’t do this. You know I’m with...”

Was she? With Cam? He’d run off and told her not to doubt his love, but he had set another embargo on his emotions. He’d

gone dark and asked her to wait.

“I know you’re with Cam.” Peter said the words she had left unsaid. “I just know we’d be good together, Jo, and I kind of haven’t given up. Thought you should know.”

And then he hung up.

Jo walked into the closet she’d shared with Cam for the last couple of months. She wanted to wrap herself up in one of his shirts from the hamper. Something that still hoarded his scent, that had lain against his skin. He hadn’t taken much. She ran her fingers over the leather sports coat he’d worn to Christmas dinner at Walsh’s house last year. She had stopped counting the number of times she’d caught him staring at her ass that night.

“I like mangoes in my salsa. I’m infatuated with your ass.”

MINE painted across her butt.

His heart in her hands.

Even gone, even with the hurt like a pyre of burning wood that started at her feet and licked to the top of her head, the memory of him could make her smile. It had been real, right? He’d been hers and she’d been his for a little while.

“Please bring him back to me,” she whispered into the lonely closet.

Tears rushed her throat, but she did what she’d always done. Gulped them back ruthlessly. She had things to do. She had kids to help. She had a life to live and Cam had his. He better hope she was here when he decided he wanted to let her in on it.

Chapter Thirty-One

Well, that's that." Jo sank into her office chair and stretched her legs out. "I think all is in order and we're ready for our trip."

"Haiti or bust." Peter grinned across the desk, his eyes drifting to her legs before returning to her face. "I'm glad you insisted on this trip. I'm looking forward to meeting all the kids this will help."

"Me too." Jo gave her skirt a subtle tug downward, not wanting Peter to get any ideas. Well, more ideas. "And I hope we'll get final word from Tiki's potential parents."

"They'll come through. Don't worry." Peter shifted in his seat across from her. "So, any word from Cam?"

Jo swallowed a scream. Mrs. Quentin asked this morning when she served Jo's egg-white omelet. Daddy called from Boston to check on her. Meredith had offered to cancel a date if Jo needed to "talk." Shaundra kept poking her head in and asking if Jo "needed anything."

Yes! I need you all to leave me the fuck alone!

"Um, no word yet." Jo shuffled a stack of perfectly neat papers on her desk. "It's fine. He has the exhibit in February. He's probably painting like a madman."

Probably not the best choice of words for the boyfriend who'd held a gun to your head, but c'est la vie.

"I'm sure." Peter's neutral tone said that he wasn't. "Hey! We should do something fun before we come back from Haiti."

"Fun?" That was a foreign concept for Jo right now. Translation, please. "Meaning like what?"

"I don't know. Maybe a quick stop somewhere before we come home. We've both been working our asses off. We've

earned some recon. Besides, heard you're in good with the big boss."

Jo's smile muscles had atrophied from little use over the two weeks since Cam had disappeared. So it almost hurt to smile back at Peter, but Jo managed it. Her cell rang on her desk, and Jo forced herself to calmly reach for the phone, instead of diving for it like a desperate idiot every time it rang, on the off-not-gonna-happen-chance that Cam had deigned to call.

No such luck, according to the screen.

"Walsh, hey." Jo smiled at Shaundra when she walked in with some papers for her and Peter to review. Peter started reading while she was on the phone.

"Hey, cuz. How you holding up?"

"He didn't die, Walsh." Jo subdued the waspish note in her voice. "Sorry. It's just people keep asking me that."

"Because we love you and we're concerned."

Jo swiveled her seat around so Peter would only see the high back and would hear less.

"Concerned enough to tell me where he is?" She warned her inner weakling not to beg.

"He's smart enough to know that you have your ways of getting information from the informed."

"I can't believe he has gone dark on me again." Jo snapped her teeth together to stop herself from growling. "That he's running again."

"He just needs a little space. Give it to him."

"You don't understand what it's like having the person you love running in the opposite direction. Having them shut you out. Having them make you wait."

Silence gathered on the other end while Walsh allowed her space to hear what she'd just said.

“Jo, do I even need to remind you of the shit storm my life was because Kerris did pretty much everything you just said?”

Jo tapped her nails on the arm of the chair.

“I know, but this is different. Kerris didn’t hold a gun to your head and run off without a word. What if he’s hurt himself? Or depressed? Every time I think I’m in, he blocks me out again, and I’m sick of it.”

“I get that. I am familiar with that feeling.”

“Then you know.” Jo pressed her lips together so they wouldn’t tremble. “You understand that this is torturing me.”

Walsh let out a weighty sigh.

“I can’t bring him back, but I can at least alleviate some of the worry. He hasn’t hurt himself. He called Kerris.”

Jo sat straight up in her seat like a hot poker had been shoved down her Alexander Wang dress.

“What’d she say he said?”

“He asked her about Dr. Stein.”

“Kerris’s therapist?”

“Yeah. That’s all I know, Jo. I probably shouldn’t have told you that much, but I know you’re going crazy.”

“I wouldn’t say *crazy*. Who says I’m going crazy?”

“Well, Meredith may have mentioned something about you sleeping at Cam’s place and refusing to change the sheets.”

“That was a private moment, and those sheets were barely used.”

Their scents had perfectly mingled on those sheets, and she’d wondered if they’d ever get to do that again.

“Yeah, well, I think it’d do you some good to get out of Cam’s place and out of Rivermont for a little bit.”

“Funny you should say that. Peter and I are headed to Haiti tomorrow.”

“I was thinking more like a vacation.”

“Like what?”

“Like after Haiti, join Kerris and me and the girls in Dubai. Now that Dad’s back, I’m finally getting to take some time off.”

“No, that’s a family trip.”

“And you’re family. We’d love to have you.”

“I don’t want to be a third wheel. I mean, even with your two little tiny wheels, you and Kerris will be all over each other. I’ve seen it up close and it’s just disgusting.”

“True story,” Walsh laughed from the other end. “So bring a friend.”

Jo kicked her seat around to face Peter, who had pulled on his glasses to read the documents.

“Peter, wanna go to Dubai with me?”

“Jo, are you sure that’s a good idea?” Walsh asked.

Jo ignored him.

“What do you say, Peter?”

“That’d be perfect.” Peter pulled his glasses off and ran a hand over his tired eyes. “It’s exactly the kind of thing I was thinking of. When?”

“When, Walsh?”

“Jo...”

“When, Walsh? We leave for Haiti tomorrow. When are you going to Dubai?”

“In a couple of days, but—”

“Great we’ll meet you there.” Jo held her hand out for Peter to pass the papers they needed to discuss. “I’ll get with Kerris for details.”

“Jo, you’re playing a dangerous game.” Walsh’s voice harbored a soft rebuke. “I know you miss Cam, but don’t drag

someone else into this.”

Peter didn't feel dangerous. Right now, he felt like her greatest comfort. Her realest friend. Some killjoy voice at the back of her mind sided with Walsh, but Jo had been through too much alone. She could use a vacation and she could use some company.

“Gotta go, Walsh. Work awaits.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

No painting this morning?”

Cam glanced up from his iPad, accepting the cup of coffee ETTY offered him before she took her seat at the table.

“In a little bit.” Cam sipped the coffee, grimacing. “I don’t think I’ll get used to Greek coffee. Do we have any of the plain old leaded coffee?”

“There’s a Starbucks up the road.” ETTY batted her lashes over her mug. “You’d actually have to leave the villa for that, though.”

Well played, ETTY. Well played. They both knew he was not leaving this villa anytime soon. He had stuffed a few things in his saddlebag, jumped on his Harley, and rode off before Jo woke up. ETTY once mentioned that her family owned a villa in Crete if he ever needed somewhere gorgeous to paint, so he’d taken her up on that offer. You could have knocked him over with a beret when ETTY came sashaying through the villa doors three days into his self-imposed exile.

And she’d been here ever since.

He’d made it incredibly clear to her that he wasn’t interested, and so far, she had respected the protective wall he’d built around his cock. He’d been tempted more than once to leave and find somewhere else to crash, but he was getting so much done. He’d finished the protocol for the film. Producer—pleased. Nice. He had started new pieces for the exhibit, and they were some of his best work to date.

Also, there was something dark and sad hiding behind ETTY’s bright blue eyes. Cam understood dark and sad. He had a patent pending on his own brand of dark and sad. He’d been around enough heiresses to know wealth didn’t guarantee happiness. There were times ETTY reminded him of Jo. They were completely physically dissimilar, but they both had so

much brass. And they could make him laugh. The scars on Etty's wrists told him she hadn't always been quick to laugh, and sometimes, she might laugh so she wouldn't cry. He'd been Mr. Tears of a Clown himself on occasion. A little while longer here in Crete wouldn't hurt.

In the meantime, God, he missed Jo. "Missed" was a tepid word for the dull, achy emptiness gnawing a hole in his heart daily. More like withdrawal. Was this what his mother had felt, willing to lay aside morals and self-respect in search of her next high? Jo was his field of poppies. A needle lodged in his arm, shooting dreams through his veins. She was sweet smoke filling his lungs with every inhale. His hallucinogen, rolled between his lips, fooling his heart that it was whole. Infiltrating his bloodstream. She was the hit he needed but would deny himself until he knew it was safe.

"Look, it's your firecracker!" Etty swept her finger over the iPad.

"Firecracker?" Cam checked back in. Etty was always screwing English up, which usually made for a good laugh. "What are you talking about?"

"I said it wrong again?" Etty pushed her bottom lip out, which some guy would find adorable. "The one I met in New York."

"Jo?" Just her name on his lips tasted good. "Where?"

"Pictures of her on vacation in Dubai with your friend Walsh." Etty licked her lips, letting out a lusty little growl. "HMMMMM. Her boyfriend is hot."

"Boyfriend?" What the fuck? "Let me see that."

The picture captured Jo emerging from the water, hair slicked back. Her bikini, flimsy scraps of black fabric, barely covered all the necessary parts. A belly chain gilded a golden trail down the elegant six-pack of muscles he'd painted Heinekens on just weeks ago. And there was Peter, looking like a damn Viking conqueror. He had his hand at the small of Jo's back, like some perfect gentleman creeper copping a feel.

His hand was probably mere inches away from her ass.

Cam thought of Jo standing naked in front of him with MINE scrawled across her backside. He literally felt hot under his collar. He practically saw red. All the clichés attacked him at once. He stood up from the table so abruptly, the wrought-iron chair fell and slammed against the terrace floor. Cam tossed the iPad onto the glass table, not even flinching when the screen cracked.

“*Mon Dieu!*” Etty divided a cautious glance between Cam and the fallen chair. “What is it?”

“Sorry. I, uh, I need to make a call.”

Cam had to dig his cell out of the saddlebag. He hadn’t turned it on in three weeks. Text and voice mail alerts crowded the screen, all of which he ignored. Moments later, Walsh’s deep voice commanded the phone line.

“Cam, about damn time you surfaced. Where the hell are you?”

“I knew you didn’t want Jo and me together, but this is low, even for you, Bennett.” Cam pulled the trigger on all the anger and resentment building in him over seeing the photos. “A romantic double-date getaway in Dubai, huh?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Walsh put his voice on ice. “I brought Jo on vacation with us so she wouldn’t waste her time wallowing over your sorry ass.”

“Exactly, and while you were at it, you played matchmaker. Peter is exactly the kind of guy you want for her, isn’t he?”

“If you mean someone who cares about her, treats her with respect, and is a decent guy, then, yeah. He’s precisely the kind of guy I’d want for Jo.”

Cam had suspected it, had even thought it himself, but hearing it from Walsh, after all they’d been through, hurt like a hornet sting.

“But.” Walsh allowed the conjunction to dangle over the long-distance connection. “She wants you.”

Cam pulled a sharp breath through his nose and forced it out through his mouth.

“Still? She isn’t into him?”

“Can I be honest without you blowing a freaking gasket?”

Cam remembered the cracked iPad and his enraged exit from the terrace.

“Of course. I’m a reasonable man.”

“No. You’re a lunatic, but I’m hoping we can converse like civilized human beings.”

“Now that I know you didn’t undercut me with Jo, we can.”

“I didn’t undercut you with Jo. *She* invited Peter.”

Cam absorbed that bit of disturbia, forcing back all the questions that clamored up his throat.

“Honestly, if you weren’t in the picture, I have no doubt they’d get together. They have great chemistry, similar interests. It’s obvious he’s crazy about her.”

“You’re not really helping with that whole not-blowing-a-gasket thing, Bennett.”

“It’s obvious she loves you. She misses you. She wants you, so where the hell *are* you?”

“You know what happened.” Shame curdled in Cam’s belly every time he remembered holding that gun to Jo’s head. “Don’t pretend you want me anywhere near her.”

“I want you to get help, which it sounds like you’re doing. Dr. Stein helped Kerris a lot. How’s it been?”

“Cool so far.” Cam tucked away as much of the emotion he felt as possible. “We’ve been meeting by Skype. Next time I’m in Rivermont, we’ll have a session face-to-face.”

“And when will you grace the Rivermont city limits?”

“I don’t know. Christmas?”

“That’s over a month away. Will you at least call Jo? Talk

to her?”

Cam already knew if he talked to Jo he'd cave. His need for her was desperate. Not just sexually, though if his balls got any bluer they might just fall off, but the need for her company. He loved being alone with her. Sitting in silence with her. Listening to his vinyl records while she knit. Yeah, no calls quite yet.

“I just need to see where I am at Thanksgiving, and I'll determine then what I need to do.”

“I'm going to be honest with you. Peter hasn't given up. I know Jo has loved you a long time, but everyone has their limit. You might want to at least call.”

“Walsh, I held a gun to Jo's head.” The words burned his tongue like hydrochloric acid. “I just...I'm not ready to talk to her. She should hate me. If she comes to her senses, she might.”

The silence over the phone filled up with all the fear and shame Cam had hidden in some catacomb of his head. Walsh had always had a way of cracking him open, without really even trying. Cam both loved and hated that about him.

“Cam, you're dealing with your past, and it's about damn time. Do you want a future with Jo?”

Did he deserve one was a better question, but that was probably beside Walsh's point.

“And speaking of the future,” Walsh plowed on, apparently prepared for and used to Cam's reticence. “I see the way Jo looks at Harlim and Brooklin. She's amazing with them. She's almost thirty. I know she wants kids of her own. Are you going to give her that?”

Jo didn't just want kids of her own. She wanted *his* kids. Cam knew it. He wanted that, too.

“I need to go.” Cam pushed back the emotion working its way up his throat like chimney smoke.

“Should I tell Jo we spoke?”

“No, not yet. I’ll reach out to her soon.”

“Don’t wait too long, or she may not be waiting anymore.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Wanna grab lunch?”

Jo looked up from the adoptive parent application, rationing a percentage of her attention for Peter’s question.

“Um...we’ll see.”

“You’re losing weight, Jo. You’re working too hard and skipping meals again.”

It wasn’t work as much as misery that had her dropping pounds everywhere except her ass. Of course, that stubborn appendage wasn’t going anywhere no matter how thin the rest of her got. If ten miles a day didn’t budge her butt, a few skipped lunches certainly wouldn’t.

Jo was a self-acknowledged workaholic. Everyone knew it, but no one ever *did* anything about it. No one except Cam had ever canceled her appointments, taken her roller-skating and peach picking. Made her slow down. She’d lived her whole life in luxury, but it had taken a hot meal and a waiting bath every night to spoil her.

God, she missed him.

And to be clear, men did not have the market cornered on wet dreams. Jo woke up sweating, clenching her thighs and sopping wet between her legs every night. Now that she’d had the real thing, no amount of knitting or running appeased that sex-starved wildcat she collared to go out in public among decent people. Behind closed doors, she missed him pushing so deeply inside her it smudged the hard lines between ecstasy and pain. She craved his tongue in her mouth. His mouth between her legs. His hand slapping her bare ass.

Shit.

Jo dropped her head into shaky hands, pushing the application aside. Tears crept from the corners of her eyes. A

tiny liquid path of pain leaked from her nose.

“Jo, can I help?”

She had forgotten Peter stood there waiting to hear her lunch plans.

“Um, no.” Jo covered her face, sneaking a quick swipe over her face before raising her eyes to face Peter. “I’m fine.”

“It’s him, isn’t it?” Peter’s kind blue eyes darkened. Concern, irritation, jealousy. Jo wasn’t sure what made them that stormy hue, but she couldn’t care enough to deny it. She was so tired of pretending to be okay.

“It’s always him, Peter.” She pushed a chunk of hair behind her ear. “Please don’t forget that.”

Ever since Dubai, Peter had been pressing her. Under the guise of work, he’d asked her to dinner. He’d started lingering in her office again. Fabricating excuses to drop by the house. As much as she hated to admit it, Walsh had been right. Taking Peter to Dubai had not made things better. In some ways, it had made things worse because her actions must have given him hope. Jo knew firsthand what a flighty bitch hope was.

“I know he’s attractive.” Peter twisted his mouth in a way that said, *If you like that type.*

Which Jo did. Very much.

“But he’s not worth this, Jo. Losing weight. Being depressed.”

“I’m not depressed. I miss my boyfriend, Peter.”

“But where is he? He doesn’t even care enough to call you. To let you know where he is.” Peter came around the desk to tower over her. “I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“You have no idea what is going on with us. I appreciate your concern, but Cam is working a few things out that will only make us better and stronger as a couple. I trust him to do that and come back to me.”

Peter opened his mouth, obviously armed and ready with

more denigration for the man Jo unequivocally loved.

“Let’s grab that lunch, okay?” Jo stood, pushing the sleeves of her mocha-colored cashmere sweater up her arms. The black leather leggings sculpted the muscles of her legs and butt. She hadn’t meant to dress provocatively, but Peter’s hungry eyes wandered over her curves like she was the meal he needed.

“I think I’ll just grab a sandwich at the cafeteria.” Jo picked up her clutch and headed for the door. “You coming?”

Or will you stand around all day gaping at my ass? Jo had inhabited this body long enough to feel comfortable with the way men responded to it. She had just never cared about any man’s lust but Cam’s.

You wore a bright red bikini with pink daisies.

He’d remembered.

Suck. It. Up, Joanne Elizabeth Walsh. She could almost hear Aunt Kris’s voice telling her that. Calling her by her full name when Jo indulged in self-pity. Aunt Kris had always known when to push and when to pull. And when to just leave Jo be and let her figure things out for herself. Jo’s compass was spinning. All her natural instincts told her to track Cam down. To follow him. To rescue him. But that sixth sense she had gotten only from Aunt Kris told her to give him the space he requested. And to trust his love for her.

“So what did you think of that last app?” Peter grabbed a tray and passed one to Jo.

“I wasn’t impressed.” Jo grinned at the hair-netted lady who always had a smile for everyone passing through the line. “Grilled chicken salad.”

“You need some potatoes, too.” The older woman ran sharp eyes over Jo’s slim curves. “You’re wasting away.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell her.” Peter collected silverware for them both.

“The salad will do for now.” Though a perfectly grilled

steak with crisp veggies would be better, especially if her man had it waiting for her when she got home.

“Hey, if we sit here, I can see the TV.” Peter gestured toward the mounted flat screen. “See the scores I missed. This okay?”

“You’re such a guy.” Jo sat down across from Peter, smiling at him and slicing into the tender chicken topping her salad. “I’m not trying to be difficult with this last adoption. I just want to make sure we find the right parents for her.”

“You’ve always had a soft spot for Tiki.”

Jo grinned, unable to deny it. You didn’t play favorites, but in a small chamber of her heart where Jo kept secrets, Tiki was her favorite.

“Yeah, well, if we could just—” Shock chopped the words up in Jo’s mouth as she caught a glimpse of the screen. The sound was down, but the ticker tape at the bottom read clearly enough over the mug shot flashing on-screen.

Local known drug dealer murdered execution style in Barfield projects.

“Jo, you okay?” Peter’s concerned eyes roamed Jo’s face, looking from her to the screen.

“Oh my God! I know...” Jo swallowed the lump snowballing in her throat. “I knew that guy.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Cam fixed his eyes on the casket at the front of the church. He slipped into the hard wooden pew at the very back of the room, one of the few seats left. Mourners wallpapered the inside of the small church, lined up like weeping bowling pins. Some toppling with their grief, some standing upright.

It was a closed casket since most of Deuce's head had essentially been blown off and was beyond the cosmetic skills of the undertaker. The iron fist Deuce had ruled his crew with had come back to deliver a knockout punch. Down for the count. In Deuce's ghetto kingdom, you lived by the sword. You died by the sword. And eventually everybody dies. Cam kept replaying that last conversation in the alley. Was there more he could have said to convince Deuce to leave the game? No, Deuce's voice hadn't even changed yet when he'd first started slinging. He'd been a walking dead man for years. Death had finally caught up to him, and Cam knew it hadn't taken him by surprise.

Deuce's mother sat in the front row, dressed in dirty money finery accessorized by stoic grief, the kind of pain that bludgeoned you later once the food was in Tupperware and all the condolences had gone home. Rollo, the brother Deuce had killed a man for violating, sat beside her.

Correction. Cam had killed that man.

Deuce's brother still carried that ageless innocence his condition afforded him. Every once in a while, his brow would crinkle, even though his smile never slipped, like he wondered what everybody was crying about. Cam longed for that blissful oblivion.

Why did it feel like a heat-seeking missile had blasted through his heart? He'd only seen Deuce a few times in his life, but they had shared the dark sacredness of a murder concealed. They'd colluded to put down a rabid beast. It

hadn't been Deuce's first kill, and certainly not his last. But for Cam, it had been his one shot at freedom from Mac's filthy tyranny. Somehow in that alley as they'd watched Mac die, they'd formed a bond that didn't need blood or proximity to be real. Death had snapped that bond. Cam wondered if Mac was lying in wait for Deuce on the other side, ready to even the score. Hell, he might be waiting for Cam. Or he might not be waiting at all. Maybe he was taking his revenge every night in Cam's dreams.

Mourners started filing out of the church, front pews first. Cam sat back and teased paint from under his fingernails. He was the only one on his row, and he might just sit awhile. Might just linger. He hadn't been in church much in his life, but it seemed like bad things wouldn't happen here, and he needed just a little time with no bad things.

"Cameron?"

The pain-husky voice came from right in front and above him. Cam glanced up, rattled to meet Deuce's eyes in his mother's face. Her skin was darker than Deuce's, but she had those same golden eyes. How did she even remember him? He'd had less contact with her even than with Deuce.

"Ms. Williams." Cam cleared his throat, hoping to dislodge the right words. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you." She took her time running her sorrow-drenched eyes over his face, seemingly unbothered that the whole line of mourners had stopped behind her. "You grew up to be so handsome."

"Um, thank you, ma'am." Cam caught the eyes of the curious people behind her, looking back to her face quickly.

"Deuce talked about you all the time."

Cam couldn't look away, hypnotized by the sincere pleasure penetrating her grief.

"About...about me?"

"Yes. He said you were one of the few Barfield success

stories.” Her small smile brushed against the black lace of the veil half covering her face. “He saw that movie with your paintings and everything.”

“Yeah, he mentioned that when I saw him last.”

“You saw him before he...” Ms. Williams dropped her eyes to the floor for a moment before looking back up. “You saw him?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You know he bought me one of your paintings.”

Cam couldn’t even form words. Syllables and sounds floated around in his head before synapses linked them into coherence.

“Which one did he give you?”

Ms. Williams took a few steps forward and leaned down to whisper in his ear, like it was a secret.

“*Quicksand*.”

Cam had painted *Quicksand* years ago and sold it to some vendor for an arts festival in Rivermont. He’d depicted the Barfield streets as quicksand pulling pedestrians under. Maybe it *was* a secret she had just shared, that Deuce had wanted to get out but hadn’t ever found the strength. Or hadn’t ever had a hand to rescue him from the sucking sand, even though he’d given Cam a hand.

Ms. Williams pulled back, smile gone, tears standing in her eyes.

“You take care, Cameron.”

“You, too, Ms. Williams. I’m sorry for...” He’d said that. “I’m just sorry.”

Ms. Williams nodded, wiped her nose with a damp, wrinkled handkerchief, and moved on.

Cam laid his forehead against the pew in front of him. He drew a deep breath to calm the tremors around his heart and

creeping under his skin. That encounter shook him, rattled his bones and his brain. So much so that his mind was playing tricks on him. Was it his imagination that he smelled Jo? That sweet, clean smell that belonged exclusively to her skin?

A soft hand slipped over his fist on the pew. If this was another of his real-as-fuck dreams, he didn't want to wake up. If he opened his eyes and she was sitting there, he might have officially lost his mind, but it would be worth it.

And there she was. Her dark, caramel-streaked hair tamed and knotted low on her neck. Scarlet tinted her wide, full mouth. She was seated, her posture demure, but he knew the black leather dress poured over her body, the sleeves clinging from shoulder to wrist, would devastate him as soon as she stood. The thought of her alone left him halfway undone. He devoured every from-the-neck-down detail before returning to her face, her eyes. He flipped his fist, opening and gripping her hand on the pew.

“Hey.” That was a better start than pulling her onto his lap in the house of God.

“Hey.” She pressed her lips together like she wished they'd both say more, but too many words might mess this moment up.

“What are you doing here?”

She remained without words for the space of two blinks before speaking.

“You're here.”

That simple. That true. She wanted to be where he was, and God knows he wanted to be with her. For once, he really wanted to do the right thing. Keep her safe, even if that meant keeping his distance for a while. Cam would never forget the horror all over Unc's face when he confessed he'd held a gun to Jo's head. Unc would probably never trust him with Jo again. Cam wasn't sure he trusted himself.

“I'm sorry about Deuce,” she said, her voice low and concerned.

“How’d you hear? TV?”

“Yeah, it was a pretty brutal murder, so it was all over local news in Rivermont.”

Cam hadn’t thought about that. He had a few contacts still in Barfield projects from when he was much younger. They’d kept him abreast of some things over the years, especially with Deuce. Good thing he had turned on his cell that day to call Walsh or he wouldn’t have known.

“How are you holding up?” she asked.

“Pretty good.” Cam pulled their joined hands to his knee, relishing her skin beneath his thumb. “I feel like I don’t have any right to hurt. You know? We’d barely seen each other over the years. Barely knew each other really, and yet I feel like I lost a friend.”

Images of that night in the alley crowded Cam’s consciousness. The righteous indignation all over Deuce’s face as he’d blown holes in Mac’s thighs. Maybe they hadn’t been friends, but they had been something. That night in the alley, they had become something that Cam never forgot and never lost. And based on what Ms. Williams had said, Deuce had felt it, too.

Cam didn’t feel much like talking, and Jo knew that. They held hands and shared air while the church emptied, many headed for the gravesite. Cam didn’t want to see that. He leaned forward and laid his temple against the pew, staring at Jo’s face, looking for changes.

“You’ve lost weight.” He frowned, noting how narrow her waist had become.

Jo looked at him from under lashes so long with mascara they looked false. He’d always loved her long, curled lashes. There was so much strength in Jo; the sweet lashes were God’s nice touch.

“A little.”

“You’re not eating?”

“Haven’t had much of an appetite and I’ve been working hard to finish the Haitian adoptions.” She inspected him, starting at his boots, climbing the pants of his suit, skimming him until she reached his head.

“You cut your hair.” She ran her free hand over the pelt of dark hair he was still getting used to. He’d cut it about a week ago, and it was shorter than he’d worn it in years.

“It was so hot.” He leaned his head deeper into her palm, like it held salve for a wound.

“It was hot where you were?” Jo kept her tone politely curious, but she didn’t fool him. She wanted to know so badly where he’d been. He pulled her hand down to his mouth and kissed her knuckles.

“I was in Crete, baby.”

“As in Greece?” Questions queued up in her eyes, waiting their turn.

“Yeah. Greece.”

“When are you...?” Jo looked through a stained glass window before resettling her eyes on his face. “I need you home.”

She knew how to demolish him. He could see the evidence of how much she needed him. Jo took care of everyone else, and for some reason, he was the only one she ever allowed to take care of her. He pulled her close beside him, and she laid her head on his shoulder.

“Soon, I hope.” Cam swallowed, senses on high alert like he was defusing a bomb. “I, uh, I’ve been talking to Kerris’s counselor, Dr. Stein, by Skype. We have our first face-to-face meeting today since I’m in town.”

“How’s that been?”

“Good. Hard. Like picking at a sore that’s never quite healed. I see why I should have done it years ago.”

“And the dreams?”

“I haven’t been having them every night.” Cam rubbed her shoulder through the sleek leather. “I had a really intense one last night, probably triggered by everything with Deuce.”

“We don’t have to sleep together, you know, if you’re worried about...you know.” She hushed the words, maybe because they were in a church. Maybe because she wanted him to strain closer to hear her.

“I know. We’ll see.”

Talking with Dr. Stein, he’d realized part of why he left wasn’t just fear he’d blow Jo’s brains out, but also the shame. Apparently he was one big recycling bin of shame. Just pour it in and he found new and improved uses for it. Shame from Mac’s abuse. Shame about his mother’s complete indifference to him. Nearly shooting the woman he loved in the head? Cherry-on-top shame. Even now he couldn’t look at Jo without a trickle of shame running down the wall of emotions he was feeling.

“My appointment with Dr. Stein is soon.” He stood, extending his hand for her to stand, too. “She only had one slot available.”

Jo rose, and the breath in his lungs frayed from the impact. It was even worse than he’d thought. The dress was black leather, so that was baseline sexy as hell, but on another woman, it probably would have been just a cool dress. Slightly edgy and obviously expensive. On Jo? Not to be ironically blasphemous, but Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. The leather flowed like liquid over every line and curve, nipping in at her waist and sheathing her hips and thighs. It wasn’t indecent. Jo just had one of those bodies that looked decadent in everything. It didn’t help that her four-inch heels stretched her legs out and put her eye-to-eye with him. His glorious amazon. She wasn’t aware of any of it, had turned without realizing the view left him speechless and embarrassingly hard in a church where he’d come to pay his respects.

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her back to his chest. She stiffened for a moment before relaxing into him. He linked

their hands on either side of them.

“This isn’t easy for me either, Jo.” Cam brushed his lips across the silky skin of her neck. “Do you think I wouldn’t rather be with you every minute we can spare?”

Jo turned to face him, looping her arms around his waist.

“I miss you every minute of every day.” Her fresh breath cooled his lips and heated his blood. “I can barely eat. I can’t concentrate. My body aches. My heart is split open.”

She leaned forward, pulling his bottom lip between hers, licking into the corners. “Come home, baby. Please come home.”

He’d fooled himself into thinking he could resist that mouth, but he couldn’t, not when it spilled soul-stripping words like that. He pressed Jo’s back until her breasts flattened between them. He cupped one side of her face, bringing her mouth to his. The kiss was an opiate, dulling all the pain.

“I think it would be bad for my tongue to be down your throat in the church,” he said against her lips, whispering kisses across the smile on her lips.

“I agree, but it was nice while it lasted.” Jo turned, keeping his hand and walking ahead of him out into the cold November day. He frowned when she shivered just a little on the church steps.

“Where’s your coat?”

“I left it in the car. It’s fine. I’ll be quick.”

“And I thought I told you never to come to this neighborhood alone.”

Cam glared at a guy across the street. He wasn’t sure if it was Jo’s body or her obviously expensive attire that drew the man’s attention, but he better keep his eyes and hands to himself either way.

“I didn’t.” Jo looked over her shoulder, her eyes uncertain but her mouth stubborn. “Peter brought me.”

Cam stood still, letting Jo take a few steps down. She turned back to look up at him, exasperation flitting across her face.

“Cam, he was with me when I saw it on the news. I was upset for you. I told him I thought you might show up here and was coming. Everyone knows this is a rough part of town. The rest is history.”

“You two seem to have a lot of history together since I’ve been gone.” Cam couldn’t stop dumb shit from leaving his mouth. This wasn’t heading to a good place, but he couldn’t stop.

“What are you talking about?”

“Dubai. Were you upset then, too? He just happened to be halfway around the world to comfort you?”

Jo’s four-inch heels eliminated the space between them before he had time to blink. She stood toe-to-toe and eye-to-eye with him.

“You idiot.” She spat the words into the cold. They crystallized in the air and shattered as soon as they left her mouth. “You jump on your Harley in the middle of the night, ride off to Greece, and leave me nothing but a note? Are you kidding me right now with this jealous foolishness?”

“I’m not jealous.” Lie. “You just didn’t exactly look like you were suffering.”

“Is that what you want?” Jo raised her brows over the blizzard in her eyes. “You want me to suffer?”

“No, you know I don’t.” Everything stiff and stupid in Cam yielded, collapsed. He couldn’t be angry with her. This was all his fault. “I just... When Etty showed me those pictures, I—”

“Etty?” Jo’s eyes snapped from wide to so narrow they were almost shut. “And where was Etty in all this?”

Dumb. Dumb. Dumb.

“Um, her family owns a villa in Crete and she—”

“You have *got* to be kidding me.” Jo kept the volume of her voice low, but he could practically see her hackles rise. “Tell me you have not been with that...*girl* this whole time.”

“I haven’t *been* with her. Not the way you mean. She was just...She came to visit...Jo, you know I would never cheat on you. For God’s sake, calm down.”

“You don’t get to tell me to calm the hell down.” Jo held up a hand between them, staying the words on his lips. “How dare you. You have the nerve to even ask me about Peter when you’ve been holed up with a girl I saw you kissing in New York? Who you know wants you?”

“Jo, let me explain.”

“I’m done, Cam.” Jo glanced around, blinking at the tears slipping from the corners of her eyes. “I have been miserable, and Peter has kept the adoption process on track. He has been a good friend.”

I just bet he has.

“I see that look, Cam.”

“Etty is my friend. Nothing more. And she knows the score. Can you say the same for Peter?”

“Peter knows the score, too.”

“I doubt it. He’s just waiting for me to screw up.”

“Well you just did.”

Jo turned and zipped down the steps. Cam skipped steps to cut her off before she reached the bottom, blocking her path out of this conversation. He took her wrist between his fingers, frowning at how fragile her bones felt in his hand.

“Jo, you have to take better care of yourself.” He looked up into the silver fire of her angry stare. “You’ve lost so much weight in just a few weeks.”

“I’m sure Etty has enough meat on her bones for the both of us.” She tugged, but he refused to let go.

“Do you honestly think I want anyone else?” He leaned in, pressing his hand to the small of her back to draw their bodies together like magnets. “Do you remember how it is with us? I think about you every night. Every day, Jo. Etty is just...She reminds me of myself. Kind of lost. She needs a friend. That’s it.”

“I don’t think you slept with her, Cam.” The hurt in Jo’s eyes sawed at his heart. “I think you let her in when you shut me out. I wanted to be there for you. I wanted to help, and you left.”

“Baby, we—”

“Is everything okay, Jo?” Peter’s question came from just below them. He glanced from Jo’s wrist trapped in Cam’s hand up to Cam’s face.

How much would he be tested today? First Deuce’s funeral. Then Jo shows up like a fantasy until everything goes wrong. And now he had to endure the Viking.

Would it be wrong to drop an F-bomb on the church steps?

“Everything’s fine.” Cam minced the words, serving them with a hard look to warn Peter off.

“I’d like to hear that from Jo.” Peter took an audacious step up and toward them. He grabbed Jo’s other hand and touched her back.

Jo looked from Peter to Cam like she was trapped between a rock and a very hard place. Cam wasn’t sure which he was, but he wanted to crush the bones in both Peter’s hands. That he was sure of.

“I’m fine, Peter, but let’s just go.”

She pulled away, letting Peter lead her down the steps. Cam walked down ahead of them, stepping into her path again, ignoring Peter’s protective presence. He cupped her face, but she wouldn’t look at him, instead studying the sidewalk beneath her feet.

“Baby, you know I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“You’re one of those guys, aren’t you?” Peter asked, a sneer distorting his neat mouth above his neat goatee. “One of those guys who kind of stumbles through life, accidentally hurting everyone and then offering lame apologies.”

Cam leveled a look on Peter that should have felt like a flesh-eating virus.

“No, I’m one of those guys who will beat the living shit out of any preppy dickhead who thinks he can steal my girl.” Cam creased his mouth into a fake smile. “Met those before?”

“Cam, stop.” Jo put her hand to his chest. She knew him well enough to know if Peter breathed wrong, he’d be flat on the sidewalk. “I’m just going to...just going to go.”

“Baby, I—”

“When you needed space, you took it.” She straightened out the trembling line of her mouth before going on. “Now I’m asking you to give me the space I need.”

She finally shifted her eyes to him, and Cam really wished she hadn’t. He’d never seen that look before. Like he had whittled something away. Like he’d broken something he wasn’t sure he could fix. It was a hypodermic needle stabbing his heart. Cam stepped back, giving them space to pass. Jo walked past him and Peter followed, opening the door to his Land Rover. Peter didn’t bother glancing back. Just climbed into the driver’s seat and drove off.

Cam’s phone alert went off. Great. Time for Dr. Stein. Could his day get any worse?

Chapter Thirty-Five

You seem agitated.”

Cam glanced from his triple-time bouncing knee to the mangled Kleenex in his lap.

“So it’s your superior deductive reasoning that justifies your outrageous rate.”

Dr. Stein tilted her chin down, eyes peering over her spectacles.

“Does that usually work for you?”

“Does what usually work?” Cam crushed the question between his eyebrows.

“You know.” Dr. Stein leaned back in her leather seat, folding her hands over her stomach. “Lashing out so people don’t get too close. It’s a defense mechanism. It won’t bring you any closer to what you want, though.”

“And what do you think I want?”

“You tell me what you want. Based on the conversations we’ve had by Skype, I think I know.” Dr. Stein patted the sleek auburn bob that looked much more vibrant in real life than on-screen. “But I’d be interested in hearing from you.”

“What do you think?”

“Oh no. It’s not that easy. It doesn’t work like that.” Dr. Stein eased her glasses back up her nose, leaning forward to settle her elbows on the desk. “I don’t work like that. You have to tell me what you want out of this process because you have to know.”

What did he want? He couldn’t see past the image of Jo leaving him today with tears in her eyes. He wanted to stop fucking things up.

“Tell me what you’re thinking right now. Don’t edit.”

“I want to stop fucking things up.”

“How do you think you ruin things?”

“Now who’s editing?” Cam managed a grin. “I didn’t say ‘ruin.’”

She wasn’t fast enough to hide how her face softened infinitesimally. She kept her eyes stern, but he’d flaked an inch or two off her professional impassivity.

“What have you messed up?”

What was left of the grin curdled on Cam’s lips, spoiled by the memory of all the things he’d screwed up.

“You want a comprehensive list?”

“Sure, if you have one.”

“I had a little girl.” Cam’s throat was a furnace, with the words trapped like fiery coals. “Kerris was pregnant with her when she had a car accident.”

“It was an accident, Cam. You realize that, right?”

“It was my fault, though. Kerris was chasing me.”

“What else was your fault?”

“I see through you, you know. I know what you’re doing.”

“Oh, what’s that?” Dr. Stein seemed genuinely curious, but Cam wasn’t fooled.

“You want me to admit I think Mac abusing me was somehow my fault, but I don’t think that.”

“Good. Then we can move on. That would be ridiculous. To blame yourself for things that aren’t your fault.”

“I see what you’re doing. You’re still doing it. I’ve seen *Good Will Hunting*.”

“I typically recommend all my patients watch that movie.” Dr. Stein scribbled in the margin of her journal. “Just making a note that that won’t be necessary with you.”

The smile was on Cam’s face before he could help it.

“Talk to me about Mac.”

So much for smiles.

“What about him? He molested me for about a year and then he died.”

“And you killed him, correct?” Dr. Stein glanced at her notes, looking up to see Cam nod. She’d assured him that his secret would be safe under patient-therapist privilege. “That must have been traumatic.”

“No more traumatic than stepping on a poisonous spider.”

“Why did you keep the gun?”

Cam shifted in his seat, eyeing her degrees on the wall.

“A souvenir, I guess.”

“And the bullet? You left it loaded as a souvenir, too?”

Cam rubbed his fingertips together but didn’t answer.

“You said you’d always reach for the gun under your bed. What did the gun represent to you?”

“Safety.” The word snuck out from between Cam’s slammed-shut lips.

“But he was dead. Why did you still need protection?”

“No one else protects you. You have to protect yourself.”

“You mean like your mother didn’t protect you?”

“You think this is about my mother?” Cam snorted. “That’s original.”

“She did know about the abuse, right?”

“Yeah, she knew.”

“And she did nothing?”

“Oh, she did something all right.” Bitterness twisted Cam’s lips. “She smoked that crack when Mac gave it to her to keep her under control.”

“So she left you vulnerable because of her addiction. You

had to fend for yourself.”

“Yeah.”

“Take me back to that.”

“Take you back to what?”

“That moment when she found out. That moment when she did nothing.”

Cam locked his teeth together. Anxiety cramped low in his belly. Water flooded his mouth. Nausea. Shame. Guilt. Fear. All piercing him like acupuncture, black needles sinking into his skin until he couldn't focus. Couldn't concentrate on what Dr. Stein was saying. His body was sitting in this chair, still slumped. But his mind was back in that tiny kitchen with only the sunlight stabbing through the blinds illuminating the room. Violent and bright. Broad daylight.

“Where are you, Cam?” Dr. Stein asked, only a voice, disembodied. Separate from the horror show Cam was watching.

“I'm in the kitchen. On the floor.”

Cam tried to lift his head, but it hurt too badly. He licked at his puffy lip and tasted dirt from the floor. He needed to move, to get up before anyone saw him like this, but his whole body was on fire with pain. His arms and legs ached where Mac's heavy boots had kicked him. His head swam around from the punches Mac had landed. Fire ants raced across his scalp where Mac had tugged his hair so hard. And the worst pain of all...that dark hole that Mac had split open wide until it leaked blood down Cam's thighs.

The sound of Mac's zipper ripped through the quiet. Cam flinched, then went still, like an animal lying low in the grass until danger passed by. Footsteps headed toward him, and the closer they got, the harder fear squeezed his bladder.

Mac's boots were in his face.

“Get up.” Mac nudged Cam's shoulder with his foot.

Cam lay still.

“I said get up!” Mac leaned down and smacked Cam’s head one good time.

Cam moved like it was new and he wasn’t sure which body parts still worked. The cool air on his legs reminded him his pants were around his ankles, and he was only wearing his Ninja Turtles T-shirt. Just when he was ready to stand, to pull his pants up, the door opened. Mama walked in. Cam almost smiled. Even with every part of his body throbbing with pain and shame, he almost smiled. Mac was gonna get it now. Mama was home.

Mama looked at Cam on the floor, her eyes moving from his swollen lip down to his private parts out in the open, to his pants and underwear at his feet. Her deep brown eyes got wide, and she walked over to Mac, still buttoning his pants and buckling his belt. Here it comes. She’s going to kick him out for hurting her baby. She’s going to slap him for what he’d done. Maybe she’d grab the butcher knife and cut him. Maybe she’d hit him over the head with a frying pan like they did in the cartoons.

Mama’s dark hair spilled around her bony shoulders. She pushed it back and reached into her bra, pulling out a roll of cash and handing it to Mac.

“Here,” she said, eyes shifty, licking her smoke-dark lips.

“This all?” Mac flipped through the bills, frowning before pulling out a money clip and trapping the money inside.

“More tonight.” Mama’s nails were already scratching at her arms. “Where my stuff?”

Mac slid his glance between Cam and Mama as if making sure Mama hadn’t overlooked her son on the floor with his privates out.

“Nothing to say about your boy?”

Cam meant to blink away the stupid tears before Mama met his eyes. Her pretty face was like an old jar of honey, the color of gold, hard and cracked, but still a little sweet. She looked at Cam but then jerked her eyes back to Mac like she couldn't stand to see Cam for another second.

"You a sick motherfucker, Mac. Gimme my shit."

The speed-of-light slap sent Mama to the floor, and Cam was afraid her fragile bones would shatter.

"What I tell you about back talk?" Mac reached a hand out, helping Mama to her feet. "I'll take care of you, but we gotta have an understanding. I'm always in charge."

"I know that." Mama worked her jaw, sliding her tongue across her teeth, maybe to make sure she hadn't lost another one. "You didn't have to..."

Her eyes landed on Cam, and for a second, maybe half a second, she looked sad. She looked sorry. But then the scratching and twitching started, and Cam knew Mama wouldn't help him. Mama needed her fix more than she needed him.

"Where my stuff, dammit?"

By the time Cam stood to his feet and had his pants pulled up, Mama was on the couch, skeletal hands trembling around that pipe, cupping a flare of light and smoke.

She didn't look at Cam again.

"She failed you."

Dr. Stein's words pulled him up out of that hell. He took in the Persian rug under his feet and the soft cushions at his back. He knew he sat in the luxury of Dr. Stein's office, but he still tasted blood on his lip and still smelled Mama's smoke.

"Cam, why did you keep the gun?" The tiniest scrap of compassion poked through Dr. Stein's therapist mask. "Why did you sleep with a loaded gun under your bed?"

Cam stewed in a pot of his own silence, feeling the skin fall off his bones the longer words eluded him.

“I needed it.”

“No, you didn’t need it. Mac is dead. You killed him.”

“But he could...She...” Cam’s words disintegrated, died in his mouth. Watery emotion boiling over in his throat. He would not do this. He wouldn’t let her do this to him.

“Cam, it’s okay. Let it go. Let it out.”

“Fuck!” The expletive exploded from his mouth. “I’m not doing this. She’s not worth it. She never cried for me. Never cared about me. Fuck her.” He glared at Dr. Stein. “That’s what I say. Fuck. Her. Sorry excuse for a mother. Sorry excuse for a human being. Druggie. Whore. Who needs her?”

“You did. You needed her to protect you, but she didn’t. That hurts.”

“No, it makes me mad. I’m not hurt. I’m not...” Cam choked on an ill-timed sob, squeezing his eyes shut, needing to catch the tears before they fell. “She didn’t do anything. She... she saw...and she...”

Cam’s shoulders heaved and shook. He clamped his hands over his eyes, but a deluge of tears, unrelenting, streaked down his face. Oh God. Pain sliced into his heart like a razor blade, nicking every tender place he’d tried to protect or ignore. How could she not even care? How could she see her own son on the floor naked and hurt by that monster and just smoke her pipe?

“She never even asked me about it.” Cam thought his voice would come out as a roar, but it was a whimper. Weak shit. He cleared his throat. “She could have asked me about it.”

“Your mother was an addict, Cam. So out of her mind she sold her body and sold out her own son for her fix. She didn’t protect you, and you had to defend yourself.”

“But I couldn’t ever defend myself. He got me every time.”

“Until you killed him.”

“I killed him.”

“He’s dead. He can’t hurt you anymore except for the ways you are *allowing* him to. In your dreams. In your life when you shut people out. When you shut Jo out.”

“But I couldn’t even kill him right because he came back and he was going to hurt Jo the way he hurt me.”

“But that was a dream.”

“I know that, but when I’m in the dream, it’s like I don’t know.”

“What if I told you Mac is dead?”

A ragged chuckle cut Cam’s throat.

“I’d say no shit.”

“You say that like it’s self-evident, yet you held a loaded gun to your girlfriend’s head because you thought she was Mac, so obviously, somewhere in your subconscious, you think he can still hurt you.”

“But he—”

“He cannot, Cam.” Dr. Stein’s eyes never left Cam’s face. “You can let him go.”

“Let him go? I’m not holding on to him. He’s the one who won’t leave me alone.”

“I think your subconscious manifests him out of your lingering fear that you are still not safe. That you still need protection. And as an extension of that fear, you think Jo needs protection, too. You never confronted Mac in your dream until he threatened Jo. Did you notice that?”

Shit. He hadn’t. Dr. Stein should charge double.

“No.” He dropped the concession into the quiet Dr. Stein allowed him.

“Cam, I ask you again. What do you want?”

Cam let the question echo in his head for a moment, sniffing and wiping his nose to regain some semblance of composure.

“I want...I want to sleep through the night.”

“I can give you a prescription to help you with that. Go deeper.”

“I want Jo. I want to spend my life with her.” He had cracked a door open and he couldn’t stop everything that stormed out past his lips like an escaped prisoner. “And I want to have kids with her. To sleep with her in my arms all night without being afraid I’ll hurt her. Or that he’ll hurt her.”

“Jo is what you want, but you ran from her for a long time. And you ran again when you felt threatened. Why?”

“I wasn’t good enough for her. I’m still not.”

“Cam, that’s a lie. You have allowed lies to shape how you see yourself.”

“No, I’m a murderer. I’m heartless and cold. She deserves better than that.”

“I doubt she thinks she’s too good for you.” Dr. Stein allowed her eyes to be kind. “I think it’s all a convolution that will take a lot more time than we have today to sort out. How vulnerable you felt because of your mother’s indifference. The shame over what Mac did. How traumatized you were by taking a life at that age, even of someone you believed to be evil. I think that’s why you let him hang around. Free yourself from these misconceptions, and I think soon, you may free yourself from those dreams.”

“And then I can be with Jo?”

“You can be with Jo now.” Dr. Stein gave him the kindest smile he’d ever seen on her face. “Most people would give anything to have someone who stands by them no matter what.”

“I know. I just...I want to sort this all out and get right for her.”

“And she wants to walk *with* you through the process. What’s wrong with that?”

“I just want her safe.”

“The only time you’ve put her in danger was with that gun.” Dr. Stein took her glasses off, holding them between two fingers, pinning Cam to his seat with her steady eyes. “So get rid of it.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Cam slipped through the kitchen door, pocketing his key and looking around the kitchen in case Q had left any food out. No such luck. He hadn't eaten a thing, so he grabbed an apple to kill the growl. The back stairs loomed in front of him, daring him to go upstairs and find Jo. There was still a lot to sort out, but they could sort it out together. He'd realized that in his session with Dr. Stein. He'd spent so much time protecting Jo from him he hadn't let her *be* with him. Not really. But he would tonight. If she was speaking to him yet.

Etty. Of all things to push Jo over the edge, it was some chick he had never even considered screwing. He could only hope Peter hadn't moved in on Jo, exploited the gate Cam left open. Stupid Crete. Stupid villa. Stupid *Cam*.

Dr. Stein would say that was still self-hatred. He'd never realized how hard he was on himself. He'd never made the connection between the gun under his bed and the irrational fear in his heart that he still needed protection. He'd never acknowledged just how much Mama's indifference had hurt him. He still had a lot to learn about himself, and for the first time, maybe ever in his life, he wanted to discover it, even the dark corridors where his demons lay in the shadows.

He walked into Jo's suite, prepared to have a new one ripped, but found it empty. He walked deeper into the suite, into her bedroom. The black leather dress that nearly had him bursting through his pants lay across the bed, and her stilettos sat on the floor, one up and one down. So she was here somewhere. He checked the bathroom and saw evidence of her rush to get ready for the funeral. Pots of makeup strewn across the sink, body butter abandoned by the bathtub, a dish of hairpins spilled on the marble floor.

He checked her sitting room, picking up the tiny sweater she'd been knitting for the twins...for weeks. Jo didn't make a great woman of leisure, and hobbies were not her specialty.

She knit. She ran. She watched *Vikings*.

Of course. She probably had a stack of missed episodes languishing on her DVR. Cam rushed downstairs and into the home theater, but it was dark and desolate. Nothing highlighted Ms. Kris's absence more than this house, so often still and quiet now. When she was alive, this place sparkled, always crammed to capacity with people rallying around her causes.

This place had been a second home for him. A second chance. Yeah, the first chapter of his life had been a tragedy with too many villains and not enough saviors. Even his savior had been a ruthless drug dealer. And, yeah, his mother had left him for dead in every way that counted. And the dragon that had raped his innocence, left it bleeding and hollow on the dirty floor of a section eight apartment—he had slain that dragon himself.

He had taken his second chance. It had been a good one. A great one that brought him a best friend for life. He'd learned all the lessons about manhood from an honorable man, from Unc, since the father he never knew hadn't bothered. And a rare, kind, compassionate woman had been a mother to him in every way but blood. And he'd stumbled through some rough times, screwed his way through too many women to remember, married the wrong woman, and made mistakes that still haunted him, but he'd met the love of his life when they were twelve years old. Only took him seventeen years to do anything about it.

He walked out to the gazebo by the river, pulling his suit jacket closer around him to ward off the cold.

“Jo!” His voice echoed back to him, and there was still no sign. He eyed the backyard swing, so much like the one he'd painted on his wall. He thought about the jar of fireflies, and the light he and Jo had used to communicate with each other that night when she'd laid out her secrets.

And then he knew where she was. He hated to be the one who had driven her there.

He entered Ms. Kris's suite for the first time since her death, and he understood right away why Jo came here. Ms. Kris's spirit lingered here. Not in a haunted, creepy way. Her gentleness, her strength had stayed like companions waiting for her return. His steps slowed as he approached the closet, hoping Jo was here, but hating it if she was. He could be wrong.

But he wasn't.

The first thing he noticed were the red-bottom shoes, blaring, glittering chartreuse with the soles dipped in costly blood. Jo sat on the floor in the deepest part of the closet, back pressed against the wall, long legs stretched out in front of her. She wore the richly colored silk robe. Her hair spilled around her shoulders, wild just the way he liked it. Not a scrap of makeup. Her tear-puffy eyes narrowed on him.

She folded her arms over her chest, like that was supposed to guard her heart from him. Thank God she'd never figured out how to actually do that.

"What are you doing here?" Jo inlaid the words with ice.

"You're here." He squatted until they were level but not coming too close.

Jo squeezed her lips together, dropping her eyes to the hands in her lap, toying with the belt of her robe.

"I'm asking you nicely to get out of my house until I'm ready to see you."

"Just give me a few minutes. I've figured some things out. Thank you for giving me the space to do that. It helped."

"Well now I need some space." Jo corralled the wavy mass of hair tangling down her arms into a rope over one shoulder. "I want you to go."

Cam let the words settle in the closet around them like snow. He sighed. Anything but that.

"Baby, I can't do that."

“You are such a hypocrite.” Her sharp stare and words lacerated the air between them. “You run tattling to my father so I won’t come after you, but when the tables are turned, you can’t give me space to think.”

“I don’t want you thinking. I want you feeling.” Cam stood on his knees, scooting closer to her. “I want you remembering how it is with us. How it’s harder to breathe when we’re apart. How we miss each other during the day and can’t wait to see each other at night. Feel that, baby.”

“I have been *feeling* that ever since you left.” Jo scooped her hair back from her face. “And this whole time you were with her. That was a betrayal to me, Cam.”

“Sweetie, nothing happened. You know you’re the only one I want. The only thing I want in this world. You’re my one essential.”

“Oh, now I’m your one essential, yet you’ve managed to live without me while you were in Crete with Ety.”

“Will you stop acting like Ety is the damn issue?” Cam’s patience evaporated. He’d wrestled against himself for weeks, denying himself air. Choking without Jo. He was ready to move forward.

“She is the damn issue.”

“No, she the hell isn’t, Jo.” Cam forced himself to stop talking before he screwed this up worse. “I didn’t let her in. She was a body in the house. I didn’t share anything with her.”

“Well you certainly didn’t share anything with me, either.”

“And I get that. I admit that. After this last session with Dr. Stein, I realize I should have.”

“I don’t want to hear about your epiphany.” Jo pulled her lips in and closed her eyes. “I’m not ready for anything you have to say.”

“Jo, I know I shut you out.”

She opened her eyes and they accused him before her

words even began.

“Yeah, you shut me out. You ran again. You went dark again. You chose to be with someone else again.”

“I didn’t choose her. You know that.”

“It feels like it. It feels the same as it’s always felt. Like I’m running after you. Chasing you when you don’t want to be caught. Not again. Not anymore.”

“No, not anymore.” Cam scooted a little closer.

“I’m done with it. You hear me?” Jo tilted her head, considering him for the space of a heartbeat. “And I’m done waiting for you to trust me. No more falling apart for you. I’m stronger than that.”

“Yeah, I know you are, baby.”

Her frown wavered as if she hadn’t expected him to agree.

“And I’m not putting my life on hold while you figure out if you want to get your shit together. I’m adopting Tiki.”

Now that did throw him for a loop.

“What? Tiki from Haiti?”

“Yes. Her adoptive family fell through, and I already love her. I’d make a great mother. I would take care of her. Teach her to help people and be kind to people. Just like Aunt Kris taught me. So I’m adopting her.”

“Not without me you’re not.”

Her frown faltered, her brows snapping together and then apart, and then together again.

“Wha-what did you say?”

“I said you’re not adopting Tiki without me.”

“Don’t play games with me, Cam.” Jo closed her eyes, but stubborn tears slid down her cheeks. “I can’t...It took all I had to make that speech. And I meant it. Just...don’t play games with me.”

“Baby, I’m not playing games.” Cam’s fingers actually trembled when he touched the crazy hair all around her shoulders.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I’m more tired of running than you are of chasing me. This session I just had with Dr. Stein was like an earthquake. Mac hasn’t been holding on to me. I’ve been holding on to him because I thought I still needed protection from something. And damned if it doesn’t go back to my mother not being there for me. Isn’t that some clichéd shit?”

Jo just blinked at him, her mouth opening and closing.

“Do you realize that is the most and the easiest you have ever talked about any of this with me?”

“I know. I feel freer than I ever have.” Cam shook his head. “Don’t get me wrong. Dr. Stein says I have a long way to go. She could be just trying to get more money out of me, but I probably do still have a few issues.”

A soft smile tugged at Jo’s lips, and he could see it all start to make the same sense to her that it had to him.

“Oh, I just bet you do.”

“But one thing I did settle tonight. I’m not going to let my past ruin our future anymore.” Cam gripped her hand between the two of his. “I got rid of the gun.”

“You did?”

“I went down to the river and hurled it as far as I could throw it.” Cam recalled the splash the gun made in the quiet by the water. “For a second, I felt more scared than I ever had in my whole life. Like I’d just torn my bulletproof vest off in the middle of a gunfight. But then I remembered all the things Dr. Stein said, and it got better little by little.”

“And now?”

“Now I guess we’re adopting a little girl. I mean, I thought we’d do it the old-fashioned way first, but we’ve done

everything else backward, why not kids? But you *will* be fat with my babies. You're not getting off that easily."

"Babies? Plural?" Joy split Jo's smile so wide he thought it might hurt. "Who said I'll breed for you, Cameron Mitchell?"

"Oh, you'll breed for me, little filly. We need a bunch of kids to teach how to swim, how to swing over the river, catch fireflies, to knit useless shit."

"My shit...I mean, the things I knit are not useless."

"You kinda never finish them and make lots of wool stuff in the summer. It's a little awkward."

"My knitting is awkward?"

"You'd tell me if I did weird stuff, right?"

"Oh, I do all the time."

"This will be an interesting marriage."

Jo's smile dropped from her face. Shock widened her eyes.

"Wait. Are you actually proposing to me right now?"

"What the hell did you think all of that was, Joanne Elizabeth Walsh?"

"*That* was your proposal?" That old fire sparked in Jo's silver eyes. "I wait seventeen years and you propose to me in a closet with no ring?"

"I promise you a do-over later." A lascivious smile overtook Cam's mouth. He wrapped his hands around her waist and pulled her into his lap. Her robe was wrapped tight over her torso and tied away from his prying eyes. He locked eyes with her, glad to see the same lust rising in her eyes that he felt surging inside of him. His hands hovered at the collar.

"May I?"

Jo nodded, sighing when his fingers brushed her neck as he pushed the robe off her shoulders. She wasn't naked, but she was the next best thing. A strapless bra with transparent cups her nipples peekabooed through. Lace not bigger than a breath

triangulated at the juncture of her thighs. Her legs folded under her, the muscles sleek and elongated. Cam ran his index finger down one leg until he reached the shoes. He slipped one shoe off and then the other. He pulled her close until her soft breasts melted into his chest.

“And from now on, you have a hard day, you come to me.” Cam wrapped her wild hair around his fist. “I’ll be your closet, Jo.”

“And will I be yours?”

Even though she smiled, the question lay real in her eyes. She and Ms. Kris had taught him the meaning of unconditional love. He had tested it at every turn, and Jo had passed over and over again. She had proven, even when he belonged to someone else, that her love went deeper than that. It wasn’t defined by romance and wasn’t confined to sex and kisses. She had always figured out how to be there for him. To be in his life in whatever capacity he needed, even when it had broken her heart.

“You haven’t answered my question.” The smile melted on Jo’s lips, but the question still lay in her eyes. “Will I be yours?”

“Oh, baby.” Cam swallowed the emotion rising in his throat and let the smile break through. Finally break through. “You already are.”

Epilogue

Happy birthday!”

Thirty-one candles blazed on the enormous cake Jo had ordered. Remnants of Q’s rib dinner littered sauce-covered plates scattered around the dining room. A small mound of gifts varying in color, size, and shape waited in the corner. And everyone who meant anything to Cam stood around singing the birthday song.

“Daddy, you have to blow out the candles.” Tiki’s grin burned brighter than the cake. One oversized Afro puff stood at attention on top of her head. Cam had slicked, pomaded, and tamed Tiki’s hair himself. Jo still couldn’t quite get the hang of it. That, like so many aspects of his life with Jo and his baby girl from Haiti, was a running joke.

Cam fake huffed and puffed for a few seconds before frowning at Tiki.

“I think I need some help.” He pulled his daughter by her narrow shoulders to stand in front of him and the cake. “Blow with me.”

She looked up at him, deep brown eyes wide and shining, an enthusiastic nod setting the cloud of hair in motion. Between the two of them, they managed to extinguish all thirty-one candles.

Thirty-one. Good grief. He’d squeezed a lot of living into those thirty-one years, but this last year had undoubtedly been the best. The movie he’d done the paintings for had been just the beginning. Bash could barely keep up with the demand these days, and Cam had started turning things down. He didn’t want to miss moments with the people who mattered most to him. He’d been given a gift that in many ways saved him, but it wouldn’t consume him. Not when he had his girls to do that.

Jo moved around the large dining room, making sure everyone had eaten enough and was having a good time. Pregnancy suited her. Of course it did. How dare it not? The dark, caramel-streaked hair fell past her shoulders, the natural wave left untamed for his pleasure. She'd always been beautiful, but that famous glow made from hormones and happiness powered up something inside of her, illuminating her face. Cam could barely keep his eyes and hands off her most of the time. Par for the course.

Jo shared a quick laugh with Shaundra, who had helped her plan the party. Her assistant had become that much more valuable since Peter resigned. It was for the best all around. Peter's father got his son stepping into his rightful place as successor to the lumber empire. And Peter got to keep his teeth, which Cam would have inevitably eventually knocked out of his mouth.

Meredith pulled Jo close, whispering behind her hand. Something dirty for sure. Meredith's mind had one track. She was a character, but she'd been such a good friend to the two women Cam had married. Was it weird to have both his ex-wife and his forever-wife in the same room? In the same family? They had turned down more than one offer for a reality show. The dynamic that so fascinated those looking in from the outside felt completely normal to them. Probably because things had turned out the way they should have been all along.

Cam caught sight of his ex-wife/cousin-in-law. Kerris and Mama Jess had cornered Q about her sauce recipe. Kerris glanced his way, grinning and mouthing "happy birthday" before turning her attention back to talk of spices and sauces.

A squeal from across the room snared Cam's attention. Walsh held one twin in each hand above his head, laughing up at his little girls. Tonight he and Kerris announced they were expecting another baby. Kerris was still in her first trimester, but not too long after Jo delivered their son, Kerris would add to the growing Bennett-Walsh brood. Walsh handed Brooklin off to Unc, and the two men settled onto the couch, tickling

the girls and talking foundation business.

Cam had mastered the trick of disappearing long ago. Even though it was his party, and even though he was supposed to be at the center of the celebration, solitude was a hard habit to break. While all eyes weren't on him, he decided to slip away.

He settled onto the gazebo bench, enjoying the early spring evening and the subtle rush of the river breaking the quiet. Music drifted down from the doors opened off the rear veranda. Cam smiled at the first strains of Al Green's "Love and Happiness." That would be Jo's doing. He promised himself at least one dance with his wife before the night ended. That was probably her way of luring him back among company.

An image, as much apparition as memory, seized Cam's mind, retrieved from some long-neglected alcove in his head. Mama dancing around their tiny apartment, cooking macaroni and cheese from the box. She'd set the pot to boil and then pulled Cam from the couch to his feet. And they'd danced to Al Green's gritty-smooth, somber voice singing about love and happiness. Mama's face, the color of toasted honey, had glowed, healthy. Happy. Free from the demons that in just a few years would chase her into the shadows. Force her to her knees and onto her back. Maybe Cam had blocked this memory, so sweet and pure, of Mama before the drugs because it was too painful to remember what he'd lost and what she'd been before. She'd cared once. Maybe that's why it had hurt so much when she stopped.

Dr. Stein had advised Cam he needed to forgive Mama as a part of his healing process. She'd urged him to write Mama a letter. Cam thought it was ridiculous, until he sat down and couldn't write one word to release Mama from his anger and bitterness. But here, on a perfect spring night, on his birthday, with Al Green reminding him of those better days, he could. He did.

Cam had never been a religious man, but in that moment, this gazebo was his church. Al Green, the impassioned

preacher. That song drifting through the quiet night—his hymn. And his soul underwent a conversion from dark to light. He forgave Mama not because she'd asked, but because *he* needed to do it. For his unborn son. For the bright spot he and Jo had adopted from Haiti. For his wife, whose love existed beyond dimension. Who had loved him when he hadn't even loved himself.

"I figured you'd be here." Jo climbed the few gazebo steps until she stood in front of him, waiting for him to pull her close.

Cam set his hands on her hips and traced the muscles in her legs through the loose linen pants.

"You're no fun pregnant." Cam pushed the tunic up to expose her small baby bump.

"I beg your pardon?" Jo pushed her fingers through his hair and caressed the back of his neck.

"You're not even fat."

Her chuckle rumbled through her belly, vibrating under the kisses he dusted over the smooth skin.

"I'm fat enough, buddy."

Cam gave her a sheepish look over the swell of her stomach.

"I want another one."

Jo's indulgent smile dropped along with her hands.

"Cameron Mitchell."

"Joanne Elizabeth." Cam pulled her to sit on his knee. "Not right away."

Jo looped her arms around his neck, laying her head against his.

"Oh. You had me going for a minute there."

"Of course I didn't mean for you to get pregnant again right way." Cam offered her a hopeful look. "Like what—four, five

months after this one? Is that enough time?"

Jo sat up and looked at him like he'd sprouted horns.

"You're serious."

"I'm very serious." Cam rubbed the little incubator his son was in. "I want as many bits and pieces of you running around here as possible. Come on. Give me another baby, Jo."

"Can we have this discussion after I have labored twenty hours with this one?"

"You won't be in labor that long. As active and fit as you are, it'll be a piece of cake."

"Says the man who only had to ejaculate."

"You shouldn't say words like 'ejaculate' when you're on my lap. The power of suggestion is, well, powerful."

Jo leaned in, whispering against his lips like the river might be listening.

"Didn't we just do that before the party, you insatiable man?"

"*I'm insatiable?*" Cam pulled back, disbelieving eyebrows elevated. "I was minding my own business, shaving and getting ready for my birthday party, when this naked woman accosted me in—"

"Accosted you!" Jo's mouth fell open, her face impishly outraged. "I accidentally brushed up against you."

"Baby, I think they only call it that in the Red Light District."

Their laughs tangled in the air, dying off into the quiet they were never afraid of together. Jo pushed the floppy hair back from his forehead, leaning in to briefly pull his lip between hers.

"What were you thinking about out here by yourself when I walked up?"

"That song you have on repeat."

“I thought you’d like it.” Jo frowned, studying his face in the dim light.

“I do. It just reminded me of my mom.”

“I’m sorry.” Concern wrinkled Jo’s eyebrows. “I didn’t know.”

“No, it was a good memory. Something I’d forgotten. I don’t think I was even five years old, but I remember her dancing me around our little apartment. Before the drugs and...” Cam trailed off, not wanting to mention the subsequent horrors in this place. In these moments he’d just made sacred. “Before everything else.”

“So the song made you happy?” Jo smiled, kissing his nose and linking their fingers on her knee.

Was this happiness? He’d lived most of his life running after this feeling. He’d thought it would be like rainbows and fireworks, but instead it was a gentle contentment, a steady flame that burned brightest and hottest when he was with this woman. With their little girl. In the house where Jo had grown up and they were making a home again.

Happy. He rolled the word around on his tongue, tested it on his heart. He had run so long, chased by demons. Maybe he never would have found this kind of happiness any other way. When you’ve run in the dark for so many years, you relish the light and love every day in the sun. He wouldn’t have appreciated all he had now without experiencing the days when he’d had nothing.

“Cam, I said the song made you happy?” Jo persisted, still waiting for his response.

“You make me happy.” He blinked at the tears that had snuck up on him, swallowed the burn in his throat. “So damn happy.”

Jo looked at him, blinking at her own tears, tracing the line of his brows and his cheekbones with one finger.

“And of all the amazing things I’ve had in my life, you,

Cameron Mitchell, are the best. I think there are all kinds of paths we can take. Choices we can make to have a good life. But my best life is with you.”

“And my best life is with you.” Cam pushed the unruly hair over her shoulder, kissing her mouth. “I think there’s one thing that would make our life even better.”

Jo’s eyes laughed and sparred with his.

“Cam, don’t you say it.”

“More babies.”

They laughed and talked like they had as children. Kissed and whispered like they had as lovers. By the river, they loved like they would for the rest of their days.

About the Author

There were several signs that Kennedy Ryan would be a writer, but making up stories with a mop as her long-haired heroine while the other kids played kick ball may have been the most telling. After graduating with her journalism degree from UNC–Chapel Hill (GO, HEELS!), she found various means of gainful employment having absolutely nothing to do with said degree, but knew she would circle back to writing, in some form or fashion. After years of working and writing for nonprofit organizations, she finally returned to her first love—telling stories.

In an alternative universe and under her government-issued name, Tina Dula, she is wife to Sam, mom to Myles, and a friend to those living with autism. A portion of her royalties will go to her foundation, Myles-A-Part, serving Georgia families, and to her national charitable partner, Talk About Curing Autism (TACA).

Learn more at:

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**Please turn the page for an excerpt from the first book in
Kennedy Ryan's Bennett series**

When You Are Mine

Available now!

Chapter One

All eyes were on him, except the bride's. Walsh hadn't looked at Kerris Moreton, his best friend's wife-to-be, for weeks. As two hundred wedding guests waited, Walsh contemplated his glass of champagne and the toast they expected from the best man.

"I met this scrawny, mean punk of a kid at camp thirteen years ago." Walsh pieced together his most charming smile around the words. "We pretty much hated each other on sight."

He paused for a ripple of polite laughter before focusing his attention on his best friend, Cam.

"But by the end of the summer, I had a best friend. I had a brother, and that's never changed. We've been through a lot together, and you deserve every happiness. I love you, man."

With a look, Walsh and Cam exchanged years of memories and emotions in a silent moment between them.

And then Walsh did what he had deliberately denied himself all day. He looked at the bride. Really looked at her, full-on, and every word he had scripted fled his mind. His breath caught up in his throat at her beauty, illuminated by the kindness and compassion he knew lay beneath that gorgeous face. His tongue clung to the roof of his mouth for an extra second before he wrenched himself from drowning in her amber eyes.

Kerris met his stare, her expression not guarded enough to disguise the fear, the near-panic. He read the question in her eyes as if she had spoken aloud.

What are you about to say?

"And what a girl you've found," he said, unable to look away from her solemn gaze. "I saw her before I knew she was the girl you'd been telling me all about. She was going out of her way to help someone. I knew then that she was different

and that she deserved a special man.”

He raised his glass to toast the bride, swishing champagne and disappointment in his mouth.

He'd wanted to be that man.

* * *

Eighteen months earlier

Walsh couldn't stop watching her. She stood too far away for him to see her face clearly in the dim light, but he suspected it would take his breath away. She peered up at the bus schedule, speaking with an elderly woman. Her bright red dress in the almost empty parking lot drew his eye like a silver lining in a dark cloud.

“Does it say when the B is coming?” The older woman's question carried across the space separating them, her white hair gleaming in the light from the street lamp.

“Oh no. You just missed the last bus.” The girl's voice was husky-hot and sweet. Honey burned to a crisp.

“Well, I only live a few blocks away. I'll walk.”

“My car's over here. I'll take you.”

“No, I couldn't put you out like that.” It sounded like only half the lady's heart was in the protest and the other half didn't want to walk in the dark. “You don't even know me.”

“I know it's too dark for you to walk the streets alone. I won't sleep tonight wondering if you made it home. Come on.”

Walsh wished she would turn around so he could see this Good Samaritan's face, but he only glimpsed a delicate profile and a flower behind her ear before she marched toward a battered Toyota Camry.

Walsh pushed the incident from his mind, crossing the parking lot and entering the hotel across the street. He was late, but his mother wouldn't care. She'd just be glad to have

him home.

“Bennett!” a voice boomed as soon as he entered the beautifully decorated ballroom. “What the hell. I didn’t know you were coming tonight.”

“It’s called a surprise.”

Walsh warded off Cameron Mitchell’s playful jabs before hooking an elbow around his neck.

Walsh watched his cousin Joanne approach, walking as fast as she could in her prized Manolos, weaving through the food-laden tables and well-dressed people. Her smooth skin glowed with health. The sleek, chestnut-streaked bob fell around her ears, a glossy frame for her oval face. Her full lips tilted up at the edges, hinting at the laughter she usually reserved for her tight circle of friends and family. Jo wedged herself between Cam and Walsh, throwing an arm over each man’s shoulder. She had been fitting nicely between the two of them since they’d met Cam at camp thirteen years ago. Walsh had been fourteen and they had been thirteen. That slim age difference had been about the only thing separating them ever since.

“You didn’t tell us you were coming.” Jo nodded at Walsh’s jeans and polo shirt, her gray eyes sparkling, a cheeky grin lighting her face. “Your mom will be so glad to see you. Even dressed like that.”

Walsh gave Jo an affectionate squeeze and kiss, eyeing her brightly patterned halter dress and Cam’s sports jacket and slacks. He *was* underdressed.

“She won’t mind.” Walsh cast a cursory glance around the ballroom. “Is Uncle James here?”

“Daddy?” Jo rolled her eyes, hand on the curve of her slim hip. “He was still at the office when I left, but he’ll be here.”

“Or Mom will have his head.” Walsh shared a knowing look with his cousin.

Uncle James and Walsh’s mother were not only siblings, but also best friends. They had always been partners in crime

in everything, including running the family foundation and raising their children.

Walsh spotted his mother working the room, trolling for donors.

“I’ll see Unc when he gets here,” Walsh said. “Going to go grab Mom now.”

Cam laid a hand on Walsh’s shoulder, his smile as broad as the Eno River, which snaked through the small town of Rivermont, North Carolina.

“Okay, but don’t forget I want to introduce you to my new girl. She’s amazing.”

“Can you believe this?” Walsh nodded his head toward Cam but looked at Jo. “The certified player, wanting one girl?”

“She is pretty amazing.” Jo offered a wry smile, bumping Cam’s shoulder with hers. “What’s most amazing is that she wasn’t running after him like the swarm of girls he’s used to.”

“It took me *six months* to even get a date with this girl.” Cam waved his hand to indicate his olive skin, blue-gray eyes, and dark, wavy hair. “Me!”

Jo rolled her eyes, shaking her head and setting her gold hoop earrings in motion. “She *is* something else.”

“I’ll meet her later.” Walsh turned in his mother’s direction. “Right now, I gotta go kiss the most beautiful woman in the room.”

He snuck up behind his mother and covered her eyes.

“Who is this?” She starched and pressed the words.

“How many people did you give birth to?”

“Walsh!” She whooped and turned around to hug him as tightly as he had known she would. Her dark hair was pulled back in an elegant knot, showing off her smooth, still-unlined skin. “I didn’t know you were coming tonight. Your room isn’t even ready.”

The ever-practical Southern hospitality. Kristeene Walsh Bennett had never lost it, even when she'd been married to his father, living among New York's most elite.

"I'll be fine." Walsh gave her an extra squeeze before pulling away. "Just as long as there's a bed. Feels like parts of me are scattered across three time zones. I just want to crash after this."

"But you will stay, right?" She rolled a threat and a plea into one tiny frown. "You have to meet our Scholar of the Year. She's overcome so much."

"Haven't they all?" Walsh thought of Cam and several of the other foster kids who'd come through the foundation over the years.

"Well, yes, but she's special," Kristeene said, something approaching pride in her voice. "She's driven and determined. Just a good girl."

"Let me guess. She has a great personality?"

"Well, yes, she does." His mother pressed her lips together, but Walsh knew laughter could spill from the sides at any minute. "Come on. Time to announce the awards."

Walsh took a seat across from Cam and Jo.

"Where is she?" Cam twisted around, scanning the crowded room. "She should've been here by now."

"She'll be here." Jo took a quick sip of her white wine and toyed with the studded bangle wrapped around her wrist. "She's probably just running late, and I'm sure there's an excellent reason for it. God forbid she'd do anything wrong."

"She did mention she was taking her mentee home after school." Worry pulled Cam's dark brows together. "But that would've been hours ago."

Was this really Cam? Walsh couldn't believe all this concern. For a girl? Cam barely remembered the names of the girls he'd slept with over the years, usually referring to them by distinguishing characteristics.

The girl with the belly-button ring.

That chick with the tramp stamp.

The one who did that trick with her tongue.

Now Cam was worried because this girl was *late*?

“Thank you all for being here tonight,” Walsh’s mother said from the platform, her warm gaze skimming each table. “My great-grandfather married a girl who never knew her mother or father. A girl who lived in an orphanage throughout her childhood. Her story compelled my family to start the Walsh Foundation, and we’ve been helping kids without parents or homes all over the world ever since.”

Polite applause from the donors. The college students who had grown up in foster homes and been able to attend college because of the foundation offered a less reserved response, cheering and whistling until Kristeene held up a staying hand.

“Speaking of all over the world.” Kristeene turned a bright smile in Walsh’s direction. “I’m going to have a proud mother moment and welcome my son, Walsh, home. He’s finally back from visiting our orphanage in Kenya. Help me convince him to stay for the summer. Stand up, baby.”

Walsh stood, offering a brief salute before quickly sitting, feeling as self-conscious as he had at six years old when she’d forced him to play the piano for company.

“We’re so proud of him.” Her eyes lingered on her only child. “He’s been working with the Walsh Foundation ever since he graduated from NYU, and he helps out his father in New York when he can.”

Walsh nearly smirked, thinking of how disgusted Martin Bennett would be to hear about his son “helping out” in New York. Like training to run a multibillion-dollar enterprise was his side gig. His father wanted Walsh to work all of what he liked to call this “philanthropy crap” out of his system with his mother’s do-gooder family.

“And that brings us to our final award, the Scholar of the

Year,” his mother said, regaining Walsh’s attention. “This young lady has impressed us all. Not only did she graduate last week with a four-point-oh GPA, but she also serves as a mentor at Walsh House in Raleigh, where we serve at-risk teens. I interviewed her myself for the scholarship last year. I was blown away by her strength of will, determination, and compassion. Please welcome Kerris Moreton, our Scholar of the Year.”

Everyone applauded. After that grand introduction, Walsh wondered if this girl would ascend to the stage flanked by cherubim and seraphim and accompanied by harps. Walsh envisioned everyone genuflecting when this paragon finally decided to bless them with her presence. His hands stung from clapping, waiting for her to show up.

Where the hell was she?

His mother scanned the room, obviously looking for the little scholar-cum-saint. She shielded her eyes against the glare of discreetly lit chandeliers.

“I guess promptness isn’t one of her virtues,” Walsh said.

Cam surprised him with an irritated look. What? Did the little saint have him under her spell, too? Wonder what his new girlfriend thought of that. Then Cam’s face lit up.

“Here she comes.”

She rushed through the door and down the aisle toward the stage. Walsh blinked, thinking she would be less lovely at a second glance. She was not less of anything. No less blinding. No less stunning. No less captivating. She rushed past their table, but not before he got a good look at her.

She was tiny. Probably no more than an inch over five feet, but softly curved in the places a woman should be. He would stand more than a foot taller. Her hair waved around her shoulders and streamed down her slim back, dark brown, spiked with lighter red streaks, as if the tresses had trapped rays of sun. Her cheekbones curved high, a perfect setting for eyes that tilted a little, glinting with green, amber, and gold.

And that mouth.

Damn, that mouth.

It was full and wide. Lush, like raspberries at peak season.

And damned if she wasn't wearing a scarlet dress and a flower behind her ear.

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in Kennedy Ryan's Bennett series**

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Chapter One

Walsh Bennett scowled at the teetering tower of paperwork overwhelming his desk.

“Trish, last time I checked, we were in the twenty-first century,” he yelled through the open door connecting his office to his assistant’s. “What’s up with all this paper? Nineteen ninety called and wants its dead trees back.”

Trisha snickered and sauntered into his office, her matte-red smile a vibrant slash in her golden brown face. She gestured to the offending paper pile, one hand on her curvy hip.

“The board expects your John Hancock on all these dead trees, so I hope 1990 sent pens.”

Walsh grinned, shaking his head before obediently plowing through the documents requiring his signature.

“Do we still have coffee around here?” He tried to keep a straight face while he growled, but it hadn’t taken Trish long to figure out he wasn’t the slave driver everyone expected Martin Bennett’s son to be.

“Would you like coffee, Walsh?” Voice saccharine sweet, Trish arched her brows at him, one of the little tricks she used to remind him that he might be the boss, but she wasn’t his gofer.

“Why, yes, Trish. Now that you mention it, a cup of coffee would be delightful.”

“Make him fetch it himself.”

They both looked to the open door, where his cousin Jo Walsh stood like a queen paying a royal visit. Her chestnut hair waved in an angled bob past her shoulders, a studied, tousled, beautiful mess. Her black leather and tweed panel dress may as well have been poured over Jo’s long, elegant body, its lines liquid against every firm curve. She strode

deeper into the office, tossing her clutch onto Walsh's desk and lowering herself inch by inch into the seat facing him.

"Jo, to what do I owe this pleasure?" He looked away long enough to catch Trish's eye and send her on her way. "Coffee."

"I'm here for Fashion Week." She pointed to the dress. "Zac Posen show this afternoon. Donna Karan later."

"Ah, I'd forgotten that was this week. Moneyed fashionistas descending on New York City. One of your favorite times of the year."

When she remained silent, he looked up from the paper he was reading over before signing.

"Right? Don't you usually waste obscene amounts of money and spend the week hobnobbing with all the other wealthy women who just have to have this season's whatever? You and Mom always..."

Walsh let his words peter out, dropping the pen to give his cousin his full attention. He looked past the glistening surface; he looked at her eyes beneath the smoky eye shadow and mascaraed lashes and saw grief, a twin to his own.

He and his father had spent the last month since his mother's funeral conducting business in Hong Kong. It had distracted him from the yawning hole in his heart, but every time he stopped for even a minute, the wailing monster inside reminded him his mother was gone. She would never return.

"It's my first Fashion Week without her." Jo straightened out the wobble in her voice before continuing, fixing her eyes on the large hourglass his father had given him, in its place of pride on his desk. "I know it seems flighty to you, but fashion was our thing. One of our many things. Doing this without her feels empty and foolish, but not doing it—"

"She'd want you to." Walsh stood and crossed around his desk, settled on the edge, and reached for Jo's hand. "Enjoy it as much as you can. We've gotta find joy wherever possible. Dad and I used work to survive the last month. You can certainly use fashion."

Jo ran the tips of her dark, square nails over a leather patch on her dress before looking back up at him.

“I miss you, cuz.”

Damn. He had to add “asshole” to whatever titles his father and the board of directors wanted to bestow on him. How could he have neglected Jo? Sure, things had been strained between them before his mother had passed. All the drama with Kerris and Cam had managed to slither into his relationship with Jo, but she had needed him. Hell, he had needed her, and neither of them had reached for the other. Until now. He’d castigate himself as a self-centered so-and-so later. Right now he needed to fix this.

“Jo, I’m sorry we’ve barely talked. I didn’t mean to abandon you. There was too much in Rivermont I needed to get away from. Mom’s funeral and...”

Walsh didn’t need to finish that sentence. Jo had stood witness to the Pompeii-like destruction of the scene with Kerris and Cam at their cottage. One kiss. It had leveled his friendship with Cam like a city, standing strong one minute, and nothing but rubble and ash the next.

Too many emotions tangled in his chest, a toxic helix of grief and regret and frustration. He missed his mother. He missed Jo. He missed Cam.

He missed Kerris.

In a matter of months, his closest relationships had disintegrated. If it hadn’t been for his father—irony acknowledged—he would probably have been drowning in one-night stands, vodka, and his own vomit. In the past, tough times had coaxed out his darkest side like a serpent from a basket, snake-charming him into a mire of bad decisions. Not this time. The last two years had changed him. How could they not have? Meeting Kerris. Falling in love with her. Alienating Cam. And to some degree, Jo. Losing his mother. Building a relationship with his father. And he’d experienced most of it without the close friendship that had always anchored him.

“How’s Cam?”

Walsh stroked his Hermès Pele Mele tie between two fingers, training his eyes on the subdued blue pattern instead of looking at Jo. She let him stew in that silence until he finally looked at her. A wile she’d learned from his mother.

“He’s okay.” Jo crossed one long leg over the other, leaning one elbow on the back of the seat. “Like you. Like me. Managing the pain, I guess. The baby helps...”

Walsh narrowed his eyes against the glare of horror in Jo’s gaze when she realized what she had let slip. Caution, too late, tightened her lips.

“Ah, that awkward moment when you realize the woman I love is pregnant with my best friend’s baby.”

“You know about...”

“That Kerris is pregnant? Yeah, I know.”

“And you’re okay?”

A bitter imitation of a laugh spilled across Walsh’s lips. His heartbeat quickened. Probably because of the hot poker slicing through it when he considered Kerris having Cam’s baby.

“Do I have a choice?” He pulled himself out of his own ass long enough to note the sadness filling Jo’s eyes. Separate from grief. Personal. “And you?”

“What about me?” Jo jerked a shade down over her pretty face, cording off her emotions beyond his reach.

“Do you still love Cam?”

He was a son of a bitch for asking her that, but they hadn’t discussed her feelings for Cam since the eve of his wedding to Kerris. Inquiring minds wanted to know.

Jo raised her brows and sat up in her seat, scooting to the edge. She rested her elbows on the armrests and impaled him with the blaze of her silvery eyes.

“I don’t poach.”

Just a few words, but a recrimination. A condemnation. A judgment he deserved. He clenched his jaw around shame and guilt and the defiant words that still, after everything he'd promised himself he'd forget about Kerris, lay on the tip of his tongue. Their eyes and wills dueled across the small space separating them until Jo eased the haughty lines of her face into something softer. A distant cousin of sympathy.

“What do you want me to say, Walsh? Do I have feelings for Cam? Probably for the rest of my life, if the last fifteen years are anything to go by. Would I ever do anything about them?” She shook her head but held his eyes steady. “No.”

How he missed those absolutes. Those black-and-white certainties that didn't account for tornadic emotion sweeping through and ripping at your convictions until they were negotiable with the promise of the thing you wanted more than life itself. He didn't say that. He barely breathed, lest he reveal how shaky his foundations were even now when it came to Kerris. Having her. Taking her. Keeping her for himself.

After spending time with his father for the last month, one thing he'd realized was that he was more like him than he had ever suspected. They shared more than dark hair and green eyes. Like his father, a predator lay in wait inside of him, relishing the hunt and capture. That beast would possess, careless of the consequences. With that legacy living inside him, he wasn't sure he could ever be around Kerris and Cam again.

Jo stood up and settled beside him on the desk, pushing her shoulder into his.

“They're happy. I want you to be happy.”

Walsh leaned his head against hers, reaching for her hand. Letting himself be soothed by the familiarity of the closeness they had always shared.

“Besides,” Jo continued, looking up at him with her smart-aleck grin. “This is much too *Dawson's Creek*. Do you want to be Pacey in this scenario?”

Walsh laughed outright, slipping his arm around her slim shoulders. How had he forgotten how Jo made him laugh?

Suddenly the laughter melted from her voice and her eyes.

“Don’t be Pacey. Joey’s not worth it.”

“What do you have against Joey?”

“She could never make up her mind and jerked those poor guys around for years. I hate indecisive women.”

“Don’t hate her, Jo. Kerris, I mean. It’s not her fault.”

“Who should I blame?” Jo glanced at the rose-gold ALOR strapped around her slim wrist and picked up her clutch. “We were fine before she showed up.”

“No, they were fine before I showed up.”

Even after Jo had gathered her things and headed off for her front-row runway seats, Walsh echoed that statement back to himself.

They were fine before he showed up. And they’d be fine without him.

* * *

“How ya feeling?” Kerris Mitchell settled onto the bench at the kitchen table beside her husband, Cam.

The month since the funeral had been just as hard as she had imagined it would be. Cam missed Kristeene terribly. How could he not? She had been like a mother to him. Kerris had done everything she could think of to soothe him and take his mind off the dull pain. Cam had been shocked and incredibly moved by Kristeene’s generosity in her will, as had Kerris. She had left Cam a small fortune in stocks, along with the Land Rover he’d always loved so much. She’d willed a significant portion of her wardrobe to Kerris for Déjà Vu, the high-end consignment shop she owned with her best friend, Meredith.

“How do I feel? Like the king of the world.” Cam touched her stomach, his hand a warm weight through the silk of the

kimono she wore after her shower.

Kerris smiled at how gentle and considerate Cam had been since she'd told him about the baby.

"I mean about Kristeene."

"It's like having the worst day and the best day of your life...on the same day." Cam pulled his dark brows together even as the corners of his mouth turned up. "Ms. Kris would be so happy for us. You're happy, right?"

"Of course." She leaned her shoulder into his. "This is what we've talked about since the beginning. A family of our own."

"And you don't...you don't regret anything?" A small storm brewed behind Cam's blue-gray eyes, but the hand resting on her stomach remained steady.

Kerris knew, of course, what he was asking; the image he couldn't shake. There were moments when her mind would, of its own volition, revisit that moment, too; when her guard would slip, and she would be in Walsh's arms again. Feel his touch. Smell him. Taste him.

"I don't regret anything." She placed one hand over his on her still-flat stomach and ran the other hand over the silky dark hair hanging past his ears. "I'm as excited about this baby as you are."

His eyes plumbed hers, looking for the truth. She hoped what he saw satisfied.

"I wonder how she'll look." Cam finally spoke, a goofy grin at odds with his handsome face.

Kerris wondered, too. Since there was no record of either of her parents, she had no idea which ethnicities had collided to create her ambiguous looks: amber eyes; dark, silky hair; and skin the color of pale honey. Cam knew his parentage, though it wasn't much of a lineage. His prostitute mother had been half black and half Hispanic. His father, a white man. Some random john. He was routinely mistaken for everything from Italian to Puerto Rican. With their mishmash of a gene pool,

there was no use trying to peg their daughter.

Wait? Daughter?

“Did you say ‘she’?” Kerris laughed and ran a fond hand over the unruly spill of Cam’s hair. “You know something I don’t?”

“I just always think of the baby as a girl. I’ll be happy with whatever, though. Healthy is what’s important, right?”

Kerris nodded and smiled. Cam kissed her before standing to his feet.

“I’ll be late for work if I don’t get outta here. Not that I’ll be working there much longer.”

“Cam, you have to be careful with that money Kristeene left you.”

“I’m not staying in that shitty graphic design job when I have stock worth millions, baby.”

“I get that, but you don’t have it yet.” She walked over, grabbing his hands between hers. “It’s a huge estate that’s incredibly complex, and it’s still being settled. Papers have to be executed. I think it’s good. Gives you some time to really think about the best thing to do with the money.”

“You know what I’ve always wanted to do.” He leaned down to kiss her nose. “I want to paint. Sebastian—you remember Sebastian, right? You met him at Kristeene’s birthday party the night we got engaged.”

“I remember him.” Kerris walked over to clear their breakfast dishes from the table. “Every time I’ve swung by his gallery, he’s never there.”

“Been in Paris.” Cam threw his voice over his shoulder as he moved toward the office to grab his backpack and laptop. “He’s back. He thinks I should take a year to study in Paris. He says I have a lot of raw talent, but I need it refined. I need to train and study.”

“A year?” Kerris’s hands froze over the sink waiting for

their breakfast dishes. “What would we—you mean *live* in Paris for a year?”

“Yeah, babe. Think about it.” Cam came up behind her at the sink to wrap his arms around her. “The three of us in Paris, where some of the greatest artists did their best work. I could study at the Sorbonne. If I apply now, I could be accepted in the next six months.”

“Six months.” Kerris turned to face him, her back against the sink. “I’m only six weeks pregnant. *Déjà Vu* is just getting off the ground. I want to have our baby here in the States with a doctor I trust, surrounded by our friends. Our life is here.”

Cam’s smile dissolved into a straight line.

“Working that dead-end job isn’t much of a life. This money from Kristeene is a godsend. It’ll give me the freedom to pursue my dream.”

“I’ve always been your biggest cheerleader, you know that.” Kerris evened her tone and placed a calming palm against his chest. “I’m just saying the timing may be a little off. Maybe in another eighteen months or so?”

“Eighteen months.” Cam stepped back and stalked over to lean against the granite countertop, facing her with arms folded across the muscles of his chest. “You expect me to stay in Rivermont for eighteen months when I’ll have money in the bank to pursue my dreams?”

“And my dreams?” She deliberately quieted her voice, not wanting this to explode between them. “What about the things I want to do? The business I *just* started? The family we’re *just* starting? Are you considering any of that?”

“You know, maybe I’m missing something.” Cam leveled his creased brows, his face giving nothing away. “Maybe there’s something else you want to stay in the States for. Or should I say *someone*.”

Kerris reached behind her to clutch the rim of the sink. She turned her back to him, rinsing out the dishes she had left there. The muscles of her back tightened under the unrelenting

burn of Cam's stare. They hadn't spoken of that moment again since that first night, but she knew it was still between them. He was a wounded animal secretly nursing his hurt.

"Cam, do we need to talk about Walsh again? I always thought we should have. We can't sweep it under the rug and pretend it didn't happen."

"Oh, I know it happened." His voice frosted over with fresh bitterness like new snow. "Do you think I will ever forget seeing you in my best friend's arms?"

"I told you it was only a kiss," she whispered, knowing that he would hear it in the eerie silence surrounding them. "We got emotional talking about Haiti—"

"Don't give me that shit again!" His voice erupting into the quiet made her jump. "Do you think I don't see how Walsh looks at you?"

Kerris, the way my son looks at you is like a starved man. It's like he can't bring himself to look at anything else in the room.

Kristeene's words in the hospital room that last day before she went home for good drifted back to Kerris. It had been months, but it felt like yesterday. Kerris tunneled her hands into the dark hair on either side of her head before turning to look directly at her husband. She clasped her hands together over the tightly coiled dread in her belly.

"And how do I look at him?" She braved the question, refusing to even blink until he had answered, determined to be as honest as he would allow.

"Most of the time you don't, which I think says just as much as the way he eats you up every time he looks at you. The two of you—"

"There is no two of us!" The volume of her own voice surprised her, reverberating in the solitude of their cottage.

"I'm out." He didn't acknowledge her statement, unfolding from his deceptively indolent stance against the counter and

leaving the kitchen. "I'm gonna be late for this job you want me to stay stuck in for the next eighteen months."

Kerris charged out after him into the living room, ignoring the gibe about his job.

"There is no two of us." She stopped to stand in front of him at the door. Cam turned to her, his face tight, eyes hard.

"You think I'm stupid, Kerris? Is that it? You think I don't know how you feel about him?"

"What do you want me to say?" The words heated up in her mouth and boiled over. "I've told you that I love you. That it was a mistake. I'm not going anywhere. We're having a baby together."

"But is that enough?" Emotion chipped away at the hardness in Cam's eyes until they were a little softer, a little sadder. "What if it isn't enough? Then what do we do?"

And there it was. The fear that had skulked around in her heart since Cam first approached her about marriage that night so long ago. That what she felt for him wouldn't satisfy. Would they have ended up here anyway, or had those few moments with Walsh cost her everything she'd thought would make her happy?

"I gotta go or I'll be late." Cam's eyes scanned her face, and Kerris wondered what he was searching for. She wondered if he found it. "Think about Paris, Ker. Maybe all we need is a fresh start somewhere new."

He leaned down to whisper something against her stomach, something she couldn't hear. Something between him and the child they had made. He looked up and hesitated before standing and dropping a kiss on her cheek. And then he walked away.

Also by Kennedy Ryan

The Bennett Series

When You Are Mine

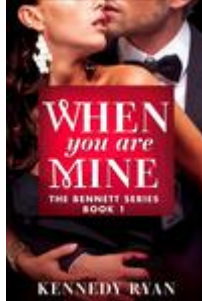
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...but what about love?

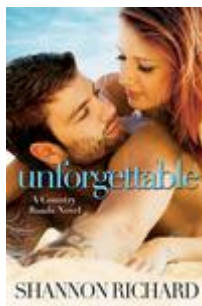
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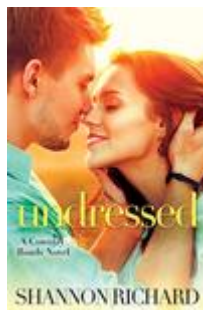
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Forever Yours

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10104

hachettebookgroup.com

twitter.com/foreverromance

First published as an ebook and as a print on demand: February 2015

Forever Yours is an imprint of Grand Central Publishing.

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ISBN: 978-1-4555-5688-5 (ebook edition)

ISBN: 978-1-4555-5687-8 (print on demand edition)

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