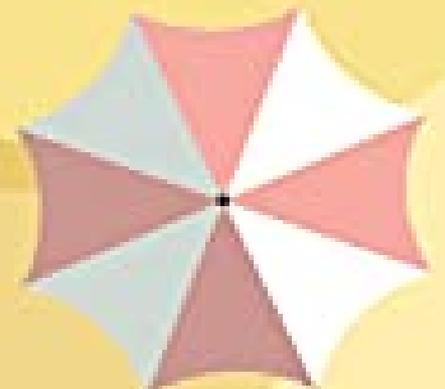


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- MAX MONROE ◦ PENNY REID ◦
- LUCY SCORE ◦ KATE STEWART ◦

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CONTENTS

[Attraction](#)

Penny Reid

[The Legacy](#)

Dylan Allen

[Flirting with the Frenemy](#)

Pippa Grant

[Arrogant Devil](#)

R.S. Grey

[Broken Miles](#)

Claire Kingsley

[Always Only You](#)

Chloe Liese

[Restraint](#)

Adriana Locke

[I Dare You](#)

Ilsa Madden-Mills

[Tapping the Billionaire](#)

Max Monroe

[The Worst Best Man](#)

Lucy Score

[Someone Else's Ocean](#)

Kate Stewart

Attraction

Bad Boy New Adult Romance

Penny Reid

From the *New York Times* Bestselling Author Penny Reid

He is everything she doesn't want, so why does she want him so badly?

One week.

Private beach.

Invisible girl.

Jerk-faced bully.

What's the worst that could happen?

Kaitlyn Parker has no problem being the invisible girl, which is why she finds herself hiding in various cabinets and closets all over her college campus. Despite her best efforts, she can't escape the notice of Martin Sandeke—bad boy, jerkface bully, and the universe's hottest, wealthiest, and most unobtainable bachelor—who also happens to be Kaitlyn's chemistry lab partner.

Kaitlyn might be the only girl who isn't interested in exploiting his stunning rower's build, chiseled features, and family's billionaire fortune. Kaitlyn wants Martin for his brain, specifically to tabulate findings of trace elements in surface water.

When Kaitlyn saves Martin from a nefarious plot, Martin uses the opportunity to push Kaitlyn out of her comfort zone: spring break, one week, house parties, bathing suits, and suntan lotion. Can she overcome her aversion to being noticed? Will he be able to grow beyond his self-centered nature? Or, despite their obvious chemistry, will Martin be the one to drive Kaitlyn into the science cabinet of obscurity for good?

Where to read more of the *Hypothesis Series*

Book 1 *ATTRACTION* (ends in a cliffhanger!)

Book 2 *HEAT* (ends in a cliffhanger!)

Book 3 *CAPTURE* (no cliffhanger)

Book 4 *MOTION* (ends in a cliffhanger!)

Book 5 *SPACE* (ends in a cliffhanger!)

Book 6 *TIME* (no cliffhanger)

Atoms, Molecules, and Ions

QUIET, SILENT, MUTED, hushed, stilled, reticent... I moved my mouth, breathed the words—soundlessly—from my hiding place.

This game comforted me, calmed me, settled my nerves. Yes, recalling synonyms while anxious was a bizarre coping strategy, but it worked. And very little usually worked.

The voices from beyond the cabinet grew louder and were accompanied by the click of heels and the dull echo of tennis shoes. I held my breath and strained to decipher how many sets of feet were represented by the approaching shoes. I guessed two, also because only two voices were audible.

“...think that he’s going to want to fuck you? After what happened last Friday?” The words were a hiss emanating from an unknown male voice; I tensed at the use of vulgarity.

“I’ll get there late. If you do your job then he won’t even remember it,” came a feminine reply. The female was closest to my hiding spot in the chemistry lab cabinet; her words were, therefore, much clearer.

“Shit,” he said. I tried not to huff in disgust at his foul language as he continued. “I don’t even know how much to use. I’ve only used it on bitches.”

“I don’t know either. Just...double it. Martin is, what? Like, twice the size of the girls you usually dope out?”

I tensed again, my eyes narrowing. The name Martin, in particular, made my heart beat faster. I knew only one Martin.

Martin Sandeke.

Martin Sandeke, the heir to Sandeke Telecom Systems in Palo Alto, California, and smartypants in his own right. I also came from a notable family—my mother was a US senator, my father was the dean of the college of medicine at UCLA, and

my maternal grandfather was an astronaut. However, unlike Martin's family, we weren't billionaires. We were scientists, politicians, and scholars.

Martin Sandeke, the six-foot-three modern day physical manifestation of Hercules and captain of our university's rowing team.

Martin Sandeke, unrepentant manwhore extraordinaire and kind of a jerk-faced bully.

Martin Sandeke, my year-long chemistry lab partner and all-around most unobtainable person in the universe—who I never spoke to except to ask for beakers, relay findings, and request modifications to the heat level of my Bunsen burner.

And by Bunsen burner I meant, literally, my Bunsen burner. Not the figurative Bunsen burner in my pants. Because I hoped Martin Sandeke had no idea that he affected the heat levels of my figurative Bunsen burner.

He did affect them. But, obviously—since he was cosmically unobtainable and kind of a bully—I didn't want him to know that.

"He's about two twenty, so...yeah. I guess," the male responded. His tennis shoes made scuffing sounds on the linoleum as he neared my hiding spot.

I rolled my lips between my teeth and stared at the crack in the cabinet doors. I couldn't see his face, but I could now discern he was standing directly in front of the cabinet, next to the unknown girl. Maybe facing her.

"But what's in it for me?" the cuss monster asked, his voice lower than it had been, more intimate.

I heard some rustling then the sloppy sounds of kissing. Instinctively, I stuck my tongue out and mocked gagging. Listening to public displays of affection was unpleasant, especially when lip smacking and groaning was involved, and most especially while trapped in a chemistry lab cabinet that smelled heavily of sulfur.

The next words spoken came from the girl and were a bit whiny. "Money, dummy. Martin's loaded—well, his family is

loaded—and they’ll buy me off. All you have to do is give him the stuff tonight in his drink. I’ll take him upstairs, record the whole thing. Bonus if I get pregnant.”

My mouth dropped open, my eyes wide, unable to believe what I’d just heard. The awfulness, rustling, and lip smacking continued.

“You dope him and I’ll rope him.” The girl’s pleasure-filled gasps were audible and rather ridiculous sounding.

“Oh, yeah baby—touch me there.” These breathy words were accompanied by the sound of a beaker crashing to the ground and a zipper being undone.

I winced, scowled. Really, people had no manners or sense of decorum.

“No, no, we can’t. He’ll be here any minute. I need to leave,” the girl pleaded. I noted she sounded the perfect mixture of regretful and hurried. “You need to make sure he stays at the house for the party. I’ll be there at eleven, so give him the stuff around ten thirty, okay?”

The zipper came back up, the man backed into the cabinet. I jerked at the resultant bang of the doors. “How do you know where he’ll be all the time?”

“We dated, remember?”

“No. He fucked you. You never dated. Martin Sandeke doesn’t date.”

“Yeah, well, I know his schedule. He comes here on Fridays and does...hell if I know what with his ugly little lab partner.”

Ugly?

I twisted my lips to the side, my heart seized in my chest.

I hated the word ugly. It was an ugly word.

Ugly, unsightly, gross, misshapen, repelling... I mentally recited. For some reason, the synonym game didn’t help me this time.

“His lab partner? Wait, I’ve heard about her. Isn’t her dad an astronaut, or something?”

“Who cares? She’s nobody. Kathy or Kelly or something. Whatever,” the girl huffed, the heels of her shoes carrying her farther away. “Forget about her, she’s nothing. The point is you need to stay here and make sure he comes tonight, okay? I gotta go before he gets here.”

“Bitch, you better not be playing me.”

The girl responded but I didn’t catch the words. My back itched and while tucked in the cabinet, I couldn’t reach the spot. In fact, it would be a difficult spot to reach even if I were standing in an open field. Also, my mind was still reciting synonyms for ugly.

I didn’t think I was *ugly*.

I knew my hair was unremarkable. It was long, wavy, and dark brown. I always wore it in a ponytail, bun, or clip. This was because hair, other than warming my head, served no purpose. Mostly, I ignored it.

I rather liked my eyes. They were grey. It was an unusual color I’d been told on more than one occasion. Granted, no one ever said they were pretty, but no one ever said they were *ugly* either. That had to count for something.

I was no supermodel in height or size, at five foot seven and a size ten. But I wasn’t Jabba the Hut either.

My teeth were reasonably straight, though I had a noticeable gap between the front top two. I was also pale—the color of paper my best friend, Sam, had once said. My eyebrows were too thick, I knew this. Sam—short for Samantha—often remarked that I should get them plucked, thinned out.

I ignored this advice, as I didn’t care about thick eyebrows so long as they never became a unibrow like my aunt Viki’s.

I glanced down at my comfortable clothes—men’s wide-leg, navy cargo pants with torn-off cuffs, worn Converse, and an oversized Weezer T-shirt. I might be plain, unremarkable, or even mousy. But it’s not like I was a horrible beast who turned people into stone with a single gaze. I was just...low maintenance.

That was okay with me. I didn't need attention, didn't want it. People, especially people my age and especially other girls, made very little sense to me. I didn't see the value in spending hours in front of a mirror when I could be playing video games, or playing the guitar, or reading a book instead.

But sometimes, when I was with Martin and we were calculating particulate levels, I wanted to be beautiful. Really, it was the only time I wished I looked different. Then I remembered he was a jerk-face and everything went back to normal.

I gave myself a mental shake and gritted my teeth. Straining to listen, I pressed my ear against the cabinet door and waited for signs the unknown male was still present.

The itch in the center of my back was spreading and I didn't know how much longer I could stand it. On the itch scale, it was quickly moving from aggravating to brain-exploding torturous.

But then the sound of shuffling footsteps approaching from the hall snagged my attention. They slowed, then stopped.

"Hey man. Whatsup?" said the mystery cussing fiend.

"What are you doing here?" Martin asked. I guessed he was standing at the entrance to the lab because his voice was somewhat muffled. Regardless, it made my stomach erupt in rabid butterflies. I often had a physical response to the sound of Martin's voice.

"Wanted to make sure you're coming to the house party tonight."

I heard more footsteps. They were Martin's. I'd know that nonchalant gait anywhere—because I was pathetic and maybe a little obsessed with all things Martin Sandeke. But the difference between my obsession with Martin and the other girls' obsession with Martin was that I had absolutely no problem admiring his finer features from afar.

Because Martin really was kind of a jerk.

He'd never been a jerk to me, likely because I was an excellent lab partner. We spoke only about chemistry—and he liked

acing assignments—but I'd seen him in action. He'd lose his temper and then *BOOM!* he'd go off on whatever poor soul he happened to believe responsible.

If it was a girl, they'd leave crying after coming in contact with his razor wit (and, by razor, I mean cutting and wound inducing). He never called them names, he didn't have to. He'd just tell them the truth.

If it was a guy, he *might* only use words. But sometimes he used fists too. I'd been a witness to this once—Martin beating the crap out of a slightly shorter but also slightly broader jilted boyfriend of one of his one-night stands. At least, that was the rumor that went around after both of them were escorted out of the dining hall by campus police.

Martin was an equal opportunity jerk-face and therefore best avoided outside of the chemistry lab.

No one spoke for a moment; then, I stiffened when I heard Martin ask, "Where's Parker?"

That was me. I'm Parker.

To be more precise, I'm Kaitlyn Parker, Katy for short; but I doubt Martin knows my first name.

"Parker? Who's Parker?"

"My lab partner."

"I thought your lab partner was that girl, the one—"

"She is a girl."

"Her name is Parker?"

I knew Martin was close now because I heard him sigh; his next words were clipped with impatience. "What did you want again?"

"The party tonight—you're still coming, right?"

"I already told you I'd be there."

"Good. Because I'm counting on you to be my wingman." The mystery speaker's voice started to fade. I guessed he was leaving, having secured what he came for.

“Yeah, whatever,” was Martin’s offhanded response.

“I’ll see you tonight, bro. You better come, I’m serious.”

Martin didn’t respond. I guessed the unknown male finally exited because, after a silent pause, I heard Martin release a very audible huff. It was heavy, exaggerated, and flavored with exasperation; of note, I’d heard him employ this sigh once before with a girl who followed him into our chemistry lab. I never wanted to be on the receiving end of that sigh—so far so good.

Meanwhile, I was still in the chemistry cabinet and the itch of the century had spread to my shoulders and stomach. I was likely going to go crazy if I didn’t scratch it within the next ten seconds. It felt like I was being repeatedly stung by a legion of fire ants.

During those ten seconds I debated my options.

I could stay in the cabinet, wait for Martin to leave, go quietly insane, then send him an anonymous note about the conversation I’d overheard.

Or, I could burst forth from my hiding place, scratch my itch, look like the doofus I was, then hope he’d forget as I regaled him with details of the conversation I’d overheard.

In the end it didn’t matter, because the cabinet doors were abruptly opened. A whoosh of fresh air followed and I found myself face-to-face with Martin Sandeke.

His eyes were blue and exceptionally beautiful. They reminded me of blue flame. Well, usually they were lovely, at present they were narrowed and sharp, and focused squarely on me. Beginning with my eyes, they moved down then up, ending where they started.

He was truly a magnificent specimen. All broad shoulders and narrow hips, with the thick muscular thighs of a rower. His brown hair was streaked with blond—likely due to all his time on the water and in the sun.

I wasn’t used to this—him looking *at* me, standing so close—thus, combined with my normal female palpitations, I couldn’t quite draw breath for several seconds.

At length he said, “Parker.”

“Sandeke.”

“What are you doing?”

“Uh...” I released the breath I’d been holding and unthinkingly arched my back, reaching behind me to scratch my itch.

Maybe it was the effect of his eyes and unavoidable handsomeness, or maybe it was because I’d seen him rip girls to shreds and was therefore a little afraid of a potential non-chemistry related conversation. Or maybe it was the itch between my shoulder blades, because without thinking, I blurted the truth, “I was hiding in the cabinet.”

His brow furrowed, but his gaze relaxed slightly, his confusion plain. “Why are you hiding in the cabinet?”

I reached over my shoulder, stretching my arm, and tried to reach the itch with my left hand instead of my right. This didn’t work.

“Why does anyone hide in a chemistry cabinet?” I shrugged, mostly because I hoped the movement would help me get to the itch.

He lifted a single eyebrow and grabbed me by my upper arms, pulling and lifting me like I weighed next to nothing. He set me safely on the ground.

Martin’s hands on my arms sent a bolt of girly awareness to the pit of my stomach. It was paired with belated embarrassment at being found as a burst of heat spread from my chest to my neck.

He still gripped my arms when he asked, “Do you hide in the cabinet often?”

“Sometimes,” I said distractedly, my jaw clenched, willing the mortified blush to recede.

“Is this an everyday thing?”

“No. Only on special occasions, like when strange people arrive to plot your demise.” I twisted out of his grip, reached

for and failed to find the spot needed to secure relief.

“Plot my demise?” His eyes darted over me again, I could tell he was studying my movements. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to reach an itch between my shoulder blades.” My elbow was in the air now, my hand down the neck of my shirt.

Martin’s eyes widened then blinked. Without a word he stepped forward into my personal space. Before I could comprehend what was happening, he’d backed me into the lab table and I was trapped. Martin was against me, his arms wrapped around my body, his hands slipped under my T-shirt to the center of my back, and then his fingers itched the unreachable space between my shoulder blades.

At first I tensed because... *MARTIN SANDEKE’S ARMS ARE AROUND ME. HIS HANDS ARE UNDER MY SHIRT. HIS BODY IS PRESSED AGAINST MINE!*

OMG. WTF? BBQ!

But then, my brain’s very understandably stunted fan-girl reaction to his movements was quickly eclipsed by the blissful relief of an itch scratched.

I melted in his arms, my forehead resting against his chest, and I moaned my satisfaction.

“Oh, yes, God. That’s the spot... Please, don’t stop,” I murmured, obviously out of my mind. But it felt so good. So very, very good. Like sinking into a hot bubble bath after walking a mile through a nor’easter.

Martin didn’t stop.

Well...not precisely.

Rather, over the course of a full minute, he ceased using his nails, and instead began caressing and massaging my back with his fingers and hands. I realized too late that his head had dipped to my neck and his lips were against my ear, his hot breath tickling me and sending delightfully dangerous shivers down my spine, and down the backs of my legs to my toes.

“Did I make it all better?” he whispered, then bit—yes, bit!—my neck, like he was tasting me.

Then he bit me again.

I sucked in a breath and my eyes opened—even as my body instinctively arched toward him. Reality burst through the delightful fog of his ministrations like one of those disturbing and jarring windup jack-in-the-box clowns.

After one and a half semesters of virtually nothing but mundane academic interactions, I was in the chemistry lab with Martin Sandeke and his hands were roaming, liberal, and greedy. His face was tucked in my neck. I was trapped against a lab table. Our bodies were intimately connected.

And I'd just moaned.

What the hiccup was going on?

I raised my palms to his chest and made to push him away. This only caused his hands to still, now on the curve of my waist, and his grip to tighten. He plastered our fronts together more completely.

“Um...” I cleared my throat, found my voice unsteady. “Yeah, yeah—all better,” I croaked.

He laughed. Actually, it was more like a lazy chuckle.

One of Martin's hands slipped up my back and under the strap of my bra, where the itch had been, his fingers splayed wide. The other went to the clip on my head and released the spring. My hair fell like a curtain and I felt him wrap his hand around the thick length.

I pushed him again, tilted my head to the side and away, feeling breathless. “I'm all better now. Thanks for the help. Services no longer needed.” Everywhere he touched sent ripples of awareness and heat to my core.

My attempt at escape was a failure, because, as soon as I pressed against him in earnest, Martin tugged my hair, encouraging me to tilt my chin upward.

Then he kissed me.

And—damn, damn, damn—he was a good kisser.

More precisely, since I had grossly limited experience in the kissing department, he was what I imagined a good kisser would kiss like. The kind girls fantasize about. The guy who just takes what he wants, like he's hungry and you're on the menu, but somehow makes it epic for both parties involved.

No preamble, prologue, or preface. Just urgent, fervent, worshipful kisses, one right after the other. I had no choice but to wrap my arms around his neck, stand on my tiptoes, and try to kiss him back. Because, honestly, the way he held me, the way he growled when our tongues met, the way his mouth moved over mine—he demanded it.

Also, in the recesses of my mind, I realized that this entire situation was completely preposterous. Likely, he was drunk, or tripping on acid, or was playing some kind of joke.

One day I would persuade my grandchildren to gather 'round while I put in my good dentures—the ones with no space between my two front teeth—and I would tell them for the millionth time about how Hercules had once accidentally kissed me in the chemistry lab at my Ivy League University.

The need for air eventually required our lips to part, though we separated only inches. If I inclined my head forward our noses would touch.

I opened my eyes as wide as they would go and glanced at his, where I found his gaze alternately moving between my lips and my eyes. I also noted I wasn't the only one breathing heavily.

I said and thought in unison, my voice just above a whisper, "What was that?"

His eyes stopped moving over my face and instead settled, held mine captive. They were heated and...hot and...intense. I was starting to understand why the blood of a thousand virgins had been sacrificed at his altar of sexual prowess.

I tried to swallow. I couldn't.

"That was necessary," he finally said. Actually, he growled it.

"Necessary?"

“Yes. That needed to happen.”

“It did?”

He nodded once and bent as though he were going to do it again. I stiffened, my hands moved instantly to his chest and I thwarted his advance—because, if he started kissing me, it was surely a sign of Armageddon. Also, I was so far out of my comfort level, I was in an alternate dimension.

“No-no-no-no.” I twisted my head to the side, braced my hands against the imposing wall of his chest. “We’re not doing that again. I don’t kiss unobtainable boys, it’s one of my life rules.”

He tugged my hair—I’d forgotten that he’d wrapped his hand around it—and bodily pressed me against the black-topped lab table. His other arm, still under my shirt, wrapped completely around me.

“Yes. We’re doing *that* again.”

“No. We’re not. We’re not doing anything unless it involves measuring the composition of trace elements in surface water.”

“Parker—” His hand left my hair and slipped under my shirt again, spanning my side and stomach.

“Because we’re lab partners and lab partners do not kiss.”

“Then we’re not lab partners anymore.”

“You can’t switch lab partners in the middle of the semester.”

“I just did.”

My fingers moved to catch his wrists because his hands were on their way to second base; I successfully intercepted his northward progress. “Nope. I don’t do that.”

“Do what?” He nuzzled my neck and whispered against my skin. He must’ve known that nuzzling was going to cause my insides to melt. I imagined he’d conducted methodical experiments into the fastest way to female self-lubrication.

“I’m not one of your easy girls, or even difficult girls.” My voice wavered, so I cleared my throat. “I’m not even really a girl. I’m more like one of the boys. Think of me like a boy.”

“Not possible.”

“It’s true. Do you kiss boys? Because, if not, then I think you must have me confused with someone else.”

His movements stilled and a long moment passed. Then his hands fell away, *he* stepped away, and I slumped slightly forward—a weird mixture of feeling bereft and relieved.

“You’re a lesbian.” He said the words as though they explained a mystery he’d been trying to solve for years.

My eyes shot to his. He was four feet away and I found him watching me with a dawning of... something. If I didn’t know any better it looked like disappointment and frustration.

I swallowed, successfully, licked my lips, then shook my head. The irony of his confusion not lost on me.

My first and only boyfriend had been gay. I just didn’t know it while we were dating throughout high school.

I was still trying to catch my breath when I responded, “No. I’m not gay. I’m just...not interested in you that way.”

This was true—because I’d witnessed his path of devastation with my own eyes.

This was also a lie—because I was most definitely interested in him *that* way, just not the after part where he would say it was meaningless sex, make me cry, and tell me to get over it.

His eyebrows jumped a fraction of a centimeter at my softly spoken declaration.

“Not interested...,” he repeated.

I stepped to the side, scaling the length of the table, and reached for my bag. I hefted it to my shoulder, escape now the only thing on my mind. His slightly narrowed eyes followed my movements.

“I know, right?” I tried to sound self-deprecating, which wasn’t difficult because I truly meant my next words. “Who am I? I’m nobody.”

“You’re not nobody,” he countered. “Your mother is a senator and your grandfather was an astronaut.”

I cringed. I hated it when people brought up my family. “Just because my family is famous, doesn’t mean I’m somebody.”

He shifted forward and said with a surprising amount of vehemence. “Exactly! That’s exactly right.”

“I know, right?” I readily agreed. “See, I’m ordinary. And you’re you and I’m sure you’re used to the deafening sound of underwear hitting the floor every time you enter a room. But I don’t do that kind of thing, even for Hercules. Sure, I’ll think about the possibility later when I’m safely alone in bed, but I never cross-pollinate fantasy and reality.”

“When you’re alone in bed?”

I didn’t acknowledge his words because...mortification.

Instead, I said, “I’m not a fast and loose girl. I’m a slow and steady girl. Who knows when or if I’ll ever cross the finish line?”

He blinked at me, at my deluge of words. I didn’t even try to read his expression because I was so focused on walking backward out of the room.

“You’re leaving?” he asked.

“Yep.” I threw my thumb over my shoulder. “I’m going to go now. And don’t worry about the experiment. I’ll come in over spring break and finish it up. And when I see you after the break, everything will be back to normal. We can forget this ever happened. We shall never speak of it.” My voice cracked on the last word.

“Parker—”

“Have a really great spring break.”

“Kaitlyn—” He took two strides forward as though he were going to stop me, but halted at the sound of crunching glass underfoot. He glanced at his feet, noticing for the first time the broken beaker on the floor. “What the hell?”

I seized the opportunity afforded by his split attention and bolted out of the room.

In fact, I ran down the hall like an insane person and slipped into the elevator just before it closed. I even jogged back to my dorm, didn't begin to relax until I crossed the threshold of the keycard access area, climbed the three flights to my room, and locked the door behind me.

I tossed my bag to the corner of the tiny space, threw myself backward on my bed, and rubbed my eyes with the base of my palms. The scene in the lab played over and over behind my closed eyelids—him touching me, kissing me, scratching the impossible itch.

It wasn't until several minutes later that I realized I'd forgotten to tell him about the dastardly plot I'd overheard.

The Atomic Theory of Matter

“I CAN’T BELIEVE you agreed to this.”

“Shut it, Sam.”

I tucked my long, straightened-with-a-flatiron brown hair behind my ears. Self-consciously, I smoothed the skirt of the little black dress she’d talked me into wearing, annoyed—for the twentieth time—that the hem of the skirt ended mid-thigh.

“You look hot, hooker. Just own it.” Sam nudged my elbow with hers and I grimaced.

If someone had asked me twelve hours ago how I’d be spending the first Friday night of spring break, I would have told them I’d be curled up in my bed against fluffy pillows, sipping tea, and eating shortbread while reading.

I would not and could not have fathomed I’d be on my way to a fraternity party dressed in lace-topped thigh highs, a black dress, stiletto heels, with my hair down, *and* wearing makeup.

That’s right. Makeup. On my face. With glitter eye shadow.

Also, my eyebrows were plucked. *Plucked!* Gah!

I rolled my eyes and huffed like the disgruntled recluse I was. I would rather shop for a bra than go to a fraternity party, and that was saying a lot.

“Oh, come on, Katy. There was no way we could get into the party wearing band T-shirts and men’s pants. This is a skirts-only party.”

I’d been educated earlier in the evening that a “skirts-only party” is a fraternity party where all the girls are required to wear short skirts. Upon hearing this news I briefly considered leaving Martin to his fate. In the end, my conscience wouldn’t let me.

Jerk conscience. Always making me do things.

“You act like getting dressed up is torture,” she continued. “You look hot.” Sam, who I suspected had been waiting for a chance like this since our freshman year of high school, didn’t sound at all sorry for me.

“I don’t look hot. I look ridiculous.”

“You’re a babe.”

“Shut it.”

“A hot babe. And guys are going to be wanting some of that.” She pointed at me and flicked her wrist, indicating my bosom and backside. “Especially ’dat ass.”

I grumbled, but made no other audible response. Inwardly, I cursed myself for the hundredth time that I’d failed to warn Martin about the plot I’d overheard in the chemistry lab earlier. If I’d just kept my wits about me I would be curled up with a book now instead of walking toward a den of iniquity dressed like a girl.

Even though we were still two blocks away, I could hear the sounds of the party. My neck felt stiff and my hands were clammy.

The plan was quite simple. I would find Martin, explain about the plot and what I’d overheard, then we would leave. Sam wasn’t a frat party kind of girl either. Yes, she liked to get dressed up, but she called sorority girls “sorostitutes” and fraternity guys “fratilos.” She labeled them “group thinkers” and claimed they suffered from a herd mentality.

She was kind of judgey that way.

I hadn’t given sororities or fraternities much thought because...no point.

“I still don’t get why you don’t have his cell number. He’s your lab partner, right? And he was your lab partner last semester too?” Sam tossed her blonde curls over her shoulder.

Sam was a little shorter than me and was attending the University on a tennis scholarship. She was determined to get into Harvard Law and, therefore like me, she was focused,

spent very little of her time looking for ways to sow oats. Her all-business attitude made her an ideal best friend and roommate.

“I just don’t. I don’t have his number.”

“Why not?” she pressed. She’d asked me this question several times as we were dressing—or, rather, as she was dressing me.

“Because,” I responded again, wiping my palms on the dress.

“Because why? What if you needed to get in touch with him about a project?”

“I’d leave him a note.”

“A note? Where? When? How?”

“In the chemistry lab, in the cabinet.”

“You pass each other notes?” Her tone turned teasing.

“No. It’s not like that. I’ll leave a note if I can’t make it on Fridays and he does the same. Or, if I’ve finished something without waiting for him, that kind of thing.”

“But why didn’t he want you to have his cell—”

I stopped walking and faced her. “He tried to give it to me, okay? He tried last semester to exchange numbers and I didn’t want to. Can you just drop it?”

“You wouldn’t take Martin Sandeke’s number?” she asked, as though the words I’d just spoken made no sense.

“That’s correct.”

“But...why the hell not? He’s...he’s...he’s Martin Sandeke!”

“*Because* he’s Martin Sandeke. That’s why I wouldn’t take it.” I started walking again, my toes protesting the movement.

“Katy, you’ve been crushing on Martin Sandeke since the first week of class two years ago when you stalked him outside of physics, before you even knew who he was.”

“That’s because he’s physically beautiful and pleasing to the eye,” I mumbled.

“He tries to give you his phone number and you don’t take it. Why did you do that? Explain it to me.”

“Because, you know me, when I get drunk—even though it’s only happened twice—I drunk dial! I called Carter the last time it happened.”

Carter was my high school boyfriend who never seemed interested in physical intimacy unless we had an audience. Since he was my only boyfriend, I figured this was normal. We’d parted as friends.

But last year I left him a drunk message asking him why he never tried to sleep with me. When I woke up the next morning, and everything came flooding back, it took me three weeks to return his call.

When I finally did, he informed me that he was, in fact, gay. Additionally, he had appreciated my willingness to be his beard in high school. He also assured me that had he not been gay, he would have tried to get in my pants early and often.

It all sounded like pity.

Worst conversation ever.

Sam stopped me again with a hand on my elbow. “That was last summer and Carter is ancient history.”

“Can we just get this over with?” I pleaded, not wanting to talk about Carter or about my stunted romantic history.

Sam released an audible breath. “Katy, you’re beautiful and desirable—”

“Oh my God, no more teasing. I’m wearing the dress, aren’t I? I even let you put makeup on me.”

“I’m not teasing you. I’m trying to get you out of this perpetual funk you’re in. You hide yourself behind baggy clothes and eyebrows so thick they could be mustaches. Carter is a lovely person but he shouldn’t have used you like that. Now you’re all skewed in the head.”

“Can we not talk about this?”

“Only if you promise to get Martin’s number tonight.”

I shook my head, shifted on my feet. “I will not. I don’t want to drunk dial Martin Sandeke a few months from now. He won’t give me pity, he’s vicious. He’ll laugh in my face and make me cry.”

Sam *tsked*, rolled her eyes, and started walking again. “Fine. Whatever. Go through life repressing your sexuality because one boy—one stupid boy who was confused—used you to hide his own inner turmoil.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re not welcome.”

I let her snarky comment slide because we were on the same block as the fraternity house.

It was what one would expect from a fraternity house at an Ivy League school. Large, several stories, classically painted, manicured lawn littered with red solo cups and drunk partygoers. The mass of bodies—standing, sitting, leaning—spilled out the front door, down the sweeping staircase, and onto the grass.

At the entrance to the house stood two very large men. Actually, I got the distinct impression they were bouncer dudes. Both were dressed in fraternity polo shirts and their necks were as thick as my waist. They were chatting up a group of five, tall, sylphlike girls. Their eyes scanned both Sam and me when we mounted the ginormous wraparound porch.

In front of us, two girls in jeans and a guy—also in jeans—began crossing the threshold of the house.

“What do you think you’re doing?” One of the big dudes held his hand out and halted their progress.

The shorter of the two jean-clad girls shrugged and faced the big dude. “Goin’ to the party.”

“Nah-uh, this is a skirts-only party.”

The second big dude tipped his chin toward Sam and me. “You can go in, girls.”

Sam pushed me gently on my shoulder and we moved around the group stalled at the entrance. Once inside, Sam and I wove through bodies; I had no idea where we were going or how I was going to find Martin.

Looking around, I started to feel a bit better about my dress. It was black cotton, sleeveless, and shorter than I thought appropriate, but it was modest in comparison to some of the dresses and miniskirts we saw as we entered the gigantic entryway.

I did not, however, feel better about the crowd. People, people everywhere; dancing, making out, arguing, drinking, laughing. Even given the mammoth size of the foyer, the crush felt suffocating.

“Excuse me.”

I stepped to the side to allow three tall and handsome guys brush past. They looked almost interchangeable—intentionally long brown hair cut in the hipster style, tanned skin; two of them had brown eyes, the other one had blue. They were wearing fraternity polo shirts and all three slowed, their eyes moving over Sam and me with plain interest.

The last of the guys stopped; he grabbed my hips, then issued me a very cute and flirty grin. “Hey, who are you?”

I opened my mouth to respond that I was nobody and that he shouldn’t go around touching people without their permission, but Sam tugged on my hand and inserted herself into the conversation. She had to semi-yell in order to be heard over the surrounding music and voices. “We’re looking for Martin Sandeke. Is he here?”

The blue-eyed one of the trio huffed a laugh and shook his head. “Get in line, sweetheart.”

Sam tipped her head to the side, narrowed her eyes at him. “Listen, we’re not staying. This is his lab partner, she needs to speak with him about the class. Do you know where he is?”

The three boys exchanged confused looks; the one with his hands on my hips leaned forward to my ear. “You’re Sandeke’s lab partner?”

I nodded, finally finding my voice. “Yes. Both semesters. It’s really important that I speak to him about, um...a project we’re supposed to be doing over the break. Also, I’d really appreciate it if you would remove your hands.”

He blinked at me, frowned, then removed his hands and took a step back—or as much of a step back as he could manage in the crush. “You really are his lab partner?”

His eyes seemed to search my face with interest. In fact, all three of them seemed to be looking at me a little funny. I smoothed my hand down my skirt again and was thankful for the dim lights. Under their triple-handsome-perusal, I knew I was blushing uncontrollably.

“She is, she’s the astronaut’s daughter,” the one with blue eyes finally said, as though he’d just realized and therefore, recognized me. He said it as though I were a celebrity.

This was aggravating.

I pressed my lips together before muttering, “He’s my grandfather.”

“I’m in Professor Gentry’s class too.” Blue-eyes extended his hand, captured mine; his expression was probing and tinged with respect as it moved over my face. “You look really different outside of class. Did you do something different to... your face?”

I thought about responding that I’d be happy to do something different to his face, like punch it, but Sam spoke first.

“So, can you three amigos take us to Martin?” Sam seemed to dislike this last question about my face just as much as I did, because her tone held moderate aggravation. “We don’t have a lot of time.”

This was a true statement. It was already 10:10 p.m. and I knew, based on my eavesdropping, that the “drugging” would occur sometime around 10:30 p.m.

Mr. Blue-eyes nodded, still holding my hand. “Sure, sure. Follow me.” He tugged me forward.

Mr. Brown-eyes, the one who felt comfortable putting his hands on my body, winked at me as I passed. “Find me later, we’ll have some fun.”

His companion hit him on the back of the head and I heard him say as we left, “Not likely, dumbass.”

“I’m Eric,” Blue-eyes tossed at us over his shoulder. “Stroke is this way.”

“Stroke?”

“Martin is Stroke.” Eric turned briefly to explain. We made a chain, the three of us, as we wove through bodies of scantily dressed females and grabby frat boys. “He’s eight seat in the boat. It’s called the stroke seat because it sets the stroke rhythm for the rest of the boat. So we call him Stroke.”

I gritted my teeth through the jostling, ignored the body parts that pressed against me—or outright palmed my anatomy.

Martin was called *Stroke*. Somehow that nickname fit.

Eric led us to a staircase where another bouncer dude stood. He nodded once to Eric and smirked at Sam and me. I deduced he thought we were on our way to engage in a throupling (a threesome coupling). This, of course, caused my blush to intensify.

Jerk conscience.

I struggled to climb the stairs in the heels, almost asked Eric to stop so I could remove them. I was so busy debating whether or not to take off my shoes that I almost collided with Eric’s back when he stopped in front of a pair of overly large double doors.

“He’s in here.” Eric turned, tilted his head, then let go of my hand to push open the door.

“Thanks.” I nodded once and gripped Sam’s hand tighter as I moved to enter.

“No. No. She stays out here.” Eric shook his head and motioned to Sam.

“What? Why?”

“Only one girl at a time, unless both are invited.”

I glanced at Sam and imagined I wore a similarly stunned expression.

“Excuse me?” Sam asked. “What is he? A sultan? Does he have a harem?”

Eric smirked, his eyes moved over Sam with simmering appraisal. “I’ll keep you company, cupcake.”

“No thanks, dildo,” she responded.

This only made his grin widen, though he said, “You’re safe with me. I promise the only thing I’ll do to you is stare at you.”

She glowered. He narrowed his eyes mockingly, though his amusement and enjoyment at the exchange was obvious.

“I’m not worried about me,” Sam explained. “I don’t trust your boy around my girl, not in this house.”

Eric’s gaze moved over my dress; his grin waned, softened, like he knew a secret about me.

“Kaitlyn will be safe. But if she’s not out in fifteen minutes we’ll go rescue her together.”

I didn’t like what his words inferred or what they implied. I wasn’t a damsel. I wasn’t going to need rescuing. If anyone was a damsel in this situation it was Martin Sandeke. I was rescuing him, he just didn’t know that yet...

I addressed Sam, my voice lowered. “I’ll be fine. Martin’s not going to do anything. I’ll just tell him about the, um, the assignment and then I’ll leave.”

Sam was teetering, still undecided. After a prolonged moment she blurted, “Oh, all right.” Then she shifted her gaze to Eric. “But I’m timing this. I have a watch.” She held up her wrist so he could see the evidence of her timepiece.

“Noted,” he said with a large smile, then held his hands up as though he surrendered.

Before I lost my nerve, I turned the handle to the door and opened it—only glancing back once at Sam before I stepped in

and shut it behind me.

The Periodic Table

I DON'T KNOW what I expected, but it wasn't a pool table.

I hovered at the entrance to the room, just inside the small alcove, and watched as Martin and three other guys good-naturedly knocked the cue ball around with their pool sticks.

No one noticed me at first and this allowed me time to chant my synonyms silently.

Unsteady, uncertain, nervous, anxious, worried, panic...

Then the thought popped in my mind, *Even though you don't feel calm doesn't mean you can't be calm*. This was something my mother had said often when I struggled with childhood angst, frustration, and disappointment. These words were an excellent mantra now.

I wasn't concerned for my safety, but I was concerned. I'd gone through life hiding in cabinets; I was perfectly happy to continue this practice once this task was over. I just had to get it over with first.

Propelled by this determination—to cross this task off my conscience's list and go find a nice, safe cabinet to hide in—I gained a step forward and cleared my throat.

One of the guys was mid-laugh and I wondered at first if they'd heard me. But, eventually, four sets of eyes swung to my position, though I tried to focus only on Martin.

“Uh, hi. Hello.” I gave the room a little wave.

Martin, like the rest, looked at me like I was a stranger. However, I felt all pairs of eyes sweep up and down in a way that made me feel like I was a car, or a horse—one they were thinking about riding.

Heated anxiety seized my chest, tightness spread into my stomach. I balled my hands into fists and took another step into the room, further into the light.

“I’m looking for Martin.” I kept my eyes on him; at six feet away, he was the closest to my position.

Recognition had not yet registered when he replied sounding both bored and irritated, “What do you want?”

“It’s me. Um, it’s Parker. Kaitlyn Parker. I was hoping I could speak with you for...a...minute...about chemistry?” I bit my lip, waited for his reaction.

Martin visibly stiffened, blinked, and flinched when I said my name. His eyes—now focused and narrowed—moved over me once more, this time with obvious and renewed interest.

“Parker?” He took a step forward and laid his cue stick on the table; he sounded and looked baffled.

I nodded and hazarded a glance at the others. They were alternately watching me then turning their heads to watch Martin’s reaction.

“Yep. I promise I’ll just be a minute, it won’t take—”

“Everyone out,” Martin interrupted, his voice a bit too loud for the space. It was a command.

To my surprise, his three companions set down their pool cues on the table and shuffled out as instructed, and without delay.

One or two of them caught my eye as they left, their expressions plainly curious but none of them spoke. Martin’s gaze never left my face; he seemed to recover quickly from the surprise of my arrival. The line of his jaw grew hard, and the muscle at his temple ticked.

I didn’t know what to make of the gathering storm in his eyes so I ignored it and attempted to think of a word to use in my synonym game. I also tried not to look at his lips.

I tried and I failed.

I couldn’t help it; the memory of his kiss—our kiss—arrived like a tsunami, flooding my body with something heated and tight. I felt overwhelmed by it, surrounded on all sides. I knew what he tasted like, how he sounded when he growled, what his hands felt like on my bare skin.

I tried not to shiver and failed at that too.

The door clicked behind me, but, to me, it sounded like a gunshot—because it signaled that we were alone. I gathered a breath and tucked my hair behind my ears. I needed to focus on reciting the speech I'd practiced in my head for the last five hours.

Then I could leave, my conscience could piss off, and this would all be over.

Ignoring the goosebumps he'd ignited with his scorching glare, I did my best impression of calm and said, "So, the reason I'm here—"

"Let me guess." He crossed his broad arms over his broad chest, his broad shoulders stiff and straight, and leaned his hips, which were narrow and not broad, against the pool table. "Your level of interested has...changed."

I squinted at him. "What?"

"You've changed your mind about me." The way he said the words, deadpan and caustic, led me to the conclusion that he thought I was there to beg for more kisses, entrap him with my feminine wiles.

Little did he know, I possessed no feminine wiles. Only the willies and the heebie jebbies.

I squinted more. I was feeling flustered. He wasn't supposed to talk. He was supposed to listen.

"No. It's not that at all. It's about the cabinet."

He scoffed, like he didn't believe me. "Nice dress."

I glanced down at myself, my hand automatically lifting to my abdomen. "Uh, thanks. It's borrowed."

"Really?" He said *really* like he didn't *really* believe me.

"Yes. It's also a little too short, I think." I tugged at the hem, wishing it longer. "I was told I wouldn't be allowed in without a skirt."

His attention moved to where my hands were now fiddling with the edge of the dress and lingered there. Martin

straightened from the pool table and crossed to where I stood—his steps unhurried, his gaze leisurely skating up my body. Again, I felt like a horse being perused for a ride.

“You could always take it off, the dress, if it makes you feel uncomfortable.”

A full-on, fire-alarm embarrassed flush rose to my cheeks. He stopped just in front of me. His eyes were shamelessly resting on the swell of my breasts with a suggestiveness that completely crossed the appropriate line.

It was so beyond appropriate it was...

It was...

It was inappropriate.

I gathered a slow breath, hoping to steady myself, and stomped down the rising wave of indescribable sensations plaguing my sensibilities—some pleasant, some not so pleasant.

“Listen,” I said through a jaw mostly clenched. “I overheard something when I was in the cabinet, before you arrived, and I thought you should know. That’s the only reason I’m here.”

His eyes flickered to mine, still hard, disbelieving. He was standing just a foot or so away and I’d tilted my chin upward to meet his glare.

After a pause, during which he studied my face, Martin said, “Go ahead, gorgeous. Enlighten me.”

“I heard two people walk into the room. So, I panicked and, yes, I hid in the cabinet. But, in my defense, I was already in there pulling out the reticulation equipment. Anyway, two voices—one female, one male—and they came into the lab together. Whoever the guy was when you walked into the lab, that was the same guy I overheard. The girl wanted the guy to drug you.”

Martin’s eyebrows bounced upward then pulled low when I said the word *drug*. I didn’t want him to interrupt me again so I spoke faster.

“She said she wanted him to drug you. They scheduled it for ten thirty tonight and he is supposed to make sure you stick around at the party. She said she would arrive at eleven then take you, drugged, up to your room and video tape the two of you. Then she said something truly disturbing—not that the rest of it isn’t already disturbing—but what she said next kind of blew me away because I didn’t know people could be that cold and calculating with no regard for basic decency.”

“What did she say?” he asked, his tone impatient. His eyes were still hard, angry, but the severity wasn’t focused on me. I didn’t appear to be the target—praise Bunsen and his burner!

“She said that if she got pregnant then it would be ‘a bonus.’”

Martin’s mouth opened then closed and his glare moved from me to the floor. He was visibly stunned. I watched his beautiful face as he processed the information, took the opportunity to examine him in a way I’d never allowed myself to do before.

He was painfully handsome. I kind of knew that before, but I really saw it now.

My chest hurt a little as I studied his features: square jaw, strong nose, perfect shape and size for his face, high cheekbones, like he had Cherokee or Navajo ancestry. Paired with his blue eyes, he was striking. I understood my previous reluctance to gaze at him directly. It was called self-preservation.

I tore my eyes from him and his exceptional form. I tried not to notice his decidedly swoony body—the way his jeans hung on his hips, the way his thighs filled out the jeans—and glanced over his shoulder.

“Well. That was what I needed to tell you. So, I guess I’ll be ___”

“Why should I trust you?”

My eyes moved back to his and I blinked at this question, because the answer was obvious. “Uh, what?”

“How do I know you’re telling me the truth?”

“Why would I lie?”

“What do you expect in exchange?”

“Exchange for what?”

He shifted on his feet just a fraction of an inch closer. However, that fraction brought with it a menacing cloud of suspicion and unpleasantness.

For someone so beautiful, his expression was surprisingly ugly.

“What is it that you want? What are you hoping to gain? Is it money?”

My mouth fell open and my nose wrinkled again, this time in outrage. I looked at him, really looked at him—and this time I wasn’t seeing the outer façade of blinding beauty. What I saw was a guy who was bitter, jaded, and maybe a little desperate—for what, I had no idea.

Finally I said, “What is wrong with you?”

His eyebrows shot up. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Yes,” I countered, my hands coming to my hips. “What is wrong with you? I came here to *help* you, the least you could do is not act like a jerk-face.”

“Jerk-face?” he shot back, his eyes growing both hot and cold. “You show up here, looking like that, and you expect me to believe you’re not after something?”

“I already told you, jerk-face, it’s a skirt party! I wouldn’t have made it through the door if I hadn’t been wearing this stupid dress, jerk-face. If you don’t like how I look, jerk-face, then you can go yell at your stupid sorority brothers.”

“You mean fraternity brothers.”

“Sorority, sorostitute, fraternity, fratigalo—whatever! It’s all the same to me.”

“So I’m supposed to believe that you have no ulterior motive? If this is true then why didn’t you tell me all of this at the lab?” He gained another half step forward and, since I refused to back down, only inches separated us.

“Because you scratched my itch and then you kissed me—both of which freaked me out because neither of which are in the course syllabus for laboratory experiments this semester. And, furthermore—”

I didn’t get to finish because the door opened behind me and a voice I recognized called into the room. “Hey Stroke—dude, why are you up here? I brought you a drink. Some of my special hunch punch.”

I’d turned toward the sound of the voice and stumbled a step backward. Martin’s arm wrapped around my shoulders, bringing my shoulders to his chest as the owner of the voice leaned halfway in—two red solo cups extended.

The guy, about two inches taller than Martin—therefore, very tall—walked through the door after a short pause. Behind him I could see Eric standing with Sam. They both peered into the room and I noted Eric’s face was apologetic as he glanced at Martin.

I tried to step forward but Martin’s arm tightened, held me still.

The stranger’s clear blue eyes moved from me to Martin, then back again. “Hey—Eric said you had company so I brought one for both of you.”

I knew his voice because it was *him*. The cuss monster from the lab.

I felt Martin’s chest expand on a slow inhale, his fingers were digging into my arm; it wasn’t painful but it was pointed, firm, meant to communicate a message—*don’t move*.

“Thanks, Ben,” Martin drawled, but the edge in his voice was glacial and he made no move to accept the cups.

Ben gave me a stiff smile, his eyes lingering on where Martin’s arm was wrapped around me, then he raised both cups. “You two should have a toast. Come down to the party.”

“Leave the drinks and go,” Martin said.

Ben frowned, glanced at the two cups and cleared his throat. “You should come downstairs, this is epic—”

“Go,” Martin repeated.

This time Ben nodded once and set the cups on a table by the door. “Sure, sure. I’ll come back in a bit to see if you need any more.” He held his hands up and backed out of the room, his eyes completing another once over of my body before he closed the door.

I exhaled the breath I’d been holding and, just for a moment, allowed myself to lean against Martin.

“That was him. That was the guy—I recognize his voice.”

I felt Martin nod, his chin and cheek against the side of my hair. We stood—still, quiet—for a long moment, then he turned me to face him. Both of his hands moved to my waist and he backed me against the pool table.

His eyes, guarded, but also tempered with curiosity, searched mine. I still saw desperation in his features and it still perplexed me. I didn’t touch him. Instead I braced my hands on either side of my hips where my body met the pool table.

At length he asked, “What do you want?”

I swallowed then responded, “I’d like to leave.”

He shook his head slowly. “That’s not what I meant. What do you want from me?”

I shrugged. “It would be great if you could tabulate the findings from last week’s assignment, but I’m not going to hold my breath.” He never did the tabulations and analyses. It was annoying.

“Parker.”

“What?”

His eyes dipped to my mouth and his voice was the softest I’d ever heard it, almost coaxing. “Kaitlyn...”

I stiffened against the feelings associated with my name from his lips, spoken in gentle tones.

I averted my eyes and my voice was a little strained when I said, “Martin, I honestly don’t want anything from you. I’d

like to leave so I can change into my normal clothes, drink tea, eat cookies, and read a good book in my dorm room.”

“Kaitlyn, look at me.”

Once again, my neck flushed and my arms broke out in goosebumps.

I tried to ignore both the blush and the goosebumps. “I also want for you to forget any of this happened so that we can go back to being lab partners.”

He was quiet for a long time, but I knew—even though I refused to meet his gaze—that he was studying me, examining me like I was something new.

Then he said, “Why do you hide?”

The words startled me so much that my eyes instinctively sought his, and this was a mistake. His gaze—now a lovely blue fire—was taking a survey of my face, as though he were memorizing every detail. It was alarming and my heart quickened.

I tried for a shrug but it likely looked like a poorly executed, convulsive shiver. “Why do you care?”

His gaze met mine then flickered to my lips. “You have fantastic lips.”

I half choked, my eyes widening. “You care because I have fantastic lips?”

“And your eyes. They’re grey. I noticed them first.” His voice was just above a whisper; he sounded as though he was talking to himself.

I cleared my throat, not really sure what to say. But it turned out I didn’t need to say anything, because he continued.

“Early last semester you wore a tank top and your hair was down. You kept pulling it off your neck.” He lifted his hand and brushed the backs of his fingers against my swell of cleavage, skirting the neckline of the dress, a soft caress. “I tried to get your phone number but you wouldn’t give it to me.”

“I give out my number as rarely as possible, it’s one of my life rules,” I said dumbly.

“The red pants, the tight ones that show off your ass. You tortured me, bending over to get supplies out of the cabinet. That isn’t very nice.”

My voice was unaccountably breathless. “The corduroy ones? I only wear those when all my other laundry is dirty.”

“You’re better at chemistry than me, you ace all the tests.”

“I like chemistry, and you don’t study like you should.”

“Haven’t you ever wondered why I come on Fridays?” His fingers curled around my neck and his thumb traced circles along the line of my collarbone. He encouraged my head to tip backward.

“So that we can get a jump start on the weekly assignment?”

He shook his head. “You.”

My eyelashes fluttered. “Me?”

He held me captive with both his heavily lidded gaze and his caressing hands. Martin leaned forward, and he brushed his lips against mine. It wasn’t a kiss. It was more like he was using his lips to feel mine, to enjoy my softness.

“You,” he whispered again.

My fingers gripped the wood on either side of my hips and I successfully fought a whimper. The tightness in my chest eased and twisted, my stomach fluttered, my breath coming shallow and fast.

My brain wasn’t quite working properly because he’d muddled it—with his words, hands, and lips of temptation. Therefore, in a paltry attempt to defend myself from his seduction onslaught, I blurted out one of my greatest fears where he was concerned.

“You’ll make me cry.”

His eyes widened a little, moved between mine. “I wouldn’t.”

“You would. I’ve seen it, I see how you treat girls.”

His hand at my waist tightened. “I wouldn’t do that to you. You’re not...I know you’re not like that. We wouldn’t be that.”

“I don’t trust you.”

He sighed, but not with impatience. “I know.” He nodded. “But you will.”

He dipped his head again, placed a soft kiss on my lips, just a hint of his tongue. It wasn’t enough. My hands lifted on their own and gripped his shirt, staying any retreat he might have planned. I didn’t do this on purpose. In fact, I didn’t know why I did it.

“Martin, I can’t—”

“You can.”

“I’m not—”

“You are.”

“You don’t—”

“I do.” He kissed me again and shifted his weight more completely against me. Martin crowded my space so that he filled every inch of it. Four of my senses were overwhelmed by him—the smell of his cologne, his hot and hard body against mine, the taste of his mouth, the low growl in the back of his throat when our tongues met and mated.

Briefly he drew his mouth from mine, and demanded, “Say you’ll spend the week with me.”

I blinked, started to protest. “Martin, this isn’t—”

He kissed me again, placed my arms around his neck, then his hands moved up my ribs and his palm cupped me through the thin material of my dress. His thumb drew tight circles around the center of my breast.

He growled, “Say it. Spend the week with me.”

I moaned, because...aroused.

He bit my lip, sucked it between his. I moaned again.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Kaitlyn.” He breathed the words suddenly, like he didn’t mean to say them out loud, but they

burst forth unbidden. “I want you to spend the week with me. Say yes.”

He kissed me again, quickly, then trailed wet, hot kisses over my jaw and behind my ear to my shoulder. He bit me—hard—and sucked on my neck in a way that made me squirm and my breath hitch; all the while his large hand massaged my breast and tortured me through the fabric. His other hand had moved to my bottom and pressed my center to his.

“Martin...” was all I could manage, because...*really* aroused. And, not that I was an expert, but judging by the hard length against my stomach, he was also really aroused.

“Please, say yes,” he breathed into my ear.

I said, “Yes...”

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

To be honest, I said it but I didn’t mean it. In that moment, I said yes because he’d asked me to—and he’d used the word *please* and I didn’t want all the good feelings to stop—not because I had any intention of spending the week with Martin Sandeke, Hercules, jerk to women, and apparently king of seducing naïve and intimacy-starved virgins.

Regardless, my words seemed to be enough for Martin because he smiled against my skin and stopped talking. He also moved both of his hands from their shockingly effective ministrations and encircled me in his arms. His mouth moved back to mine.

This time the kiss was slow, less urgent, gentle, and sweet. It felt like a prelude, a beginning. When he lifted his head, I opened my eyelids to find him gazing down at me, his eyes alight—blue flames.

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow,” he said. His voice was different, softer, deeper...content.

“What?” I blinked at him.

“Be ready at eight.”

“Eight?”

“You don’t need to pack much.” He kissed my nose, released me from his arms, threaded his fingers through mine, and tugged me toward the door. “I hope you like private beaches.”

Enthalpies of Reaction

“WHAT ARE YOU going to do?”

“Nothing.”

I heard Sam shift in her seat causing the leather to creak. “What do you mean *nothing*? He’s expecting you to go away with him for spring break.”

I shrugged, staring out the window of Martin’s chauffeured car. That’s right. A *chauffeured* car, for a twenty-year-old college student. If I hadn’t felt so pensive I might’ve looked for the Grey Poupon Dijon mustard.

After my lapse in judgment against the pool table, Martin had navigated Sam and me to the back of the fraternity house while calling his driver on the phone. The man was at the back door by the time we arrived.

Martin pulled me in for a quick kiss—which was completely bizarre, provocative, and off-putting—then unceremoniously loaded us in, telling his driver to take us to our dorm.

Sam pumped me for information as soon as the door shut. I relayed the facts, which gave me an opportunity to recover a measure of sanity. In hindsight, I realized I’d been acting like a crazy person. Proximity to Martin made me lose my sense. I’d been senseless. Without sense. Not any sense. No sense.

Nonsense.

I spoke to the window rather than be faced with Sam’s anxious expression. “I mean, I’m going to do nothing. I can’t be held responsible for my reactions—what I say or what I do—when faced with a real life Martin Sandeke. He’s the man equivalent of a gun to the head, except without the fear for my life aspect. I’ll write him an email, tell him that he adversely affects my ability to function as a rational being. As such, our discussion this evening and all resultant agreements are null and void. I’m sure he’ll understand.”

I felt like I had stumbled into an alternate reality and was just now finding my way out of the rabbit hole.

Sam snorted. “Um, no. He’s not going to understand. And, I doubt he’ll take no for an answer. He’s kind of a bully that way, or least he has that reputation.”

This statement captured my curiosity; I turned in my seat to face Sam. “Wait, what do you mean? Does he—has he forced himself on—”

“No! God, no. I would never have teased you about getting his number if he forced himself on girls. That’s not what I meant. He wouldn’t need to do that in any case, as he has them lined up around the fraternity house with skirts up to their elbows, willing to bend whichever direction he prefers. I bet that’s why he was hiding upstairs. It must get exhausting at some point...” Sam trailed off and I got the sense she was speaking mostly to herself.

I frowned at Sam. “Rape isn’t about need, it’s about power.”

“Exactly. Sorry if I implied otherwise. Regardless, Martin Sandeke has a reputation for getting it on with a cornucopia of willing females.”

“Then what are you talking about? How is he a bully? Other than making females he’s slept with cry and getting into fist fights.” I listened to the words as they left my mouth, realizing that those two facts made him enough of a bully to be labeled as such.

“I just mean he’s used to getting his way, right? He has his own yacht. His. Own. Yacht.” She stared at me, her eyebrows raised with meaning. “If he wants something, it’s his. He doesn’t even ask, he just mentions it.”

I twisted my lips to the side and considered this information, not really understanding why it was pertinent to our discussion. “So? What has that got to do with me?”

Sam’s eyelids drooped with disbelief, but her eyebrows stayed suspended. “Have you not been paying attention? I saw the way he looked at you, the way he held your hand all the way

to the car, the way he kissed you before we left. He wants you. Martin Sandeke wants you.”

I considered her, her words, and sighed. “I’m not a yacht.”

“No. You’re a girl. He’s had hundreds of girls. But he has only one yacht.” Then under her breath she added, “Well, he has only one yacht that I know of.”

“Sam, weren’t you the one pushing me to get his number?”

“Yes, but that was before I was told to stand outside while you went into his lair. That was before I saw the dazed look on your face when you emerged from the aforementioned lair. That was before I found out he wants you to go away with him for a week! I want you to get your freak on, but I don’t want you to get your heart broken.”

“I think you’re overreacting. You said yourself, he has them lined up around the block. I’ll politely decline his offer, and he’ll move on to someone else. There is no need to become hysterical.”

“I’m not hysterical and you are being purposefully obtuse.”

“Fine. I’ll sleep with him. I’ll call him tomorrow and tell him I want to get it over with. Then, by your logic, he’ll go away. Problem solved.”

Sam growled. “That’s not a good idea either.”

“Well, what do you want me to do?”

“You should tell him face-to-face that you don’t want to go. You should explain your reasons why and establish boundaries for future interactions. And you should have me there as your representative to make sure he doesn’t try to zap you with his sexy ray.”

“Zap me with his sexy ray?”

“You know what I’m talking about. I barely saw him and I’m feeling the effects. He’s got like an...electromagnetic pulse of sexy or something. So does his friend, Eric. They’re a menace. They shouldn’t be allowed in public.”

“That’s not how electromagnets work.”

“Whatever. You get my point.”

“We’re here.” The driver’s voice over the speaker interrupted our conversation and drew our attention to the view of our dorm outside my window.

I heard the sound of him exiting the car, presumably walking around to open my door.

Sam covered my hand with hers bringing my attention back to her. “Just think about what I said. Carter did a number on you, but his intentions weren’t hurtful. This guy,” she paused, her eyes moving between mine, “if Carter was a stick of dynamite, this guy is a nuclear weapon.”

* * *

THE CAMPUS EMAIL directory was public information within the school’s Black Board system. I could find any person’s email address by conducting a simple first name, last name, year enrolled search. However, since it was so easy to find a person’s email address, very few people actually used their on-campus email account, preferring Gmail or another alternative where spam wasn’t such an issue.

I knew this. I knew the chances of Martin actually receiving my email were minute. Regardless, I reasoned I would have the moral high ground if I sent him an email as soon as I arrived home. Then, when he showed up the next day and I was missing, I could point out later that I did—in fact—send him an email.

It wasn’t my fault if he didn’t check his email.

Martin,

I hope you are well.

I appreciate your offer to accompany you on your travels during spring break, but I’ve reconsidered my response. Upon

gaining distance from the situation, I see that I made an error when I agreed to go with you. I simply have too much school work to do this week. As well, I volunteer at a women's crisis center as their resident desktop support. I do not want to leave without giving them proper notice as they count on me to be here when issues arise. Therefore, please accept my apologies. I'm sure you'll have no problem finding an alternative.

As well, I would appreciate it if our future topics of conversation were limited to chemistry (and only chemistry) from now on. See you in the lab.

-Parker

“What are you doing?” Sam asked as she walked into our room.

When we arrived back to the dorm, I'd gone to the bathroom first to wash my face and brush my teeth while Sam changed. Then, she went to the bathroom while I changed. But instead of changing, I pulled out my laptop.

“Nothing.”

She *tsked*, putting away her toiletries. “You're sending him an email. That's a mistake.”

“It doesn't matter if he gets it. I sent it. That's what matters.”

“That's not what I meant. You're giving him a heads-up. Now he'll be able to plan a counter attack.”

I glanced at her from the corner of my eye. “Counter attack? This is not some exercise from Sun Tsu's *The Art of War*, this is me rejecting his free vacation offer. What can he do?”

“You'll see.” She said this in a sing-song voice, switching off the light on her side of the room, and climbing into bed.

“Besides. I sent it to his school account. He probably won't even get it.”

“Then he'll show up tomorrow and you'll have to deal with him in person.”

“No. I'll be gone. He said he'd be here at eight. I'll leave at seven and stay at the library all day.”

“Coward.”

“Is a chameleon a coward because it can change its color? No. It’s evolved and awesome. I like to think of myself in a similar fashion. There is nothing wrong with having a strong sense of self-preservation.”

“Whatever. Do you want me to wake you up? I have tennis practice at six.”

“Nah, I’ll set the alarm on my phone.” I closed my laptop and tucked it next to our shared nightstand, then stood to dress for bed.

After changing, I grabbed my phone to set my alarm for 6:30 a.m. I wanted to be gone long before Martin or one of his people arrived. I usually woke up around 7:30 a.m., therefore the alarm was necessary.

Upon glancing at the screen of my cell, I noticed I had two missed calls from my mother plus a text message. It read,

Just got home. Call when you can. I’ll be up until 2.

My mother: senator, workaholic, efficient conversationalist, superhero.

Distracted by the message, I abandoned my alarm for the moment and dialed my mother’s number. It wouldn’t take long. Our discussions rarely lasted over three minutes. She answered after one point five rings.

“Kaitlyn. You have not communicated your plans for spring break. Is it your intention to join us in Monterey or are you remaining on campus?” my mother’s brisk, businesslike voice sounded from the other end.

She had an agenda and talking points for every conversation. Growing up, she would hand me a paper copy and ask me to follow along. When I was very young, she used pictures in place of words and we’d discuss things like: *Three month review: Preschool. Scheduled: Haircut. Action plan required: Cleaning your room. Music: Interfering with scheduled playtime.*

Before I left for college, if one or both of my parents were traveling, the family meeting would be conducted via conference call. Now we typically held the meeting via conference call due to my physical absence from home. Topics for discussion ran the gamut of *Purchase Request: New Bike*, to *Family News: Your Grandmother has cancer*, to *Point of Concern: Time spent on music surpassing time spent on homework*, to *Scheduled Recreation: Yearly vacation options*, to *Kaitlyn News: Accepted to Harvard, Yale, Princeton, MIT, Caltech*.

“I am remaining on campus.”

“Will Sam be present?”

“Yes.”

“Do you require any funds?”

“No.”

“Are you amenable to a visit with your father and me next Sunday? Brunch or lunch, Kartwell’s Deli.”

“Yes. Sunday. Brunch.”

Even now, family meetings occurred on Sundays. My father and I would submit agenda items to George, my mother’s PA (Personal Assistant) no later than Friday night. A draft agenda would be circulated Saturday afternoon for comment and the final version distributed Saturday evening. Attached to the agenda would be a copy of our individual calendars for the next month, updated weekly.

I’d fallen out of the habit of updating my calendar since leaving home. Agendas, schedules, and lists ensured we made the most efficient use of our time. I knew this. But my schedule only changed once a semester. My life was predictable, therefore I saw no need to send weekly updates.

“How is school?”

“Very well. How is work?”

To my surprise, she didn’t provide her typical rapid-fire response of, “It is what it is.” Instead, she paused then sighed and said, “Terrible.”

My mouth opened and closed, I could feel my eyebrows jump on my forehead. “Uh...care to elaborate?”

“My Net Neutrality measure is not progressing to my satisfaction in The House, the Telecommunications lobbyists are growing rabid, and the FCC is being difficult. I am frustrated.”

I immediately responded, “Net Neutrality is an important issue and worth the effort and frustration. You are doing the right thing.” Every once in a while I served as my mother’s cheerleader. Every so often she served as mine. These occasions were rare as we both believed in self-sufficiency unless circumstances were dire.

However, we loved each other. Neither of us were so austere as to withhold support when it was requested, but I appreciated and subscribed to her no-drama mantra. Energy should be spent on solutions to real problems—like the abysmal status of the US foster care system, or our strained foreign policy with Pakistan, or Telecommunications giants using Net Neutrality as a weapon against the public good—therefore, when she said she was frustrated it usually meant she was at her wit’s end.

“Thank you. I appreciate your words of encouragement and I value your opinion.” Her tone was softer. It was the voice she’d used when I was a kid and she’d read me the first three Harry Potter books before bedtime.

“Anytime.”

She then surprised me further by saying, “You know I love you, right?”

Again, my mouth did its little opening and closing dance before I blurted, “Of course. Of course I know you love me. I love you too.”

“Good...good.”

She told me every Sunday that she loved me. It was the last thing my parents and I would exchange on our conference calls even though it wasn’t listed on the agenda. A mid-week *I love you* hadn’t occurred since my parents dropped me off at University my freshman year.

I was about to push her for more details on the source of her stress, because she was obviously out of sorts and had me concerned, but before I could, her efficient tone was back.

“Please send George your updated calendar with a weekly update for the period of spring break. You do not have classes next week, as such the calendar is incorrect.”

“I will.”

“Thank you. Goodnight, Kaitlyn.”

“Goodnight, Mom.”

She clicked off first. I held the phone to my ear for several seconds before lowering it to the nightstand, then distractedly readied myself for bed.

My mom was the daughter of a physicist (my grandmother) and an astronaut (my grandfather). My grandfather was also a physicist in the Navy. She'd been an overachiever her whole life and believed in goal-focused structure. She was a superhero. She was *my* hero. Therefore, moments when she allowed herself to display vulnerability were distressing. It was like watching Superman struggle through a bout of kryptonite exposure.

I returned to my pillow and comforter, both of which I loved; they smelled like lavender, and were so cozy, poems should be written about their epic cozy wonder. I snuggled against their softness and willed away the touch of anxiety I felt about my mom's strange behavior.

Eventually I fell asleep.

Basic Concepts of Chemical Bonding

“PARKER.”

Fingers were in my hair, brushing it away from my face. Then the fingers caressed a path over my shoulder, down my arm, and fit themselves around mine, squeezing.

“Parker... Time to get up. Time to go.” A mystery male voice reverberated in my head. It was a nice voice. It made my insides feel like a warm marshmallow, sweet and fluffy and melting.

I lifted my eyebrows but couldn't quite open my eyes; I asked in a sleep mumble, “Where are we going?”

“We're going to the beach.”

The words sounded faraway and my drowsy brain told me to ignore them. I began to drift.

“You're cute when you don't want to wake up.” The mystery voice sounded both growly and amused. I liked the mystery voice.

I also liked the word *cute*, but not as much as its alternates. “Adorable, captivating, charming, darling...”

“What?”

“Synonyms.”

“Okay. Come on, Cutie pie. Wake up.” The hand was on my face, cupping my cheek. I noted that it felt exceptionally callused. A thumb brushed back and forth, whisper light touches over my bottom lip, sending little shivers down my neck to my spine.

I opened one eye, managed a squint at the fuzzy form, and recognized the owner of the mystery voice. It was Martin

Sandeke. And it looked like he was sitting on my bed. I couldn't quite make sense of it.

"What's going on?" I rubbed my eyes with the base of my palms, still someplace between my dreams and reality, but closer to dreams.

This was a dream. I was certain. It was a dream within a dream or one of those dreams that felt eerily real. Maybe, if I was lucky, I'd be able to control the action of the dream and spend some naked time with Martin Sandeke's superior physique without the danger of his personality ruining things.

"I'm picking you up for our trip." His hand settled on my bare thigh. The weight of it felt very real.

I stopped mid-eye rub, opting for motionless contemplation instead of a gasping shriek.

"Martin?" I asked to what I hoped would be an empty room.

"Yes?"

I jumped to a sitting position, my eyes flying open. "Oh my God, what are you doing here?"

Martin was sitting on the edge of my bed toward the middle. I stared at him; he was wearing dark, faded jeans, a white T-shirt, and a smile. He was so handsome I felt like filing a civil lawsuit against his parents, claiming punitive damages, pain and suffering to my psyche.

"I'm picking you up."

I reached for my phone to check the time. It was 7:00 a.m.

"What? What? Why? What?" was all I could manage, because my alarm didn't go off.

I had fallen off to sleep, but forgot to set my alarm... Gah!

So, Martin was one hour early and he was here. In my room. Sitting on my bed. Watching me like he wanted me for... things.

He leaned forward, his gaze on my mouth somehow both gentle and wicked. Horrified that he might try to kiss me first thing in the morning, I scrambled to my feet and ran off the

bed, jumping from the mattress like it was a spring board. I'm sure I jostled him on my way.

I reached for my bag and pulled out my Wintermint gum, unwrapping three pieces, and shoving them into my mouth.

"It's seven," I said sloppily around the wad in my mouth.

"Yes. I'm early."

I glanced over my shoulder and found Martin Sandeke had stretched himself out on my bed, ankles crossed, leaning against my pillow, his laced together fingers resting behind his head.

Turning fully around, I aggressively chewed and stared at him. His eyes were moving up and down my body with a heated and slow appraisal. I glanced down at myself. I was wearing my Sponge Bob Square Pants tank top and sleep shorts. But I wasn't wearing a bra and my shape was easily discernable through the fitted shirt.

I crossed my arms over my chest and stiffened my spine. "How did you get in?"

"I have my ways..." He'd gone from appraising to ogling. He licked his lips. The action felt malicious. "Why don't you come over here?"

"I'm perfectly fine over here," I said primly, but the effect was ruined by the gob of gum in my mouth that was quickly losing its flavor. I reached for a napkin next to my food stuffs and daintily rid myself of the gum, tossing it into the trash two feet from my position. The nice thing about dorms is that everything is within reach.

However, I'd positioned myself on the side opposite the door. If I wanted to leave I'd have to walk by Martin on my way out.

Abruptly he said, "Bring the red pants."

"What?"

"When you pack, bring those red pants. I've been thinking about them a lot."

I sputtered, "I'm not bringing the red pants."

He shrugged, his hands still folded behind his head. “Fine. Don’t bring the red pants. Bring nothing.”

“I’m not bringing nothing, I’m not bringing anything!”

“Good. We’re in agreement.”

“That’s not what I meant. I’m not bringing anything because I’m not going.”

He squinted at me. “You promised.”

“Under duress.”

“I wasn’t holding a gun to your head.”

“No, just holding yourself to my body. That’s quite enough to put me in a state of duress.”

“My body places you in a state of duress?” Something wicked sparked behind his eyes.

“Of course. Of course it does. What a ridiculous question. Your body causes distress, disquiet, desolation, and puts me in a state of duress.”

He grinned, sitting up in the bed like he planned to stand up. “Maybe I’ll use it now.”

“Please don’t.” I held up my hand as though it could stop him. It didn’t stop him. He stood, reached for and closed the door, then whipped his shirt off. My mouth went dry. My heart thumped painfully. My girl parts forcefully made their opinion known.

Me want Martin flavored cookie! Me want cookie now!!

The sight was indecent because the sight immediately made me want to do several indecent things to him, around him, near him, on top, underneath, adjacent to—if it was a preposition, I wanted to do it with Martin.

“Ack! No!” I squeezed my eyes shut and covered my face with my hands. “Not the chest! Anything but the chest!”

“Anything?” I did not miss the wicked teasing in his taunt, nor did I miss the distinct sound of a zipper being undone.

“Okay, I lied. Shirtless is fine, just please, please, please don’t take off your pants.” I turned from him, still covering my face with one hand, and blindly reached for the door of the closet with the other. The closet ran the length of one wall and had sliding doors. I knew I would be able to fit inside. Maybe I could barricade myself until he left, or throw my shoes at him like missiles.

For the first time in my life I wished I owned spiky heels instead of mostly sneakers. I did have one pair of Doc Martins, however...

His pants hit the floor, the change in his pocket jingling on the descent, and I imagined he was now toeing off his shoes.

“For the love of Bunsen, please put your pants back on.” My voice sounded desperate because I was desperate.

I slid the closet door open just as Martin’s hands claimed my hips from behind. I stiffened because he pressed his bare chest to my back and his groin to my bottom. He was hard and I was soft, and I was convinced I was about to die of... something related to abrupt sexual desire. I released a tortured moan because I could feel his stiff thickness through his boxers—or briefs, or boxer briefs.

Unthinkingly I reached around me, my eyes still shut, and encountered the thin cotton of his boxer briefs just as he bit and kissed my neck. I yanked my hand back. “You’re in your underwear.”

“So are you.”

“Oh my God. Who does that? Why would you do that?”

“I’m launching a counter attack.”

“A counter attack? I haven’t attacked. You can’t launch a counter attack until the other person has attacked.”

“Fine.” Kiss. Bite. Tongue. Lick. “Then it’s a preemptive strike,” he said, hand under my shirt, on my stomach. Other hand over my shirt, kneading my breast.

Some instinct had me pressing my bottom backward and against him as I arched into the hand toying with my breast.

“You think I’m only interested in you for one thing. You’re wrong,” he whispered against my ear, hot breath spilling against my neck making me shiver, his hand on my stomach inching lower.

“This, what you’re doing now, how you’re touching me, does not give credibility to your words.” My breath hitched, my brain disengaging.

“You’re wrong. I’ll prove it to you.”

“I’m right. I’m right. I’m so, so, so right.” I sighed, my hands abandoning the closet door and reaching behind me to touch his body. My center ached. My stomach fluttered. My skin was on fire. Lust and madness had descended.

“You’re coming with me. There is nothing temporary about how I want you.” His thumb was tracing a circle around my nipple. He pinched it roughly, causing me to suck in a startled—yet delighted—breath.

He was so talented at this. So very, very skillful. His movements were expert, practiced. Meanwhile, I was fumbling, a creature of instinct, reacting to his proficient petting.

“Do you like this?” he asked, his voice sounding dark and lovely against the shell of my ear. “Does it feel good?”

I nodded.

“Do you want more? Say yes or no.”

“Yes,” I gasped. “So much yes.”

The fingers of his other hand delved into my panties, his long middle finger stroking my center. If I hadn’t been lost to lust and madness, I would definitely have been embarrassed by the state of my nether region.

I was sure the girls he was used to had porn-star vaginas—waxed, smooth, bleached for color tone consistency, surgically enhanced to make them appear less like a forest floor—but I was au naturel downstairs. I’d never had a reason to do anything beyond trimming the hedge for hygiene’s sake.

But I wasn't embarrassed. I was a little terrified and a lot confused, but mostly I was trapped in Martin's erotic haze. I was bucking against him because his finger had just entered me.

"Whoa!" I panted.

"Fuck," he breathed against the back of my neck, his teeth sharp as they bit my spine. "You are so tight. So fucking tight."

"That's because I'm a virgin and I'm aroused," I said unthinkingly on an exhale. "The vaginal canal swells when aroused."

His hands stilled—both at my breast and in my panties—though his penis seemed to push more insistently against my ass, as though raising its head and saying, *Tell me more about this vaginal canal swelling of which you speak.*

"What?" he asked, his tone sharp, exacting.

"It's true, it swells." I shifted restlessly when he remained motionless. "It also elongates."

"You're a virgin?"

It was my turn to hold still, a spike of some unpleasant sensation coursing through my body. I hadn't meant to admit that. I hadn't meant to ever tell him anything personal about myself, anything that could be tucked away and used to make me cry at some later date.

"Um...", I said, struggling to think of some way to hide that fact without flat-out lying.

Martin withdrew his hands and I felt the loss of him at my back; a few seconds later I heard the jingle of the change in his pants pocket. I closed my eyes again, my forehead hitting the closet door.

"Ah, barnacles," I whispered, my body cold and hot. I was tightly wound with both mortification and unspent sexual energy.

"You're a virgin," he said, this time not a question; it sounded like an accusation.

I nodded, took a deep breath, and glanced over my shoulder. He was buttoning his jeans, his expression thunderous. I glared at where his fingers gripped the waist of his pants.

“So what?” I said. If I pretended like it was no big deal maybe he’d believe me. “So what, I’m a virgin.”

Finished with his button, he pulled the zipper up with a rough yank. “So you’re a virgin and I’m not going to—” He growled, cutting himself off and reached for his shirt with a rough swipe. “I’m not a total bastard,” he said, this to his shirt.

I glared at him, disbelieving what he’d just said, what he’d just implied. “What does my being a virgin have to do with anything? All girls should be treated with respect regardless of whether or not they’re virgins. Being a virgin doesn’t make me any more or less worthwhile than a non-virgin. Your seduction logic is flawed.”

“It’s not virgins I have a problem with. I’ve fucked plenty of virgins.”

I winced at this and watched him pull his shirt on with jerky movements. Before I could recover from his harsh admission, he continued.

“But you being a virgin and you being Kaitlyn Parker makes me want to ensure our first time touching each other isn’t some grope session against the closet of a dorm room.”

“So if I hadn’t been a virgin, then we would...what? We would have just, just...” I couldn’t say the word *fuck*. I just couldn’t. Instead I rushed to finish. “You would have impaled me with your penis while I face planted against the closet?”

“God, Kaitlyn. No!” His protest appeared to be equally appalled and earnest. “I wanted to tease you until you agreed to come with me. I wasn’t going to let it go that far. Haven’t you ever fooled around before?”

I think he knew the answer before he finished asking the question, because his eyes widened with realization as the last words left his mouth.

No. No, I have never fooled around.

I didn't want to admit anything. Yet I couldn't help but look away, stare unseeingly at the foot of my bed. I belatedly realized my small evasive action told him everything. My hands balled into fists and I crossed my arms over my chest. The weight and heat of his gaze, what he must be thinking about me, made my skin feel three sizes too small.

"Damn it, Kaitlyn! Was I your first kiss too?" He sounded angry and his words made me jump.

"No. Of course not." My cheeks and neck were on fire. I tried to lift my eyes to his but couldn't manage any higher than his chin. "I've kissed someone before."

"*Someone?* As in, one other person?"

For some inexplicable reason, I felt like crying. Tears stung behind my eyelids and my throat felt tight.

I knew it.

I KNEW IT.

I knew he was going to make me cry. It's what he did. Therefore, I didn't answer him. I just blinked at the foot of my bed and pressed my lips together, focused on my breathing.

He sat down heavily on the edge of my bed, his elbows on his knees, running his hands through his hair, and I heard him exhale a dumbfounded, "Fuck."

I muttered, "That word is unimaginative."

"You're completely inexperienced." He said this to the room.

He was probably thinking, *What is wrong with you that you've only been kissed by one other person? That you never made it past first base prior to yesterday?*

"I've read books," I said dumbly, clearing my throat, safely past the threat of tears. "And watched a number of pornographic videos. I took extensive notes. I've also read several enlightening journal articles on pubmed about the physiology of the sex act. I probably know more about the logistics of it than you do. I'm not an idiot."

“No. *You’re* not the idiot,” he said. Again, he sounded angry. He bent to put on his shoes and I noted that his jaw flexed, and he was grinding his teeth.

I shifted uncomfortably on my feet. The instinct to hide was strong. I considered stepping backward into the closet and sliding the door shut. Maybe he wouldn’t notice. He’d just look up eventually and it would look like I’d simply disappeared.

I was about to put this plan into action when he stood abruptly. It startled me so I did a weird step forward then backward shuffle, similar to a jazz square. He crossed to me, his eyes fierce, his gaze intent. I retreated until my back hit the closet, lifting my chin to maintain eye contact.

“This is what is going to happen,” he said, his hands moving like he was going to touch me, but then he yanked them back at the last minute and stuffed them in his pockets. “Pack your things, you’re coming with me.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but he cut me off.

“You promised, Parker. You said yes and you promised.”

Not breaking promises was one of my life rules. If I made a promise, I kept it. Therefore I frowned at him and admitted nothing.

He studied me for a moment, his gaze growing thoughtful, introspective. His words sounded shaded with distraction as he said, “We’re going to take this slow. We’re going to start over and do this right.”

I squinted at him, my mouth doing its opening and closing dance. “What? What are you talking about? Take what slow?”

“You like me.” He said this matter-of-factly, with a hint of belligerence.

This statement did not answer my question.

“What?”

“You like me. You want to know me better.”

“I most certainly do not want to know you better.”

“I definitely want to know you better.” His gaze flickered down then up meaningfully.

I gaped at him because—hot hottie from Hotsvillie—the growly and intense way he’d said, *I definitely want to know you better* made my insides flare into a frenzy of wanting that *wanted* him to know me better.

My immediate thought was, *Okay, let’s do that. Let’s just do whatever you want, just say everything using that voice, mmm-kay?*

He continued, “We’ll have dates.”

Because my mind was distracted, I didn’t understand his meaning, therefore I said, “I don’t like dates. They’re too sugary and stick to my teeth.”

His somber and fierce façade cracked, a small smile tugging at the side of his mouth. He leaned closer, resting his hand on the closet behind me, his face just inches from mine.

His truly magnificent eyes were bright with amusement and something else as they scanned my face. His truly magnificent lips formed a mesmerizing curve. His truly magnificent body was scant inches from mine, but touched me nowhere.

“Fine.” His voice was quiet and laced heavily with intimacy. “We won’t have dates on our dates. We’ll have tacos.”

“I like tacos.” I said this because I did like tacos, but I was also mesmerized by the voodoo of his closeness.

“Good. Tacos. Promise me.” He stuck out his hand.

“I promise.” I took his hand, shook it, released it, then frowned. “Wait, what?”

His eyes darted to my lips and he licked his own, drawing the top one into his mouth and biting it. I think I fainted a little, which I know isn’t possible—one does not *faint a little*. But his sexy lip-lick-suck-bite thing may have caused a head rush.

I thought he was going to kiss me, because he was staring at my mouth in such a way that lead me to believe he was hungry...for my lips. He appeared to be struggling, warring with himself; I held my breath.

The five seconds he hesitated proved to be the undoing of the potential kiss, because we were unceremoniously interrupted by a shrieking Sam.

“What the hell is going on?”

Chemical Kinetics

“FOOLISH, ABSURD, BRAINLESS, crazy, preposterous, ridiculous, silly, stupid...,” I muttered.

“What are you doing?”

I slid my eyes to my right where surly faced Sam sat, flipping through her political science textbook pretending to study.

“You know what I’m doing,” I whispered.

“It’s the synonym game, isn’t it?” she whispered back, turning just slightly in her seat and dipping her head close to mine.

“What’s the word?”

“Foolish.”

“Oh. How many do you have so far?”

“Uh, seven I think, maybe eight.”

“Well...you need more than that.” Sam turned and glanced over her shoulder.

I had the window seat. She had the aisle seat. Therefore, the boys were behind her. I’d achieved maximum willpower and hadn’t looked at Martin for the last forty-five minutes. If this were a video game, I’d be on level one thousand, about to face the final boss, and my palms would be sweating with the anticipation.

My palms were sweating now.

Not looking at Martin every thirteen seconds was torture. He was so...lookable. And *lookable* wasn’t even a word. It should have been, because he was definitely it. Easy-on-the-eyes was the closest phrase I could come up with that would be synonymous with the non-word *lookable*. Maybe mesmerizing?

*Mesmerizing, hypnotic, irresistible, alluring, seductive...
Hmm...*

“Did you know that deductive and seductive are only one letter away from being the same word?” I asked.

Sam turned back to me and gave me a slight stink eye. “And conducive is conductive, but without a T.”

“Huh.” I nodded. That was interesting. I wondered how many –ductive words I could identify.

Sam continued on a whisper, “Are you ready to talk about it yet?”

“Talk about what?” I removed my eyes from her and stared at the vacant seat in front of mine. Since we were on Martin’s dad’s private plane, we had tons of space. Two seats were on each side of the aisle, and the plane had six rows with an open seating area in the back that included a bar, couches, and a big screen TV. In the front cabin, every other row faced backward which resulted in four seats facing each other.

When we boarded the plane, Sam insisted she and I needed all four of our seats and that neither Martin nor any of his boy-entourage were allowed to sit across from us. Since finding Martin hovering over me earlier in our dorm room, with clear intent-to-kiss posturing, Sam had been doing a lot of insisting.

Sam leveled me with a narrowed glare. “Don’t play dumb, Kaitlyn Parker. Why are we on this plane?”

I folded my arms on my knees and buried my head in my arms.

I felt her tugging on my hair, not hard, just trying to get me to sit up. I didn’t. A moment later she was leaning over me, whispering in my ear, “When I walked in on you this morning you were about to do something *imprudent*. Is that one on your list of synonyms for foolish?”

“No. I’ll add it to the list.” My response was muffled because I was hiding.

“Parker, why are we on this plane?”

I stared at the fabric of the jeans covering my legs within the dim cavern created by my head, arms, and hair. Blowing out a long, measured breath, I sat up slowly, straightening until my

back was resting against the seat cushion again and my eyes were level with surly faced Sam.

I stared at her. She stared back, expectant.

“I promised him,” I said.

Her eyebrows bounced up then down. “You promised him? That’s it, that’s why we’re here? You promised?”

I nodded. “Yes. I promised him. I promised him last night and I promised him this morning and then you walked in and you freaked out and then he freaked out and then I thought about hiding in the closet, but I don’t own any spiky heels, so I just agreed. Okay? I just agreed so the freak outs and the name calling would cease and desist.”

Sam’s eyes were half-lidded and her continued surly expression told me she was not impressed with my answer.

But it was the truth...kind of.

When Sam walked in, she’d pitched a fit and started yelling at Martin. Really, she overreacted because she loves me. She was pretty nasty to Martin, called him some unpleasant names I won’t repeat, but I will say they are synonyms for whoreson.

Then Martin, who has no problem yelling at females, males, turtles, grass, and furniture, yelled back. Really, he was defending himself from her overprotectiveness and nasty name-calling. To his credit, he didn’t call her any names. Mostly he just told her to back off and to “*mind her own goddamn business.*”

I stepped in and tried to calm them both down. In doing so, I reassured Martin that I would be going with him—because I did promise him more than once—but only if Sam could go too. Eventually he overcame the shock of my request and agreed. Once he confirmed our destination would have a tennis court, Sam agreed.

Then he did something weird.

He gathered me up in his arms like I belonged there, gave me a swift, closed-mouth kiss, and said he’d wait for me in the

hall. Then he left the room and stepped out of the suite area and promptly waited...in the hall...for me...for a full hour.

I felt like Scarlett O'Hara after she was kissed by Rhett Butler, confused and anxious and swoony and wanting it to happen again.

Sam and I had a brief argument after that, and by some miracle she agreed to come with me. Honestly, I don't think she felt like she had a choice since I stubbornly insisted I was going, and she lacked the time necessary to argue me out of it.

However, all the arguing and promising and name-calling aside, a large part of me was strangely excited about the trip. I was nineteen years old and the dodgiest thing I'd ever done was drink peach schnapps and drunk dial my ex last summer. I'd never thrown caution to the wind before. I'd never done anything this nutty and spontaneous. It was equal parts thrilling, terrifying, and confusing.

So...here we were. On the plane, with Martin, his handsome friend Eric from the fraternity party, and seven other dudes, most of whom looked like they'd stepped out of an Abercrombie and Fitch photo-shoot; except they had clothes on, unfortunately. Sam and I were the only females if you didn't count the two flight attendants.

We'd been briefly introduced to the boys upon entering the plane. Martin had referred to a few of them by a number first, then by first name.

Interestingly, they didn't seem to be surprised by our presence. I was also pretty sure they were checking me out, but not in the, *I might hit that* checking me out. More like a, *Are you a Yoko Ono?* checking me out.

As I shook everyone's hand I was surprised to see that one of the seven guys was Ben, the cuss monster from my time spent in the science cabinet. I couldn't fathom why Martin would have him come along, especially given the fact he'd tried to drug then extort Martin the night before.

Maybe they'd man-hugged it out.

Boys were just weird.

I made a mental note to tell Martin the entire conversation between Ben and the unknown female, because Ben had basically admitted to drugging girls. And there was really only one reason he could be drugging girls. He was Ben the rapist as far as I was concerned and I wanted nothing to do with him.

Sam and I took a seat in the front of the plane after introductions and left the males to their bonding.

I felt the mounting pressure of Sam's glare; she pressed her lips together in my general direction, looking displeased and surly.

"I can't believe we did this, I can't believe I let you talk me into this. How did that happen? How did we get here? And now we're going to some private beach in the middle of the Caribbean? This is crazy."

"It is kind of crazy." I shrugged, feeling shell shocked by the fact I was on this plane and all the circumstances leading up to this moment. Less than twenty-four hours ago I'd kissed Martin Sandeke—or rather, he'd kissed me. And then it happened again...and again. He'd placed his hands on my body like he had a right to do so, and I let him.

My skin still remembered his touch. Just thinking about his hands on me made my breasts feel tight and heavy, and my neck, back, and arms break out in goosebumps. I was warm all over and felt a little drunk with excitement and fear.

"But," I started, stopped, gave my head a quick shake, then began again, "but...it's okay. We're okay. We're together. If we get there and we don't want to stay we can leave."

"And go where? Do what? Swim to Jamaica?"

I shook my head, fighting back the swelling tide of Martin-inspired lust.

"No. I sent George, my mother's PA, a message. George knows the flight information, where we are. Worst case scenario, I call him and he arranges for us to leave. We're good."

Sam looked at me for several soundless seconds, then blurted, "You told your mother?"

“Of course. Well, technically I told her personal assistant, George. As the daughter of a senator I have to inform her any time I leave the country.”

“You don’t think she’s going to freak out?”

“No. Why would she? I’m using the buddy system. She knows where I am, and with whom, and for how long, and why.”

Although, I was still a bit uncertain as to why...

“You ladies need any drinks?”

Both Sam and I glanced up to find handsome Eric hovering in the aisle, poised at the precipice to our secluded island of four seats. Sam stared at him, like she was confused by his presence.

“What?” she asked.

“Drinks. Do you need any...drinks?”

“No. No drinks.” She crossed her arms and tilted her head to the side, her eyes narrowing as though she were inspecting him. “You’re shorter than I remembered.”

He returned her eye squint and raised her a smirk. “Maybe you’re suffering from altitude sickness. You should probably get up and walk around, stretch your legs.”

More squint staring ensued and now they were both smirking.

At length, Sam nodded and said, “I could stretch my legs.”

I eyeballed her as she quickly unbuckled her seatbelt and stood, all the while her gaze affixed to handsome Eric. His smirk became a grin when she stepped into the aisle and his eyes visibly brightened when she moved a tad closer to him.

“Let me give you a tour of the plane,” he offered helpfully like a boy scout. “You can lean on me if we experience any turbulence.”

“Sure thing,” she drawled, sounding surly and amused at the same time. “Lead the way, shorty.”

Eric rubbed the back of his neck and breathed a laugh as the two of them walked off together to the front of the plane. I

craned my neck and watched them depart with borderline rapt fascination.

When Sam laughed at something Eric said I could watch no longer without labeling myself a creeper. So I relaxed—as much as I could relax—back in my seat and stared at my hands.

“Parker.”

I jumped at the sound of my name coming from Martin’s lips and turned to face him. I also, for reasons known only to my subconscious, balled my hands into fists and lifted them between us, like I was prepared for a fist fight or a boxing match.

He studied my defensive posturing and smirked, taking the seat Sam had vacated without asking permission. Meanwhile I glared at him, my mental wall up and prepped, though my hands fell back to my lap. I had to do this because...super-hot boy alert level ten thousand.

“Sandeke,” I said. I knew I sounded ridiculous, like I was greeting a sworn enemy, but I had to be on guard.

His gaze skated over my face then flickered to my hands, still fists on my lap. Then he gave my hands a smile. Apparently they amused him.

“Are you going to hit me?”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “It depends on if you take your pants off again.”

“You’ll hit me if I take my pants off?”

“Yeah...I might give you a junk punch.”

He laughed, very loudly and very suddenly, and with the complete abandon that comes from being surprised. But his laugh was a radioactive seduction and had a half-life of infinity. I wanted him to stop laughing never. It made his eyes crinkle and his mouth curve in a sinful smile, showcasing his excellent dental hygiene regimen.

He also looked so different. He usually wore an expression of perpetual unimpressed boredom. Perpetual unimpressed

boredom was a good look for him, a very good look. As were all the other expressions I'd seen, like distrust, mischievous amusement, thunderous anger, unveiled interest, etc.

But laughter...he almost looked happy. Happiness on Martin was a revelation of beauty and physical perfection married to excellent and infectious good-mood vibes. I let my fists drop. Less than a minute into our first interaction on this trip and my carefully constructed defenses had been virtually blown to bits.

I might as well wave the white panties of surrender.

"Oh, well. Barnacles," I said to nothing and no one.

His laugh gradually receded and his eyes flickered over me. "No more fists."

"Nope. There's no use." I'm sure I sounded despondent.

"So you think I could take you in a fist fight?"

"I think you could take me whenever." I shrugged. "If you wanted to, and I really only have myself to blame."

Martin narrowed his eyes, and they sharpened, surveying me. "You don't look happy about this."

"I'm not."

"Why not?"

I stared at him for a beat then freely admitted the truth. "Here is the problem, Martin. I feel like I like you."

The sharpness in his gaze softened and his mouth curved into a lazy, satisfied smile. "That doesn't sound like a problem to me."

"But it is," I pressed. "Because the feeling originates entirely in my pants."

Martin choked a shocked laugh, and leaned away from me.

I rushed to continue. "Hence the problem, you see? I know you as my lab partner who won't help me tabulate findings. And I also know you as a bit of a—and pardon the expression—as a bit of a manwhore who is not nice to the girls he sleeps

with and who gets into fist fights, and who is somewhat bitter and jaded despite having the world at his fingertips.”

Martin clenched his jaw. His eyelids drooped into unhappy slits and he flinched just slightly. His long fingers tightened on his legs.

I ignored the outward signs of irritation, wanting to make him see reason. “We have nothing in common. You’re in a fraternity, go to parties *on purpose*, own a yacht, and are the king of the universe.” I pressed both of my hands to my chest. “And I’m an unapologetic nerd who thinks it’s fun to spend Saturday nights playing my guitar and writing music. I like arguing about Doctor Who episodes, and whether Samwise Gamgee or Frodo Baggins was ultimately responsible for the destruction of the ring. I play video games. I limit myself to three cookies, but then always cheat and have seven. Meanwhile you look like you’ve never had a cookie in your life. I’m a virgin and you’re only the second boy I’ve kissed... We just don’t fit.” I said this last part quietly, gently, hoping he’d see reason.

Martin’s face was devoid of expression, but his gaze moved from the tip of my chin to the top of my forehead, then back to my eyes.

He was smiling...sorta. But it resembled a grimace more than a smile. I watched his chest expand with a deep breath before he said, “You don’t even know me, how can you say we don’t fit? That’s not right, Kaitlyn.”

“I—”

“The way you describe me makes me sound like an entitled asshole.”

It was my turn to flinch, lean away. My cheeks heated and stung as though they’d been slapped. I gaped at him and his fierce blue eyes for a long stretch. When he said nothing more, just glared at me, I ducked my head and studied the armrest between us.

“I. I. I...you’re right,” I admitted on a sigh. “I don’t know you, not really. And you’re right that my conclusion we don’t fit is

based on my observations and assumptions, which are clearly limited to empirical data sources.”

“I’m not suggesting marriage, Parker. I just...” He paused, though I felt his gaze on me and it felt heavy. “Look at me.”

I braced myself, then lifted my chin to meet his eyes. I expected to find a glower or a scowl. Instead I found his stare to be oddly earnest and searching.

“I’d just like a chance to know you.”

“But why?” I blurted, feeling offended on behalf of everything that was perfect and gifted and beautiful about him. “Why me?”

“Because you’re not intimidated by me.”

“Well, that’s wrong. I am. You scare me.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You kind of do.”

“No, I don’t. That feeling of fear and excitement? *That* originates in your pants. It isn’t about who I am, it’s about what I look like. I feel that for you too.”

My brain stumbled to grasp his meaning. I lifted an eyebrow, pursed my lips, and considered this statement.

He continued before I was finished considering. “You don’t care about my family.”

“I care about your family as human beings, but I don’t know your family,” I said defensively. “I’m sure if I knew them I’d care about them.”

“Exactly. That’s exactly right, except you wouldn’t. If you knew my family you wouldn’t care about them, because you’re smart.” The cloudy frustration in his eyes began to dissipate and he looked like my answer pleased him.

“That’s true. I am smart. But you are also smart, maybe smarter.”

“And you’re funny.”

“You should know that most of the time the funny is not on purpose.”

“And honest.”

“That’s not always a good thing.”

“And fucking gorgeous—”

I paired a huff with dismissive snort-laugh. But then my expression sobered when I saw Martin was serious.

I swallowed with difficulty then cleared my throat. I couldn’t quite bear the weight and intensity of his stare, so I glanced down again at the arm rest. I’d learned from my mother that when someone gives you a subjective compliment—meaning one that can’t be disproven and is based on opinion—but that you find to be completely false, rather than argue, it’s much better to just say *thank you*, or *I appreciate that* and strive to be that compliment.

Fools fight compliments, she’d said, and sometimes other people see you better than you can see yourself.

So I quietly said, “Thank you,” to the armrest.

“You’re welcome.”

I tucked my hair behind my ears and wrestled to find the courage to look at him again. I made it as far as his neck.

“Are you going to give me a chance? Yes or no?” The way he spoke, with such severe directness, was off-putting and strangely alluring. He was entitled, or at least he came across that way, because all of his words were demands.

It also made me want to refuse what he was demanding.

“I’m...going to be open to the possibility of giving you a chance.” When I finished, my eyes flickered to his. I discovered him watching me with a narrowed stare and a little smirk. He was really too freaking good-looking, it was the un-fairest of the unfair.

“Is that the best you can do?” he challenged, leaning forward.

“No. But how you speak to me sometimes makes me want to withhold what you want.”

His eyes flashed and felt at once more penetrating. “How do I speak to you?”

“Like I owe you something, like you’re entitled.”

“That’s just confidence. I’m not going to be self-conscious for any reason, and I’m not going to fake it to make you feel better.”

His response was jarring, irritating, and oddly thrilling, so I volleyed back, “Maybe you should be. Maybe your confidence isn’t based on reality. Maybe you’re not infallible. Maybe you’re not always going to get what you want.”

He watched me as several long moments passed, his gaze growing increasingly inscrutable but somehow hotter. I held his eyes, maybe finding the courage because my feathers were ruffled.

“Okay,” he finally said. “I’ll try not to demand things of you... as often.”

“Good.” I felt strangely disappointed at this news, which made no sense. Did I enjoy it when he spoke to me like I was an underling assigned to obey his every whim? When I reflected on it I realized that maybe I did, because I certainly enjoyed rebelling, defying, and challenging his demands...

We stared at each other. I tried to look at him and his beautiful face with as much objectivity as possible. Who was this person? Who was Martin Sandeke really?

“Tell me something, Martin.”

“What do you want to know, Parker?” Again my question seemed to please him, his features softening and settling into amused—dare I say enthusiastic?—curiosity.

“What do you think about the Samwise Gamgee versus Frodo Baggins debate?”

His smile flattened just a little and for the first time since he sat down, Martin glanced away. He cleared his throat, picked at a spot on his jeans, then returned his gaze to mine. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

This admission made me smile, then laugh belatedly because he looked uncomfortable. Martin Sandeke looked uncomfortable and it was because he was out of his depth, specifically, he was out of his nerd depth, and being out of his depth looked adorable on Martin.

“Well, let me enlighten you,” I said with a bit of show-womanship, waving my hand through the air. I then turned toward him completely. I didn’t try to dim my bright smile. “There is this book, it is called Lord of the Rings and it was written by a linguist w-a-a-a-a-y back in the twentieth century.”

“I’ve heard of the Lord of the Rings.” His lips twitched but his tone was deadpan. I took this as a good sign.

“Ah, good. Have you seen the movies?”

“No.”

“But you’ve heard of the twentieth century? It came right after the nineteenth century.”

He didn’t respond, but his closed-mouth smile grew. His fathomless blue eyes were at half-mast, aquamarine, and glittering like the ocean at sunset.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Anyway, in this book there are different kinds of races—elves, orcs, humans, blah, blah, blah, dwarves—but also, there is this race of beings called hobbits. They are little, short of stature, and usually considered insignificant. They have furry feet and they like to smoke pipes and live quietly. In fact, they live very quietly. But they have several breakfasts daily, so...awesome. Anyway...”

Martin cocked his head to the side as though studying me. I didn’t know if he were actually listening or not, but his eyes were intent and focused, like I was providing him with a super important riddle he would have to solve at some point. It gave me fluttery butterflies in my stomach to have his complete attention like this. It also reminded me how much that area in my pants liked him.

“Anyway,” I repeated, trying to focus. “The whole point of the book is to destroy this ring, because the ring is very, very bad.”

“Why is it bad?”

“You’ll have to read the book, and don’t interrupt me. It’s distracting enough looking at you. You’ve already derailed my brain train with your face several times.”

Martin’s mouth pressed together more firmly and I got the impression he was trying not to laugh.

“Back to the story, ultimately—spoiler alert—the ring is destroyed by two of these hobbits.”

Both of his eyebrows jumped in surprise. “How did they do that? You said they’re insignificant.”

“Like I said, you’ll have to read the book for the specifics, but the crux of my question has to do with the two hobbits who destroy the ring—Frodo and Samwise. Frodo bears the ring. He carries it. But,” I lifted a finger in the air for emphasis, “Samwise is his trusted servant, and he is very trustworthy. He supports Frodo, he keeps Frodo from giving up. He even bears the ring for a short time. Plus there’s this bit at the very end that...well, you’ll have to read the book. So, the question is—who deserves the credit for the destruction of the ring? Who was stronger? Frodo or Samwise? The master or the servant?”

Martin frowned at me; I took it as a good sign because it meant he was actually considering the question. But then his frown started to worry me because his eyes grew cagey and guarded.

After a few minutes he asked, “Is this a test?”

I lifted an eyebrow at him and his tone. He sounded a little angry.

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said, is this a test? If I answer incorrectly are you still going to give us a chance?”

Yep. Definitely angry.

It was my turn to frown. “Martin, it’s a conversation. We’re just having a conversation. This isn’t a test. You said, and I agree, that I don’t know you very well. This is my attempt to get to know you better.”

“But if I answer in a way you don’t like, what happens?”

I stared at him, my features likely showing my disorientation at his odd question. “Um,” my eyes flickered to the side, because I was trying not to look at him like he was a crackhead, “nothing? I mean, we talk about it, each reviewing our own opinions and providing support for what we believe. But then, we can always agree to disagree at some point.”

“Then after that?”

“I guess we could end it with a high five to show that there are no hard feelings...?”

His eyes narrowed at me, and he was looking at me like I was the puzzle; when he spoke next it was with an air of distraction. “That sounds nice.”

I frowned, considering him, considering his reaction to a simple question. It made me wonder whether or not Martin Sandeke had ever had a conversation before, one where he was allowed to disagree without being made fun of or punished for his thoughts, where it wasn’t a test.

I was about to ask him something along these lines when the pilot’s voice came over the intercom. He announced we were approaching the airport, and should buckle in for our final descent. Meanwhile, I blinked at Martin and a dawning and disturbing realization took root.

Martin Sandeke wasn’t used to freely voicing his thoughts and feelings...nor was he used to kindness.

Molecular Geometry and Bonding Theories

MUCH OF SAM'S surly mood dissipated after her fifteen-minute plane tour courtesy of the handsome Eric. I was both pleased and distressed by this turn of events. Since Sam's attention was redirected—or best case scenario, it was split between me and Eric—this meant she wasn't quite as focused on her role as my spring break chastity belt.

A very luxurious stretch limo picked us up. Inside the car, I sat next to one of the seven other guys; his name was Ray, and his parents had immigrated from Mumbai, India, when he was two. He was a biochemistry major, and he was five seat.

“Five seat?” I asked, my head titling to the side. “What do you mean five seat?”

Two more of the boys entered the limo, sitting on the bench across from Sam and Eric.

“Five seat in the crew boat. I'm a starboard,” Ray explained, flashing me a big smile when he saw I didn't quite understand what he meant. “We're all on the crew team together, in the same boat. I'm five seat, Martin is eight seat. He's the stroke at the stern, the back of the boat.” Ray lifted his chin toward one of the other guys. “That's our coxswain, Lee.”

I gave Lee a friendly smile. “What's a cocks-twin?”

Lee chuckled and shook his head. “It's pronounced cox-wain, not cocks-twin. Basically, I steer the boat and keep these guys from being lazy assholes.”

“Lee also gets to stare into Stroke's dreamy blue eyes all day,” Ray added with a grin. “You should probably be jealous.”

I shrugged my shoulders convulsively, feeling acutely weird and self-conscious. “What...I...we...it's...I mean...what are you talking about?” I sputtered as my hands did weird things,

jerky movements in the air in front of me. “I’m not jealous. Why would I be jealous? I don’t even know the guy.”

Ray, Lee, Eric, and another of the guys whose name was Herc—who had obscenely large leg muscles—all lifted their eyebrows at me in unison.

“You’re his girl, right?” Lee glanced at his teammates as though to confirm his statement.

“That’s right,” Herc confirmed, his tone sure and steady.

I felt Sam tug at my shirt but I ignored her. At that moment three of the other guys entered the car; I’d recognized two of them as the pair of brown-eyed frat boys who’d been with Eric at the party the night before. The taller of the two, Griffin, had been handsy with me at the frat house. The other one, Will, had hit Griffin on the back of the head as they’d walked away.

The other guy’s name was Tambor. He had blond hair, darker than Ben’s, longish with pale highlights likely caused by the sun. He had deep brown eyes and an exceedingly stoic face. He and Herc were the shortest and the stockiest of the boys at an approximate and *measly* six foot one.

“So...where does everyone else sit? In the boat, I mean,” I asked weakly, wanting to change the subject.

“As you know, Martin is stroke, which is eight seat.” Ray then pointed to Eric. “Eric is a starboard, seven seat. Ben,” he paused and looked around the inside of the vehicle. Ben and Martin were the only two not in the car yet. “Well, Ben who isn’t here is port, seat six. We’ve already established that I’m starboard five seat. Griffin is behind me, port four seat. Then Will, starboard three seat. Tambor, port second seat. Last but not least is Herc. He’s the bow, first seat, in the front of the boat.”

“All the even seats are port seats, and the odds are starboard?”

Ray nodded. “That’s right. Port and starboard have to do with the sides of the boat. My oar is rigged on the starboard side; whereas Martin’s, Ben’s, Griffin’s, and Tambor’s are rigged on the port side.”

I nodded, picturing a crew boat I'd seen on TV during the summer Olympics. Now, considering how Martin had originally introduced everyone on the plane—referring to each of them as a number first before their names—this made a lot more sense. Their nicknames were their seat assignments, with Martin called Stroke and Herc called Bow.

Martin entered the limo just as Ray finished explaining port and starboard. I noted that a hush fell over the occupants; everyone seemed to sit a little straighter, the guys looking to him as though called to attention.

His did a sweep of the interior as Ben entered through the other door and shut it. Martin's gaze paused on me, which sent heat to my cheeks and set off a buzzing in my stomach. Eventually he glared at Ray and his eyes narrowed by an infinitesimal margin.

Ray's answering smile looked cautious. "I'll just move over this way..." Ray scootched away from me, leaving plenty of room for someone to fill the void.

Martin followed Ray's movements with his eyes, stared at him for a beat, then ducked and crossed to the now vacant seat next to mine. Martin then cast a dark glare around the limo, almost like he was warning them off his Chinese takeout leftovers.

Meanwhile I pressed my lips into an unhappy line. I was unimpressed with the dynamic of unspoken, but clearly understood, possessiveness.

Even if I were Martin's girl—which I wasn't—there was nothing amiss with me sitting next to Martin's friend. I felt abruptly as though I'd just been peed on.

I didn't want to be peed on.

* * *

THE REST OF the journey was eventfully uneventful. The limo's journey to the marina was fifteen minutes. At the marina, men appeared—as though from nowhere—and loaded our belongings onto a boat. Then the men disappeared. The boat journeyed forty-five minutes to another, much smaller marina situated on a speck of an island.

At least it looked like a speck at first. Upon closer inspection, I estimated it was about four miles long and at least a mile wide. The lush tropical forests were dotted with obscenely massive luxury homes—some directly on the beach, some higher up on hilly cliffs. I counted seven as we circled to the dock.

We then loaded into five all-terrain golf cart-like vehicles, two per vehicle. I traveled with Martin, Sam traveled with Eric. We traversed a well-maintained dirt road to where I surmised we'd be staying for the next week.

I didn't bring up Martin's inappropriate behavior; this was for several reasons. First, drama repelled me. I didn't want to start a conversation on the topic when others could overhear. Therefore I just put up with his hovering and the way he would stare down the other guys when they'd enter my radius.

Second, I didn't know how to start the dialogue. What if I was imagining things? What if I was being overly sensitive? What if this was what normal relationships were like? If we'd actually been dating, I think I might have been able to navigate through the conversation, but we weren't.

“Why are you so quiet?”

I'd been wrapped up in my thoughts and started a little at his bluntly spoken question.

“Uh.” I glanced at him. He was splitting his attention between me and the road. “Because I'm thinking about something.”

“What are you thinking about?” he asked. As usual it sounded like a demand.

I tried not to read too much into the tone of his voice; maybe Martin didn't know how to ask nicely, another thing I didn't like very much about him.

“I guess because I don’t have much experience with boys, so I’m trying to figure something out.”

“What is it? Maybe I can help.” He nudged me with his elbow.

I shook my head, not ready to talk about it yet. “I’m not ready to discuss it. I need some time with my thoughts.”

His intelligent eyes flicked over me, his expression growing distant and impassive. At length he shrugged, grim-faced, and gave his attention wholly to the road. We didn’t speak again until we arrived at the house.

And by house I mean not a house at all. It was a behemoth.

Once inside I marveled at the opulence. The giant foyer steps were a blue marble, resembling turquoise, with inlay brass. A grandiose and gracefully curving staircase dominated the left side of the entrance, while a three-story single-paned window provided natural light and a breathtaking view of the ocean beyond. In the center of the space was a wide fountain with a surprisingly tasteful sculpture of a mermaid blowing water out of a conch shell.

Everything was overly detailed. The wooden carvings on the staircase had carvings. The brass inlay danced beautiful oceanic patterns over the floor. Glorious mosaics of blue and copper decorated the fountain.

It was all too much. It didn’t feel like a house, it felt like the lobby for a huge, swanky hotel.

When I realized I was gaping, I snapped my mouth shut and glanced at Martin to see if he’d caught my oddball display of horrified amazement. He had. He was glaring at me. Again.

I was starting to wonder if I’d imagined his laugh back on the plane and if he were capable of anything other than heavily-lidded severe stares. Don’t get me wrong, he still looked heavenly even when he was administering heavily-lidded severe stares, but that was only if one wasn’t the recipient of said stare.

I was on the receiving end now, his focus on me, and he looked unhappy.

Therefore I gave him a buggy-eyed nose scrunch, followed by a full-on weird face—tongue out, eyes crossed, teeth bared like a rabbit—and then refocused on his features to see if it had made any effect.

It had. Now he was looking at *me* like I was a crackhead.

“Parker, what are you doing?”

“Making a funny face in an effort to make you stop staring at me like I murdered your beloved goldfish. What are *you* doing?”

I was pleased to see his eyes lighten with something like confused wonder, but before he could speak, the sound of voices entering the house pulled my attention back to the massive doors. I opened my mouth to announce where we were, but the words never came because Martin put his hand over my mouth—abruptly but gently—bringing my attention back to him.

He put a finger to his lips in the universal symbol for *shhh* then fit his hand in mine and pulled me around the fountain, down a hall, beyond the massive, three-story window overlooking the sea, through a large living room with a giant fireplace—fireplace? On a tropical island? Rich people were crazy—and into a massive bedroom suite done all in sterile whites and shades of blue and sea-green.

He shut the solid teak door then backed me up against it, staring down at me, holding me in place with his eyes and the promise they held. My heart thudded painfully in my chest and I was drowning in his intense focus.

I opened my mouth again to say something, anything really, but it was lost because he was kissing me. The hot, urgent slickness of his tongue robbing me of my breath, his solid body against mine warming me beyond the humid stickiness of the tropics, permeating to my center.

We kissed and kissed then kissed some more. It wasn't until he tore his mouth from mine that I realized I was holding fistfuls of his hair and was on my tiptoes.

His forehead met mine and he growled, a low sound laced with frustration, before he said, “You are too fucking cute.”

“You too.”

He exhaled a disbelieving breath, and swallowed. “I’m cute?”

“As a button.”

He chuckled, stealing another kiss. “I wish we were here alone. I wish...God, I just want you to myself.”

A prickle of unease made the short hairs of my neck stand at attention. On one hand, it was a lovely thing for him to say. On the other hand, he’d just figuratively urinated a circle around me in his blatant display of caveman possessiveness. Maybe I was overreacting, but I had no baseline for comparison. This was all very, very new territory for me.

I needed time to think, away from his lips *and* mesmerizing looks.

Luckily, I was pretty certain this place had some nice closets.

* * *

“**HE’S THE ALPHA** male.” Sam said this from my bed where she lay with her arms and legs spread out. I was next to her, my arms and legs also spread.

We weren’t touching. The bed should have had its own zip code.

After my lovely kisses with Martin, he informed me that the gargantuan and beautiful suite was mine. The voices of our co-travelers grew louder, closer, and so he told me to stay put. He explained people would be bringing in my luggage as well as food. Then he left.

People did arrive with my bags. Again, random people seemed to appear out of thin air—an older man in a suit directed a younger man where to place my things. Then a woman about

ten years older than me showed up with a tray of decadent food, sparkling mineral water, and asked if she could draw me a bath or arrange for a massage.

I politely refused both, but insisted on introducing myself to these apparitions. Ultimately I had to press them for names because at first they offered me only titles.

The older man was the staff director - Mr. Thompson.

The younger man was one of the groundskeepers - Peter.

The woman was the house manager - Mrs. Greenstone.

I tried to modulate my tone to offhanded and nonchalant as I asked how many other staff members were present at the house. After Mr. Thompson listed the cook, cook's aide, three other groundskeepers, and two maids, I stopped counting. The house staff outnumbered the guests.

Sam found me just as Mr. Thompson was taking his leave.

That's right, taking his leave...like some grand butler from regency England. I'd entered the bizzaro world of the obscenely rich where baths were drawn and leave was taken.

Now Sam and I were munching on the tray of food and staring at the vaulted ceiling. An immense, beautiful skylight showed me the late afternoon sky was a cloudless blue.

Sam continued voicing her theory while munching on grapes. "You know, like a pack of wolves. He's their alpha."

I grimaced and twisted my lips to the side to hide my expression, not that she was looking at me.

"That's silly," I said.

"No, it's totally not. They all...well...they all basically worship him, I think. Eric said that eight seat, Martin's position, is arguably the most important seat in the boat. He sets the rhythm for the rest of the boat, pushes them. Even Lee, who *freaking* steers the boat, follows his lead. They do what are called 'power tens' during practices and races. It's where they all row as hard as they can for ten strokes—well, Martin decides when and for how long. He's only a sophomore and he

has the most coveted spot on the team, *and* he's team captain. The rest of the guys are juniors and seniors."

"Maybe it's because he's from such a fancy family," I said flippantly, because Sam was starting to make it sound like this stuff mattered. Granted, she was a competitive athlete, therefore I could forgive some of her wide-eyed expression and excitement in her voice.

Whereas I'd never understood sports and team dynamics. I'd tried playing soccer once; everyone was so serious about it. I kept thinking how silly it was to run around a grassy field, kick a ball into a net, and think of it as an accomplishment.

Finishing *War and Peace*, now that was an accomplishment.

"No, I asked Eric how Martin got his seat," Sam said, turning to face me, her elbow and hand propping up her head. "He said Martin has the best erg time—it has to do with the rowing machine they use, the ergometer or whatever it's called—and that he has the best form *by far*. Honestly, it's like Eric is brainwashed or has a crush on him or something. They talk about him like he invented the sport."

I shrugged, but my mind was caught on the "pack of wolves" metaphor, Martin as an alpha to a pack of hard-bodied rowers. It might explain why every time he spoke it sounded like a demand. As well, it explained the pack mentality in the limo and on the boat. He was younger than they were. I wondered if all his dazzling wealth had anything to do with why he was able to command their respect so completely.

I could feel Sam's eyes on me. I kept my attention focused on the sky.

After a while she said, "You are beautiful, you know."

My eyes jumped to hers and I automatically frowned, her earnestly spoken words catching me off guard.

"What you talkin' 'bout, Willis?"

She gave me a little smile then pushed on my shoulder. "You, being beautiful. You are beautiful. You don't focus on your looks or even seem to care about them, but you're really quite spectacular to look at."

I turned my head completely toward her and folded my hands on my stomach. “And you think this is why Martin is suddenly whisking me and my foul-mouthed friend off to private beaches? Because he thinks I’m beautiful?”

“It’s definitely part of it. The boy has eyes and urges.”

“Ha. Yes, he does...”

“But that’s not why, or that’s not all of it.”

“Then what is it? Why am I here?”

Sam was quiet for a minute, then asked, “Why do you think?”

I glanced over her shoulder, my eyes resting on the magnificent view behind her. The entire back wall of the suite was glass and overlooked the beach. The house was some feet above sea level. If I’d been standing I would see the white, sandy shore. But from this vantage point, all I saw was blue sky kissing the blue ocean at the horizon.

“I think,” I started, deciding to speak my thoughts out loud as they occurred to me. I needed to talk this through with someone and I needed to get out of my own head because I couldn’t get any further than, *This makes no sense!*

“I think he wants someone to be nice to him,” I blurted.

I brought Sam back into focus, saw her surprised expression, but then something like contemplation gripped her features.

I continued. “I think he’s tired of people judging him or making assumptions about who he is based on who his family is. I think he wants someone to be nice to him, like him, and show interest in who he is because he’s Martin, just Martin, and not because of who his family is, how much money he has...or what he looks like.”

“That sounds...well, actually, that sounds plausible.”

“I wonder,” I propped myself up on my elbow, facing Sam and mirroring her position on the bed, “maybe he really just wants a friend. I think I could do that for him.”

Her eyes narrowed on me. “I don’t think he wants you to be his friend.”

“But that’s what he needs,” I said, wrinkling my nose. “I think he trusts me because I don’t want anything from him. I think he just really desperately needs someone to talk to, someone who is on his side, and he’s confusing trust with...lust.”

Sam smiled her amusement, her eyes dancing over my face. “Or he’s confusing lust with trust.”

I rolled my eyes and fell back to the bed, again staring out through the skylight.

“But seriously,” she started, paused, then took a deep breath, “he’s kind of possessive of you, right? Like, how he stared down Ray in the limo. And I thought he was going to bite Griffin’s arm when he touched you while we were on the boat. It seems especially strange since you two aren’t even really together yet.”

Yet... O.o

“It is weird. I’m glad you said something because I wondered if I was just overreacting. And it’s all so fast.”

“No, not really. You’ve been lab partners for almost two semesters. From what you told me about your conversation with him against the pool table last night, for him, I think this relationship—in some form—has been going on for months, not hours. I suspect he’s been thinking about you far more than you realize.”

I covered my face with my hands. “How do I survive this? How am I going to get through this week? He needs a friend and all I can think about is doing very bad things to his body.”

“You’re starved for physical intimacy. He’s starved for emotional intimacy. Maybe you can help him *and* help yourself.”

“I don’t want to use him like that. I think his whole life people have been trying to use him.”

“I’m not talking about sex, Katy. I still don’t think you’re ready for that. You have a big heart and it would definitely get in the way of a no-strings arrangement. I’m just saying, there’s nothing wrong with fooling around a little with a guy you’re attracted to. Maybe...,” Sam reached for my hands and pulled

them away from my face. She then lifted her eyebrows and gave me a pointed look. “Maybe you can help each other.”

Bond Polarity and Electronegativity

SAM SPENT THE night with me. Having her there helped. But despite the heavenly bed and the sound of the ocean in the background, I didn't sleep very well.

Sam and I hadn't joined the boys for dinner. Instead we opted to sit on the balcony overlooking the sea and study. This was my idea. I needed more time to think, to consider, to plan my next move with Martin. I was certain he needed a friend much, much more than he needed a girlfriend, now I just needed to convince him of this fact.

Mr. Thompson stopped by to check in and make sure everything was to our liking. I asked about having dinner in the suite and he said he'd pass the message along. One of the maids brought us dinner. Her name was Rosa and she reminded me of my paternal grandmother; her big smile was sweet and she promised us cookies if we ate all our vegetables.

She also brought me a note from Martin. In his scrawling, masculine, chaotic script it read:

Parker,

I'll be down at the beach tonight. Come find me.

-Martin

I was relieved he didn't come by or press the issue of me taking dinner in my room. I needed space and time and... basically all the known dimensions available to me, maybe even the assistance of invisible dark matter. I wasn't ready for a moonlight stroll on the beach with Martin yet. The sky had too many stars to be anything but fatalistically romantic.

After eating, Sam and I studied some more. I opted for the giant shower with seven heads—despite the fact the bathtub

was the size of a small swimming pool—then worked on a term paper until midnight when we went to bed.

It was early when I woke, the sun just making an appearance and the light still soft and hazy. I pulled on my bathrobe and walked to the window, wanting to catch the purples and oranges painting the sky before it surrendered to blue.

I got my wish and then some. The view was epically spectacular. The white sandy beach and calm water called to me in a way I'd never experienced. Suddenly, I wanted to go swimming. Right that minute. I needed to leave the manufactured luxury of the big house. The genuine beauty of nature called to me.

I quickly changed in the bathroom, careful to lather myself in super high SPF, and grabbed two oversized beach towels.

I also packed a canvas bag with a leftover bottle of water from the night before, my current book, a big hat, sunglasses, and other beach essentials. I exited out the balcony door and picked my way down the path to the beach. The path consisted of ten stone steps and a hundred feet of the finest, softest sand I'd ever touched.

Once there I dropped my belongings, discarded my T-shirt, cotton shorts, and flip flops, and walked into the salt water. The water was crystal clear, the temperature cool and refreshing, and was nearly as calm as a lake. It felt like heaven.

For at least an hour I floated, swam, searched for shells, and just generally enjoyed the alone time with my thoughts in this beautiful place. When my fingers became prunes, I reluctantly abandoned the water for the shore.

I arranged one of the towels under the shade of a big palm tree and rolled the other towel into a pillow for my head. Then, I read my book, drying in the sea air, and lazing about like a lazy person. This was the kind of unscheduled relaxing I'd embraced since starting college.

I was maybe four pages into my novel when I heard the noise; it was a chant—faint then louder—of baritone voices. Lifting

onto my elbows, I set my book to one side, holding my place with my thumb, and peered around for the origin.

Then I saw them. All nine of the boys—looking remarkably like men—out some distance from shore; far enough away I couldn't quite make out individual faces, but close enough I could plainly see they were all shirtless. And it ought to be noted that they should always be shirtless. In fact, they should be disallowed from wearing shirts...ever.

They were rowing, their boat flying over the water. I strained my ears and realized they were counting backward from ten.

I followed their progress, marveling at how they moved so quickly and with seemingly so little effort in perfect unison. I wondered what that must be like, being part of something so perfect, so harmonious. It was...well, it was beautiful.

The closest I'd ever come to something like that was playing my music, losing myself on the piano, or jamming with my Sunday night bandmates. But we weren't perfect. We were far from harmonious, however sometimes we'd have a good night where everything felt right and effortless, like we were flying on the music we'd created together.

Just as suddenly as the rowers appeared they were gone. The boat went around the edge of the cove and their chant grew fainter, farther away. I stared at the spot where they'd disappeared for a minute then reclined back on my towel, watching the horizon.

“Holy crap. That was something.”

I turned my head slightly and found Sam standing on the beach, her hands on her hips, and her attention focused on the bend of the cove. She was wearing an itchy bitsy bikini that showed how hard she worked on her tennis game.

“Hey, you there. Good-looking female,” I called to her. “Why are you up?”

“Because I bought this damn bikini last year and this is my first chance to wear it.” She sauntered over to where I reclined and spread out her towel. Her spot was somewhat in the sun, but I doubted she minded the opportunity to tan. I didn't want

to take the chance of blinding someone, so I liked my spot in the shade. With my paper-white complexion, the glare off my thighs would likely burn retinas.

She turned to me to say something else, but then the chanting became audible again. Sure enough, the boat came back into view. Eight muscled rowers sweeping the water with their oars, Lee at the stern facing Martin. Their arms and shoulders flexing, their stomachs and backs rippling. The movement of their bodies was as mesmerizing as it was arousing. This time they were close enough I could almost see their facial expressions, see the sweat rolling down their necks and chests.

From where I sat, they looked stern, focused, maybe a little bit in pain, but still beautiful. Heart-achingly beautiful. My mouth went completely dry.

Sam and I watched them for almost a full minute before they flew past and were once more out of sight.

Then, she fanned herself. “Yeah. I am totally going to have sex with Eric. That was hot.”

I said nothing, because once again my dirty thoughts were at odds with what I knew was smart, with what I knew was right.

Martin needed a friend.

I would be that friend.

I would.

And my pants hated me for it.

* * *

THREE OF THE groundskeepers brought brunch down to the beach under the oversight of Mrs. Greenstone. And by brunch, I mean they transported what looked like the equivalent of a fancy outdoor restaurant down to the beach. A large buffet was spread out on a huge wooden serving table, and beautifully

carved dining tables and chairs with deep cushions were set up on the edge of the water. A sideboard with china, crystal, linen napkins, towels, suntan lotion—and basically everything else one might want for the beach—was set out with practiced and aesthetically pleasing efficiency.

To top it all off, several large arrangements of tropical flowers were placed on the tables along with little packets of aloe set on ice to chill.

I glanced sideways at the opulence, feeling out of place with my modest, black two-piece that was three years old, my turquoise Walmart flip flops, and my gas station sunglasses.

To be honest, the excess repelled me in much the same way the size and luxuriousness of the house had repelled me when we first arrived. I wasn't against people being rich. Nor was I against people owning and enjoying nice things.

I guessed the problem was that everything was too big, too much, too shiny, too new, too sterile, too impersonal. I felt like all the real details that mattered—the smell of the ocean, the sensation of sand beneath feet, the soft sounds of the sea meeting the shore, the rustle of wind through the palms—were lost in the ostentatiousness of the house and its sprawling splendiferous shadow.

Where Sam and I had set our towels was a good two hundred feet from the fancy buffet and beneath the shade of a palm; however, the spot was clearly visible from the trail. We were both on our stomachs and reading when Herc, Ray, and Ben appeared from the house path.

Ray gave us a little wave and an amiable smile, Herc gave us a little wave that I imagined was friendly for him, and Ben gave us a leering look and no other acknowledgement. I silently wondered again why Martin had invited Ben as all evidence pointed to the fact he was an unsavory sort. The guys crossed to the impressive brunch spread.

No sooner had they made it to the tables did Eric and Griffin jog past. Eric skidded to a stop when he saw us and gave Sam a bright smile. Griffin lifted his chin and waved politely, then made a beeline for the food.

“I’ll be right back.” Eric held out his index finger to us in the universal symbol for *give me a minute*. “I’m starving.”

“Take your time.” Sam shrugged, and I saw she was doing her best to appear unaffected. “It’s not like we’re going anywhere.”

“Yeah. Good.” Eric’s eyes moved over her body—not in a leering, *I’d-hit-that* kind of way, but rather in a *damn-you-must-work-out-and-I’m-impressed* kind of way—his eyebrows doing an adorable double jump of appreciation as he scanned her. Then he shook his head as though clearing it and slowly turned away. In fact, his steps were almost halting as he walked to the buffet yet turned back and glanced at Sam twice.

Sam, however, was looking at her book. But I could tell she wasn’t reading. When he was out of earshot, she asked in a near whisper, “Did he look back?”

“Yes. Twice.”

“Excellent.”

I smirked and looked up at the guys. Unable to help herself, Sam lifted her eyes as well.

They hadn’t bothered yet with shirts and were still clothed in spandex shorts that ended just above the knee. Really, they should have been naked. Their outfits left nothing to the imagination.

I quickly refocused attention on my book, my cheeks red from sudden exposure to male fineness, but Sam gaped for a few minutes longer.

“Thank you, Katy. Thank you for being Martin Sandeke’s lab partner. Thank you for having no idea how amazing you are. Thank you for driving him wild with your clueless indifference. Just...thank you for this moment.”

I rolled my eyes behind my sunglasses and flipped onto my back.

“You’re welcome. Never say I didn’t get you anything, especially since there are four more shirtless rowers on their way.”

“I will die happy here, today, in this spot,” she sighed.

“In your puddle of lust.”

“Leave my puddle of lust alone. Get your own puddle.”

A few moments passed in relative silence, relative because the sound of the boys’ conversation drifted to us, though none of the words were decipherable. I was actually able to concentrate on my book for about ten minutes before we were interrupted.

“Hey, so what do you think so far?”

I turned my head and found Eric kneeling in the sand next to Sam’s towel, splitting his attention between both of us. I rolled to my side then sat up, pulling my knees to my chest. Sam, however, continued to lounge on the ground.

“It’s really nice,” I said with feeling, because it was nice and he was being nice, and it’s nice to be nice.

Then, because I wanted to say something more than just nice, I added, “The beach is exquisite. I’ve never seen this kind of sand.”

Eric gave me a friendly smile. “Yeah, this is our second year. Last year Martin brought us down for spring break and I’ve been looking forward to it since we left. I love this place.”

“I can see why,” Sam said, “it’s gorgeous.”

Eric’s gaze rested on her for a beat before he agreed, “Yeah, gorgeous...”

My eyes flickered between the two of them, obviously sharing a moment, and I tried not to make any sudden movements. I averted my gaze to the cover of the book I’d discarded and realized I had no recollection of what I’d been reading.

Eric was the first to speak, and he did so with a charming grin. “So, Sam. Would you mind helping me put suntan lotion on my back? I’d like to go for a swim but I’m sure the stuff I put on earlier is mostly gone by now.”

“Sure,” she responded immediately, then hopped to her knees, grabbed her lotion, circled behind him as they both stood, and

applied a generous amount of liquid SPF and UV protection to his torso.

He was facing me, so Sam was behind him. Therefore I was treated to her facial expressions while she touched his body. At one point she mouthed the words *Oh my God*, her eyes growing large. I had to roll my lips between my teeth to keep from laughing.

After the longest lotion lathering in the history of forever, Sam moved to step away but he caught her hand.

“Want to go swimming?”

She nodded, a big smile on her face. All her earlier attempts to keep it cool must have melted away...for some inexplicable reason.

Without a backward glance or a wave or an, *I'll see you later* in my direction, the two of them took off for the ocean. I watched them go feeling a mixture of excitement on Sam's behalf, and worry, also on Sam's behalf. She obviously liked him a lot. And I supposed he was likeable enough. But neither of us knew him very well.

“Hey. Kaitlyn, right?” someone said from behind me.

I turned toward the voice at my back and found Ben—the cuss monster, would-be druggie, self-admitted rapist, and blatant leerer—hovering at the edge of my towel. My stomach tightened with trepidation.

“Yes. That is correct. I am Kaitlyn,” I said, not meaning to sound as robotic as I did but unable to help it. This guy wanted to hurt and extort Martin, and that alone was enough to make me dislike him with the heat of magma.

“Hey, so,” his eyes moved over me again, where I was curled into a ball on my towel, “I need help getting this stuff on my back.” He held up the bottle of suntan lotion Sam had just discarded.

“Okay...?” I peered at him, not understanding why he was telling me this.

We stared at each other for a beat. He was quite good-looking, very well built, very tall, and he made me exceedingly uneasy.

At length he huffed. “So, I need you to put the lotion on my back.”

My frown deepened and I shook my head. “Um, no thanks.”

“No thanks?”

“That is correct. No thanks.”

His eyes darted between mine and he appeared to be confused.

“You’re not going to do it?”

“Correct. I’m not going to do it.”

Ben’s confused expression morphed into a sneer. “What’s the big deal?”

I tightened my arms around my legs. “It’s not a big deal. I don’t touch people I don’t know, it’s one of my life rules.” The nice thing about having life rules is that you can make up new ones on the spot when it’s convenient. Not touching people I don’t know hadn’t been a life rule before this minute, but it was definitely on the list now.

“We’ve met.”

“Yes, but I don’t know you and I don’t want to touch you.”

He stared at me for five seconds, but it felt like an hour, his pale eyes growing mean and angry. Abruptly, he blurted, “Why are you being such a bitch about this? I just need some fucking help here and you’re acting like a fucking bitch.”

I flinched at the words—even his expletives were redundant and unimaginative—and then pulled my gaze from his, opting to stare at the beach and wishing I’d forced myself on Sam and Eric. They were in the water, floating, talking, and probably not cussing at each other.

Even though you don’t feel calm doesn’t mean you can’t be calm. My mother’s words came back to me.

“Go away,” I said. My heartbeat and the pumping of my blood roared between my ears. My body was beyond tense, like it

was bracing for a physical blow, and I felt abruptly cold and removed from my surroundings, like I was in a tunnel.

“Fine, fatty. I don’t want your fucking chubby-ass fingers on me anyway.”

I closed my eyes, waiting for the sound of his departure and trying to calm my heart. But he didn’t leave. I felt him hovering there, just beyond the little island of safety that was my towel. I was about to launch myself up and away to the water, when he spoke again.

“Yeah, glad you’re having a good time. This place is pretty great.”

I frowned my confusion—which had momentarily paralyzed me—but didn’t open my eyes.

But then Ben said, “Oh, hey Stroke,” just as I discerned a new set of footsteps approaching from behind me. Martin was walking over.

I exhaled a slow breath, my insides still feeling like icicles, and slowly opened my eyes. I kept my attention affixed to the shore as I didn’t want to look at this Ben person again, probably never.

“Hey,” Martin said from someplace nearby and over my shoulder. “What’s going on?”

“Ah, not much. Just keeping Kaitlyn company.” Ben’s voice was remarkably different, friendly, affable. “But since you’re here, I’ll just go grab some food. Do you want anything? Can I get you something?” Ben was obviously directing this solicitous question to Martin.

I wondered briefly if Martin should invest in a poison tester of some sort. I wouldn’t trust Ben with a snake I didn’t like, let alone to bring me food that wasn’t tainted with arsenic.

“No,” Martin said.

I nearly laughed, despite my brittle state. Martin’s simple *no* sounded like so much more than a *no*. It sounded like a warning and a threat, like a dismissal and a command. I was

impressed how much disdain he'd managed to pack into a single syllable word.

“Okay, well...” At last I heard Ben’s feet move against the sand. “I’m starving so I’m going to eat. See you two later.”

I remained still even when I was sure Ben had left. I couldn’t quite pry my fingers from where they held my legs tightly tucked against me.

Growing up, I’d struggled a bit with my size, but not in the way most people approach size frustrations. I struggled and worked to accept it. I wished I could be different, yet because I trusted my mother and her assurances there was nothing wrong with me or the way I looked, that the baby fat was normal for me and that my body would shed it eventually, I never fought against the rolls.

I was a pudgy kid and very, very short through most of my childhood; then, during my sophomore year of high school, I stretched out and grew four inches basically overnight. I grew another two inches in my junior year.

But I’ve never been lean and firm; rather, I’ve always been soft and curved. I did rather like the line of my waist, however, because it tapered dramatically beneath my ribs, then flared out again to my hips—an hourglass, my mother had said with a smile, defining it for me.

She told me I should be proud of my healthy shape and healthy body, and love and treasure it because it was mine. No one, she said, could tell me what to think of my body. If I let another person’s opinion matter I was giving him or her control over me, and I had complete control over my self-image.

That’s what she said.

But that wasn’t the truth, not really. Because even though I knew Ben was a bottom feeder of the worst sort and his opinion mattered just as much as the coruscations in the sea, words like *fatty* hurt, no matter the source.

I felt Martin’s eyes on me and I wished I had a shirt, a bathrobe, or a big plastic trash bag to cover the imperfections

of my shape. Furthermore, I wished I'd junk punched Ben when I'd had the chance.

Martin moved, walking on Sam's towel and sitting next to me. I lifted my chin and kept my eyes on the horizon; I was not yet ready to look at him. I was still trying to gain control of my scattered feelings. I was also attempting to suppress the self-consciousness creeping from my chest to my throat and choking me. I was this awkward, pudgy girl, the color of chalk, sitting alongside a muscled and bronzed Greek god.

Martin stretched his long legs in front of him; he rested a hand behind me so his arm and chest brushed against the bare skin of my arm and back. The contact was a spark in my tunnel of frigid numbness. Then he leaned forward, nuzzled my cheek softly with his nose, and placed a gentle kiss on my jaw. Unexpectedly, I felt myself melt.

"Hey, Parker," he whispered, then kissed the hollow of my cheek. "What's wrong?"

I shook my head even as my body instinctively leaned into him, my shoulder resting against his chest. He felt good, solid, warm.

"Why is that guy here?" I asked.

Martin glanced over his shoulder to where his teammates were eating, then faced me again. "Did he say something to you?"

I cleared my throat then answered with another question, "Why would you invite him? After what he tried to do to you."

He exhaled softly, then brushed the back of his fingers down the length of my arm to my elbow; his eyes followed the path. He seemed to be studying my hand where it gripped my leg.

"Because he's strong and we, the boat, need him to win." His voice held an edge of ire, but I knew it wasn't directed at me.

I slid my eyes to the side, considered this news and Martin's expression. He didn't look happy about having Ben there. In fact, he looked angrily resigned. I got the impression he wasn't used to making compromises, and this one felt wrong and unwieldy.

“He tried to drug you,” I stated with a fervor that surprised me, feeling outraged on Martin’s behalf.

“I didn’t say I trust him. I said we *need* him. Trusting and needing someone are usually mutually exclusive.” Martin lifted his dazzling eyes to mine. This close I was startled to see they were the exact color of the ocean. Flecks of green, silver, and turquoise radiated from his pupil like a starburst.

“But sometimes, rarely...,” he started, stopped, his attention drifting to my lips briefly, “you meet someone you need, who you can also trust.”

He stared at me and I stared back, feeling muddled and disbelieving the implication of his words. He allowed me to struggle for a full minute, then he reached for my hand and pried it from my leg, holding it lightly, reverently.

“Kaitlyn, did Ben say something to you? Because if he did I’ll get rid of him.” Martin’s eyes narrowed by a fraction and his gaze grew penetrating, searching.

I gathered an expansive breath and turned from Martin’s probing stare. His obvious concern was doing strange things to me. His protectiveness didn’t feel like possessiveness, and I wondered how often I’d lamentably mistaken one for the other.

I didn’t want to lie. But if Martin could live with Ben trying to drug and extort him for the sake of team cohesion, then I guess I could live with a few nasty words.

Of course, there was the whole Ben drugging girls for undefined reasons issue...

I looked over the water as I spoke. “Martin, I didn’t tell you this on Friday when I saw you at the party, but you’re not the first person Ben has tried to drug. When he was talking to that girl, he made it sound like...like he’s been drugging girls for a while. That can really only mean one thing, right?”

I peeked at Martin and his scowl was fierce. He said through gritted teeth, “Thanks for letting me know. I’ll handle Ben. He won’t—” he stopped, exhaled slowly, “he won’t be doing that again.”

“But what about what he’s done so far?”

“I’ll take care of that too.”

“He’s so awful. He’s...he’s like ammonium dichromate with mercury thiocyanate. He’s the college boy equivalent of the bowels of hell.”

Martin’s smile was sudden and its unexpectedness seemed to take us both by surprise; he laughed lightly at my analogy, but he also looked concerned. “Hey, did he say something to you? Before I came over?”

“I don’t like him,” I said, then rushed on when I feared Martin would see I was being evasive. “He’s unpleasant and creepy and I don’t want to talk about him anymore. Let’s talk about chemistry.”

I felt rather than saw Martin’s small smile because he’d leaned forward and nipped my shoulder, his lips hovering against my skin. “Yes, let’s talk about chemistry. We have excellent chemistry.”

I leaned a tad to the side and away because his soft lips, sharp teeth, and hot mouth were overwhelming to my chest, stomach, and pants.

“I meant our assignment. I brought all my notes, I think we should start on the literature search this afternoon.”

“Na-ah.” Martin lifted his head, placed my hand on his thigh, and then gathered several stray strands of hair away from my face. He tucked them behind my ear. “We’re leaving. You and I have plans.”

“Plans? What plans?”

“I know a place where we can be alone.”

“Other than the fifty spare rooms back at the house?” I said, then immediately felt myself burn scarlet at the unintended insinuation. “Ah...I mean...that is...what I mean is...oh blast it.”

He watched me struggle under his suspended eyebrows, a whisper of a smile on his face, then cut in when I tried to hide my face in my arm. “No, the place I have in mind is better.

Lunch is packed. Come on.” He squeezed my arm then pulled my hand as he stood, tugging me with him. “We need to get going.”

I snatched my hand back and quickly covered myself with a towel.

I tried not to look at him, mostly because he was magnificent. Unlike the others, he was clothed in board shorts that ended at his knee. His shirtless torso was flawless and completely smooth. He looked like a golden statue, cast in hard relief by the sun, but warm to the touch. And that was just his torso! I didn’t trust my gaze to venture downward to assess the flawlessness of his legs...or elsewhere.

My heart and the area previously defined as “my pants” both twisted and tightened at the sight of his perfect body. I felt pinpricks and tingles all over and a little lightheaded as I turned away from him.

“Let me get changed first,” I mumbled without thinking. “I wish I’d invested in a burqa or a moomoo...”

Martin gripped the towel as I tried to wrap it under my arms, bringing my attention back to him.

His expression was again fierce, his eyebrows lowered in a frowny scowl. “What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

“What are you doing?” His gaze flickered to the towel then back to mine.

“Getting my things.”

He yanked on the towel and I held it tighter. His frown intensified. As he surveyed my face, I felt very much like I was being examined under a microscope.

Martin took three full, measured breaths, his hand now stubbornly fisted in the terrycloth, before he asked again through clenched teeth, “What did Ben say to you, Parker?”

“Nothing important.” I tilted my chin upward and shrugged. When he looked like he was going to press the issue further, I let go of the towel, letting the weight of it drop in his grip.

Martin looked troubled, but his attention strayed as though he were compelled, as though he had no choice but to look at my body. I tensed, fought the urge to cross my arms over my chest, and glanced at the sky, letting him look.

It didn't really matter. We were at the beach for Bunsen's sake! Sooner or later he was going to see me in a bathing suit. I repeated my mother's sage advice, *If I let another person's opinion matter then I was giving him control over me; I alone had complete control over my self-image.* I held still for as long as I could.

Then I heard him sigh. "Fuck me..."

My eyes darted back to Martin and I found him looking at my body with a mixture of pained hunger and appreciation. The profanity had slipped from his tongue like an odd caress.

"Excuse me?" I questioned, though I almost asked, *Was that a request?*

His gaze jumped to my face and he stepped forward, tossing the towel to the sand. He didn't touch me except to fit the fingers of my left hand in the palm of his right. "It's an expression, Parker. It usually means a person is surprised."

I squinted at him. "What's surprising? Is it my ghost-like skin? Does it scare you?"

I saw his mouth tugged to the side just before he turned from me and pulled me toward the house path. "No. Your ghost skin doesn't scare me."

"Is it—"

"You're fucking, goddamn gorgeous, Parker," he said roughly, a half growl, and without looking back at me.

Startled, I snapped my mouth shut, as a pleased and pleasant warmth suffused my cheeks, chest, and stomach. For the first time in my life I found I didn't mind the use of curse words.

Reactions in Aqueous Solution

I DIDN'T CHANGE clothes as I completely forgot that I wanted to change clothes. Therefore I continued to wear my relatively modest, halter-top, two-piece bathing suit on the ride from the house to this new and better place where Martin insisted we go...to be alone...

Being alone with Martin didn't freak me out at first. It felt like a very theoretical state of being; like being informed I was going to go become quark-gluon plasma (i.e. one of the theoretical phases of matter) or the winning contestant on American Idol. So, equally likely.

The truth was that my mind was slow on the uptake because everything was happening too fast. On Friday afternoon I was hiding in a science cabinet on campus. It was now Sunday afternoon and Martin was practically wooing me—insomuch as crazy handsome, billionaire, geniuses woo a girl—on a small island in the Caribbean.

I was not used to change and I was not good with surprises. The entirety of my past and all changes therein were well documented via the agendas prepared by George. I'd always had time to prepare.

But not this time.

Thus, I forgot to freak out until he was leading me by the hand down a sandy path and through a healthy amount of tropical underbrush. In his other hand he held a picnic basket. I glanced up and blinked at the broad muscles of his back and it abruptly hit me where I was and who I was with and what we'd done so far.

The kissing, the touching, the whispering, the shared moments *and* the heated stares. I'd made eye contact with him more in

the last thirty-six hours than I had in the last six months as his lab partner. A shiver passed through me. Life was happening too fast.

I mumbled, “Fast, quick, rapid, supersonic, hurried...”

Martin glanced over his shoulder, his oceanic eyes sweeping me up and down. “What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

His eyes narrowed on me. “Are you okay?”

I lied, “Yes. Good.” Then deflected, “Where are we going?”

A glint of some devilry flashed in his gaze, curving his mouth to one side—devilry looked really good on Martin Sandeke—and he returned his attention to the path. “Just this place I know with a waterfall and cave. It’s part of the estate, so no one else uses it.”

“How nice,” I said, bending as he held a palm frond out of my way, and added conversationally, “we have a garage at my house. It holds a car and some of my dad’s tools.”

Martin glanced at me, equal parts amused and confused. “Oh?”

“Yes. And a hammock in the back yard.”

“Is that so...”

“Yeah.”

“So, no waterfalls?”

“No. But this one time, when it rained a lot, the gutter broke. That was similar to a waterfall.”

Martin laughed. I knew he was laughing because, though he was quiet, I saw his shoulders shake; and when he turned to look at me, his eyes were bright with humor and he was flashing a lethally bright smile.

“You’re funny, Parker.”

“Thank you.” I looked away from the beacon of his smile. It was blinding. “You’re also...humorous at times.”

We walked another hundred yards or so in silence and I forced myself to study the surrounding landscape. The ground was sandy—light grey and white—and heavily littered with bleached shells. Tall palm trees provided the ceiling of the canopy. The path was littered with thick palm bushes and underbrush. All around us insects buzzed and hummed a constant symphony, and I could make out the faint sounds of rushing water. It grew louder the farther we walked but not overwhelming. The weather was warm, and would have been hot if we were in the sun and farther inland. But in the shade and so near the ocean, a cool breeze whispered over and cooled my bare skin.

Martin turned slightly, still holding my hand, though his attention was on a series of rocks before us that descended a stairway of sorts.

“Be careful here, just watch your step. It might be better if you do this barefoot. You’re not going to need shoes anyway.”

He released my hand, kicked off his shoes, and preceded me down the path made by the sandy boulders.

I, likewise, kicked off my flip flops and followed, keeping my attention on the trail. The sound of the rushing water increased exponentially as we descended. Then I stopped because Martin stopped, and I looked up and saw this place where he’d brought us.

And my mouth fell open.

He’d brought us to a very small cove, mostly shaded by palms and the surrounding rock face. It was about twenty feet in diameter. The crystal clear, turquoise water was mostly still, but rippled near the far end. Upon closer inspection, the cove appeared to be adjacent to a cave. The waterfall was unseen, but I heard it; I guess it must be behind the rock face.

It was like a little room, private, intimate, breathtaking.

I don’t know exactly how long I stood there gaping at the small natural loveliness of our surroundings. But I became aware of Martin’s gaze all at once, watching me; I darted a look at him, snapping my mouth shut.

“Do you like it?”

I nodded. “It’s...it’s stunning.”

He grinned, obviously pleased. He’d set the picnic basket down at some point on a shelf created by the curving rocks, leaving both of his hands free. Martin with two hands free felt a little dangerous. I glanced at his hands, my heart skipping.

“Come on,” he said, holding one of his dangerous hands out to me.

I accepted it, and he led us down into the water, his eyes holding mine. It lapped at my ankle, then calf, then we were submerged to our waists just three feet from the edge.

“How deep is this?”

“Uh, that’s an entrance to the cave where the waterfall is.” He indicated with his head to the far side. “It’s relatively deep over there, maybe fifteen or twenty feet. But on this side,” he pointed to my right, “it’s flat and about three or four feet.”

“Have you gone into the cave?”

He nodded, his eyes traveling over me. It was a slow perusal of my body that did things, unexpected things, like made me tremble, my stomach flip, and my nipples harden. The longer he stared the hotter and more intense his gaze grew. It felt like he was on the precipice of something, saying something.

I didn’t want him jumping off any verbal cliffs, so I interrupted him, pulling my hand from his, before he could speak. “What’s the plan, Stan? What’s the deal, Neil? Is there a schedule for the rest of this week? Anything I should be aware of? I remind you again and in all seriousness that I have two papers to write and a vector calculus test to study for. Also, again, you and I do have that lab assignment we need to prep. I have you trapped here, therefore I expect you to help with the literature search. Also, I have two books I’ve been dying to read.”

Martin wasn’t smiling, but his eyes were warm and interested.

“Do you always talk like that?”

“Like what? Like awesome?”

“Yeah, like awesome.” His tone was serious, verging on earnest.

I felt pleased by the compliment despite the fact I’d self-deprecatingly complimented myself and he’d merely agreed. Because I did want to be his friend so it was important to be honest. “Actually, no. Truthfully, you make me nervous so I’m a little more jumpy and vociferous than usual.”

“Vociferous. You have an excellent vocabulary.” He pushed himself backward a few feet and began treading water near the center of the cove. His eyes seemed to glow, reflecting the sea-green of the saltwater.

“Ah, yes. That I do. I’m a big fan of synonyms.”

He exhaled a soft laugh, peering at me like I was weird and wonderful. It made my smile widen.

“So, plan for this week? What can I expect?” I took small steps near the edge, not wanting to venture too close to Martin and his glowing eyes and dangerous hands.

“Well, team practice, like this morning. The waves are minimal on this side of the island because we’re basically set in the middle of a large inlet. The Gulf is like a big lake. We’ll be practicing and training in the mornings, so you’ll get your quiet time.” His voice was downright conversational. It was nice.

“Good.” I tucked my hair behind my ears, this news settled my nerves somewhat. If he was training in the mornings then I could use the time to prepare my friend attacks.

“But in the afternoons and evenings...,” he paused, licked his lips, his eyes flickering over me, “I want us to be together.”

This news halted my progress around the rim of the cove. Paired with the predatory glint in his eyes and the slight undercurrent of a mandate in his words, my insides felt like a jumble of knots...made out of magma. That’s right, magma knots. Perhaps if I hadn’t skipped breakfast my stomach wouldn’t have been so tumultuous.

“To have tacos?” Despite my best efforts, this question emerged somewhat high-pitched and breathless.

“Yes, tacos. And there will be parties and other things.”

Parties.

Parties?

What?

I frowned. I’m pretty sure I scowled. This reaction was instinctual. I hated parties. Hate.

“Parties?” I may have curled my lip in a miniature sneer.

“Yeah, on the island, at some of the other houses, friends of mine. You know, the usual college scene stuff.”

Usual college scene...just a bunch of billionaires’ kids and their friends. It sounded delightful.

“Yeah, no thanks.” I pulled my eyes from his, inspected the rocks. “I don’t go to parties. It’s one of my life rules.”

“Life rules?”

“Yes. Good ideas to live by.”

“You just made that up. Not going to parties isn’t one of your life rules.”

He was right, I had just made up not going to parties as a life rule, but he didn’t need to know that. Therefore I ignored his last comment and tried to act blasé. “I don’t want to go, but don’t let that stop you from going.”

“Parker.”

I sighed, then met his gaze.

“I want you to come.”

“No, thank you.”

He ground his teeth. “Kaitlyn, you promised you were going to give this a try.”

“I will...”

Once again he was giving me the severe stare down, likely because my weakly delivered *I will* didn’t even sound convincing to me.

Managing to swallow around the sudden thickness in my throat, I squared my shoulders so I was facing him.

“Here’s the thing, Sandeke. I am. I am going to give this a try. Despite my worries—”

“What worries?” He sounded exasperated.

I ignored his question. “Despite my worries and reservations, I’m going to give this the good college try. But I don’t even know how to dance. I can tango like a pro, but I don’t do the body wiggle weird thing. And isn’t that what the kids do these days at parties? Dance?”

He lifted an eyebrow at my excuse—obviously unimpressed—and with two fluid strokes moved to join me.

I stiffened, my eyes wide, and backed up a step at his advance. “What...what are you doing?”

“I’m going to teach you how to dance,” he said simply, already on me, reaching for my body.

I stiffened further, feeling unaccountably breathless as his big hands slipped around my waist and settled on my hips and lower back.

“But there...but we...but—”

“Shhh,” he said, pulling me closer. “Relax.”

“Create cold fusion,” I murmured in response, unable to relax and placing my hands nowhere, because placing them anywhere on Martin felt perilous to my well-being.

He glanced down at me, his eyebrows in a perplexed V. “What does cold fusion have to do with anything?”

“You tell me to relax, which is impossible. I tell you to create cold fusion, which is impossible.”

His answering smile was crooked. “You can’t relax?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You know why not.”

“Well, it might help if you touched me.”

“That will not help.”

“It might.”

“It won’t.”

“Touch me.”

I scowled at his chest, my hands still in the air at my sides.
Stupid perfect chest.

“Parker, if we’re going to dance you have to touch me.” He sounded amused and his fingers flexed on my bare skin. I felt the roughened calluses of his palms just before he released my body to grab my hands. He brought them to his shoulders, pressed them there, then returned his own to my hips. I didn’t miss the fact that his hand placement was now a bit more daring than it had been a moment ago, lower, closer to my bottom.

I swallowed thickly, glaring at my fingers where they touched his perfectly sculpted shoulder.

“Don’t you want to touch me?” he asked, his inflection daring, teasing, but also something else. Something hesitant and uncertain.

I lifted my eyes to his; they were guarded, his smile looked bracing, almost like a grimace, like he was preparing himself for bad news.

I sighed. I knew I sounded resigned and a little pitiful.
“Yes...”

His gaze thawed as it dropped to my lips. “Then you should... because I want you to.”

“I don’t know how,” I blurted.

“I’ll teach you.” His voice was low, soft, and held a promise.

“I’m not good at this.”

“We haven’t even started.”

“I don’t mean the dancing, I mean the touching. I’m pretty sure I’ll be good at the wiggle dancing once I apply myself, as I have excellent rhythm.” Heat was beginning to build in the

space between us where we didn't touch; my stomach and his, his chest and mine. I had the sudden sensation we were magnetized, and I had to make my body rigid to keep from plastering myself against him.

“Why do you think you'll be good at dancing? You're very stiff, you need to loosen up.” He swayed his hips and mine to the left, then the right, then back, his movements measured and slow. I moved with him, trying to loosen up without succumbing to the magnetism.

“Because I used to ballroom dance and I play three instruments. Did you know that? And also the drums...so I guess four instruments.”

His eyes, which were still on my lips, flickered to mine and his eyebrows ticked upward with surprise. “Really? What else do you play?” He sounded interested.

“Guitar mostly. But also the piano and saxophone and the aforementioned drums.”

He smiled. I swear he'd been smiling so much it felt unnatural. Before now, I thought I'd seen him smile three times in the last six months and all three of those times the smile had been mean and hard because he'd been about to unleash a world of hurt on someone.

These were different smiles, relaxed and happy smiles. They were devastating and no less precarious to my wellbeing than his mean and hard smiles.

“I'd like to see that,” he said after a beat. “I'd like to see you play.”

“We can go back now and I'll show you. I think I saw a guitar in one of the rooms back at *the compound*.” I said “the compound” in a deep, weird voice, hoping to cut through the raging tension building between us, making it difficult for me to breathe.

I made like I was going to move away. His grip on me tightened, staying my attempted retreat.

“No.” He shook his head, the word sharp, and his eyes flashed with a warning. Then he brought me flush against him.

This was not a good idea. It drove all the breath from my lungs and I trembled, gasped, spikes of hot and cold rushing under the surface of my skin. I felt sensitized everywhere. Instinctively, my eyes shut, startled by the ferocity of the sensual, swirling, damning, overwhelming physical feels.

He half growled, half groaned then set me away, placing essential distance between us. My lashes fluttered open and I found him watching me with his jaw set and his eyes ablaze. His hands were on his hips and I saw his Adam's apple move with a thick swallow.

I shifted on my feet, not sure what to do with my arms. I decided to place them in the water at my sides. "Sorry."

"Why are you sorry?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm not sorry."

He growled, his eyes half closing, and he tugged a hand through his hair. He looked...frustrated.

His frustration made me frustrated because I didn't know why he was frustrated. I surmised based on his expression that I'd done something wrong, made some novice misstep, but I had no idea what.

I hated I was so clueless about boys. I didn't know anything about them other than what one can absorb from porn and pubmed articles. Otherwise they were a cornucopia of conundrums.

"What's going on?" I blurted, feeling lost and confused by the last sixty seconds, not to mention the last two days. My hands convulsively gripped my thighs in the water. "What are you thinking?"

His eyes lifted to mine and he stared at me, saying nothing, but his frustration was tangible. I could hear him breathe though, could see his chest rise and fall with his deep exhales. The longer he stared at me without saying anything the faster my heart beat; I felt like it was going to throw itself out of my ribcage.

Then he said, "Come here," causing me to jump a little, though his voice was quiet, almost lost amidst the combined

sounds of the waterfall and the insect symphony. Even if I hadn't heard the words, I would have read the want—what *he* wanted—in his eyes. He looked a little wild with want.

I tried to take a deep breath but managed only a shallow inhale. Silently I obeyed, wading toward him until a foot separated us. I was glad my hands were in the water so he couldn't see them shaking, because they were shaking—just a little.

When I stopped, his gaze dropped to my body, to my chest, ribs, and stomach. My lower belly felt tight and my breasts heavy. Full. The force of his stare was physical—corporeal—and I shifted a half step backward under its intensity.

Maybe he thought I was going to turn and flee, or maybe he'd reached the limit of his patience. Whatever the reason, Martin closed the remaining distance between us. He gripped my waist again. This time the shock of sensation from Martin's rough calluses against my bare midriff sent a jolt to my center and up to my heart.

He held me firmly as though he didn't trust me to stay.

"I need to touch you."

"You are touching me," I whispered breathlessly, unable to tear my gaze from his.

Martin shook his head slowly, lifted one hand to the tie at my neck that was holding up my top. Without breaking eye contact, he tugged on the fastening, loosening, then releasing the halter. With a feather-light touch he brought the straps forward, the tips of his fingers on my neck and shoulder sending a shiver down my spine. His movements were slow and purposeful, and he didn't stop pulling, and his eyes never left mine.

He brought his other hand to the second strap, the backs of his knuckles brushing against the tops of my breasts—pulling, pulling, still pulling—until he delved with meticulously measured movements into the material of my bikini top and tugged it down with aching deliberateness, exposing my body.

His gaze dropped to my bare breasts and he blinked, his eyes half lidded, the rise and fall of his chest obvious.

Then he touched me with the backs of his hands and knuckles—my hardened nipples and the undersides of my breasts—until the top was lowered completely. My stomach twisted and my back arched on instinct. I was near panting now.

I felt crazed, overwhelmed, like I was on the precipice of a high cliff and needed to jump—I had to. I had no choice. I absolutely needed it. Whatever Martin was about to do, I needed it.

A small, helpless sound escaped my lips, something like a whimper, causing his gaze to sharpen and his body to sway toward mine. I realized his chest was rising and falling faster than it had been, and the sense he was close to a similar edge made me bold.

So I touched him.

It was just my fingertips against the hard ridges of his abdomen, but it made him flinch and release a growly sigh like I'd both hurt and pleased him.

“Kaitlyn...” My name from his lips was tight, choked, needy.

He shifted an inch closer; the water swirled around us. One of his hands slid back up my body and cupped me—reverently at first, like I was fragile—and his other moved lower, around my back, slipping into the fabric of my boy short bikini bottoms, inside, down, until he was gripping my bare ass with one hand and massaging my breast with the other, his thumb sweeping over the peak twice before pinching it.

I cried out, the spike of pleasure severe and unexpected and clearly wired straight to my core. My hands instinctively lifted to grip his shoulders and my back flexed, arching on instinct.

“Dammit.” His eyes half closed, and he brought me against him with a jerky movement, as though it were a reflex he couldn't control.

Suddenly he bent at his waist and his mouth was on me. He licked, kissed, and sucked my nipple into his hot mouth, then grazed it with his teeth.

“Ah! Martin.” My eyes drifted shut briefly and my hips bucked, my grip on his shoulders increasing. I felt taut and swollen and greedy for his touch, his hands, his mouth, his body.

“I have to touch you.” His voice rumbled. He circled the center of my breast with his tongue before drawing it between his lips.

“You are touching me,” I repeated, holding on to his neck and the back of his head, pressing him to my chest, and feeling a little insane.

“Not here,” he growled, his caresses growing more aggressive, insistent, forceful.

He bit the underside of my breast and my ribs like he wanted to consume me, his fingers on my bottom digging into my flesh, severe and punishing. He pinched my nipple again, this time harder, and it hurt, but it also felt necessary. Then his hand in my bikini moved from my bottom to my front, his fingers parting and entering me.

Martin straightened, then captured my lips with his just as I cried out my surprise. His tongue mirrored the stroking of his fingers. His free hand grabbed my ponytail and he roughly positioned me how he liked, tilting my head to the side, opening my mouth just as he was opening my center.

My nipples grazed his chest. I flexed my thighs, my stomach, and my back tight. My nails dug into his shoulders and back. His fingers were inside me and it wasn't the soft teasing he'd employed in my dorm room. This was rough, urgent, his fingers searching, uncomfortable and a little painful, but... God, it felt so good. So good. So, so good.

My body seemed to understand what my mind hadn't yet discovered and my hips rocked instinctively in time with his strokes. He bit my lip as I panted, his hot mouth moving to my jaw then neck as he yanked my hair, exposing the vulnerable expanse of skin to his teeth and tongue.

As though from a great distance, I heard him cussing and complimenting me. A steady stream of growled *fucks* and

beautifuls and *gorgeous* and *damns* between clenched teeth, against my skin, hot breath spilling over my ear and neck. I became aware all at once that his erection was pressed against my hip and he was moving the hard length, rubbing against me, as I moved on his hand. My breath hitched as my stomach coiled tight. My jaw was tight. Everything felt tight and taut and close to breaking.

And then I did.

I broke.

In fact, I cried out.

Violent, sweet desolation tore through me, delicious spasms accompanied by fierce trembling. I was paralyzed by this vicious wave of beautiful destruction, strangling and releasing and suffocating me over and over. I became aware of his fingers stroking slower, softer, like they'd taken what they wanted and were now moving as a mere echo of their earlier urgency.

My body also instinctively relaxed without my telling it to do so, going almost limp. Martin's mouth was on my neck, sucking, licking, and biting. I felt his heart beating against my bare breast and its thunderous pace matched mine. My vision was blurry and I realized I wasn't breathing, so I gasped for air, swallowing a gasping breath as I buried my face below his neck, hiding.

I felt him shudder. His fingers inside my body, still stroking and petting—like I'd done something good and he was rewarding me with a gentle touch.

With plain reluctance, he slipped his hand from my bikini shorts and released my pony tail. At first I thought he was going to set me away again, but he didn't. He embraced me. His strong arms came around my body and he crushed me to him. Automatically I snuggled closer.

I wasn't confused. I was nothing other than my body. Blissfully satiated. My mind was completely blank, devoid of thought. I merely felt.

And everything about being in Martin's arms felt like bliss.

Properties of Solutions

ONCE AGAIN, SAM and I took dinner in my room.

It took me a while to recover from...

MY VERY FIRST ORGASM!!!

That's how I thought about it in my brain.

MY VERY FIRST ORGASM!!!!!!!!!!

It was all capital letters, followed by a ridiculous number of exclamation points. In the past I'd tried to bring myself to satisfaction any number of times and always failed, which was why I'd done so much research about the sex act. I thought if I could read enough about the subject I would eventually find the key to...wait for it...

MY VERY FIRST ORGASM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I didn't expect it to render me speechless, but it did, and for several hours. Luckily and bewilderingly, Martin also seemed to require recovery time. Neither of us spoke afterward, not in the cove, not on the walk back to the golf cart, not on the ride back to the estate.

Although, some barrier between us had been shattered, because he seemed to feel at liberty to kiss me and touch me whenever and however he wanted, and I let him because I quite simply needed the post-orgasm reassurance and touching. It felt necessary and natural and I craved it.

Before wordlessly retying my halter, he lavished my breasts and shoulders with hot, wet kisses—fondling my body like it was his with which to play and explore as he liked. As we left the cove, he pulled me into his arms and kissed me until I was climbing him breathlessly. During the duration of the drive in the golf cart, he placed one possessive hand on my thigh, then caressed my bottom greedily as we walked to the house.

Once inside, he caught my hand and spun me around until we were pressed against each other from knees to chests, and he kissed me again, his hands smoothing down my neck, then shoulders, arms, waist, and hips.

When we finally separated, he wore a deeply satisfied smile and his eyes glowed like they had in the cove.

Then he spoke. “Go clean up. Take this.”

I glanced down at the basket he was holding. It was the picnic we hadn't eaten. I took it then returned my gaze to his.

“You should eat something,” he said.

I nodded obediently.

His smile grew. “Are you ever going to speak again?”

I blinked at him then shrugged my *I don't know*.

Speak? Speak? What was that?

He laughed, pulled me in for another hug, and kissed the top of my head. His eyes were happy as he sent me on my way with a low, “See you at dinner.”

But I didn't see him at dinner. I ate in my room with Sam because my mind caught up with what had happened while I took my shower. I felt the soreness between my legs and reality crashed over me like a tempestuous waterfall. The world came into sharp focus. I reached for the wall of the shower to steady myself.

His fingers hadn't been gentle, hence the soreness. And as I reflected on the events in the cove, I recognized that everything about him—his touch, his words, his kisses—had been dictatorial, forceful, and domineering. He may have given me my very first orgasm, but he'd taken something as well.

And he knew it. He'd known it *while* it was happening.

Adding to my confused state, I saw in the bathroom mirror that he'd left bite marks and hickies on my skin - two on my neck, and one on the underside of my right breast. They

looked like evidence. Like they'd been placed there purposefully.

I needed time to marinate in the events, to accept it had happened, to decide what it meant, to figure out why I'd let it happen, and to determine whether it was a good thing or a bad thing.

I didn't panic. But I did remember that the blood of a thousand virgins had been sacrificed at the altar of his sexual prowess.

A cold lump gathered in my stomach, comprised of confusion and uneasiness, and I dressed in sweatpants and a large T-shirt.

Sam stopped by about an hour later—found me curled on my giant bed staring out the window to the sea. Though I knew she noticed the purple marks on my neck, she seemed to sense I didn't want to talk, and I was grateful when she suggested we eat dinner then study in my room. I'd brought my class-specific notebooks, to which I had an unhealthy attachment, therefore I was all for getting down to study town.

My notebooks were soothing to me. Just seeing my handwritten notes was like going back in time to the day of the lecture. They gave me confidence. They made me feel like I might actually be capable of acing tests. They were the brain-spinach to my Popeye the sailor man.

As well, I didn't really want to face Martin's teammates with hickies, obvious evidence of what we'd done. I wasn't regretful or embarrassed, but it felt private, sacred to me. I didn't want to share what had transpired with a room full of near strangers, especially with Ben the leering douche-bucket.

Therefore, Sam and I sat on the balcony and munched on salmon cakes, garden salad, and asparagus, between chapters and class notes of vector calculus and European history. At sunset we went for a walk on the beach. She told me about her day, wherein she swam with Eric then convinced him to play tennis with her.

Of course she kicked his ass.

I didn't ask her whether she liked him and she didn't ask me what was going on with Martin. In a lot of ways Sam and I

were similar. When real, weighty feelings were involved, we both found vocalizing unformed thoughts difficult. I think we both needed time to figure out our own stuff before talking it through with each other.

During our walk we decided to share my giant bed again, so she went off in search of her PJs, while I grabbed the tray with our dirty dishes and wandered around the house in search of the kitchen. I needed tea, not to mention cookies.

In the kitchen I encountered the chef—a red-cheeked, red-haired, red-nosed woman in her sixties named Irma, and her aide—a similarly red-cheeked, red-haired, red-nosed forty-something woman, Tamra—who I suspected was Irma's daughter. They gently admonished me for clearing my own dishes then promised to bring me up tea, milk, and cookies. I asked for directions back to my room, and Tamra offered to show me the way.

Upon my request, she was showing me the most direct path, rather than the scenic route, as I suspected I would make several stealthy trips to the kitchen during my stay. I probed her for answers about the house as we walked, and learned it had been acquired by Mr. Sandeke senior—Martin's father—ten or so years ago. The staff came with the house. I also learned Tamra was divorced and childless, and had moved down to work with her mother some four years prior.

They lived at the house in staff quarters year round and fed the rest of the staff daily—most of whom were also employed year round. However, Mr. Thompson and Mrs. Greenstone were also responsible for several other extensive family properties in England, Italy, Switzerland, Thailand, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States. They traveled with the family and always opened the houses for Martin and his parents wherever they went.

We turned into the long hallway that led to my suite when Tamra stopped—walking and talking—suddenly, then took a step back.

“Oh! Mr. Sandeke.” Tamra turned toward me, gave me a tight smile, then walked off without another word.

I watched her go, a bit perplexed by how suddenly she fled her employer.

When I turned back to my door I understood why. Martin's eyes were deep blue pools of unhappiness and his jaw was set in a firm, grim line.

"Where have you been?"

My eyebrows ticked upward—because his demanding question made me want to junk punch him—then lowered—because I remembered he now had carnal knowledge of me and I'd not joined him for dinner like we'd agreed.

Also, despite his grumpy tone and face, my body apparently wanted him to give me the rough treatment again, because it melted and hummed under his scowl of dissatisfaction.

I straightened my spine, giving my body a mental slap aimed at sobriety, and lifted my chin.

I was careful to keep my voice nice and steady. "I've been cavorting with the servants."

"Cavorting," he repeated, his tone flat. But I was pleased to see the granite-like edge to his jaw soften and his eyes lose their harsh glint.

"Yes. Cavorting for cookies. I wandered the halls for a while, got lost, then eventually found the kitchen." I said this while walking toward him as casually as I was able, then entered my room, leaving the door open behind me in a silent invitation.

He took the invite and closed the door as he followed. I heard him sigh before he demanded, "Why weren't you at dinner?"

"Sam and I decided to get some studying done. And I was tired." I crossed to the sitting area by the big window and plopped down in a chair, then gave him a small, friendly smile. "How are the boys? Quite recovered from the perils of traveling via private plane, limo and yacht, and practice this morning?"

Some of the sharpness re-entered his gaze and he crossed his arms over his chest. "You would prefer to fly commercial?"

“Of course not. I’d prefer not to fly at all. I insist you teleport me the next time we take a vacation to paradise.”

He finally cracked a smile and crossed to where I sat. He examined me for a moment in silence, then took the chair next to mine. He eased into it, all fluid grace, long limbs, and coiled power.

“The next time?” he asked, and I was pleased to hear his voice held a hint of teasing.

“Of course. I’ve decided that you and I are going to be best friends, just as long as you keep me in a steady supply of salmon cakes.”

“And cookies.”

“Yes. And cookies.” I bent my elbow on the high, cushioned arm of the chair and rested my cheek against my hand, let my eyes move over his handsome features and found him watching me, his eyes intent.

His mouth curved into a smirk that was mirrored in his stare. “And dancing lessons?”

I grew very still, my eyes locked on his, because by dancing lessons, I knew he meant orgasms. Probably mutual orgasms. And lots of them.

I swallowed thickly, and heat traveled up my chest to my neck. The cold lump in my stomach seemed to balloon and press against my lungs. I thought about the marks on my skin and the soreness between my legs, reminders of how physical intimacy with Martin had been exciting and satisfying, but also extremely intense and a little scary. Maybe too intense.

He reached for my hand where it rested against my cheek and I stiffened, straightened, and yanked it away, opting instead to twist my fingers together on my lap. I also tore my gaze from his and stared at the floor.

We were silent for a stretch as I tried to figure out what to say, how to respond. This was problematic as I didn’t know what to say or how to respond.

“Look at me.”

I tried to swallow again but experienced a swallow misfire, and released a shaky breath. “Martin...” I covered my face with my hands. My cheeks were hot and I shook my head.

“Kaitlyn, if you tell me you regret what happened...” His voice was low, sounded tight and barely controlled.

“I don’t regret it,” I blurted, because it was true. I didn’t regret it. I liked it, a lot. And I wanted to do it again.

I peered at him from between my fingers, found him watching me, his jaw set and his eyes fierce. When I spoke it was muffled by my palms pressed to my mouth. “I don’t regret it. But I don’t know how to feel about it because it was a little scary.”

His gaze grew introspective, like he was searching his memory, and I noted his forehead was marred with wrinkles of concern. “Scary? How so?”

I tried to distance myself from the conversation and approach it with pragmatic analysis. “Well, I think the first true ‘sexual experience’ for any girl is going to be frightening, so there is that. But also...well...I’m sore. And you left bruises on my hip and bites on my neck. You were quite intense and I liked that a lot, but you weren’t very...gentle.”

He blinked rapidly and a flicker of something like dismay clouded his features. He studied me with pensive unhappiness. Then his head fell backward to the cushion of the chair and his chest expanded with a large breath. “Goddammit.”

He looked angry.

“Are you...mad?” I asked, my hands dropping to my lap as I studied his face for a clue. I couldn’t believe he was angry. For heaven’s sake, I was new at this, at *all* of this.

He closed his eyes for a full five seconds, then said, “I didn’t mean to hurt you, not at all. I don’t *want* to hurt you.”

I examined him, how upset he was, and realized that irritation was pointed inward. “Can you be—I mean—is it possible for you to be less rough?”

He lifted his head, his eyes opening and I saw his determination before he spoke. “Yes. You have my word. That won’t happen again.”

I got the sense he was disappointed in himself...*very curious*.

“I didn’t say that exactly. I mean,” I cleared my throat, trying to quash my nervousness, because it was weird doing a post-orgasm analysis with Martin Sandeke, “so, just to be clear, it was good. It was all *very good*. I liked what happened... earlier. My pants liked it too. But, as much as my pants want to get this party started, I’m very new to all of this.” I emphasized *all of this* by waving my hands over my pelvis then waving them in the direction of his entire body.

Some of his dismay gave way to amusement. “I know.”

“I’m not saying the rough was bad, and I’m not ruling it out for future interludes—if there are future interludes—as long as I get to be rough sometimes too.”

His gaze abruptly heated and his eyes narrowed, sharpened. I ignored this because the idea of getting rough with Martin was...epically arousing. I rushed to continue, “I’m just suggesting that, if this happens again—”

“When it happens again.”

“—you go a little easier on me until I know how to do this thing.”

He nodded and I was pleased to see him relax a bit more.

We stared at each other for a beat, and the air felt ripe and heavy. He was watching me as though he were imagining these future interludes, planning and preparing for them.

“I just wish—”

“What do you wish?”

A sudden idea occurred to me and I embraced it before I could think too much about the ramifications; I assumed he’d reject the idea outright, which is why I blurted it. “Heck, let’s go all in. If we’re going to give it a try, we might as well *really* give it a try. I think we should throw caution to the wind and label each other as girlfriend and boyfriend. Ala, *Have you met*

Martin? He's my boyfriend. I'm Parker, his girlfriend. We're together in the biblical sense of the word, sans the sacrament."

He stared at me for five full seconds, obviously caught off guard by my suggestion, but then he surprised me by reaching forward, and with a sure and smooth movement, pulled me onto his lap. I stumbled and basically fell into him. Meanwhile his hands cradled my face, his thumbs caressed the line of my jaw, and his eyes moved almost reverently from the progress of his fingers to my lips.

"Parker," his voice was a rumble, growly whisper, laced with warning, "don't say it unless you mean it."

Well, crap. Bluff called.

I licked my lips—a nervous habit—which had the byproduct of turning his aqua eyes darker. He looked...greedy.

"Martin, this is nuts. You don't need or want a girlfriend."

"I want you."

Gah! Right in the feels!

He felt comfortable touching me, that much was clear. But I hesitated to touch him. I didn't want to touch him when he wasn't really mine; because *when* this was over, I wouldn't be allowed to touch him anymore. Then I would have lost something.

Therefore, I crossed my arms over my chest and shook my head.

"Let's talk about our differences," I said, hoping a well-reasoned argument would make some kind of dent in his crazy fixation.

Again, he ground his teeth; his hands slipped away from my face and his arms wrapped around me, as though to keep me from leaving.

"Yesterday, back in the limo," I said, firming my resolve, "and then on the boat, and then when we left the marina, you did this thing where you gave the other guys dirty looks for talking to me."

Martin stared at me, betraying nothing of his thoughts.

“I feel pretty confident in stating that you’re...well, you’re interested in me and it’s not platonic. Therefore, your behavior felt as though you were marking your territory. I’ve never had a guy do that before, but maybe I’m misreading the situation...?”

He cleared his throat again. “You’re not.”

“I didn’t like it.”

“You didn’t like it?”

“No. I didn’t. It made me feel like, I don’t know, like I was Chinese leftovers and you didn’t want anyone to sample me.”

“I don’t want anyone to sample you.”

“But I’m not food. I get to say who samples and who doesn’t.”

“I thought most girls liked it when guys were possessive.”

“Really?” I asked this because I really didn’t think so; then I shook my head. “No. At least...well, at least I don’t think so, not like that. It’s like, why would I want to be with someone who doesn’t trust me to be loyal? I’m not a buffet. Guys can’t sample the lo mein just because I’m standing there. I get a vote in who eats my noodles.”

“I trust you,” he said quickly, his gaze darting to mine then away. “After Friday night, what you did, I think I trust you more than anyone.”

Oh, gah! He sounded so...sincere. I ached for him, because I believed him and it made me sad. How was it possible *I* was the most trustworthy person in his life? How heartbreaking was that?

Unable to help myself and spurred by a sudden desire to touch him, I placed my hands on his shoulders. “Martin, it’s just, I don’t have much experience with dating or having a boyfriend. I’ve had one, but he wasn’t...well, he didn’t count. I’m not really sure how it works—”

“I have even less experience than you.”

I glared at him. “That’s a lie.”

“No. It’s not. I’ve never...,” he cleared his throat, “...you’re the first girl I’ve wanted...like this.” He sounded enormously frustrated and his fingers dug into my hip and ribs where he held me. When he spoke next it was through gritted teeth. “I just wish you’d be less stubborn.”

“You can’t always have your way.”

“I know that. If I had my way we’d be naked right now in the ocean or...shit, doing anything other than discussing more reasons why you don’t think this is going to work.”

My instinct was to pacify him, reach forward and soothe his bad temper, promise I would stop being difficult and just give in to the fantasy of this being my reality. But I couldn’t ignore reason and logic, even if I was strangely flattered by his caveman displays, possessive impatience, and apparent fixation.

And also...skinny-dipping with Martin = pre-bedtime imagery for the win.

Heat raced up my neck and over my cheeks and I squeezed my eyes shut, gathering a deep breath. I hoped to also re-gather my wits, because right that minute they were skinny-dipping with Martin some hundred yards away in the Caribbean.

“And now you’re blushing.” He didn’t sound pleased about this. He sounded frustrated and resentful.

“What do you expect?” I asked, then opened my eyes. “I’m not used to this. It’s going to take me some time to get used to the idea that you’re interested in me. For cripe’s sake, it’s been forty-eight hours and we’re not even dating—”

“We are dating. Remember, we’re having tacos and soon we’re going to have lots of dance lessons.” His eyes drifted to the love marks on my neck and he smirked. It was a satisfied, pleased smirk.

A jerk smirk.

“Well, future tacos notwithstanding,” strategically and stubbornly, I ignored his reference to dance lessons, “I know I’m not your girlfriend, and even if I were I wouldn’t want to be peed on.”

Martin choked on air then gave me a squirrely look. “Peed on?”

“You know, figuratively and—for the record—literally. If we got to a place where we became ‘involved’,” I used air quotes to emphasize *involved*, because it seemed like an odd word, but the most appropriate for the situation, “I don’t think I’d be happy with you marking your territory, unless some guy was being inappropriate with me and I sent out the boyfriend bat signal.”

He glared at me, his gaze searching. Then he nodded. “Fine. If I go all day tomorrow without...peeing on you,” his lips twitched, but he quickly schooled his expression, “if I do that, then you’ll come to the party with me tomorrow night.”

What should have been a request or a question was once again a declaration. I stared at him. I really hated parties.

But he looked...oddly hopeful.

Oddly hopeful on Martin Sandeke made my heart melt. His expression, plus the feel of him all around me, meant I really didn’t have much of a choice.

“Fine.” I sighed, trying not to sound like a petulant teenager and *mostly* succeeding. “I’ll go.”

Stoichiometry: Calculations with Chemical Formulas and Equations

MARTIN DIDN'T PEE on me. In fact, he didn't even look at me or talk to me for most of the day.

Like the day before, the guys were up early practicing, Sam and I assumed our spots on the beach, and they arrived in the early afternoon for food. I left as soon as Ben arrived. He made me feel uncomfortable and icky—and I knew that was on me. I should have been able to ignore him, but I couldn't. So I left.

I milled around the house, exploring, expecting Martin to show up. He didn't. I found the music room—yes, this compound of excess had its own music room, with signed gold records from rock and country music legends lining the walls, signed concert posters, and pictures of a tall, lanky, geeky looking dude alongside several notable musicians and celebrities.

I recognized the geeky dude in the photos as Martin's dad and noted they had the same thick hair and lips. They were likely the same height. But that's where the similarities seemed to end. After inspecting the pictures several times, testing out the baby grand piano—it needed to be tuned—and discovering three beautiful Gibson guitars along the wall, I went back to my room and read.

Then I did some chemistry homework.

Then I took a nap.

Then I woke up on a man.

I didn't realize it at first, because I suffered from post-nap confusion. When I did come to my senses I discovered I was

half sprawled on a hard chest, and fingers were playing with my hair, brushing it back from my cheeks and neck, gathering it, twisting it, tugging it lightly.

I stiffened, shot upward, lifted my fists to defend my honor, and found Martin laying on the bed, his hands up like he surrendered.

“Whoa!” His eyes were huge and he gave me a startled smile. “Do you always jump up like that after sleeping?”

“Like what? A badass?” My voice was gravelly, still laced with sleep.

“Yeah, like a badass.”

I huffed, let my fists fall to my lap. “No. Only when I find Martin Sandeke on my bed.”

“Good to know.” His lips twisted to the side and his eyes swept up and down my form. “I’ll make sure to wear protection when I’m in your bed.”

“You should probably wear it even when we’re not in bed.”

“I always use protection.” He lifted an eyebrow meaningfully.

Pause.

Blink.

Oh...I get it.

Amazingly I didn’t blush. I just gave him a half-lidded *I’m not impressed* glare which made him burst out laughing.

“You are such a guy.” I gave him a reluctant smile.

“What do you know about guys?” He repositioned himself on the bed, scootching up and placing his hands behind his back against the pillows.

“Admittedly, not much. My dad isn’t much of a *guy*.”

“What’s your dad like?” Martin sounded interested, his face suddenly sober.

“Well, let’s see. He’s a scientist. He’s always losing things. His socks never match. He loves baseball, but he can’t play it very well. He tried to get me to play softball. I’d always sneak my

Gameboy in my practice bag then hide behind the bleachers and play Dr. Mario instead.”

“So he pushed you a lot?”

“No. Not at all. I think he wanted me to do it because he likes cheering for me...to be honest. He’s always the one taking pictures, at events, ceremonies, that kind of thing. He’s hardly ever in the pictures. I looked back at my high school graduation photos and realized he’d taken over a thousand, but he wasn’t in any of them. So I dressed back up in my cap and gown, did my hair the same, and—with George’s help—arranged to have a photographer come to the house so we could get some good shots.”

“Who’s George? Your ex-boyfriend? The one who didn’t know how to fool around?”

“No.” I glared at Martin, shook my head at his antics. “George is my mom’s personal assistant, he’s like an older brother to me.”

“Hmm...” Martin’s eyes narrowed a fraction, considering me, then asked, “Did your dad like that? What you did?”

I nodded, smiling at the memory. “Yeah. He did. He cried actually. Not a lot, just a little. The last time I visited him at work, I saw he’d hung up no less than six of the pictures in his office.” I laughed lightly, shaking my head. “He’s a goof.”

We were quiet for a long moment, sharing a stare. His mouth held a whisper of a smile as though he were living vicariously through my experience and found it a pleasant place to visit. It was...nice. Comfortable. Strange.

I cleared my throat, averted my eyes, finding this nice, comfortable, strange moment more disconcerting than the heated exchanges we’d shared so far. This felt like it could lead to something lasting and normal. We were Martin and Kaitlyn having a conversation, sharing things, like real people did. Not like billionaire playboys did.

“So, what about your dad?” I asked, because I was curious. I knew a lot about Martin’s dad because his dad was a genius,

sickeningly rich, and seemed to be in the news all the time dating some model or actress.

“My dad...” The smile left his eyes, and the one that lingered on his lips looked false.

“Yes. The man who raised you.”

He barked a humorless laugh and his eyes closed. “He didn’t raise me.”

I studied his features—his full, delicious lips, strong jaw, high cheekbones, and thick lashes—his perfect features. So perfect. I wondered what it would be like to be perfect, or at least seen that way by the outside world. It seemed to me that perfect—the word and all its connotations—might feel a bit like a cage, a defined floor and ceiling.

“Tell me about him,” I said, knowing I was pushing.

Martin opened his eyes and the bitterness that had been absent the last few times we’d been together was back. Jaded, jerk-faced Martin.

“He didn’t come to my high school graduation.”

I blinked at him. “Oh?”

“No. He said later that it was because I wasn’t valedictorian, but I think it’s because he forgot about it. It didn’t rank in his priorities.”

“Oh,” I said, because I wasn’t sure what else to say. His eyes were hooded, guarded, taunting—like he was daring me to feel sorry for him. I wouldn’t though. Or, rather, I wouldn’t show it.

“He’s the smartest man in the world, did you know that? He’s taken all the tests, whatever the fuck that means, and overall he’s the smartest.”

I placed my hand on his thigh and squeezed. “There’s more than one kind of smart, Martin.”

“That’s true,” he conceded, his eyes losing focus over my shoulder as he considered my words.

Feeling brave, I added, “I don’t think any of those examinations tested for parent-smarts, or priority-smarts, or valuing-your-incredible-son-smarts, because if they did, he would have failed.”

His brilliant gaze refocused on mine and I was somewhat surprised to see the bitterness leech out of his expression, leaving only sorrow and breath-stealing vulnerability.

“You’re a good person, Kaitlyn.” He was frowning at me, like I was a puzzle or a unicorn, like “good people” were the subject of fairy tales.

I opened my mouth, then closed it, then opened it again. “Thank you. You are too, Martin.”

His answering smirk looked wry and his eyes moved to my neck, where I still had the purplish marks from our encounter in the cove.

Normal and comfortable conversation gave way to our baseline: sexual tension. His half-lidded stare grew hot, the intensity of it built a fire in the area of my pants. He was forever building fires in my pants. The figurative Bunsen burner forever alight.

“You’ve never lied to me before,” he said, his voice sultry and teasing.

“I haven’t lied yet.”

“Parker.” He gave me a knowing look.

“What?”

“I’m not so good. You know that, remember? You called me a jerk-faced bully.”

“Well, so far you’ve been good to me, as far as I know.”

“I’d like to do more good things, better things, if you’ll let me...”

I was hot. My cheeks were flushed. I had to measure and regulate my breathing. The soreness between my legs was a lovely reminder of the good things he’d done, but so were the marks on my neck.

“No more hickies,” I blurted.

His eyes widened though he grinned. “Why not?”

“Would you like me to give you a hicky?”

“Hell yeah.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m going to call your bluff. I will give you a hicky.”

He held his hands out to his sides like he was offering himself to me. “Anytime, lambchop.”

“I’ll do it on your bottom and I’ll make them so big, you won’t be able to sit down.” I narrowed my eyes and pointed at him.

He groaned like a starving man taking a bite of the most delectable dessert, as though the very thought was more pleasurable than he could process.

I scoffed at him, snorting. “*You’re* a doofus.”

Then he sat up and scootched to where I sat, one hand sliding up my thigh into the hem of my cotton shorts, his other tucking my hair behind my ear. His eyes felt cherishing and a little lost. The effect of his triple assault—earnest eyes, caressing hands, sexy smile—potent.

“I told you before,” he paused, brushed a light kiss over my lips, leaving me breathless as he continued in a low voice, “don’t say it unless you mean it.”

I lifted my chin for another kiss, but to my surprise, Martin stood from the bed. I watched him, confused by his withdrawal, and wrapped my arms around my middle.

He glanced at me and must have sensed my confusion, because he explained as he walked backward to the door. “It’s late, you’ve been sleeping for hours. You missed dinner, again. I’ll get Rosa to bring you a tray before we leave, but we need to get going.”

“Going? Where are we going?”

His smile turned smirky and victorious as he said, “To the party of course.”

The party.

The bet.

I'd forgotten.

Well...barnacles.

* * *

MARTIN WON THE bet, even though he'd cheated, and therefore Sam was in my room getting me ready for the party. She saw me coming out of my room with my hair in a ponytail, wearing sweat pants, flip flops, and a raggedy stained T-shirt that showed Chuck Norris destroying the periodic table. It read, *The only element I believe in is the element of surprise.*

She didn't think my attire was appropriate.

Therefore she marched me back into my room, made me wait while she found some suitable clothes from her room, then dolled me up. She'd put me in a backless orange and purple paisley halter dress that made my boobs look fantastic. She also scrunched my hair with chemicals, separating my curls and somewhat taming the frizz.

To top it all off, she put makeup on my face. *Again.* It was some kind of personal record, makeup twice in one week. I gave her my resting bitch face while she applied mascara to my lashes.

"The straps of the halter covers your...", her eyes flickered to my neck, "...it covers your love marks."

I grumbled. "Just make me look pretty so I can throw myself off a cliff."

"You are being ridiculous."

"You know I hate parties."

“You didn’t complain this much on Friday.”

“That’s because I had a mission. I had a reason to be there, an assignment. Get in, tell Martin about the plot, get out, go home. This time,” I lifted my hands—and my newly painted purple fingernails—then let them drop noisily with a smack on my thigh, “this time I’m window dressing. I’m the paisley curtains.”

“This dress looks great on you.”

“I know, I’m sorry. You are being so nice. I just need to complain.”

I wasn’t kidding when I’d said I hated parties.

Hate!

I didn’t understand them. They seemed to bring out the worst in people. People laughed too loud, talked too loud, exhibited odd behavior, pretended to have fun when they weren’t having fun...or maybe that was just me. Maybe people *did* have fun at parties and I was the weirdo.

Despite my grumpy stance, I had to admit Sam was a miracle worker. I looked good.

We met the boys in the foyer; they were dressed casually in shorts and T-shirts, but they all seemed to have taken special care shaving, administering product to their hair, and applying cologne. It was a variable hurricane of smells—all flavored Proctor and Gamble mainly.

Yet some of my surliness receded when Martin looked up and our gazes met. When his eyes widened a little and he appeared to be some degree of blindsided by my appearance. His lips parted and his eyes dropped, moving up and down a few times, blinking.

Sam nudged me and cleared her throat, saying just loud enough for me to hear, “It’s not the dress and it’s not the makeup, it’s you.” Then she walked toward Eric, addressing her next comment to him, “This time I want to drive.”

“You drove last time.”

“Your point?”

He smiled at her, looking handsome and happy, then shrugged. “Fine, drive now, ride later.”

She hit him on the shoulder, but she laughed at his double entendre, and walked out the door. Meanwhile Martin pulled his eyes from me and I was a little perplexed to see a mask of boredom slip over his features.

“Hey Ray,” Martin said. “You got Parker? Griffin is going to ride with me.”

I felt like I’d just been pawned off and had no idea why. I didn’t even want to go to this party, Martin had *insisted*, and now he didn’t want to ride with me?

Ray glanced from me to Martin, then back again, his raised eyebrows and slightly parted lips betraying his surprise.

“Ssssure,” he said, hesitating, frowning his confusion. Martin and Ray exchanged a glance as I fiddled with the pocket of my dress, all the good feelings upon entering the foyer dissipating in the face of this strange exchange. As well, Ben was there and I could feel his slimy eyes on me. I wished my boobs didn’t look quite so fantastic in this dress.

Then Ray nodded with sudden vehemence. “I mean, absolutely.” He turned a bright smile to me. I was relieved to see how genuine it looked, and he offered me his arm. “I’d love to.”

“Thanks.” I gave him a tight smile.

Boys were weird and I hated them. Except Ray. Ray was nice.

We left first. He chatted amicably on the drive over, making me laugh with a story about how he fainted in high school when he had to dissect a stingray. He also had a really engaging smile and an openness about him and made me think we were friends, or he was my ally, or I could trust him not to eat my Chinese leftovers even when I wasn’t looking.

When we arrived at the house—another sprawling monstrosity, though slightly less sprawling—Ray ran over to my side of the car and helped me out. We were the first to arrive, so he seemed content to loiter by the car while we waited for the others.

Ray fit my hand in his elbow and gave me a big grin. “So, you and Martin, huh?”

“I don’t honestly know. Doesn’t make much sense to me,” I admitted, shrugging.

“It makes sense to me.” His words were quiet, softly spoken.

I looked up at Ray, surprised to find him looking down at me with equally soft eyes. “You’re smart, beautiful—”

I snorted, rolled my eyes.

“Wait, listen, you’re not pretty in a conventional way. You’re not pretty at all. You’re beautiful.”

I pressed my lips together and frowned at him, saying flatly, “And I have a really great personality, right?”

He grinned at that, looked like he was trying not to laugh. “Yeah, you do have a really great personality.”

“You’re nice, Ray.”

“No, *you’re* nice, Kaitlyn. And you have a nice laugh and a great, weird smile with that cute gap between your teeth.”

I mock-scowled at him, pressing my lips together.

He seemed to hesitate as he studied me, debating whether or not to give a voice to his thoughts. He must’ve decided in favor of the idea because he abruptly said, “You’re the girl that guys like us, if we’re smart and if we’re lucky that is, you’re the girl we marry. You’re the marriage girl.”

My jaw dropped and my eyes bugged out of my head. It took me three or four seconds to find my voice before I said, “What are you talking about?”

“I have two sisters, and I tell them this all the time. Be the marriage girl. Don’t be the hook-up girl. Don’t be her. She’s stupid and shallow. Yes, she gets lots of male attention, dressing in her sexy lumberjack or sexy nun costumes...for a time. But then she’s used up, hardened, disillusioned and desperate, because no one stays with the hook-up girl.”

I blinked at him, pulled my hand from his elbow, and backed up a step. “You’re disgusting and that’s completely

misogynistic. What if the hook-up girl is using you just as much as you're using her? What if she's just having fun? This is the problem with society. When a guy sleeps around, he's sowing oats. When a girl does it, she's a hook-up girl."

He held his hands up and shook his head. "I'm not going to defend society, I'm not saying it's right. I'm saying it's biology. It's evolution. It's programmed behavior."

"You do realize I'm nineteen, right? I may never marry. And I certainly won't be getting married any time soon."

"Doesn't matter. Your independence, the fact you aren't actively seeking your MRS degree—that the very idea is repellant—only makes you more of the marriage girl. You're the polar opposite of the hook-up girl."

I growled at him. He laughed at me.

"Listen, I'm not talking about the girl who wants to have fun and a good time with no strings attached. I'm talking about the girl who's looking for a free ride after the ride ends."

I snapped my mouth shut, scowling at him for real, and crossed my arms over my chest. I said nothing, because I knew that girl. Well, I didn't know her, but I'd overheard her plotting with Ben on Friday to drug Martin. *That* was what Ray meant when he was talking about the hook-up girl.

"Ah...I see you know what I mean."

I huffed. "I don't even know what we're talking about anymore."

"You. You're not the hook-up girl, you couldn't be if you tried. You're the girl we marry."

"How lovely for you, especially after you've spent your adolescence and early adulthood making girls like me feel like excrement."

He gave me a shrug that would have been charming ten minutes ago. "I'm just telling the truth. It might not be easy to hear, but that's the way of the world. You are the finest example of the marriage girl I've ever met. You're beautiful. From what I've seen, you're graceful under pressure, smart,

capable, and drama free. You come from a family that's historically famous for being brilliant and exceptional. You're nice—like really, really nice—genuine, and you're hilarious.”

“You think I'm funny now? Just wait until the party. There will be copious pointing and laughing then.”

Ray ignored me. “*That's* why you and Martin make sense. Because, if Martin is one thing, he's smart. He may not be nice, but he is fucking sharp as a Katana. He's never had to work for it, he's never had to work for anything. He's bored. He's had his fun. He's over the hook-up girls. He's ready for what's next and you are the Olympic gold medal, the Nobel Peace Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, and the Academy Award of marriage material.”

The rest of the carts chose just that moment to show up. I heard Sam's squeals of glee as she and Eric swung around the corner. They parked neatly and tidily in the space next to Ray's. Herc and Tambor were next, followed by Lee and Will, Ben by himself, then Martin and Griffin bringing up the rear.

Meanwhile Ray was looking at me like an older brother might look at his sister, or a father might look at his daughter, after delivering a hard truth about life. Like he was apologizing for the way things were, but not sorry to have delivered the message.

He stepped forward and offered me his elbow. “Did I ruin your night?” His tone was sober and apologetic.

I shook my head, took his offered arm, and said, “No.” He hadn't ruined my night because I was going to a party. There was no way to ruin something that was already ruined.

“I've known him forever,” he whispered, as the engines of our companions' carts turned off and they spilled out onto the gravel driveway.

“How long?” I asked, careful to keep my voice low.

“Since elementary school.”

I nodded, thinking about this, thinking about our bizarre conversation.

“He’s kind of crazy about you, Kaitlyn.”

My eyes cut to Ray’s. His mouth was a grim line. Before I could question him further, the others were upon us and our strange heart-to-heart was at an end.

“Let’s go!” Sam slipped her arm in mine and tugged.

Ray let me go with a small smile and a wave, and a look that said, *Let me know if I can help.*

I didn’t know quite how to respond to that, what look to give in return. So I turned my attention to the mansion in front of me and the task at hand. I couldn’t think about being Martin’s marriage girl, not until I was safely through the evening with the odious party at an end.

Then and only then would I examine this new development and try to figure out what, if anything, I was going to do about it.

Limiting Reactants

SOMETIMES I HATE it when I'm right. Sometimes I love it when I'm wrong.

Let me explain what happened. I'll try to keep it as emotion free as possible for the sake of all the people who can't deal with the ups and the downs, and the drama and the angst. This is because I'm one of those people. I can't deal with the drama. Admittedly, this is likely because I was raised in a drama-free household.

I once tried being dramatic when I was fourteen. My mother told me to add it to the calendar.

We arrived at the house, Sam and I arm-in-arm, the boys behind us. We walked in the door. Martin gave me a curt nod then left. That's right, he walked away. He disappeared into the crowd.

I stood there stunned for about twenty seconds before Sam pulled me closer and yelled over the music, "Maybe he has to use the bathroom or something."

"Or something," I said, feeling gargantuan levels of annoyed and hurt and confused. Boys were so epically strange and obviously placed on the earth to torture girls. Martin's behavior made no sense. I considered trying to sort it out, but ultimately decided the actions of men were beyond my comprehension.

I noted Herc was glued to Ben as they passed and were absorbed into the throng. I'd wondered if Ben would try to drug someone at this party, but now I suspected Herc has been assigned to keep an eye on him.

Sam, Eric—who, let the record show, stayed with Sam—and I took a brief tour of the party. We walked from room to room, surveying the surroundings, getting a lay of the land as it were.

To me it looked like a party in a big house and nothing more exciting than that. So...not at all exciting.

The rooms were gargantuan and lavishly decorated and were getting trashed by partygoers. A DJ played loud house music. People were dancing and getting drunk, and talking loudly to hear each other over the music. The majority of the girls were dressed in string bikinis. The majority of the guys were dressed in shorts and T-shirts, or board short swim suits. The pool was huge and wrapped around one side of the house. It had a waterfall and three slides as well as four hot tubs.

Sam said she wanted to go swimming. I hadn't brought a swim suit. She lifted up a bag on her shoulder and informed me that not only had she brought me a swim suit, it was a string bikini. I thought I might die of happiness.

That last part isn't true. I was being sarcastic. Sorry.

Sam and I left Eric on the deck with a promise to return once we were appropriately attired. I numbly got dressed, refusing to look at myself in the mirror, because...why? Why would I do that to myself? Afterward, we walked downstairs. We walked on to the deck.

And I saw Martin kissing a girl.

That's literally how it happened. I took two steps out the door, scanned the space for Eric, and instead saw a leggy blonde with her arms around Martin's neck and her body plastered to his, and her mouth suctioned on his like she wanted to taste his dinner.

I immediately averted my gaze.

Even though you don't feel calm doesn't mean you can't be calm.

"I'm going to kill him." Sam's voice was low with menace.

I gripped her arm to keep her in place and I shook my head, letting her see I considered the whole situation ridiculously futile. I doubted my gaze of acceptance had been very effective because I could feel tears sting my eyes. I turned back to the door and walked away from...all of that hot mess.

I heard her growl at Eric when he started to explain and felt her close behind me as I wove through the crowd. She stopped me when we reached the far end of a huge kitchen.

“God, what an asshole!” I could feel her eyeballing me. “What do you want to do?”

I shrugged and rolled my eyes so I wouldn’t cry.

I wouldn’t cry.

Nor could I deal with the funnel cloud of feelings that tore through me, because...I just couldn’t. I didn’t know what to say or do or where to look so I glanced over her shoulder. Several guys were doing keg stands near the largest refrigerator I’d ever seen.

“Kaitlyn, what do you want to do? Do you want to leave?” Sam poked me.

“No,” I said. I didn’t want to leave. I wanted to find a closet and go chill with myself, calm the rising tide of emotion. “But I do have to go to the bathroom.”

“I’ll come with.”

“No.” I shook my head as I spotted Eric hovering behind her, about five feet away. He gave me a grim, apologetic smile. “No. I’m actually fine, I just need a minute. I’ll come find you later.”

“Kaitlyn...”

“Really, I’m fine,” I yelled over the cheering keg standers and lifted my chin toward Eric, encouraging him to rescue me from Sam.

I did need a minute alone. Actually I needed several. Ironically, I was more likely to find alone time here, in this crowd, than I would if Sam and I left the party. She would want to rage against Martin, maybe pack up and leave the island tonight. I didn’t want to do that. I wanted to gather my thoughts, leave the party in a few hours, and fulfill my end of the bargain.

Then in the morning, after a very calm, rational discussion with Martin Sandeke, wherein I spelled out all the very factual

reasons he and I would never work—for example, how I now hated him with the fire of all the furnaces in hell, and that he was a lying liar who lied when he said he would never hurt me—I would leave the island.

I wouldn't cry.

I wouldn't accuse.

I hadn't really expected any better from Martin, so why should I be surprised now? Just because he gave me an orgasm near a waterfall. So what? It's not like he'd given me a unicorn. It was just an orgasm.

I would *not* cry. I would simply leave.

As soon as I arrived home, I would email my chemistry professor and request a new lab partner. And if I was very careful—and very lucky—I would never have to set eyes on jerk-face Martin Sandeke ever again.

~END PART 1~

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Penny Reid is the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* Bestselling Author of the Winston Brothers, Knitting in the City, Rugby, Dear Professor, and Hypothesis series. She used to spend her days writing federal grant proposals as a biomedical researcher, but now she just writes books. She's also a full time mom to three diminutive adults, wife, daughter, knitter, crocheter, sewer, general crafter, and thought ninja.

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Chapter One: Thermochemistry

I walked through the house and the partygoers in search of quiet, space, and cleanliness. In the end, numbness descended and I embraced it. Basically, I decided not to care, and instead thought about my ideal party.

Give me a small intimate gathering of five people, a dinner party, where one-on-one conversations can be had, where people talk about current events, good books, good food, and weird news. That was my idea of a good time.

Not keg stands with a hundred people on a private island, with a DJ and underage girls puking in the bushes while venereal diseases were shared in the hot tub. Add to that Martin ignoring me and making out with random girls.

Not that. That was not fun.

I happened upon the library, or a room with a lot of books. It was packed with people and I'm pretty sure a few someones copped a feel as I tried to squeeze past the bodies in favor of the books. I scanned the shelves and felt a spark of something good, something nice as I spotted *Twenty Years After*, by Alexandre Dumas. I'd been meaning to read it for a while. It was about the three musketeers twenty years after their initial adventures.

To my right someone threw up on the carpet. I glanced at the guy and decided that if people were throwing up on the carpet then no one would care if I borrowed a book.

I pulled it off the shelf, clutched it to my chest, and went in search of a quiet space. I roamed the house for a bit, thought about going back to the souped-up golf carts and just waiting for everyone outside, but dismissed the idea. The available reading light would be insufficient. I also dismissed the bedrooms, as those would be occupied. A bathroom was an obvious choice, but not a good one because they'd be in high demand, and it would be selfish of me to tie one up so I could read.

I tried to find a closet with a light. At one point I almost tripped over a passed-out Ben in the hallway. I glanced around and found Herc hovering nearby, talking to several girls. He gave me a nod. I returned it and continued on my way. I decided my suspicions were correct: Herc had been following Ben around. I wondered if Ben had inadvertently consumed his own date-rape drug.

I made a mental note to contact the campus police department about Ben when I got home. Martin had promised to handle it—whatever that meant—but if *handling it* meant no jail time for Ben, I would step in and do something.

Shaking off thoughts of Ben the rapist, I ended up stumbling upon the laundry room quite by accident. It was actually perfect. There was a clean comforter folded on the washer and plenty of reading light. Therefore, I arranged the blanket and hopped up on the machine, leant against the wall with the cushy comforter at my back, and began to read.

It was a truly excellent book. I didn't know how much time passed—two hours, maybe three. That Porthos...I swear, he's a riot. His antics always make me laugh. Although Athos was my favorite. I think it was because of his tragic past. I was a bit of a sucker for a guy with a tragic past.

“What are you doing?”

I lifted my eyes at the sound of Martin's voice, but not immediately. I finished the paragraph I was reading, then I looked up, holding my place in the book with my thumb.

He was dressed in swim trunks and he was wet, with beads of water dripping down his chest. As such, he looked super hot.

However, only the right side of his body was visible as the door blocked the other side. His hand was still on the doorknob and he leaned a tad to one side, into the room.

My eyes wandered over his form and I allowed myself to appreciate the beauty of Martin Sandeke like I might admire the beauty of a cold, soulless statue. Physically, he was a magnificent male specimen: corded muscle, long limbs, and rigid angles. Even his temples were drool worthy, especially since I knew his head housed a giant—albeit mismanaged—brain. Truly, he was one of our finest. His ancestors should really give themselves a big pat on the back.

A little pool of water had gathered at his feet, which made me wonder how long he'd been standing in the doorway. My eyes traveled upward again and I noticed he wore an angry expression. He looked livid.

I started a little at the heated annoyance in his stare. Then I glanced around the laundry room, searching for the source of his anger. I found that I was still alone. Therefore, I surmised his fury must be directed at me.

But, just to be sure, I said, “Who? Me?”

“Yes. You,” he growled, then stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. “What are you doing in here?”

I raised the book and tipped my head toward it. “I’m reading.”

Martin exhaled loudly, another growl. “I can see that, Parker. But why the fuck are you in here reading?”

I frowned at his use of profanity, my shoulders bunching with tension. I realized I'd gotten used to it, how often he cussed; I'd accepted it as part of him. But that was before he'd left me standing at the entrance to a party I didn't want to attend, and that was before I'd seen him kissing a random girl.

“It’s the first sequel to *The Three Musketeers*. I’ve been meaning to read it. I found it on the shelf in the library—or living room, or whatever room. There are too many rooms in this house, so I don’t know what half of them are called.”

Martin gritted his teeth, and I got the distinct impression he wanted to strangle me. “Parker. This is a party. And you’re in

the laundry room? Reading?”

I paused a beat to make sure this wasn't a trick question. When I could find nothing amiss with his interrogation, I nodded slowly. “Yes. This is a party. I am in the laundry room reading.”

“Why? What is *wrong* with you?”

My mouth opened and closed but no words arrived, because his questions continued to confuse me. Finally, I admitted, “Martin, I don't know what you want me to say or why you appear to be upset. I found the book when I was in one of the several rooms with lots of books. I've been meaning to read it. So I picked it up and found a quiet place. Why are you so angry?”

He charged at me and I ineffectually scrambled backward on the washing machine. In less than two seconds he'd pulled the book from my hands, slapped it on the counter at my left, and braced his arms on either side of my legs, leaning forward.

I realized he'd made me lose my page in the book. I decided to ignore my urge to vocalize this complaint, because his eyes were beyond heated.

They were incensed blue flames. I braced myself, my gaze wide and watchful, and flinched when he lifted a hand. I relaxed a smidge when he used it to push my hair off my shoulder.

When he spoke, his voice was low, strained, like he was trying very hard to control his temper. “I brought you here as my date. That was our agreement.”

I nodded once. “Yes. I know.”

“And, instead of talking to people or having fun, you're in here reading a book.”

I kept my voice even and calm, tried to sound soothing. “I am having fun. I'm reading a book.”

“You're trying to punish me for winning our bet, for bringing you here.”

I shook my head, hoping he would see the honesty in my denial. “I’m not. I promise. I like to read.”

“Who comes to a party, an entire mansion at your disposal, and reads Dumas in a laundry room? I’ve been looking for you for two hours.”

He’s been looking for me? For two hours? Why would he do that?

“If you’ve been looking for me then why are you wet?”

“This place has pools with caves, and I’ve been through all of them searching for you. You’re avoiding me.”

“Honestly, Martin...” I shrugged. “I didn’t think you’d notice.”

“You didn’t think I’d *notice*?” he roared.

I winced. “That’s right.”

He blinked at me once, then held perfectly still. His features completely motionless as though his face were stuck in angry suspension. I could see something building behind his eyes, like how you can see a far-off storm gathering in the distance. Therefore, I decided it would be best to explain before he lost control of his temper.

“Earlier, after I changed,” I motioned quickly to the string bikini I was wearing, “I went back to the deck and saw you had your hands full—and at one point, your mouth full of a tongue that wasn’t yours—so I figured you were good. You know, entertained, taken care of, no need of my escort services.”

He flinched, blinked rapidly during my explanation like I’d splashed water in his face, and his back straightened.

“You saw that?” He appeared to be surprised.

Lifting my hands up between us like I surrendered, I nodded and continued, “But, no worries. I understand that kissing random girls is in your wheelhouse. Which, like I’ve been saying all along, is another reason why we’re not compatible. Because, as I’ve said—and no judgment—I’m not really into kissing guys who kiss other girls. *That’s* not in my

wheelhouse. So you should go return to your women folk. I'll be down here reading; no rush. But if you plan on spending the night, let me know so I can ensure to hitch a ride with Eric and Sam, or Ray. For your own safety though, please make sure the sheets are clean. I overheard one of the guys in the library say that he thinks he has ringworm. I didn't ask which bedroom he used."

Martin's eyes narrowed as I spoke and his mouth curved into an unhappy line. When I was finished he lifted his gaze to the ceiling, subtly shaking his head; he paired an eye roll with a whispered, "Fuck."

Again, I flinched at the profanity and scrunched my nose, my gaze moving back to the discarded book. I wondered how much longer this conversation was going to take, because Porthos's shenanigans were seriously cracking me up.

"Parker..."

My eyes jumped back to his, which were now once again on me. He didn't look as angry, but he did look frustrated.

"Yes?"

Martin lifted his hand like he was going to put it on my leg, but stopped when I stiffened. He cursed again. Shook his head, again. Gritted his teeth, again.

"Look," he said, "if you'd stayed, then you would have seen me push her away. I'm not interested in her." His expression relaxed, and I saw the flash of hopeful vulnerability. My heart leapt in response.

Stupid heart.

He cupped my cheek, his thumb tracing the line of my jaw, and added, "I'm not interested in any girl here other than you."

I pressed my lips together to keep from frowning, though I knew my eyes betrayed my disbelief because Martin's frustration visibly spiked.

Before he could continue, I interjected, "Martin, even if I believed you—which I don't—it doesn't really matter. You pawned me off on Ray for the drive over. When we walked in

here, into this house, you left me. You walked away from me, and you didn't introduce me to anyone. You went off as though I wasn't there. I don't know any of these people and I'm terrible at parties."

His gaze turned thunderous. "Is that what this is about? Are you down here because you're pissed that I left? I thought I was doing what you wanted. You said that you didn't want me to be possessive and hover. Is this some kind of punishment? Because I don't respond well to that kind of mind-fuckery or passive-aggressive bullshit."

Despite my desire to stay calm, his words felt like gasoline on a fire I'd been carrying around in my chest, but had thus far managed to keep under control. My temper rose and with it the volume of my voice.

"No, Martin. I don't do passive-aggressive and I don't punish people. That *is* one of my life rules. I'm honest. If something upsets me, I'll let you know. But in order for me to be upset, I'd have to be surprised by your terrible behavior. What you did, leaving me in a room full of strangers and giving CPR to female partygoers didn't upset me, because I don't really expect more from you."

It was his turn to flinch. He sucked in a sudden breath and straightened away from me, his eyes cooling to frigid icicles. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're used to getting what you want or who you want when you want it. And I couldn't care less if you were upstairs, right now, having a ginormous orgy with the ringworm gang. Because I've known all along that you are a jerk-face and you don't know how to treat people with decency."

His mouth fell open, presumably at my words and my hostile tone, and he stared at me. His expression was that of someone who'd been stunned speechless.

I didn't like losing my temper. In fact, I prided myself on how laid-back and in control of my reactions I was, and how I never lost my temper. Therefore, this loss of control was

another irritating new development since spending time with jerky Martin Sandeke.

At length, he found his voice. Though, surprisingly, he didn't sound quite as angry. "If you don't like how I treat you, then why do you keep letting me kiss you?"

"Opportunity and lust."

Gah...that was spiteful.

He flinched like I'd kicked him and he glanced away. His reaction made my heart hurt, and therefore, I heaved a gigantic regretful sigh.

My words came out in a rush. "That's not true. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. The truth is..."

He lifted his eyes to mine, and the raw emotion made me forget myself. It made me forget to be cautious. Without really thinking about it or planning to do so, I gave him the whole embarrassing truth.

"You're smart—in fact, you have flashes of brilliance which is a huge turn on for me—and you're funny and charming when you want to be. And sometimes, you treat me with kindness and respect. Also, you're a good kisser. I thought at first it was my lack of experience, but now I think you're just an exceptionally good kisser. I like kissing you. I like the way it feels. I love how you make me feel when you touch me. But what feels good isn't always what's good for me, and I'm not willing to settle for being with someone who *sometimes* treats me well. I'd rather be alone."

With the end of my unplanned speech the numbness returned. I peered at him in a way I hoped demonstrated my acceptance of the situation and the impossibility of us, and I reached for my book. I did all this while I tried to suppress my blush of mortification. "Now, if you'll excuse me, Porthos is rather charming and I'd like to finish this chapter before leaving."

Martin's glare moved from me to the book. Before I understood his intention, he'd reached for the book, pulled it from me, and tossed it over his shoulder. I yelped my surprised unhappiness, but couldn't retrieve the novel because he'd

stepped forward again, crowding my space. He gripped my waist and yanked me forward so he was between my legs, and my chest was against his.

My mind might have been numbed to him, but my pants weren't. I sucked in a sharp breath at the contact, everything tightening and twisting and bracing for his touch.

He stared at me for a long moment, during which—I'm ashamed to admit—my heart rate quadrupled and my body responded by pressing more fully against him. When he did speak, his voice was a growly and hostile whisper. "Listen to me for one fucking second, okay?"

I also whispered, but only because he was whispering, "Only if you stop using the F-word like you get paid royalties every time you say it."

"I'll fucking use whatever fucking word I want to fucking use whenever I fucking want to," he whispered back.

I shook my head and spoke mostly to the other washing machine and two dryers lining the walls. "Again, proving my point, jerk-face."

"Kaitlyn, you are irritating."

"Feeling is mutual, jerk-face."

"Especially when you're right."

"Well, you can..." I paused, blinked at him and his shocking words. "Wait, what?"

His eyes moved over my face as he spoke and the tension in his body eased. Peripherally, I noted he was wrapping his arms around me, one hand sliding under the string of my bikini and against my bare back.

"I'm sorry." He was still using his growly whisper.

I narrowed my eyes, attempting to peer into and through his words, looking for trickery. As well, I was trying to ignore the wave of goosebumps that had spread outward from where his hot palm pressed against my back, and the fluttering butterflies in my stomach.

A beautiful man is the devil's most potent weapon.

A few seconds ticked by while we stared at each other. I wondered if I looked as hostile as he did.

I responded, "Do you even know why you're apologizing?"

"Yes." Another growl.

"Why? Why are you apologizing?"

"Because I shouldn't have left you when we got here. I should have kept you close to me, and I shouldn't have let Danielle close enough to touch me, not when we're together."

My brain stumbled on the word *together*, and I frowned my confusion at his accurate listing of offenses. "This seems like a miraculously sudden apology."

His jaw flexed. "Are you seriously going to give me shit about apologizing?"

I shook my head. "No. No, I am not. I accept your apology. Thank you for apologizing."

His eyes flickered between mine, then lowered to my mouth. "Now it's your turn."

"My turn?"

"Your turn to apologize."

My eyebrows bounced an inch upward. "What am I apologizing for?"

"For always assuming I'm an asshole."

~END SNEAK PEEK~

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The Legacy

Dylan Allen

He just won control of his legacy. Loving her could cost him everything.

Billionaire Hayes Rivers came into my life like a hurricane...

Heir to an oil empire, he was sexy and seductive, controlling and scorching hot. I craved every touch, every filthy promise that fell from his beautiful mouth, knowing he could break me. My past had left me battered and bruised, with scars he was determined to heal.

Loving him was like drowning—he consumed me, body and soul.

But Hayes has secrets of his own. And nothing could prepare me for the shocking pieces of our pasts that threaten to rip us apart.

When the truth is revealed will our love be enough to shelter the storm?

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V62020.lm

Dedication

FOR MY DAY DREAMERS.

YOU MAKE ME BELIEVE.

YOU ARE MY PEOPLE.

I LOVE YOU.

Prologue

THE LEGACY

HAYES

I hear the crunch of footsteps behind me, but I don't turn around. I know I'm not supposed to be here. It should worry me that I've been discovered. I've been warned repeatedly that this part of our property is off limits.

But I'm not worried.

Not today.

Maybe not ever again.

What could possibly happen to me that's worse than my father dying? The worst day of my life has already come and gone. The boulder of pain that has lodged itself into my chest is heavy and no other emotion has been able to find a foothold in it for weeks. With each day that's passed since my father died, I've become more convinced that what I'm feeling is something bigger, less definable than simple pain.

Pain is a basic, localized thing.

What *I* feel is sophisticated, all-encompassing.

Pain has a remedy.

There's no cure for what has taken root inside of me.

"Yo! What are you doing here?" a man's voice calls out from the clearing behind me. I'd been expecting Swish to come looking for me. I did bail on my father's funeral, after all. But that deep, loose, and jaunty voice is definitely *not* Swish.

When I turn around, a tall, young, dark-haired man I've never seen before is watching me with a wary look on his face. Like *I'm* the intruder. Yes, I'm breaking a rule by being here, but this is still my family's property.

I stand up slowly and face him. “Who the fuck are *you*?” I ask with as much aggression as I can manage.

“Remington Wilde.” He says his name like it’s a title. Like he expects it to mean something to me. And, it does. Even though I’ve never laid eyes on him before. His last name was among some of the very first words I ever learned.

Remington Wilde is the oldest son of my family’s biggest rival.

His family’s heir in training.

Just like me.

I’ve been raised to think of him as my nemesis.

I don’t know what I expected him to look like. Certainly not so... *normal*. He could be any other teenager at my high school. Like me, he’s taller and broader than average. He’s got a basketball tucked under one of his arms and is dressed like he’s been playing.

“Who the fuck are *you*?” he says just as combatively.

“Hayes Rivers,” I answer and straighten my spine. The same surprise I felt flickers in his eyes for just a fraction of a second before he schools his expression—but I don’t miss it.

Then, he starts dribbling the ball. His hand meets it every time it springs off the ground, but his eyes never stray from me. I’d heard he was a major basketball talent. But he attended the public high school, Lamar, and I go to the private Strake Jesuit. Our teams have never played each other. But if his playing is anything like his skillful but absentminded dribble, he was clearly born to hold a basketball.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” he says and draws my eyes back to his.

“Neither are you,” I shoot back.

We stare each other down. The longer I look at him, the more I’m sure I’ve seen him before.

He narrows his eyes at me, crosses his arms over his chest and curls his lip. “I came to get a ball that came over the wall. But

you look like you've been making yourself comfortable back here." He nods at the sleeping bag that's stretched across the huge boulder in the center of the clearing. I've been coming here since the day my father died. It's been my escape from an endless stream of people who have been at our house to pay their respects.

"So?" I respond with a defensive shrug. I nod at his arm. "Looks like you got your ball. Why are you still here?" I ask.

His eyes narrow briefly, but his expression stays neutral.

"I thought your old man's funeral was today," he says casually, quietly. And yet, the reproach in his tone hits me like he yelled them inches away from my face. A flush of shame washes over me.

Of course, he knows. Everyone does. His mother, the widely-respected Tina Wilde, sent flowers. Eliza hurled the vase against the wall when she read the card, and they were not invited to the funeral. But I know their family must be watching ours closely to see how things change now that my father is gone. I wonder, too. He looks nothing like the mythical foe I'd imagined he would. But, our families have shared nothing more than the wall that divides our properties for the last—nearly—fifteen years.

He glances at his watch, frowns at it and then looks back at me. "It can't be over already? At nine o'clock in the morning?"

I imagine St. John's United Methodist Church packed to the rafters with people, pretending to care that my father is dead, mingling with the handful that really do. I've been handed so many business cards this week by people hoping that *the Riverses will continue to be customers*.

I've thrown them all away.

"Nah, it's probably just starting." I kick at the leaf-covered ground and avoid his disapproving gaze.

"So ... why are you here and not there?" he asks.

"I already said goodbye," I say with a shrug of my heavy shoulders.

“What about your mom? Your brothers? Don’t they need you there?” he asks. Kindness softens the disapproval in his tone.

I don’t like it.

I don’t want it.

But, I do feel a flush of shame that I’m not there for my brothers. I push that down and say words that are much closer to the surface and less problematic for me.

“She’s not my mom,” I say.

“Oh, she’s not?” He looks genuinely surprised.

“Nope. She married my dad when I was seven,” I say.

“So, they’re your step brothers?”

“They’re my *brothers*,” I clarify. I hate that word. We haven’t made that distinction since the first year our parents got married. Their mother was an equal opportunity terrorist. She made them as miserable as she made me and we’d formed a real brotherhood in the trenches of Eliza’s crazy. As far as I can tell, the only reason my father married her is because she was a wealthy widow with the right last name with potential spares for his heir. He adopted them, so we’re not just brothers in spirit—the law says we are, too.

“She’s never been my mother,” I say, and my voice sounds hollow in my own ears. I’ve never said that to anyone about Eliza. I’ve hidden my resentment. Mainly for my father’s sake. But now that he’s gone, so is my restraint.

“Where’s your real mom?” he asks.

“She died.” I shrug because I can’t do anything else. “I’m an orphan.” I say that word out loud for the first time and it tastes as bitter as I knew it would.

“Go be with your family, kid,” he says.

“I’m not a kid, and you’re not old enough to be calling me one,” I say.

“I’m eighteen. In college. My dad’s been dead since I was two, and my mama hates the sight of me. So, I’ve been old enough for a lot of things for a long time,” he says. There’s nothing in

his tone that implies that he's sad about his father, but now that I know what it feels like to have to say 'my dad's been dead ...' Or maybe he just has a well-honed poker face. I need to work on mine.

"Listen, your brothers are going to need you to act like you have your shit together. If you can't do it for yourself, do it for them." He puts a hand on my shoulder, and it's oddly comforting—not at all awkward. Still, I don't want kindness or comfort. So, I shake it off.

"I'm surprised you even care. Don't the Wildes hate the Riverses? Isn't that why we've never even *seen* each other before?" I ask.

"First of all, it's the Riverses who hate the Wildes." He bounces his ball once. "And I've seen you before. Didn't know who *you* were. You and that little cheerleader girlfriend of yours come into Eat! over on Wesleyan. I work behind the deli counter. You probably didn't notice since you didn't take your sunglasses off the whole time you were in the store," he says and dribbles his ball a few more times.

"You *work* there?" I ask.

"Yeah, who else is going to?" he says.

"Doesn't your family own it?" I ask.

"Yes, and we all work in the businesses until we're old enough and smart enough to run them. We ain't like the Riverses," he says, his dark eyes cocky and daring me to challenge him. I can't. It's true. My family members don't work in any of their businesses. They don't work at all. But damn if I'm going to let him know it bothers me. So, I smirk.

"I'll say hi next time I come in. Maybe you can make me a sandwich," I say.

"*Today*, I'll cut you some slack and let you get away with that. But don't try that on a day that's *not* your father's funeral," he says and bounces the ball one last time before he tucks it back under his arm.

"Or what? You'll leave the mayo off my sandwich?" I scoff.

He snorts out a laugh and throws the ball so hard and fast that I barely catch it before it hits me squarely in the chest. “Nah. I’ll use my hands to show you why I can call you *kid* any time I want.”

I throw the ball back with as much force as I can. He catches it without even looking. Then he turns and starts to walk back through the little clearing in the woods that leads to the door I’ve never dared to open. It’s the emergency access to Rivers Wilde, the neighborhood the Wilde family established when they bought this land from my father, right around the time I was born.

He’s almost disappeared into the brush when he stops and looks back at me.

“Go to your dad’s funeral. Trust me, you’ll never finish saying goodbye, and you’ll be glad you saw him this one last time.”

He leaves, and after a few minutes, so do I.

* * *

“You wanted to see me?” I duck my head through the heavy oak door of Swish’s office. He’s had this office in Rivers House for as long as I’ve been alive.

The smell of old books, aged leather, and coffee is comforting. I breathe a sigh of relief when I see that he’s alone. Everyone else has met with me in pairs—mostly with their lawyer present. I haven’t had a truly personal conversation in a whole week.

“Hello, son.” Swish greets me in his swashbuckling East Texas twang that sixty years of living in Houston hasn’t ridden him of. Despite the red-rimmed eyes and the disheveled, finger-mussed state of his normally perfectly styled, legendary silver hair, he’s smiling at me. It’s a beleaguered lift of the left corner of his mouth, but it’s more of a smile than I’ve seen on his face

in a month. It's sincere and warm, and when he says, "I'm glad to see you," I believe him.

He tugs his glasses off his nose, dangles, then drops them wearily onto one of the haphazard, stacks of paper littering his desk.

"Come in, close the door." He gestures to it and then hefts his bulky frame out of his chair and strides over to sit in one of the tufted dark red leather seats in front of his desk.

"Sit down, please." He nods at the identical chair across from him. The warm smile is gone and what's replaced it is so grave, so grim, that my stomach clenches. I wipe my suddenly sweaty palms down the front of my jeans-covered leg and do as he asks.

He groans through a yawn, presses the heel of his hand to his bleary eyes and rubs them slowly.

He's oozing fatigue, and it's catching because I'm starting to feel weighed down by my own as I watch him. He looks old. And I'm very aware of the fact that time is not on his side ... or any of ours, really. But, he folds his gnarled, spotted hands over the middle of his infamously large beer belly and leans back in his chair.

"The last two weeks have been ... difficult." His voice is weighed down by all the things we've faced this week.

Difficult.

Memorizing the first nineteen lines of *Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* in Olde English for class last month was *difficult*.

Having to live without someone you love and knowing you'll never hear their voice again isn't difficult. It's impossibly hard.

I wish he would get to the point so I can go back to my room and put on some music and try to sleep. My father loved Elvis. I used to think it was such an odd thing for a boy from East Texas—who grew up sucking at the teat of Wednesday night Bible study, Friday night football, and Sunday morning service—to love music that my grandmother used to call the *Devil's seduction*. The night he died, I played one of his albums on

repeat and fell asleep to “*Can’t Help Falling in Love.*” Now I can’t sleep without listening to it.

“Your father was like a son to me. That I have outlived him *and* his father ...” He shakes his head. “I don’t know how to feel about it, Hayes. But the one thing I know is that I wouldn’t wish it on anyone. I’ve had a real difficult time finding reasons to be grateful for my advanced age, son. But today, I’m glad I’m here—because you need someone,” he says solemnly.

This time, his lips only quirk when he attempts to soften the graveness of everything.

“You don’t have to smile. I don’t even try,” I say. We’re familiar bedfellows when it comes to sitting across from each other with grim sadness between us.

When my father’s brain tumor returned so aggressively—and within weeks of his surgery—it was Swish who told me it was time to get ready to say goodbye. He was dead two weeks later. In so many ways, my life feels like it’s come to a screeching halt.

I haven’t been to school. My stepmother has taken my brothers and gone to her parents’ in College Station. And my uncle Thomas and his newest future ex-wife have moved into the wing that belonged to my father. I don’t know how he can stand to be in there. The last time I walked into that part of the house, it smelled like my dad, and I couldn’t stomach being there. I can’t imagine sleeping in his old bed, breathing air that smells like him. I miss him so much.

“I was raised in a different time. And your father, God rest his soul, reminded me so much of his father,” he adds,

“They weren’t anything alike,” I interject and lean forward because I want to see his agreement with my own eyes.

Instead, all I see is pity.

“They weren’t,” I insist.

He sighs. “I know your grandfather was ruthless at times.”

“All the time,” I mumble.

“People tell all sorts of stories about him. Your father didn’t speak highly of him. Thomas only speaks of him in hushed tones of reverence. The truth of the treatment his legacy deserves is somewhere between those two. But, he did what he had to, to preserve the family’s traditions of service. As did your father. And you will, too. Remember that you’ve been raised to honor and preserve your family’s money and their name. Your grandfather was the first Rivers to serve the family’s business in a purely figurehead capacity. Your father expanded some of the roles, but they both saw to it that the family’s businesses were run by people who’d done more to prove themselves worthy than just inheriting it. So, as chairman of the board, the title your father held—and that you will hold—is still an important one because you’re in charge of the family’s personal fortune. You’ve seen the reports in *Forbes*?” he asks.

“Yes, I have no idea if they’re true. I mean, do we really have twenty billion dollars?” I ask.

“There is no ‘we.’ It’s just you. And it’s much more than that,” he says, and my jaw drops.

“*Me*?” I ask.

“Yes, *you*,” he says mirthlessly.

“Holy shit.” I sigh and lean back.

“A lot of that comes from your ownership in Kingdom stock. But Hayes, the trust doesn’t give *you* access to any of it until you’re twenty-five. Until then, your guardian has control over it, and the trustee has control over him.

“The will says that in a case where the heir is too young to assume, a regent or guardian is appointed. It would have been your mother. But ...” He purses his lips.

So, I finish his sentence for him. “But, she’s dead, too.”

“Yes, she is,” he says with a new heaviness in his voice. “Your great-great-grandfather Rivers was obsessed with the idea of establishing his own dynasty. Unfortunately for Thomas, it means his inheritance and importance to the family is much

smaller. But now, as your guardian, he'll also be the acting chairman," he says grimly.

"So, it's only until I'm thirty?"

"Yes, but I know he wants that chairmanship permanently. And he wants it to pass to *his* heirs. That useless cousin of yours would then inherit after him," Swish warns me, and my worry spikes when I think about my cousin Jesse, who lives with his mother in Miami. We've never gotten along. I can't imagine him leading our family.

"As we learned yesterday, your father's adoption of your brothers doesn't make them heirs as he'd hoped. So, the only way Thomas could ever take your place permanently is if you died. And you're so young, he has no hope. But he's going to do everything he can to find a way to undermine you. And he'll have sixteen years to do it," he says.

"What can I do to stop him?" I ask.

"Nothing. I think he's going to ask me to resign as the trustee of the family foundation where all the money sits," he says.

"But you won't. Right?"

"No. And he can't remove me. But son, I'm eighty-two. I'm not going to be here forever. And he'll have complete discretion to pick the next trustee," he says, and I feel a surge of worry.

Each word stings like they're wrapped in shards of glass. My stomach dropped when they read the will yesterday. I didn't expect to become chairman right away. I'm only fourteen. But to have no say—at all—over anything completely surprised me. What was I going to do for the next sixteen years?

"Okay, so what happens now?" I ask.

"Well, that's what I want to talk to you about. Your father made plans right before he died." His voice is grave, and he stops and watches me while his words sink in.

"What plans?"

"You're going to live with your aunt Gigi. In Positano," he says.

“Who?” I ask sharply, sure I hadn’t heard him correctly.

“Your father has an older sister, Georgiana, but everyone calls her Gigi,” he says again, and I sit back. A cold weight spreads in my core as I look at Swish with eyes that go from wide with shock to narrowed in suspicion.

“No, he doesn’t,” I insist.

“Yes, Hayes, he does,” he says softly. He watches me solemnly, and I realize, with real horror building in my chest, that he’s telling the truth. But ... my father wouldn’t hide his sister. Would he?

“How come I’ve never even heard her name before?” I ask, the demand in my voice softened by the quaver in it. My entire *body* is shaking. My mind is whirling. I don’t understand.

“She was disinherited before you were born,” he says, and I blanch at the idea.

“Are you serious?” I ask rhetorically—the answer is obvious from the look on his face.

He just nods.

“But-why?” I stutter on my question because I can’t imagine that there’s an answer that would help me understand.

“She chose a man over her family, and that was that. Your grandfather wrote her out of the will, out of the family Bible, out of the family tree, and for him, she hasn’t existed in almost sixteen years,” he says.

“His own daughter?” I ask. My grandfather was not a kind or loving man, but he behaved like family was paramount to everything. And he liked control. Over everything. I can’t imagine him having a child out in the world whom he couldn’t rule over with his iron fist.

“It was her choice. Your father stayed in touch with her—secretly. The week before he died, he asked her to be your guardian,” he says.

“He did?” I ask dumbly. But I’ve stopped thinking. What else don’t I know about my family? About my father? Part of me wants to know. The other part hopes I never find out.

“I would have rather he’d let me be your guardian, but he insisted. He wants you to live with her. And she agreed. So, she’s coming to get you, Hayes.” His big body heaves with his sigh like he’s relieved to have said it.

“Coming from ... where’d you say? Post what?” I ask. My head is spinning; I don’t even recognize my own voice.

“Positano,” he says with a weird accent.

“Where the hell is that?” I ask.

“Italy,” he says.

“What’s she doing there?”

“She lives there,” he says slowly, his face contorted like he’s bracing for a strong gust of wind.

“In *Italy*?” I ask.

“Yes. She got married and moved there with her husband. They’re not married anymore, and she stayed after they got divorced.”

“Is she moving here?” I ask hopefully.

“No,” he says that and nothing else.

“You’ll leave with her in two days. And you will take care of yourself and your name,” he says.

I look at him, confused and in denial about what he’s saying and shake my head as it starts to settle.

“But—I live *here*. I just made the JV team. I have a girlfriend,” I say and my life flashes past my eyes like a movie. But the reel is withered, burned, incomplete. My heart races as panic starts to set in.

I scramble to my feet. The chair scrapes against the floor as I push out of it.

“I’m in the middle of my freshman year. I just—”

“There are no options for you to stay here.” He cuts me off brutally.

“But ...” I shake my head helplessly. How, in the span of two days, can my life go from one thing to something completely

different? “I don’t even know her. We’ve never even met,” I say.

“You will get to know her. She’s already here,” he says. I surge out of my seat and turn around to scan the room.

“What I mean, Hayes, is that she’s in Houston, at the St. Regis. Not here at Rivers House. She got in very late this evening,”

I sink back down in my seat, disappointment ripe in my chest. I sit, my head bowed, my hands dangling from my knees and only half listen to what he’s saying.

“Now, she’s going to do her best to make sure that you’re ready for the chairmanship when you turn thirty. Chairman of the board at Kingdom is a figurehead mainly, but there’s also power and discretion that comes with that role. So, just because you’re not an executive making decisions, you need a good understanding of the company’s business model. Every year the chairman, with the advice of the board, revises or reaffirms the platform and goals. The foundation and the family have had decades of solid leadership. I’m sure that when you’re ready to take over, you’ll continue that legacy. For now, it is up to your uncle to act in your stead.”

I drop my head into my hands.

“I know ... I know. Since his last divorce, he’s taken an advance on his income from the trust nearly every month,” he says sadly but with growing conviction in every word. “As the trustee, I have discretion over what happens to your money. I’m going to make gifts to you from the trust every year. It will be a lot of money, and you can’t touch it until you’re ready to assume the chairmanship. But at least this will keep it out of Thomas’s reach.”

I don’t say anything. I can’t. And what would be the point? I have no say in anything.

“And Gigi will take good care of you. You listen to her. You father trusted her with your life. I do, too.”

“My life?” I ask.

“I mean that you are your father’s only child. If you die without children or a wife, your uncle inherits,” he explains.

My jaw drops. “*Die?*” I ask in horror.

“I’m not saying he would try to *kill* you,” he says dismissively.

“Just that if something happens to you, the entire family’s future will be in his hands. And he is *not* fit to hold it,” he says in a display of temper that is rare and telling.

“I don’t know. None of this makes any sense,” I mutter and drop my face into my hands and try to think.

“One more thing,” he says, and I don’t even look up. One more thing—a million more things. I don’t think things could feel any worse.

“By virtue of being a Rivers, you’ll have people who try to get close to you just to use you for money or access to something they perceive you as a gatekeeper of.”

This speech, at least, is familiar. My father drilled that into me from an early age. Not because he didn’t want me to have friends but because it could never be at the expense of the family. It was first. For him and for me. He married Eliza after a very short time dating. She was a recent widow. Dare, my youngest brother, hadn’t even been one year old.

They never loved each other. He married her because she was young, from an old family, and had her own wealth to bring to the marriage. Just like my mother had been. He told me that the woman I chose had to be someone just like that. “*Love grows where there’s commonality of purpose. And if it doesn’t, at least you will always have that to hold you together. But you must never yield your family duty to anything else.*”

“All of this is your legacy.” Swish waves his arms around the vast room that’s been his seat of power for the last forty years. “You have to come back and make sure the Rivers name, mission, values, and ethics remain intact. Your family isn’t respected just because it’s wealthy. It’s because they use that money to do good, to create opportunity. They have been to Houston what the Medicis were to Europe during the Renaissance. And you’ve got to remember everything your

father taught you. Gigi will do a good job keeping your feet on the ground.”

“What does she know about running a business?” I ask bitterly. I resent her already.

“The running of the business isn’t your role—the stewardship of the family’s foundation and money is. Your father died too young. You’re not ready, but I’m going to make sure that when your time comes, you are,” he says. There’s a calm in his voice that tears at me. How can he be calm? In less than two weeks my entire world has been ripped to shreds, and I’m being sent halfway across the world to live with a woman I don’t know.

“I don’t want to go,” I say, and I wish again that my parents were here.

I think about my brothers. They’re still so little. Stone, the closest in age to me, is only ten. But we’re close. Despite their mother’s attempts to put distance between us, we have always gravitated toward each other.

“I bet Eliza will be happy,” I mumble to the floor.

“Sadly, I agree. But even more reason why you should go.”

I listen to everything he’s saying, and with each word, a piece of my world goes dark. I promise myself that when I have the chance, I will be ready. I’ll do what I must. Go where I need to and when it’s time, I’ll come back and make my father and Swish proud.

Part I

Chapter One

Hello

Hayes

“Can you hold the door, please?” a voice calls from down the hall. This is the third time the doors have attempted to close and someone has stopped us. I’m standing by the button panel and have no intention of pressing the “Door Open” button.

“Excuse me,” a woman behind me says and then a feminine finger complete with a short, but perfectly manicured, light pink fingernail slips around my side and presses the button just as the door is about to close completely. I was reading emails when I stepped onto the lift, so I didn’t see who was standing right behind me. But, now I can feel her. Her breasts press into the back of my arm and her perfume, something with roses, wafts up my nose.

If there were a single inch of space in the elevator I would turn around to see who she is. But there’s not. As soon as her finger disappears, I press the “Door Close” button and keep my finger on it.

“That was rude,” the woman behind me says as the door shuts in the face of the woman who called out for us to wait.

“Oh, well,” I say in return. I look up at the top of the mirrored elevator ceiling. I can only see the tops of our heads. Hers is crowned by a mass of blonde waves that appear to tumble down her back. It’s pushed off her tanned, delicate shoulders. Each one is bisected by two skimpy black strips of fabric holding up what must be a very lightweight shirt.

As the elevator stops on consecutive floors and people step off, it becomes less and less crowded. But she stays pressed to my back, and her hand moves, like she’s fidgeting with something between us.

I wonder briefly if she's a pickpocket, and just as I start to turn around to ask her what the hell she's doing, she speaks.

"Please don't move. My necklace is snagged on your shirt," she says with enough alarm in her voice to halt my movements.

The elevator reaches the next floor and a couple gets off. She and I are the only ones left.

"Shit, I can't get it loose," she mutters. I start to turn again. "If you move, it'll break the chain," she says again in her voice which calls to mind smoke. And rain. And sex.

"Yes, got it," she says right as the door to my floor opens. She steps back and the rush of cool air between us isn't refreshing. It's just a very sharp contrast to the warm, soft heat that had just been there. I step off the lift and turn around. I stop in my tracks. Her eyes are wide set and almond-shaped. Their color is a medley of the same blues and greens of the sea that surrounds this villa. Not clear, but compelling and inviting. They make her face, which is a very nice face, completely extraordinary.

Her gaze is direct and questioning while our eyes are locked. Then, it travels down my chest, lingers at the waist of my low-slung shorts before they skim my bare legs and my sneakered feet.

I cough, and she looks back at my face. The muscles in my chest tighten at the naked admiration in her eyes.

"Hello," I say and extend my hand. She flushes the prettiest shade of pink and tucks her hair behind her ear.

Damn.

She's got the doe-eyed, sex kitten look down to a science. Her eyes are wide with surprise. Her lips are parted ... *fuck*, her lips are perfect.

She looks like a fucking snack—the perfect portion of everything I like. But it's the one thing I know about her that corrals the compulsion I have to find out if that sweet pink mouth is as soft as it looks.

“Hello,” she says slowly, a tentative smile spreading across those lips. Her voice is even sexier when paired with the vision standing in front of me.

She holds out her hand and shakes mine. When our palms touch, my pulse jumps and every one of the thousands of nerve endings that run along the surface of my skin wake up. She flushes even darker as our fingers wrap around our hands. We hold hands for a beat longer than necessary before she gasps softly and pulls her hand away.

“My necklace,” she says as if she’s explaining. She holds her open palm out to me. A delicate gold chain with a pendant in the shape of a raindrop hanging from it sits in the center of her hand.

“Is it broken?” I ask and cup her hand in mine and lift it up so I can see better. It’s not necessary, but I like touching her. She steps closer to me.

“No, but I had to unfasten it to get it unhooked from your shirt.” She pulls her hand out of my grasp and drops the chain into my still upturned palm. “Would you mind?” The heat in her voice turns that question into a not-so-subtle ‘come hither.’ The unmasked attraction in her eyes hits me like a fist to my chest, and I have to clear my throat before I can respond.

“Of course,” I say. She turns her back to me and bows her head. Those tumbling curls spill down to the middle of her back. Her black camisole skims her waist and exposes a bare slice of smooth, tanned skin.

She’s short, a whole foot shorter than my six foot three—and petite.

Well, except for that ass.

Shit.

I’m an ass man and that is one of the finest I’ve ever seen. Clearly genetics and exercise have been making magic back there because it’s fucking perfect. Her hips flare and then bam! There it is!

She cups the curtain of hair and sweeps it off her neck and lays it over one shoulder. I step forward and take in the creamy soft

expanse of skin that covers her back and neck. She glances over her shoulder at me. Her lower lip is captured between her teeth and her eyes are hooded as she looks up at me through her lashes. “You okay?” she asks when I don’t move or say anything.

Get your shit together, Hayes.

“Sorry.” I shoot her an apologetic smile. “Turn around,” I say and she nods before she does. I reach over her and drape the chain across her neck. I look over her shoulder. The teardrop is resting in the middle of her chest. I drag it slowly up and into place. I watch, transfixed, as it glides over her skin like I imagine my own fingers would. When it slides into the small hollow between her collarbones, I draw the clasp together at the nape of her neck.

I fumble with the tiny closure a few times. “My hands are big.” I apologize as my fingers brush the soft skin of her neck. She exhales sharply and gooseflesh ripples over her skin. There’s no air conditioning in the hallway. I smile to myself. Maybe this weekend won’t be as mundane as I’d feared. I manage to close it and she turns around and rewards me with the prettiest fucking smile I’ve seen all year.

The loud trill of my phone fills the air like a siren, and she jumps back. I glance at the phone in my hand and grimace. “Excuse me, I have to take this,” I say and send her an apologetic smile.

Her answering smile is the epitome of graciousness. . “Of course. I’m on this floor ... maybe I’ll see you later.”

“Absolutely,” I respond before I turn toward my room and answer my phone.

“Hayes, honey, you there?” my aunt Gigi asks as I walk into my room.

“I’m here. How’s my favorite girl?” I ask.

I flip the switch on the air conditioner, pull my shirt over my head, and go stand beneath the wall unit that’s perched above the south facing window.

“You sure know how to make your Gigi feel special, Hayes. How was your flight?”

“It was good. I worked,” I tell her.

“Of course, you did. Now, before I get down to business, I want you to make me a promise,” she says.

“That’s not fair. I can’t agree to promise if I don’t know what you’re going to ask,” I cajole her. Even though I know exactly what she’s going to ask.

“Don’t be smart, Hayes,” she chides me in the way only she can.

“Pardon me,” I apologize sincerely.

“I want you to promise me you’re going to try and have a good time. Don’t scowl so much. That face of yours is so handsome when you smile, honey,” she coos.

“Okay, sure thing. I promise,” I say.

“You’re lying, but I love you for humoring me,” she says airily.

“It’s what I live for,” I return dryly.

“Don’t be smart. I’m helping the movers sort boxes and they can’t find the box with your crockery.” She sounds distressed.

“What’s crockery?” I ask and lean against the door of my room and gaze out the window at the copse of pine trees that provide a natural border for the property and perfume the air all year round.

“Your plates, glasses, bowls,” she explains.

“Oh, that’s because there are none. I never eat at home. I didn’t see the need for them,” I answer honestly.

“Oh, Lord, Hayes. People will think you were raised in a barn,” she cries.

“No one will think I was raised in a barn,” I say dryly.

“I’m going to the Crate Barrel in Highland Village to place an order. I don’t know if they deliver, so you’ll need to pick it up

when you get back. I'm just going to go over the list of things I'm getting," she says.

"Thanks for doing this for me, Gigi," I say.

"Well, it's the least I can do since I won't be here when you actually move in. And I should be thanking *you* for going to the wedding for me, honey. I know he's a pretentious little shit, but his mother was my dearest friend in Positano. I would have hated to not have anyone there. And *maybe*," she drawls conspiratorially, "you'll meet the girl of your dreams," she ends hopefully.

"Have you seen Thomas?" I ask, changing the subject.

"No." She sniffs like she smells something bad. "He and I haven't been in touch at all. I just shudder to think what the foundation would look like if he had even one more year with it. I'm so glad you're moving back here," she says.

"Nice to know you'll miss me," I say dryly.

"*Of course, I will*, baby. But I'm glad you're getting on with your life," she says. But I can tell there's something on the tip of her tongue by the way she catches her breath at the end of that last sentence.

"What's going on?" I ask and brace myself. My aunt is the most direct human being on the planet. The only thing she's ever been hesitant to talk about is Renee. "What did she do this time?"

"She accepted your offer," she says.

"How do you know that?" I ask. I put her on speaker and open my email application.

"Well, I was at that lovely restaurant in your new neighborhood ... oh, Hayes, I *love* it here," she says dreamily.

"You were about to tell me how you know about Renee," I say impatiently.

"Oh, sorry, I just get so carried away talking about this place. The Wildes have done such a good job—"

"Gigi ..."

“Okay, sorry,” she says like she’s being put upon.

“Just tell me about Renee,” I say with feigned patience. She doesn’t like to be rushed. And slows down purposely sometimes when she is.

She clears her throat, and I can just see her, tucking her feet underneath her and sweeping her dark, salt-and-pepper hair off her shoulders before she speaks. “Well, like I said, I was at a restaurant. Her lawyer was sitting at the table right behind me!” she says triumphantly.

“How did you know he was her lawyer? I don’t think I’d know him on sight, and I’ve sat across the table from him at least a dozen times in the last two months,” I say.

“Hayes, you know I never forget a face. Also, I heard him say her name. It’s why my interest was piqued in the first place and then I realized who he was and what he was talking about,” she explains. “Stop interrupting and listen,” she says impatiently.

“Excuse me, go on,” I say sarcastically.

“Of course, he had no clue who I was. He was celebrating. His thirty percent is more than you should have given that disloyal little bitch all together,” my aunt says in her most severe voice.

“I’m just glad it’s done.” My voice is toneless. Renee, my ex-wife and my biggest regret, sued me two weeks ago. Gigi introduced us. We were all in Carmel for an annual party one of her friends throws every Fourth of July. I had just finished my MBA at Wharton and was working for a KPMG in Rome. I’d come out for the party because I was turning twenty-five and had somehow managed to let Gigi convince me that I needed to find a wife. This party she said would be crawling with women who would be suitable. Suitable meant she’d be from a wealthy family and a well-trained socialite who never put a foot out of place publicly.

Renee—on paper— was perfect. That she was sexy was icing on the cake.

I learned early on one of the hazards of having a lot of money. Your worst impulses have all the fuel they need to turn into your biggest regret. We were married within weeks of meeting each other. Our alcohol and sex-fueled dash down the altar had lasted a grand total of twenty-two days. Once the booze wore off, the sex got boring. Once that was gone, we realized we didn't even like each other very much.

When we divorced, everything I'd earned during our marriage was half hers. That was barely anything considering we were officially separated less than thirty days after we found each other.

Our divorce finalized on my twenty-fifth birthday. The same day my inheritance from the Rivers Trust, and what Swish had been setting aside for me for the last ten years, all vested. She'd never known the details of it. There was never any need for her to.

I gave her enough money to get settled in a new place by herself and to give her breathing room until she could find a job.

She found a new husband before she found employment, and I was off the hook for alimony.

Then, a year before my thirtieth birthday, coincidence created a set of circumstances that set us on a course for a much-less-than-amicable reunion. A job took her and her new husband to Houston. Less than six months later, he'd left her for another woman, and her divorce was being formalized.

The Houston press was in a tizzy about my impending return. Would I be able to navigate the treacherous swamp of Houston's upper-class society when I spent my formative years in Europe? Did I even still speak English? How had becoming one of the wealthiest men in the country—practically overnight—changed me?

It was that last question that got Renee's attention. Though she'd never married without a prenup again, none of her husbands were green enough to let her walk away with more than enough to satisfy that "the lifestyle to which she was accustomed" clause in their prenups. So, when she heard that

I'd gone from successful accountant to the new "Rivers King," as they called me in the press, she pounced.

She sued me for a share of my inheritance. She argued that it should have been included in our community property because I concealed its existence from her and because it matured while we were still legally married.

I pushed back. She was asking for thirty percent of my estate. I wasn't willing to give her thirty *cents*. The day after our first court hearing, she showed up at my house with a bottle of wine and an offer for settling. I slammed the door in her face.

The next morning, she sat down on a local talk show wearing sunglasses and implied that I'd removed her—physically—from my house. The police paid me a visit and set the rumor mill spilling.

My lawyers advised me to settle. Gigi wanted me to fight back. But, I didn't want a court battle. She just wanted my money. And that is the one thing I have plenty of. It kept the foundation's and family money out of her reach.

"Don't let it get you down," Gigi says. She mistakes my silence for sadness.

"I'm not down. I'm glad she's gone," I say honestly. It's true. I hope our paths never cross again.

"Most people aren't so calculating," she says. "You had one bad experience. You can't stay single forever because of it."

"Why not?" I say it like I'm joking, but I've actually considered it.

"Don't say things like that! People will start thinking you're like that ridiculous George Clooney," she says.

"He looks like he's doing all right," I say frankly.

"Hayes McGregor Rivers," she says sharply, and I laugh at how riled up this topic always gets her.

"I know I got Renee wrong. But, in my defense, I didn't think you'd marry her a week after you met. If you let me leave this earth without grandnieces and nephews, I'll haunt you forever," she says.

“Well, that doesn’t sound so bad. I like having you around,” I retort. She lets out a pained, long-suffering sigh.

“You’re thirty. You need to start thinking about it again. Especially if you’re going to make a successful transition back into Houston’s society.”

I can’t suppress my groan. We’ve been having this argument for the last year.

“Gigi, let me do one thing at a time. The foundation needs my attention right now. The wife hunt can wait.”

“Well, there are lots of eligible girls from very nice families in Houston,” she says.

“Gigi—”

“Oooh, if I’m here more often, I could be your matchmaker,” she says hopefully. I start to quip that she’s done enough by introducing and encouraging my liaison with Renee. But, it goes beyond whatever her hopes are. I have watched one marriage of convenience after another fail and fall apart. It’s the last thing I want. So, I level with her.

“I’m not interested in being with anyone who would use a matchmaker. Especially not if it’s any one of the women you’re talking about. They wouldn’t care if I was eighty, sterile, and impotent. They want my money and they want to secure themselves a lifetime of monthly checks in the form of child support when they birth little Rivers heirs, and they would sleep with our gardener to make sure they got it even if I couldn’t give it to them,” I say.

She’s completely quiet.

“Gigi?” I call her name.

“You need to think about who you’ll move on with,” she says finally. Her voice is completely normal. I put her silence down to a bad connection.

I’ve already moved on. To a place where choosing a wife will never be an impulsive, uninformed act again. I’ll never put Kingdom at risk like that again. “I will. If *you* will drop this conversation,” I say.

“Deal. I had lunch with Henny yesterday,” she says perkily, and I relax a little. Rivers Wilde gossip, I can deal with.

“How was that?” I ask.

“She looks *wonderful*. Retirement agrees with her. We ate lunch in her pool and drank an entire bottle of wine. Her friend Sally made lunch. It was grand,” she giggles to herself. “I was sick to my stomach when I got home, but it just made me think about how much I miss living here,” she says dreamily.

“Perfect, I’ll buy you a house and you can move with me,” I say.

“I-I couldn’t leave Positano, but I’m thinking with you gone, it won’t feel like home. I spent the first twenty-five years of my life in Houston. Being back here, especially in Rivers Wilde ... I’m tempted to start spending part of the year here. It’s charming,” she says happily.

“Charming isn’t how I would describe it, but I think you being there would make it feel less like hostile territory,” I say.

“I wish your brothers would come home. You need them. Though, with that dreadful mother of theirs, I can understand why they scattered the way they have,” she says ruefully.

“They will,” I say with more confidence than I feel. I certainly *hope* they will. So far, their responses to my request have been less than promising. But, Gigi’s right, I need them. They’re all the real family I have left.

Houston doesn’t feel like home anymore, and I have to find a way to make it so. Having them around might make that easier.

“Oh, dear.” My aunt sounds dismayed. “I shouldn’t have mentioned Renee. She always spoils the mood.”

“She’s good for that,” I say.

“Just goes to show how money can’t buy you anything that matters.”

“Right,” I say shortly. Talking about Renee and money are two things I’d always rather not do. But when I think about all the money I spent to book this particular suite in the hopes of

finding quiet, and how that, too, has managed to elude me, it makes me downright antsy.

“All right, baby, you go on. Just promise you’ll try to have a nice time,” she says.

“I promise,” I say and hang up.

I walk back to the door and open it.

The corridor is empty, but that delicious perfume she was wearing lingers.

Oh, I plan to have a *very* nice time.

Chapter Two

Gold Digger

Hayes

“This is paradise.” A female American voice drifts into my ear as if carried by the light sea breeze and interrupts my afternoon nap. Reluctantly, I open my eyes slowly and sit up. I squint against the afternoon sun’s glare and sweep my eyes over the huge veranda. I’m as alone as I’d been when I first came out here to lie down.

I listen and don’t hear anyone talking. I walk over to the ornately-carved stone wall and rest my forearms on the smooth, sun-warmed cement rail and stare out at the view.

The sweeping green and blues of the sea, sky and verdant, lush landscape seem endless. The light breeze isn’t stiff enough to do more than ruffle the very fine hairs on my arms. But it carries with it the smell of lemon and pine. The salt of the sea spray gives the air a bite that’s softened by the sound of the sea’s lazy current.

The sea stretches and disappears into the curve of the horizon. I gaze at it and understand why people thought the world was flat. From here, I can imagine falling off the illusion created by the glancing kiss it shares with the sky.

The mossy cliff that runs along this stretch of beach surrounds the villa making it feel secluded even though there are neighboring villas on either side. My room is one of only two massive suites on the fourth floor. I thought it would be quiet. I hoped that if I had neighbors, they would be people who wanted to be as far away from the festivities’ noises as possible.

A cacophony of excited women’s voices tears a hole in that hope. Laughter and unintelligible shouts of delight spill

through it and splatter all over my mood. *It was good while it lasted*, I tell myself. I pull out my phone and scan my emails.

I scroll through email after email of bad news. Kingdom is being hit with lawsuits left and right. From breach of contract to improper dismissals. In the last fifteen years, my uncle's failure to manage Kingdom and all of its holdings properly is matched only by his lack of transparency. He's stacked the board with his minions instead of competent people. We are in violation of hundreds of regulatory guidelines in nearly every facet of our business, and everyone is looking to me for answers I don't have.

It's been two weeks since I became chairman of the board. The first email I received in my official capacity was from my newly-appointed executive assistant. In it, she asked me to send her a guest list for my swearing-in ceremony and banquet. My reply informed her that, until we had something real to celebrate, the banquet was postponed.

This wedding couldn't have happened at a worse time. When Gigi asked me to attend on her behalf, I said no.

She pinched my ear, told me not to talk back, and booked my flight.

So, here I am.

"Let's go out here. I want to see the ocean," the same voice that woke me says. Even though I can hear the women, I can't see them, and they have no idea I'm here.

"Yeah, I can't believe we're here. This is beautiful," another voice gushes.

"You know, I live forty-five minutes from the beach, and I don't think I've seen the ocean all year," another voice raves. Like the other voice, hers is bubbling with excitement.

"It's the *sea*, Cass. The Ligurian Sea. Not the ocean, and I've got a headache. I'm going to lie down. Have fun with the girls, okay?" This voice makes my ears perk up. It's my elevator girl. But she sounds decidedly unhappy.

Who wouldn't be happy to be here?

You. That's who. I remind myself.

“Oh, come on, TB, it feels so good out here,” the enthusiastic voice calls out to her.

“No, you guys have fun. I’m just tired after that trip,” she says, her words muffled by a very fake yawn.

A chorus of pleasant goodbyes rings out behind her, and the door closes with a sharp rattle of wood and glass.

Then the claws come out.

“God, Cass. *Why* did you bring her?” one voice drones as if she’s in pain.

“Actually, I brought *you*. She’s my plus one. And she’s having a hard time, so you guys better not be dicks,” Cass responds.

“Well, from what I heard, it’s her own fault,” another voice chimes in.

“And why is she dressed like that? I mean, if I had thighs like that, I’d never wear shorts.”

“I think her thighs look great,” Cass says defensively.

“I mean, she’s pretty, but ... like ... how can she even afford this trip? This room? I heard no one will hire her,” a chorus girl says.

“That’s none of your business, you guys.” Cass’s voice is rising in anger.

“Well, if her gold-digging ways are going to reflect on us—”

“You’re only here because Liv was nice enough to let you use her room block despite the fact that you’re not wedding guests. And if this is how you feel about her, then just keep your distance this weekend.”

I like this Cass. There’s a beat of silence before one of the voices responds in a whiny bray.

“She’s the one who—”

“I’m baaaack!” The door flies open as the voice belonging to “TB” rejoins the group. Their conversation comes to a complete and utter stop.

“Oh, hey. Couldn’t sleep?” Cass says in a much thinner, more hesitant voice than the one she’s been using since they came outside.

“No. I was just so excited thinking about all the rich guys who’ll be here this weekend,” she says in a sing-song voice.

I freeze. Suddenly, I wish I’d gone inside. This is the very last thing I need or want to hear.

“I mean, it’s an Italian villa. It’s bound to be crawling with them,” Cass says and her discomfort is loud and clear even from where I’m sitting.

“Exactly, ladies,” TB crows. “If you want me to teach you, all you have to do is ask. It’s not that hard. Men with money are the *best* boyfriends. They’re usually so busy making it they don’t have time for you. You might only have to fuck him once a month,” she says. A chorus of uncomfortable giggles ripples through the crackling air around me.

I know firsthand about women like her.

I’ve just finished freeing myself from the clutches of one.

My amusement, interest, and good mood fizzle all at once. I start to head back inside. At least I’ll know who to avoid tonight.

I’m almost to my door when my phone starts to ring.

The loud trill fills the air like a siren, and the conversation from the next balcony comes to an abrupt stop.

“Oh my God, is someone there?” I hear one of the chorus girls say right as I shut the door behind me and answer the phone.

Chapter Three

Dolce Vita

Confidence

“*Who is that?*” I lean over to Cass and whisper without taking my eyes off the tall, well-built, beautiful man who just strode into the tent like he’s about to tell us all he’s our new ruler and ask us to pledge our loyalty or die. He’s even more beautiful in that suit than he was in that hallway this afternoon. I can still feel the soft brush of his fingers on my neck. The way my breath caught in my throat when he’d dragged the pendant up my chest until it nestled into the small hollow at the base of my throat.

His dark, wavy hair is just long enough to curl right at the edge of his crisp white tuxedo shirt. It’s unruly and perfectly artless in a way that no human hand, and no amount of pomade, could create. Those silky dark-chocolate waves are the work of God himself. His profile is strong and bold; his nose prominent and straight. His lips are set in a straight line but I can see their fullness even in his profile. And God, his jaw. It’s chiseled and wide and covered in a beard low enough to be a five o’clock shadow, meticulously groomed so you can tell it’s not. His broad, tall frame is poured into a black tuxedo that fits him perfectly. He looks like he’s the sovereign of something—a country, a business, a thousand women in a harem somewhere ...

Heads turn as he crosses the room. And I can’t blame them—not even a little bit. He oozes sex and power. His long strides eat up the floor, and he reaches the lone empty table at the back of the tent quickly. When he’s adorned the chair with his glorious body, he turns to face the front of the room where the bridal party is sitting and giving their speeches.

“Who’s who?” she asks and pokes her head around the room. I tug her arm and nod at him.

“Him. Also known as the man of all of my dirty dreams,” I purr excitedly, my eyes trained on the finest specimen of man I’ve ever seen this close up.

“Ohhh,” she drawls, eyes widening with interest and props her chin on her hand and ogles him.

“That’s Hayes Rivers,” the woman on my right says. Cass and I both turn to face her, surprised by her interjection.

“Heir to Kingdom,” she says when neither of us respond.

“I knew it. He looks like a king. Which kingdom?” I ask. I’m already imagining myself in a ball gown, crown on my head walking down some long, red-carpeted aisle where he’s waiting at the end.

“No, not *a kingdom*.” And just like that, she kills my dream. “*Kingdom* is the name of his family’s business. He inherited all the money when he turned twenty-five. And now he’s the new Rivers king,” she says.

“How old is he now?” I ask, my curiosity overtaking my normal abhorrence for gossip.

“He must be thirty ... he’s one of the richest men in the freaking world,” she exclaims.

“Really? Why’s he here?”

“His grandmother is friends with the groom,” our little canary says.

“I can’t believe you’ve never heard of him. His return to Houston is all anyone’s talking about,” she says and looks at both of us like we’re crazy.

“I don’t live in Houston,” I say.

“Well, *I* heard ...” Her eyes dart around as if checking for spies and then she leans into us. “Apparently, he had a fight with his ex. And it got *physical*,” she grimaces. But her eyes are twinkling. “I’m not one to gossip ...” she says and Cass and I exchange a *yeah, right* look.

“But, she was all over the place wearing sunglasses. No one saw her, mind you, and she never said, but it was obvious he

roughed her up,” she says.

My lawyer hat comes on and my eyes slide away from the delicious man to her. I make sure there’s no warmth in them and her silly, careless smile falters.

“That’s actually the exact opposite of obvious,” I say dismissively.

“Only if you’re blind. I mean, yeah, he’s nice to look at, but he looks so angry, don’t you think?”

I glance at him, and just then, like he knows what she said, his jaw clenches.

“Well, if people were talking about me like this, I might be angry, too,” I say and Cass pinches me.

“Well, if you think you know better, you can ignore me. But don’t say you weren’t warned,” she says and turns back to the victim on her other side.

As if I need any warning. I can smell a violent man the minute he enters the room. I grew up with them under the same roof. I watched them do more damage than any of the natural disasters that were a way of life for us in the Mississippi Delta.

I lean toward Cass.

“He’s staying on our floor,” I whisper. I can’t take my eyes off him. My whole body is tingling just from looking at him.

“Thank you, God,” I say, pressing my hands together in gratitude.

Cass laughs. “I mean, he does clean up nicely, but he looks like he’d be more comfortable in a boxing ring than on a dance floor,” she says.

“Yes, exactly,” I practically purr before I take another sip of my gin and tonic. My thighs clench when I think about how rough things could get.

“His nose doesn’t look like it’s been broken, though,” she muses.

“No one’s perfect,” I joke and take a final swig of my drink.

“Enjoy. My fantasy Italian fling is more in the style of Jude Law in the *Talented Mr. Ripley*. He looks like he could eat Jude Law in a single bite.”

“Or me,” I drawl with a wink and stand up. I run my hands down my dress.

Cass grabs my arm and yanks me back down in my seat. “Where in the world are you going? You are *not* going to approach him,” she says as if scandalized.

I glance over at her and grin, because I am *so* going to approach him.

“You never approach anyone. You’re still getting over Nigel. Who *are* you?” she asks, green eyes wide with surprise.

“I’m Confidence Ryan, and I’m about to go climb my very own Mt. Olympus,” I say with a suggestive waggle of my eyebrows.

“Are you drunk?” she asks when I start to stand up again.

“Yes, but so what?” I say.

“You’ll regret it in the morning,” she frets.

“Maybe ...” I shrug.

“This isn’t you.” She peers up at me.

“Again, so what?” I shrug off her questions. “I’m in Italy. I’m single. And I think that if I’m ready to walk over and put my ass on a table for another man to make a meal of me, then I might be over Nigel,” I say.

“True facts,” she says with an enthusiastic nod.

“And if I have regrets ... then, at least it will be for something worth regretting. I want to know what that kind of regret feels like,” I say in a moment of rare vulnerability.

“Okay,” she says, relenting in her attempts to stop me. Even if she doesn’t quite sound convinced.

“Just be safe. Get your own drinks and drop your glass so it shatters if you need a rescue,” she says and takes a sip of her drink.

“I won’t be breaking any glasses. If I need a rescue, I’ll do it myself.” A sudden bolt of doubt flashes through my mind.

This *is* very unlike me.

I self-consciously glance down at myself.

“Do I look okay?” I cast a sheepish glance at Cass. My bravado has failed me now that I’m about to walk the walk.

“You look better than okay. You look wonderful,” she says with all of the sincerity of a dutiful and loving friend who would never say anything other than how wonderful I look.

I lose my nerve and lower myself back into my seat. I grab my wine and take a moody, resentful sip.

Cass puts her drink down and grabs my forearm.

“What happened?” Her dark brows are furrowed in concern. “I thought you were off to get laid.”

I sink down in my seat and pout.

“Why in the world would he be interested in me? She said he’s filthy rich or something. He’s young and hot, too. Do you know how rare that is? I bet he’s engaged to marry one of those princesses—Eugenie or whatever.” I fling my hand in his direction, but my eyes are fixed on the drink I’m lifting back to my lips.

“If he is, then I feel sorry for *her* because he’s going to be leaving here with the hottest woman in the room,” she says with a little too much enthusiasm. And I roll my eyes.

“Confidence, you’re a *catch*,” she exclaims.

I give her a disbelieving look. “Oh yeah, I know thousands of eligible, sexy men who are beating a path to be with a broke, failed lawyer whose family is a poster for dysfunction,” I say grumpily.

“That’s not all you are,” she whispers fiercely, squeezing my arm. I chuckle—it’s humorless, short and dry.

“Well, I’m glad you agree that it’s *some* of what I am,” I quip and take another swig of my wine.

“For God’s sake, one lost job doesn’t mean you failed,” she cajoles.

I throw her a glance. “I was almost disbarred.”

“That was all that fucking Nigel’s fault,” she reminds me.

“True. But it’s certainly *not* his fault that I’ve spent sixty percent of my life savings in the last three months. A good chunk of it on this last minute, incredibly glamorous vacation. Who doesn’t find a financially irresponsible spendthrift *irresistible*?”

“You think anyone worthy of you will care about any of that?” Cass asks me softly.

“One of us will have to care. Even a lifetime of sex with that beautiful man won’t make up for my flagrant disregard for budgets.”

She chuckles. “Now you’re just being dramatic. At least you have your life savings. If I lost my job, I would have to move back home with my parents after one month,” she says and nudges me with her shoulder.

I sigh and look back at my man ... God, I’m ridiculous. He’s not my *anything*.

“I’ve never broken a rule my whole life, Cass,” I say to her. “I didn’t even shave above the knee until I was twenty-one. I did whatever I thought I had to, to get out of Arkansas. I had a good run, and in one fell swoop, I’ve managed to ruin my life.” I drain my glass and drop it on the table. “So, If I’m hanging out in rock bottom city, then I’m at least doing it in style.” I wave an arm around the opulently decorated room to make my point.

“Well, you can thank Jules for being smart enough to land an Italian count with enough money to pull off a party like this.”

“To Jules,” I say.

“To Jules,” she repeats as we clink our empty glasses.

“You know what?” I ask and stare at the bubbles clinging to the lip of my glass. They remind me of myself. I’m holding on. Long after life should have swallowed me whole.

“What?” Cass asks when I don’t continue.

“I’ve found that rock bottom might be the best thing to ever happen to me. I’ve spent the last three months shopping, traveling, eating, and sleeping to my heart’s content. Sure, after this, I have to move home. But, have you seen how round my ass has gotten?” I lift and point to my silver sequined covered backside and wink. “It’s amazing, right?” I grin at her.

“It’s got that Beyoncé circa 2014 magic,” she says with authority and we clink our glasses together.

“And you have not hit rock bottom, TB,” she says reproachfully.

“No, I have. Really,” I assure her with a falsely proud smile. “But, I have a plan. And being back home will light a fire under me. Not to mention taking this trip has brought me perilously close to poverty. It’s time to give up my apartment, go home, and regroup.”

She pats my arm consolingly. “Well, if all of that fails, you could turn your new hobby into a business,” she says.

“Yes!” I clap my hands and hoot with laughter. “Like I could be some sort of plus one for hire.”

“You’ve had enough practice in the last few months,” she ribs me.

“I know,” I crow with delight. “Weddings are such a *score*. I mean, I have classy-as-fuck friends, so the venues are always marvelous, and I get it at the block rate.” I laugh out loud and stop when I see Cass isn’t laughing with me.

“What?” I ask and blush.

“I’m glad you’re letting that crazy dark hair go. Your hair is the prettiest natural blonde I’ve ever seen. I’ve missed the fits of jealousy I used to have every time you wore it down.”

“I *do* look good, don’t I? A life of leisure is apparently the real fountain of youth.” I wink. “But tell me why you’re looking at me like my mom did the first time I managed to bait a hook

myself,” I tease, but I’m blushing at the unfiltered pride in her eyes.

“It’s just that I’m glad that you’re doing what makes you happy. It *is* slightly reckless to blow through your savings this way. But, I also know that you’re a brilliant, passionate attorney, and the minute you’re ready, you’ll have a score of job offers. I’m thrilled you’re being a sexy, lazy, beach bum for once in your life. You’ve earned it, ” Cass says with the most sincerely delighted smile on her face. I smile back at her with equal delight.

This is why she’s my best friend. She loves me as much as I love her. And when I’m happy, she is too. My heart swells with gratitude that I have her in my life.

I look back at my *dream man*. He’s sitting with his arms crossed watching the dancing people like he’d rather be anywhere else. His heavy, square chin has a cleft.

I want to stick my tongue in it. I regain my resolve.

“I’m about to add slutty to that sexy and lazy,” I say and give her a bawdy wink. Then, I stand up again before I lose my nerve. I’m about to turn and walk his way when I remember something and lean down to talk to Cass.

“The guy behind the bar—his name tag said Luca—he’s a dead ringer for Jude Law, and I saw him checking out your ass when we walked through earlier,” I say.

She leaps out of her seat. “I can’t believe you saw *him* and didn’t tell me.” She scowls and starts to gather her phone and the lipstick and gum that spilled out of her tiny gold clutch.

“How was I to know what you were in the mood for? And if I told you every time a guy checked you out, we’d be here all night.”

“You sweet talker.” She swats my arm and presses a quick kiss to my cheek. “Be safe, have fun. And remind me to stick an extra-long pin in my Nigel voodoo doll when we get home.”

“I love you,” I say through a giggle.

She really has a Nigel voodoo doll at home. It's a pathetic little stick figure made of popsicle sticks. All of its limbs are broken.

"How could you not?" She wiggles her fingers goodbye and disappears into the crowd. I run my fingers through my heavy hair. Thank you for low humidity and great hair products. There's not a hint of frizz in sight, and there hasn't been since I got here. I take all of this as an omen. Beautiful setting, great company, best hair day of my life—the stars have aligned. Of course, the man of my sexual dreams would be here, too.

With that thought, I take a deep breath and turn to face my future conquest.

I hope that tonight, though, I'll be the one who's conquered. I'm five foot three. Tall, well-built men are my weakness.

The strapping, dark-haired, Duke of Midnight across the room looks like he might be up for the job. I say a quick prayer that I didn't misread things in the elevator this morning and that I'm not about to make a fool of myself and start toward him. As I weave my way across the moderately populated dance floor, I lose sight of him once or twice. But when I step off the other side off the dance floor, my view of him is completely unobstructed. When his eyes swing in my direction, they land on me right away. His eyes sweep up my body, his head's angle marking their current position. My feet, my legs, my hips, stomach, my breasts, and on my face.

I feel a shot of confidence that propels me forward. I've never done anything like this before. But when I saw him this afternoon, I thought, *mine*.

Despite my little blip of doubt, I'm excited about the possibility of having a night with him. That's all I really want.

Since we've been in Castiglioncello, I've felt different—freer, happier. It's the most beautiful place my admittedly limited travels have ever taken me. The sea's perpetual whispers and roars lend an air of magic to the cove of neighboring villas we're staying at this weekend. As soon as we stepped off the dreary shuttle that brought us the forty miles from the airport in Pisa, I knew this would be a trip I'd never forget. Until now,

I thought it would be because of the spectacular views, the clean, fragrant air, and being with Cass. Yet, as I approach Mr. Tall Dark and Glorious, I know that this is going to be the experience that defines this trip. Lord knows, I was in desperate need of something glorious and unforgettable right now.

When I'm two tables away, his eyes come into focus. Like my mama would say, *Lawd ha'mercy*. While I'd been gawking at his body, the shadows in the hallway had been hiding the real treasure. They're a heart stopping disc of pure hazel ringed in what could be a mossy green or nutty brown ... the light doesn't allow me to see clearly. They're fringed by a thick tangle of lashes and burning with intelligence and ... wariness.

He stands up just before I reach him.

His tall, broad frame is a little leaner up close. "Hello," he says and takes my hand. He presses a kiss to it and offers me a seat by pulling the one next to him out.

Holy Father. If this is how they make men in Europe, then I was born in the wrong place. Because this man is straight out of one of those fairy tales that I never believed in because I never saw a girl like me in one of them.

"Thank you," I say demurely, the flutter in my stomach turning to a vibration as I plant myself in the offered chair.

"You're welcome," he says noncommittally and then just watches me. That trace of wariness grows as he observes me.

"Why aren't you dancing?" I ask.

"I don't dance," he says shortly.

"Oh. Okay," I say with a grimace of shame when he doesn't speak. I feel a surge of mortification when I realize that I have, in fact, been too presumptuous.

"I don't know what I was thinking," I say. I wish I could snap my fingers and make myself disappear. "I thought ... maybe when we saw each other earlier on the elevator ... that you seemed interested. I'm sorry. I'll just ..." I start to stand up and pray I can run in these stupid shoes that I spent too much

money on. I want to cry. I scrape my chair back and he grabs my wrist.

“No, don’t go. I’m glad you came.” His voice is deep and smooth like the molasses in my grandmother’s gingerbread cookies. And he’s American, too.

Thank you, God, I mouth down to my lap before I look up and smile.

“My mouth is good for a lot of things ... small talk just isn’t one of them,” he says, gaze smoldering and yet so relaxed. I’m so startled by the innuendo that a bubble of laughter escapes me. I cover my mouth with my hand. He reaches over to stroke the back of my hand and then circles my wrist. He tugs my hand away from my mouth. “Your smile is beautiful.”

“Oh, my ...” I sigh and my stomach does a summersault. I can’t believe this is happening. He’s actually into me.

He gives me a small, quick smile that I feel a surge of pride at having pulled it out of him.

“So, you’re in business?”

“That’s cute,” he says quietly and takes a sip of his drink.

“Huh?”

“No, I’m just an ordinary man.” His glass hovers in front of his lips and he watches me out of hooded eyes.

“There’s nothing *ordinary* about you,” I say and stick my hand out, “I should introduce myself. I’m Confidence Ryan, and I don’t really know the bride or the groom, but I’m my friend Cass’s plus one,” I say.

“Your name is Confidence?” he asks, perplexed.

“I know, it’s kind of weird at first. But I promise once you get used to it, you’ll see it’s actually a really great name,” I assure him.

“No, not weird at all. Hayes Rivers,” he says without any other detail. Not that I need any more for what I’m hoping is going to happen. But, his smile doesn’t quite meet his eyes.

“I love that name. Is it a family name?” I ask.

His smile dims slightly. “No,” he says shortly.

“Well, my parents named my siblings and me after things they hoped we’d grow up to possess. I definitely lucked out. My siblings are named Happiness and Fortune,” I tell him and then wish a hole would open up and put me out of my misery.

Why am I not better at flirting?

It’s his turn to laugh, and he says, “Now, that is a great line.” He shakes his head. “Can you imagine if people actually gave their children names like that?” he asks and I cringe. Hard.

He stops laughing. “Oh ...”

“Yeah,” I say slowly.

“I’m sorry,” he says quietly, real contrition in his eyes

“No, it’s okay. I’m used to it and they grow on you,” I say and change the subject. “So, you friends of the groom?”

“No, my aunt is. She couldn’t go, so I came in her stead.”

“Well, you’re a lot nicer than an RSVP and a gift card that most people send when they can’t come to a wedding. It’s nice of you to come. Even though, I bet it wasn’t that hard of a sell. It’s beautiful here,” I say.

“I’m not nice. My aunt raised me. So, when she asks something of me, I do it.” He shrugs and takes a sip of water, and I glance back at our table for a second to see if Cass is back. She’s not.

“May I?” he asks, and I turn back to face him. He’s watching me expectantly.

“May you what?” He nods to the table. His hand is hovering right above my wrist.

“Oh, you want to ...” I ask in surprise, but smile and nod. “Feel free to put those big hands wherever you’d like,” I say and groan internally at how thirsty I sound.

He smirks a little before his thumb swipes once on the tender skin on the inside of my wrist. I shiver and bite back a moan at the tremor that runs down the center of my body. I’m shouting *YES* in my head.

He lifts my hand to his face. His breath tickles me before he draws in a deep breath, his eyes closed as he rubs his nose back and forth across my wrist. My insides liquify.

“You smell like roses,” he whispers so softly, his breath floats over the inside of my forearm and a tingle dances all the way up my arm.

If I'm dreaming, please don't ever wake me.

I lean into him and put on my sauciest smile. “It's this body lotion I bought in duty free—”

“It smells cheap.” His voice is no longer soft and seductive. Heat rises up my neck and spreads on my cheeks as his words sink in.

I yank my hand out of his grasp and lean away, “Excuse me?” I ask in affront.

“Didn't anyone tell you before you came over that I only entertain heiresses and above?”

“Entertain?” I put the words in air quotes while I gawk at the man who just turned from a prince to a toad in less than three minutes.

“I'm not interested in being your next payday,” he announces.

My jaw drops.

“Don't feel bad,” he says without looking at me. “Go try it on one of the drunker, more persuadable men here. I'm sure you'll leave with enough money to at least cover your expenses,” he says and my head snaps back so hard, I'm surprised it's still attached to my body.

His gaze flits over me. “No question. You're a knockout. But, if you're looking for something more than a weekend, I'd suggest you invest in your look. Off-the-rack dresses aren't going to cut it with this crowd. Dress for the job you want, and all that,” he says and falls back in his chair.

Each insult and insinuation is barbed with contempt. They flay old wounds wide open.

“You jerk,” I spit and lean forward so I can look him in the eye when I tell him to fuck off.

They’re cold, dark, and shuttered. He looks like a completely different person than the one I met on the elevator. I wonder who put that look in his eye. I know it’s not me. The disillusionment I see is deep-seated. Despite the warm May sea breeze passing through the tent, goosebumps replace my tingles.

“Do better research on your next target. Approaching me at an event like this was a dead giveaway about your motives. You should have bumped into me at the airport or something less obvious.” His voice is devoid of any emotion, his gaze moves to the dance floor. His gaze is observant but detached. “Hmm ... it’s a shame, I think we would’ve had a great time together,” he says while he looks at me like I’m a car he’s thinking about buying.

I wonder for a minute if I’m being punked. I glance around the room. The music, the tinkle of silverware scraping plates, people shouting to be heard over the noise are still there. No camera crew is rolling in to surprise me.

Nothing changed. No one’s watching us. I look back at him.

“Are you serious?” I ask him. I look closely at him for a sign that maybe he’s kidding.

Nope, that disdain is real. He frowns and adjusts the cuffs of his jacket before he leans forward. “Let me spell it out.” His eyes skim over me again. “Based on your lack of ... polish,” his eyes roam my body, from head to toe and a flush burns over my skin in their wake. “I’m assuming you’re new to this scene. All the regulars know better than to try a trick like this. This place is littered with rich men. I’m sure you’ll find one. You can thank me by calling out my name when you pretend he made you come,” he says without a hint of humor and adjusts his cufflinks.

I clasp my purse to my chest in shock.

He looks back at me with complete disinterest.

“You’re the one who claimed to be the expert at landing rich men. I’m just trying to make sure you don’t look like a fool in front of your *friends*.” He leans his head in close like he’s sharing a secret. “Just a heads-up, they don’t seem to really like you very much,” he says.

My heart plummets to my toes.

“Were you listening to us?” I gasp in horror. We thought we heard a phone ring, but one of Cass’s debutante friends said it came from the terrace.

“It was hard not to when you were speaking at the top of your lungs,” he says.

I stare unseeingly at the room full of revelers who have no clue that this man is taking a pickaxe to my pride. I shake my head. He’s taken my words, spoken in a moment of pure self-preservation, out of context. But I’ll be damned if I’m going to explain myself to him.

“Don’t look so down in the mouth. You’ve been spared a night of pretending that you’re turned on by anything more than the diamonds in my watch.”

And just like that, he turns away and faces the front of the room again.

I don’t know whether to be angry, offended, sad, or ashamed. I settle on all of the above and they move through me like lava pushes its way past the earth’s crust. I stand up, step right in front of his face, and let them spill.

“Oh, no you don’t,” I snarl.

He has the nerve to look surprised that I’m still there.

“What?” I widen my eyes in an exaggeration of his own expression. “Did you think I was just going to slink away in shame?” I glare down at him. “I’m not the one who should feel ashamed. You are a *pig*.” I spit the word at him. He looks back at the dance floor.

“You don’t get to accuse me of being some sort of gold digger and then turn back to your entertainment like it’s not a completely unwarranted insult,” I say and nudge his shoulder

with one of my fingers when he doesn't look up. He glances up at me and sighs as if I'm tedious.

"Actually, I do get to do that. I just did. And, seriously," his eyes flit over me from head to toe again. "Think about investing in your look. At least if you want to be someone to take out in public," he says and turns his stony expression back to the dance floor. Those words spoken so casually, hit their target with the precision of fast flying bullets.

I imagine what it would feel like to slap that smug look off his face. But imagining is as close to satisfaction as I'll ever get. I have enough problems without adding an arrest in Italy to it.

"And you should invest in fixing your terrible personality," I snap, completely enraged by him.

"Sure. I'll take your advice if you'll take mine," he says.

I bend down so I can put my face in his. I see a flare of heat in his eyes, but I can't tell if it's ire or desire. Because even as I face off with him and burn with real dislike, I can feel a tug between us. His mouth is inches from mine and I can't keep my eyes off it. Before he shuts his expression again, he looks at my mouth the same way.

That bored, blank expression is back, and I pull back from him. "I don't know what kind of upbringing you had that you feel like you can talk to someone the way you just talked to me. Your money doesn't make you better than me or anyone," I say.

"Hmm," he says and stands up and takes a step toward me. The heated expression in his eyes makes me take a reflexive step backward.

"Hmm, what?" I ask

His hand darts out and he grips my hip before I can take a second step.

He trails a finger down my arm and wraps his fingers around my wrist. He presses the pads of his fingers to my pulse point.

"It's a shame ... you're fucking beautiful," he whispers, and I can hear real regret in his voice. It offends me at the same time

as it thrills me.

Damn him for being an asshole while looking the way he does.

“Let go of me,” I say, but I make no effort to free myself.

“I don’t want to,” he says quietly. “You don’t want me to, either.” His thumb strokes my pulse point and I shudder. I tug my arm free. No way will I give him the satisfaction of knowing that his touch is the most exciting thing I’ve felt in a long time.

“*Tesoro dolce*,” he murmurs.

“I don’t know what that means, but you better cut it out,” I warn him.

Because when he does, I want to stop and listen, even though I have no idea what he’s saying.

“Why? Don’t you like it?” he asks silkily.

“No, that’s probably the word for streetwalker or cum dumpster or something,” I grumble.

His hand skims my hip and the rest of my body quivers, throbs, tingles, and yearns for the same treatment.

“I can teach you. While I fuck you. I think you’d still let me,” he says and that wakes me up. I pull out of his grasp.

I cross my arms over my chest and glower down at him. “Right, you called me cheap, and now, you’re calling me easy?” I say in my best offended Southern woman voice.

“I wasn’t calling you easy, but if you *are* ...” He raises his eyebrows suggestively. “I’ll overlook the cheap and even take you back to my room,” he drawls with an amused smirk on his face.

I have never itched to slap someone more than I do right now.

“Fuck you!” I spit.

“See? We want the same thing,” he quips with a grin that’s cold as ice.

“You must be in a world of pain to act like that. You’re a total asshole and you should be ashamed that you take joy in trying to make people feel small. You failed, by the way. Goodnight.” I spin on my stupid heels and walk with as much ass shaking as I can back to my table.

“Ugh, who cares?” I mumble as I arrive back at my table full of strangers and no Cass.

“No luck?” my doggedly gossipy neighbor asks when I sit down. “Don’t worry, he looks like he would break you in half,” she says with a conspiratorial wink.

That’s exactly what I’d been hoping.

I drop down in my seat and grab one of the sesame rolls from the breadbasket and slather it with the fancy butter that’s served with every meal here. I’m about to take another huge bite when I remember the little joint I dropped in my purse, and I decide that I’ll just do another one of the things on the Confidence Gone Wild list.

I grab my purse and head toward the back of the tent. When I get to his table near the rear exit, I give him as wide a berth as I can when I walk past him and push the flap of the tent open.

“Where are you going?” His hand is around my wrist and it brings me to a jerking halt that nearly sends me tumbling into his lap. I brace myself with a hand on his shoulder.

“None of your business, you rude man. And if you’re thinking about apologizing, you can save it. I’ll *never* forgive you.” I yank hard.

He doesn’t let go.

“It’s not safe out there. The path is uneven and the steps are slick,” he says.

“Thanks for the tip. I’ll make sure to break my neck,” I say with as much asperity as I can muster, and he has the grace to wince.

“What? I thought you’d like the thought of that,” I grit out and pull my arm again—in vain. “Let go. You can’t manhandle me like this,” I say when his grip only gets tighter.

“I’m not manhandling you,” he says, but his grip on my arm loosens, “and I’m not letting you go until you turn around and head back into the party. Think of all the potential benefactors you’ll miss out on if you plunge to your death,” he says sarcastically.

“Are you actually making fun of me?” My anger is reaching a boiling point. I need to get out of here. I narrow my eyes at him. “If you don’t let me go, I’m going to scream,” I threaten.

He lets go immediately, and I see a flash of worry in his eyes. I recall my gossipy table-mate’s comments about him and his wife and immediately feel guilty.

“I wasn’t really going to scream. I just wanted you to let go,” I say quickly. Then I Square my shoulders and look down my nose at him. “Enjoy being miserable. Sorry I ever met you. Goodbye,” I say and turn to leave.

“If you insist on going, I’ll go with you,” he says and starts to stand up.

“No, you will not,” I say and rush out of the tent before he’s fully on his feet.

I slip my nude sling backs off my feet and fumble until I have a good grip on the railing of the staircase. It’s dark and the moon is the only source of light, but the path is completely canopied in trees so in the places where the leaves are dense, it’s pitch black. The sound of the sea is very close; the breeze whips up the skirt of my salmon-colored dress. I love this dress. I can’t believe he insulted the way I’m *dressed*.

“For God’s sake, wait. This is *actually* completely crazy,” he calls after me.

“Then why don’t you go back to where you were *actually* being a jerk?” I call back over my shoulder.

I pull my phone out of my purse and fumble to find the flashlight button. The light is comforting, and I take one more step before I look back.

“Confidence, come back before you get yourself killed,” he shouts, and he actually sounds concerned.

He's good.

"Just one less evil gold digger in the world, right? Leave me alone." I grip the rail and take another step. My heart and foot plunge simultaneously. There's nothing but air under my foot.

"Woaah!" I find my balance quickly. I glance down to see the gently lapping waves of a small inlet. I sigh in relief and sag against the rail.

"No, Confidence!" is the last thing I hear before the awful crack that seems to split the night in half. The entire rail collapses underneath my weight, and I fall backward off the side of the cliff. My scream is swept up by the wind and carried off in a soundless current.

I close my eyes and imagine the sea rushing up to meet me. The last thought before my world goes black is that I wish he'd at least kissed me before he opened his mouth and ruined it.

Chapter Four

The Ledge

Hayes

I break into a sprint when I hear the crack of the wooden railing. My stomach sinks like a twenty-pound stone in water. I slow down just in time to stop myself from following her over the ledge. I stand in the spot where I'd seen the flutter of pink fabric before she disappeared. One shoe and her small gold handbag are scattered on the ground close to where she had been standing. I close my eyes, count to three, and prepare myself for whatever I might find.

It happened so fast. I know that it's a long drop from there to the shallow pool of water that's been formed by erosion.

Trepidation and horror make my heartbeat slow down even while it thuds hard against the cavity of my chest. I hold my breath and look down.

Relief floods me, fast and wild, and it makes me dizzy. Her fall was broken by a ledge jutting out of the side of the stone face of the cliff. This cliff has dozens of them. It's an elite rock climber haven, and every fall, just when the weather starts to clear and cool, they descend to risk their lives climbing cliffs like this all over Tuscany.

The sound of the sea roaring is gone, and I realize that it hadn't been the sea I'd been hearing. It was the rush of my own blood as I imagined the worst. It's actually very quiet here. The water laps gently on the rocky shore, the waves break in the distance. Behind me, the strains of music from the tent create a strange dichotomy. They have no idea what's happening out here. And, I'd like to keep it that way as long as I can.

I pull my phone out of my breast pocket before lying on my stomach. I slide forward until my head dangles off the ledge,

and I can see her clearly. She's a little less than ten feet down. Not too far, but not close enough that I could reach her by extending my arms.

She's moved since I first spotted her. She'd been lying on her back, legs splayed. Now, she's curled up in a fetal position. That she's been able to move herself is a very good sign.

"Confidence," I call down. She doesn't speak, but whimpers loudly and nods.

I assess the ledge. The thick coating of moss covering it is a blessing and a curse. It saved her from landing on hard concrete, but it's also slick and will make moving around on it treacherous. The piece of rock she landed on looks to be about ten feet long and eight feet wide. It's not small, but there are only about five feet between her and its ledge.

If she rolls over a full body turn, she'll fall off. I glance up at the sky. It's dark, but the moon is very bright. The cloudless sky is good news. But even that comes with the caveat of the unexpected showers that are very commonplace in Tuscany during the summer.

I need to get help in a hurry.

I dial the preprogrammed number for the villa's security and explain to Marco, as succinctly as I can, what happened. Just as I hang up, she moves her foot, and a loud, gut-wrenching moan floats up to me on the wind. I drop my phone next to me and clear my throat before I speak.

"Confidence, can you hear me?" I shout down.

She nods, and puts a hand on her head and starts to roll her shoulders.

"Don't move, please!" I shout. She freezes immediately.

"The ledge is five feet from your left. Don't go in that direction. Can you roll backward until you touch the cliff wall?" I ask. "In fact, if you could just not move at all, it would be best. Does anything hurt?" I ask her.

"Oh my God!" she shouts tearfully. "Everything hurts. So much." She cries, but she does what I ask. When she reaches

the cliff wall, she scrambles up to sitting and looks up and over her shoulder at me.

I can only see the shadow of her profile in the inky moonlit dark. “I’m really scared,” she says softly, and the vulnerability in her voice twists my gut.

“I know,” I breathe and then realize I whispered it. “Help will be here soon, okay?” I say in a louder voice.

“You’re rich, right?” she calls up to me.

“What?” I call back in surprise.

“You said so,” she presses impatiently. “It had better be true. Sending a dead body overseas is expensive. My mother doesn’t have the money.” She’s talking quickly, but her voice is thick with emotion and pain. “Since it’s your fault this happened, you have to promise to pay to send me home, so I can be buried next to my grandparents and as far away from my father as possible,” she says.

“You’re not going to die. It’s lucky I’m here,” I call down.

“Yeah, in the same way it’s lucky to be mauled by a bear,” she yells. The bark of laughter that springs straight from my gut, surprises me. And she has a sense of humor.

“I don’t know how that’s lucky, but we’ve already learned that you and I don’t share a lot of common perspectives,” I joke back.

“I can’t believe you’re making jokes when I’m about to die!” she screams, and the pitch of terror in her voice is enough to squelch my little burst of levity.

“You’re not going to die,” I tell her.

“I will *never* forgive you. Not for what you said and not for killing me. I will haunt you from the grave,” she shouts. I remember about Gigi’s threat earlier and almost laugh. Almost, but I don’t dare. Not yet.

“I haven’t asked forgiveness. I gave you an honest assessment. And for the final time, you’re not going to die,” I tell her.

“What do you mean for the final time?” she cries up to me. “You mean you’ll stop reassuring me? You’d just let me sit here and panic about dying and not try to make me feel better?” She’s nearly screaming and her words are punctuated by sobs.

“You’re making yourself hysterical,” I call down in a voice that I hope doesn’t betray my unease.

“You’d be hysterical if you were the one down here facing impending death,” she cries angrily.

“I promise you’re not going to die,” I repeat.

“Don’t say that. You can’t promise that. Everyone dies. I had a feeling something significant would happen while I was here,” she says mournfully. “Twenty minutes ago, I thought it was that I would get to have a fun little fling with a sexy stranger. Hahaha, what a joke,” she cries.

She turns her head more so that nearly her full face is visible. A beam of moonlight breaks the dark shadowing them. I can see those eyes that tempted me so much tonight. Her face, even while twisted with pain and fear is like a painting—with features that separately you’d never think to pair together. Big eyes, a tiny nose. That lush, but small mouth ... Yet they come together and create an expressive, very interesting, and beautiful masterpiece.

My phone rings, and I answer it with my head still over the side so I can keep an eye on her “One sec, it’s about the rescue,” I tell her before I put it to my ear. Marco starts speaking right away and my heart sinks when he gives me the status.

“What’s wrong?” she asks as soon as I hang up.

“Nothing’s wrong—”

“Your face says otherwise,” she snaps. “Just tell me because I’m freaking out down here,” she says.

“It’s not a big deal,” I reassure her. “The station’s rappel team is one man short tonight. One of the guy’s wife went into labor about an hour ago,” I tell her. Her eyes widen in horror. She pushes up to sitting and scoots closer to the cliff wall. I listen

for signs of cracking or shifting in the rock. I hear nothing and exhale in relief. “There’s a team thirty minutes away, and he’s already on his way to them.”

“This is what I get for being so goddamn selfish. I’m going to die on a cliff in Italy and all because I wanted to live a little,” she cries.

“You’re not going to die,” I repeat what has become my refrain.

“Oh, the irony,” she shouts and throws an arm over her eyes.

“Well, it will certainly be a loss for the theatre, if you decide to throw yourself to your death,” I say dryly.

“It’s not funny. You come down here and see if making jokes seems like a nice thing to do,” she says, her eyes still covered by her arm.

My anxiety and guilt are tangling with each other. I don’t know what to do and everything I say seems to only make her more upset.

“Do you want me to go get your friend?” I ask, feeling like a failure.

“No. Please don’t leave me.” Her hand stretches out to me. And she looks up over her shoulder again. Her eyes are full of sorrow. “She’s having the time of her life. I’ve already ruined her trip by coming in the first place. I don’t know why I did,” she says.

“I’m sure she’s glad you came and maybe—”

“I need to confess something,” she calls, lips having been pursed in pain and now they twitch. I feel a prick of unease.

“No, you don’t need to confess anything. And it wouldn’t even count, I’m not a priest,” I call down. “Save your energy and try to think about something—”

“You will *listen*, you owe me,” she yells in a high-pitched, primal voice that is rich with anxiety and fear.

I give a sigh of resignation. I need to do whatever it takes to keep her calm and still while we wait.

“I’m listening. But not because I think you’re going to die,” I say.

“I got fired from my job three months ago. It was my dream job. And I was supporting my entire family with it. And I haven’t told my mother what really happened. I’ve lied to everyone,” she says in a rush.

“You don’t have to—” I try to stop her, but she just keeps pushing forward.

“I wish I hadn’t because I’m going to die, and those cunts who were making fun of me are going to think I’m really someone who uses men for money,” she says angrily.

“Aren’t you?” I ask her.

She glares daggers up at me. “Really? I mean, if I were, I’m clearly terrible at it. You practically threw me off a cliff to get rid of me,” she says.

I laugh despite the real anxiety I’m feeling waiting to hear back from Marco.

“I thought you were about to confess lies. You’re just telling more of them,” I quip.

“Just because you didn’t put your hand between my shoulders and shove me, doesn’t mean you’re not the reason I’m out here,” she snaps.

“Sorry.” I feel instantly contrite.

“I heard them talking about me. Out there on the balcony,” she says quietly. “I was leaving and came back for something and overheard them. I just wanted to make them think that I didn’t care. But, of course I care. But all anyone knows are the rumors. And they would rather believe the most ridiculous theories, with no basis in fact, than hear the boring truth,” she says. I know exactly how that feels. Renee dragged my name through the mud and I know most people believed her.

There’s an instant kinship, an invisible knitting of recognition and connection that I feel for her. I’ve been struggling with this very thing since I moved back to Houston. And I’ve had to endure gossip, not respond to innuendo and have everyone

think *Oh, look at the size of him. Of course, he choked her out* or whatever. The gossip campaign that Renee started has died down in fervor, but I know that these people think they know things about me. And they know absolutely nothing.

“Tell me what really happened,” I hear myself asking before I can think about it. It would be bad form not to ask, I tell myself. But, I can’t deny that I’m eager to know more about this woman who has me lying on my stomach with my head dangling off the edge of a cliff in the dirt, playing the role of confessor.

“I was living in Nashville. I had a great job at the Southern Poverty Law Center right out of law school. But the money was shit and I wanted to be able to do more for myself and my mama. So, I started applying for jobs in law firms. Big ones where I swore I’d never work. I went to a shitty law school, but I was first in my class and I wrote an article that the Harvard Law Review published. So, I had no problem finding a job. I moved to Washington, DC. It was great. The cost of living was crazy. But, I was renting and took the train in. Everything was great until I started seeing someone at work,” she says.

“Well, I don’t know how you could have foreseen that wouldn’t go pear-shaped,” I say sarcastically.

“Oh, it gets even worse. He was my boss,” she drones.

“Oh.” *Damn.*

“That’s not the best part.”

“What? Was he married?” I joke.

“Engaged,” she says quietly.

That was the last thing I was expecting to hear.

“Shit, I keep putting my foot in my mouth with you, don’t I?”

“You did say you were terrible at small talk.” She laughs, with real humor and shakes her head in what I have to guess—because I can’t see her face—is chagrin.

“I lived in Rockville. That’s a suburb of DC. It was affordable and not crowded, you know. I didn’t really spend much time in

DC beyond work. I didn't have any friends there, so my time in the actual district itself was limited to my office in China Town. But earlier this year, I ended up having an unexpected free afternoon after a deal closed early. You have no idea how rare that is. It's fucking brutal, that life. I worked like a mule at harvest time. On the days we were prepping for a deal to close, I would go forty-eight hours with no sleep. I never complained. I was proving to be something of a wunderkind in the practice that dealt with large insurance settlements. We were charting courses no one had ever even thought of. I was making an impact and I was making money. I never complained about the shitty treatment, the shitty hours and the constant sexual harassment."

"That intense," I say.

"It was. But like I said, it had its upsides," she says and she sighs up at the sky in nostalgia. "On the first free day I'd had in a year, I woke up feeling like doing something special.

"I decided to go to Dupont Circle and walk up Connecticut Ave to Nigel's favorite store—so I could buy him a fucking *tie*. He was in California for the week and I thought I'd be wearing it, and nothing else when he got back in a couple days ..." The image she paints turns me on until I remember that she did that for another man. The surge of jealousy I feel is dismissed for the ridiculousness that it is. She's not mine. Nor do I want her to be. But, I have to admit that seeing her naked with only one of my ties around her neck would have been fucking nice.

"Well, turns out his 'I'm going to be in California for work all week' was a lie," she says.

"He was at the store?" I ask.

"Yup, with his fiancée. I saw him, and at first, I was excited. I called his name. They both turned around. You should have seen his face." She snickers, and it makes me smile, too. "It was the classic, *I think I'm going to shit myself, so I'm clenching my ass as hard as I can face.*" She laughs to herself and I find it miraculous that she can laugh at the memory even while she's lying there in pain.

I feel my first pang of doubt about the conclusions I drew about her.

“Can you believe that at first he tried to act like he had no clue who I was?” she says, and I guffaw incredulously.

“No fucking way.”

“Oh, *way*,” she says.

“I mean, *hello*, motherfucker. Your tongue was buried between my thighs two days ago, remember that?” She laughs and I do, too. But my laugh isn’t a loose, easy one. It’s knotted around the discomfort I feel every time she refers to her sexual relationship with that man.

I don’t like it. Not one fucking bit, and I have no idea why or where that feeling came from. Because honestly, half an hour ago, I didn’t give two shits whether I saw her again or not.

“Come on, Rebecca, *look at her*, would I date a girl who shops at *The Gap*?” She says this in a deep voice that I’m assuming is meant to be the boyfriend. “I mean, who says things like that?”

“Well, apparently, your boyfriend. So, what’d you do? I hope it was worse than throwing yourself off a cliff because what he did was way worse than what I did ... and look how you’ve punished *me*,” I quip.

And when she laughs, I feel a swell of pride. And then immediately wonder who the fuck I am. Maybe I’ve had too much to drink.

“I didn’t throw myself off a cliff, and I wasn’t trying to punish you. You’re so vain. Not everything is about you,” she says angrily but with no malice.

“Anyway, I wish I’d done something to punish him then. It would’ve been much more satisfying getting arrested if I’d actually done something to earn it,” she says irritably.

“You’re like one of those Russian dolls. So many layers,” I say in wonder.

“Huh?” she replies.

“Nothing, keep going,” I prompt, eager to hear what came next.

“He had the nerve to call security. In seconds, they swooped in and escorted me out. I was truly speechless. Shocked beyond belief.”

I can be ruthless with people I’m not happy with. But, I can’t imagine pretending not to know someone you’ve been intimate with.

“What next?” I ask, intrigued beyond belief.

“I get back to work and find out the girl he was with is the daughter of our firm’s managing partner. Overnight, my job became a different kind of hell. It wasn’t just long hours and hard work. It was *impossibly* long hours, being assigned to cases in practice areas like white collar crime—places where I had no expertise and no interest. They gave me all these extremely technical questions to answer for super valuable clients. Then they’d tell me they needed the answer back in a matter of hours. These questions required a full day’s worth of work in less time than I was given to complete the job. So of course, I made mistakes. I fucked up assignments. I took too long to return phone calls. Whatever you can think of, I did it. I was constantly being called to task,” she rants. “They started saying things like, maybe I couldn’t do the work because I didn’t go to Harvard or Cornell like everyone else. For nearly an entire month after the incident at the store, they did everything they could to get me to quit.

“I knew what they were doing. I tried to stay strong. I was finally taking care of my mother the way she deserved. So, I hung on because I liked the money too much, and I thought I could outlast them. I’d never lost a fight in my life. And I have fought some really big demons,” she says, and her voice is clogged with heavy emotions.

“Wow,” is all I say, despite the dozens of questions I want to ask. Her honesty is so refreshing. I want more of it.

“But one day, the fuck up was *too* big. And a partner threw an entire three-ringed binder at me from across a conference room,” she says.

I was stunned at that.

“*I know*,” she says as if she can hear the shock in my silence. “No one did anything. In fact, they asked me to clean up the papers that had fallen out when it slammed into the wall next to my head.

“I started to think about quitting. I decided that there was no amount of money worth all of this. And if, at the age of twenty-eight, I was making nearly 200k a year, it meant I could find something like that again, right?” she posits.

“Right,” I agree.

“Wrong,” she deadpans. “When I leave here, I’m moving back home to Arkansas because I can’t afford my rent in DC anymore. This trip was my last hurrah. But now, I’m going to die.” Her chest rises and falls rapidly as she tries to catch her breath after that diatribe.

I ask her the question that’s been on the tip of my tongue.

“How could you not know that your boyfriend had someone else in his life?” I hear a voice in my head say, *Not now, she’s in the middle of what she believes could be her deathbed confession*. But, the woman I’m looking down at, that I’m listening to—that woman is smart and damn perceptive.

So, I double down when she doesn’t respond right away. “*Really*. How could you not have known?”

“I ask myself that every day,” she responds miserably.

“You seem like an astute person,” I muse.

“Then *you’re* clearly not,” she says with disdain.

“Thanks, that’s nice,” I say dryly.

“Haven’t you been *listening* to my story? Don’t you see the parallels?”

“Parallels?”

“Yes. *He* fucked me on the down low, but basically said I was too low class for him to be seen with in public. *You* wouldn’t even fuck me. And you made it very clear that even if you *could* lower yourself to being with me, I was too cheap to do

more with than that,” she says without any recrimination at all in her voice. “I must be the world’s biggest kind of fool. I keep meeting and liking the same kind of guy,” she says.

“Hey, I am not the same kind of guy as *that* asshole,” I say.

“What says you’re not? Certainly not the way you spoke to me. I mean, you being out here on this ledge is nice. But considering how it’s your fault and all, you leaving me alone out here would make you a pretty evil son of a bitch, so ... I’m not sure that I can see any real difference between you and my boyfriend of five years except he kept his sense of superiority hidden for much longer than you did.” She lays this indictment on me with the force of a sledgehammer.

Swish would be so disappointed in me right now, and there’s nothing worse than feeling that certainty settle down on my shoulders.

“Anyway, all I’m saying is, clearly, I have a type. With Nigel, all I lost was my job. You’re about to cost me my fucking life,” she says.

“Don’t say they actually fired you. Didn’t you have a contract or something?” I ask, ignoring her melodrama.

“I know you only date heiresses, so you wouldn’t know much about jobs and employment like the rest of us working stiffs,” she snarks. She’s making a joke, but a lash of shame strikes me right in the center of my chest when I remember the way I spoke to her.

“Most of us who have jobs are what’s called *at will*. I can quit whenever I want, and they can fire me for any reason. They found their reason and fired me,” she says simply.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing. I left. They offered me money to sign a nondisclosure, something saying I wouldn’t sue them for wrongful termination. I was tempted. That money would *not* have gone begging.”

“So, you signed it?” I ask.

“Hell *no*,” she says like it’s the stupidest question she’s ever been asked. “Of course not. I would dance naked on a pole in Little Rock before I took their hush money. I’ve worked too hard to let them drag my name in the mud. That is *my* story. And I’ll tell it if I want to,” she declares.

“So, have you?” I ask.

She sighs loudly. “No. Because it would destroy what’s left of my career. No one would ever hire me again. But, I hope they spend the entire three-year statutory period looking over their shoulders for that lawsuit. They’re playing games. I’m playing for my *life*. I have one shot to escape the future that I was born to, and I’ll be damned if they take it from me,” the lioness on the ledge roars.

Goddamn.

She’s sexy as fuck when she’s angry. Her voice is strong. There’s no fear. No apology.

“Nigel made sure to stop by my office on my last day and tell me how sorry he was that things didn’t work out. He told me that I should lower my ambitions. I had a great body, a decent face and amazing hair. But my pedigree was all wrong. ‘Stop punching above your weight, find your kind,’ he said.”

“Shit. He’s a proper asshole,” I say.

“He’s worse than an asshole. He’s a hemorrhoid. Useless, painful, and rotten on the inside,” she says with real scorn. “My *kind* are hunters and trackers. We’re keepers of tradition. We’re salt of the earth. I refused to feel ashamed of that.”

My dick gets hard. Like her words are her mouth and they’re wrapping themselves around it, sucking as hard. Just how I like it.

Fuck. Me.

I’m about two minutes from jumping down on that ledge with her and finding my way under that little dress and making both of our dreams come true.

“Oh, about two weeks after I left, Nigel had what he called a ‘crisis of his conscience.’ But really, what he meant was that

he wanted to fuck me again.”

My dick deflates. “Please spare me the details.”

“Oh, stop being a prude,” she says, misunderstanding my request. “Nothing even happened. I got home from another awful interview and found him sitting in his car outside my building. I lost it. I took my briefcase and started pounding his car. I broke his headlights and put a good dent in the hood before he drove off.”

“Did he leave you alone after that?”

“Yeah. He sent the police to me instead.”

“*Shit.*”

“Yup. Then, I got a call from my old partner,” she says.

“About *him*?” I ask.

“No. When I was fired, we were waiting for a ruling on a pro bono case I took on for the firm. Flood victims suing the insurance company for failing to pay legitimate claims. The ruling came back and we won. Big time. There was an appeal filed by the insurance company, and they wanted me to help with it,” she states. “Said they could get the DA to drop the charges if I did. So, I did. I could have been disbarred if I’d actually been prosecuted,” she says.

I whistle, impressed at their nerve. “Why didn’t they just assign another attorney?”

“I’m regarded as the foremost expert in the area of disaster relief financing for municipalities and regulated businesses like property and casualty insurance companies,” she says.

“That sounds impressive as hell, but it’s all Greek to me. Tell me, in plain English, what that means,” I ask her.

“Well,” she sighs. “When I was in law school, I wrote this article for a prestigious law review about the economics of hurricane disaster relief and how wrong we get it. That we focus on the bulk of the money of the issues that are sexy and headline worthy. Like helicopter rescues and helping resettle displaced people in new cities and states. But what about the people who stay? Whose homes aren’t washed away, but

simply flooded. The news cameras ignore them. It's not sexy to sit in your house and suffer quietly. No one wants to tell stories that would force us to really think about how we treat poor people in this country. So instead, we see the people lifted out of their homes by helicopters, moved to entirely new cities, given new clothes, new lives, and that makes us look benevolent. And I've been advocating for the litigation of cases that will force the federal circuits to take a position. Or maybe even make it to the Supreme Court." She shakes her head. "Gah, sorry, I could talk about this all night," she says.

"I could listen to you talk about this all night," I confess.

"Because of you, I'll never get my Nobel Peace Prize. I had so much potential," she cries and shakes her fist up at me.

"Stop speaking of yourself in the past tense," I chide her gently.

"You've ruined my life," she yells up at me. "And you know what's worse?"

"What?"

"Forget it," she says.

"Forget what?"

"Nothing," she responds sullenly.

"Okay," I acquiesce.

"I guess it doesn't matter if I tell you now," she grumbles after a few seconds pass. I smile but hide it in my voice when I speak.

"Shit or get off the pot, Confidence. Tell me or stop talking about it," I say.

"See? You're rude. But, because I'm stupid when it comes to men, I like you." She says it like it's a fate worse than death.

"You do?" I ask, completely surprised and pleased.

"Of course, I do. I saw you and thought, *yes, he's mine.*" She leans her head against the wall and gazes up at the stars.

"Did you, really?" I ask. I like the way that sounds.

“Yes. Something is *very* wrong with me,” she says miserably and I snort out a laugh. “It’s not funny. Every time I look up at you, I think about how much I want to kiss you.”

Heat coils in my chest. “I want to kiss you, too,” I admit.

“Of course, you do, now that I’m lying down here about to die,” she says angrily. I laugh. *Again*. God, she’s funny.

“I should be inside eating cake, getting drunk, and taking some beautiful stranger to bed. What kind of karma is this?” She wails to the sky and slams her open palm on the ground.

I watch helplessly from this stupid ledge. I feel like total shit.

“I’m sorry about what I said,” I start.

She doesn’t respond.

I haven’t apologized for anything in a long time. I don’t even know if I’m doing it right, but her increased volume makes me think not.

These are my “What would Swisher Do” moments. As soon as I ask myself that question, the answer comes.

“It was shitty, and I was an asshole for no reason,” I call down.

“Yes, it was.” She snuffles and looks up at me over her shoulders which are pressed flat against the rock. “No one’s an asshole for no reason. But, I really hope yours is good, because I want to forgive you,” she says begrudgingly.

I laugh. “You sure about that?” I ask.

“Only because if I get off this ledge, I’ll be able to have the night I wanted.” She scowls up at me.

I like that scowl.

I like *her*.

Very much.

The fearlessness of her conviction is so fucking attractive.

It’s a very rare trait. It’s the lack of that trait that makes the saying, *and there are no atheists in foxholes* very true.

But here she is. In her proverbial foxhole, and she's not finding her faith. Or compromising. I've only known four other living people who are like this, and three of them are my brothers. So, I give her a sign of respect that I give very few.

The truth.

"I can count my family on one hand. My aunt, my brothers. To everyone else, I'm a means to an end. And that end usually has something to do with my money. I've stopped minding. I just wish I would meet someone who would be honest about it." I say the words out loud that I've only ever let fester in my chest, and they sound as awful as they feel.

Her voice softens. "Oh, Hayes—"

The blare of sirens and the glowing from their flashing lights cuts her off.

The spell is broken, and I switch to action mode. I speak quickly and urgently down to her.

"I told them not to alert anyone inside. But it's going to be impossible for them to get out here without that now. And people are going to come out and see what's happening."

"Of course, they will," she says dejectedly. "For once, I'd love to not make a dramatic exit." And I feel her pain. More than I can say.

"I'm going to go and make sure they don't come too far, and I'll do my best to make sure your dignity is in one piece when the night is over," I tell her and start to get up.

"No, you can't leave me alone with them!" she cries out, and her eyes widen with fear. "What if they drop me? What if I fall?" she cries. Her chest heaves and arches her back off that wall.

"No, don't worry, and don't move. I won't leave until they get here, but I want to go and stand by the entrance to make sure that no one else comes out here. The last thing we need is for you to have to push through a crowd of people."

"I'm so scared. Please promise you'll stay close by. I just want to hear your voice, please?" She pleads with me with such

earnest vulnerability that it makes me wish I could be the one to bring her up to safety.

“I’ll make sure you’re safe. And I’ll be just behind the rescuers, okay?” I search her eyes until she nods.

She looks over to her left and whimpers.

“Don’t look. Keep your eyes turned up here.”

“It’s so dark. I’m scared, Hayes.” She hiccups my name, and my heart squeezes in my chest. A sudden gust of wind picks up her thick mane of hair and blows it wildly around her head.

She screams! “Oh my God, are there birds?” Her hands wave frantically around her body.

“No, it’s just your hair, Confidence,” I call. I look over my shoulder when I hear shouts and chairs scraping the ground.

“What if they can’t find a way to get me up?” she asks tearfully.

“It’s really not that far. It’ll be a breeze, and I’ll be right here. I’ll make sure you’re safe. I promise.”

I’ve barely managed to keep myself safe. But I’ll be damned if I don’t excel at it for her. I hear the commotion before the back flap of the tent explodes open.

“Down here,” I call out and start to lift off the ground.

“Haaaaaaaayes, I can’t see you anymore!” she screams.

“I know, but I’m here. I need to make room for the rescuers. One second!” I yell and then rush a few feet to meet them.

A woman in a short, multicolored sundress comes dashing out. Her eyes are wild with fear. She runs at me. “When I heard a woman had fallen, I was afraid it was TB, and then I saw *you*.” She reaches me and shoves me in the chest. “And I *knew* it was her. What did you do to her?” she snarls in my face.

Then, she crumples against my chest and covers her face with her hands. “I should have stopped her!” she wails.

I put my hand on her shoulder and pull her back. Her green eyes are clear of anger, and I can see her distress is real.

“Come on,” I say and start walking again. “I told her I’d be close enough to hear her, and right now, I’m not,”

When I reach the rescue party, Confidence is shouting, “He left me!” over and over.

“No. I didn’t,” I shout over her.

“You did.” She sounds unhinged. “You promised me, Hayes,” she wails.

“I didn’t leave. Your friend came down, I was just—”

“Oh my God! Cass!” she shrieks.

“TB, I’m so sorry, I’m right here, don’t worry,” her friend yells over her shoulder.

“So, what’s the plan?” I ask one of the men who’s talking on his walkie-talkie.

“We’re just getting anchored, Signore Rivers,” he says. “Then we’ll send Danelo down to secure her harness, connect her to the rappel, and we’ll pull her up. Once we’re anchored, it will only be a matter of minutes,” he says.

I exhale a sigh of relief I didn’t even realize I was holding onto.

“Why don’t you go sit there?” He nods at the stone steps where the rest of the guests are gawking. “You look very pale.”

“No, I want to be close enough for her to hear me,” I tell him. “I’ll wait right here.”

Chapter Five

Turd Blossom

Confidence

“Thank goodness,” Cass cries when my feet touch the ground after the rappel team hauls me to safety.

I wince at a shooting pain in my ankle and immediately bend my knee to take the pressure off it.

The harness is heavy, and when I try to stand on one leg, it’s impossible. I sway a little until a pair of strong hands grab me by the shoulders and steady me.

“Let me hold you up.” Hayes’s deep voice makes my heartbeat quicken. I look up from the three pairs of hands that are working to loosen the various latches and clasps on the contraption that saved my life. When our eyes meet, his are full of worry and warmth that I hadn’t seen up close. I’d been staring up at those eyes while I was sitting on that ledge. They had been my lifeline. I know he never felt fully afraid, but I did. When I landed on that ledge, it took me a full thirty seconds to convince myself that I wasn’t dead.

“Thank you for staying with me.” I reach over the men kneeled around me and grab his outstretched forearm.

“I’m sorry you were out here in the first place,” he says. His eyes are close and hypnotically focused on my mouth. I look at his mouth, too. One of his hands leaves my shoulder and cups my face.

“You scared me, Confidence,” he murmurs.

“You pissed me off, Hayes,” I say softly.

“I’m sorry, if you are,” he says.

“I hold grudges, so I’m not ready to accept your apology,” I say honestly.

He smiles.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

“But I’ll work for it if I have to,” he says. His hazel eyes burn into mine. I swallow hard at the heat in them. He’s looking at me like he wishes we were alone. I do, too.

Something happened between us while I was on that ledge. I didn’t feel it fully because no matter how much he did to distract me, I couldn’t forget that I was a few feet away from falling off. But now that I’m safe and in his arms, I’m catching up. And my body is buzzing for an entirely different reason. I smile up at him, bright and wide with my perfectly straight teeth that my mom always called God’s apology for fucking up everything else in my life.

“I’m so glad you followed me out, even though it was your fault. You kept me from going crazy,” I say softly. We’ve run the full gamut of emotions, and we’ve ended up intrigued and much more than interested.

He leans in slightly—his eyes are open and on mine. My heart is thudding like I’ve just sprinted for a mile. My face is tingling. His fingers move in slow, small circles at the base of my neck; his thumbs massage the muscles that are clenched in my jaw. My head falls back and his fingers slip into my hair and cup the base of my skull. He cradles my head like it’s the most delicate thing he’s ever held. I’m liquifying. The adrenaline is mingling with lust, and I’m turned on in a way that I’ve never been before. What they say about near death experiences making you horny is true. His fingers caress my scalp and send chills through me that curl into heat-seeking missiles that turn my entire body into an erogenous zone.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” he murmurs and leans forward to brush a kiss on my mouth. But my lips want more and they cling to his greedily. Kissing him is like being hit with a thousand lightning bolts of full-blown pleasure. He feels like the most worthwhile regret I’ll ever have. I want to make this count.

I sink my teeth into his lower lip and tug. He hisses, but he takes control of the kiss and covers my mouth with his. And

then he kisses the shit out of me. It's so perfect that it feels like I fell off the edge of the cliff just so this could happen.

His lips are soft and demanding. I could get addicted to this man—really fast. My body is *singing* like it's just had that first, singular hit of its new favorite drug. He pulls back after one of the men working on my harness coughs loudly. I hold onto his lips until simple biology makes it impossible for me to hold on anymore. We smile like lunatics at each other. He looks like a kid on Christmas morning and that's exactly how I *feel*. When they pull the harness off me, I know two things for sure. One, this was just the first of many kisses I'm going to share with him. And two, that I'll never forget him or this trip as long as I live.

"I still don't forgive you," I remind him.

"I want to make it up to you."

"Okay," I whisper when he leans away.

"Hell yeah, TB!" Cass calls from over Hayes's shoulder.

The harness loosens and the men crouched in front of me working it loose all stand. Hayes lets go of me, and I drop my leg back down for balance. I immediately regret my decision because pain—almost blindingly sharp—shoots up my leg from my ankle.

* * *

We're in my bed. The EMTs decided my ankle was only sprained. They put me in a soft knee length boot to mobilize it. Considering that I fell down that ledge, I'm amazed I walked away with that being the only thing wrong. I also walked away with the most unexpected, beautiful surprise. Hayes Rivers. He's still mostly pretty rude, but he's been attentive and tender. And I can't keep my hands off him.

“So, tell me, what’s TB mean?” he asks. His breath is warm and tickles the fine hairs near my temples.

“Turd Blossom,” I say, and his chest tightens against my cheek.

“What in the world is that?”

I laugh hoarsely and pat his chest softly. “And you call yourself a Texan,” I say.

“Is knowing what a turd blossom is a prerequisite for being a real Texan?” he asks.

“No, it’s not a prerequisite, it’s a *requirement*. To call yourself a real Texan, you’ve got to have had some shit dumped on you and come up smelling like roses,” I tell him.

“And how do you know so much about being a Texan?”

“I went to college in Texas,” I tell him.

“UT?”

“Not UT, I couldn’t afford that. I went to Texas State in San Marcos. It was like Paris, France compared to Amorel,” I say and laugh as I remember how googly-eyed I’d been for the first couple of weeks.

“Where’s Amorel?” he asks.

“It’s where I’m from. Right in the armpit of Arkansas, just across the Tennessee border, and along the banks of the great Mississippi River.”

“Is it a small town?” he asks.

I laugh. “That would be a generous description. We have one road running through town and really, it’s just there because the railroad tracks need a place to cross.” I laugh.

I wiggle the toes of my healthy foot along his shins. “It’s why my feet are extra wide.”

He laughs. “This because of your childhood? Or is this a random Confidence fact?” he asks.

“My childhood,” I clarify. “I was barefoot all the time. Walking on hard ground with no shoes makes your feet spread

and hardens them.” I miss the springy, fertile, cool soil of Amorel beneath my feet suddenly.

“I played barefoot all the time,” he says

“I didn’t play barefoot. I *lived* barefoot. I even went to school without shoes. And so did a lot of the other kids.”

“Barefoot? Were you ...” He trails off like he doesn’t want to say it.

“Was I poor?” I ask and laugh. “It’s not a dirty word. I’m not ashamed of where I come from. Because look where it got me,” I tell him.

“Well.” He hums low in his throat like he’s thinking deeply. “I think you defied the odds, getting out of there to where you are now.” He leans back and looks down at me. “I have a feeling you left a string of broken hearts in town when you left, and I’m sure half of them never managed to make it out and come after you,” he quips.

“Yeah, no.” I laugh out loud at the idea. “There was nothing romantic about my existence. It was a hard life, but my town did everything they could to make sure I got out. And, there was no string of broken hearts.” I nudge the center of his chest with my nose. “I was too busy doing chores, hunting, cleaning, going to school, and reading everything I could get my hands on.”

“See? You did what it takes to get out of there and your family helped you,” he says.

“Not by myself. And not because of my family. At least, not my blood family. It was the sheriff, my school librarian, the woman who ran the food market. Family, for me, isn’t because of blood. It’s because we decided to be each other’s support system.”

A strange expression crosses his face. “What? Does being a trust fund baby negate the need for family?” I ask.

“Of course not. And I don’t like that phrase. I’ve never been comfortable with the idea of being idle. I’ve worked since I left university. My brothers are the same way. We all have professions,” he says.

I pull back, “Profession? That sounds fancy. What did you do?”

“Nothing as *fancy* as a big firm lawyer,” he drawls. “I’m an accountant. Or I was,” he says and for some reason it tickles me to death. I laugh.

“You’re an accountant? You look like James Bond, the superhero version. I would never have guessed,” I tease. Kinda.

“Yeah, and I worked for my family’s company for a while. I’m the first Rivers in two generations to do so,” he says with pride.

“But, I think that if I didn’t have the benefit of all that money, it would have been a lot harder.”

I shrug, unimpressed.

“Sure, having to work a second job while going to school full-time meant college wasn’t a barrel of laughs. But, you know what?” I ask him.

“What?” he responds with an indulgent smile.

“I don’t even remember the hard work. I just know it’s paid off. So, yeah, I come from one of the poorest places in the country. But, I can also tell you that the more successful I become, the more terrible the people I meet are,” I say.

“Oh, come on.”

“It’s true. There are five hundred people in my town. They’re all like my family. They say good morning and they mean it,” I say.

“Hmm, sounds nice.”

“It was. That entire town raised me. When I left for school, over a hundred of them drove down to Memphis to hug me at the airport. They couldn’t give me money, but they gave me the work ethic to fuel my ambition just because they love me. Now everyone around me wants something in return.”

“Maybe. But I still think you defied the odds,” he says.

“So did you,” I throw back. “If you have disposable income, good health insurance, and job security, then you’ve defied the odds. Do you know how unattainable that is for so many people? The odds are stacked against most of us,” I tell him.

“Honestly, I have no idea. I’ve never had to think about any of those things,” he muses like he’s never considered the mundane aspects of life.

Lucky him.

“Do you volunteer?” I cock my head at him.

“Like, you mean ... my time?” he asks like it’s the most far-fetched thing he’s ever had.

“Yes, your *time*. You know, in your community? Worked in a soup kitchen, repaired a roof, cut grass, read to someone who couldn’t read to themselves?” I ask.

“No ... I support those things financially,” he says.

I shrug. “Yeah, that’s great. And we should all do that if we’re able. But if you don’t interact with the people you’re writing those checks to support, you’ll never see them as anything but poor. Which, contrary to popular belief, is *not* a character flaw.”

He doesn’t respond, and after a full minute of tense silence, I can’t stand it anymore.

“I’m sorry. I’m just passionate about ... well, about everything,” I admit.

“Everything?” He laughs and it rumbles around his chest and rolls over me like thunder. I snuggle closer to him.

“Well, yeah—everything I do, anyway. I don’t see the point in doing something if I’m not all in. It’ll take the same amount of time to do it whether I’m enthusiastic or not. And I’ve found my greatest passions that way. What you give is what you get ... I acquired a lot from my experiences, so I know that means I’ve got to give them my all, too.”

He doesn’t say anything and I start to feel uneasy. Me and my oversharing big mouth. “Did I just scare you off?” I press my

forehead to his chest and close my eyes. “I’m a little neurotic,” I say.

“Where did you come from?” He drops his chin onto the top of my head and pulls me close to him. He smells so good.

“Did you fall asleep when I was talking? I just told you. I’m from Arkansas—”

“That’s not what I mean. I mean, I didn’t know people like you existed ...” He pulls back so he can see my face. I flush at the awe in his eyes.

“Oh, come on. I’m a clumsy, country redneck with a law degree and a nice ass,” I quip to hide my embarrassment.

“Yeah, I can only agree with the nice ass part and I guess I believe you’re a lawyer, but I need to see a diploma.” He slides his hands down and cups the cheeks of said ass in his strong hands. “I’m sorry for what I said to you. You’re incredible. I have never met anyone like you, and I’ve never wanted a do-over so badly in my life.” He rushes the words out in a clumsy, halting sentence. I school my smile before I tilt my head up at him. His eyes are so beautiful and they’re fixed on mine in an open, honest, slightly vulnerable way.

“My mother told me that we speak from our brains, but we hear from our hearts,” I say.

“Meaning you know bullshit when you hear it?” he asks with an amused smirk.

“I know bullshit when I hear it,” I confirm. “And *that’s* the only reason I’m forgiving you. I can tell you’re really sorry. Also, it sucks that you have such shitty people in your life that you’re walking around expecting to be used,” I say honestly. He tenses again.

“I don’t know that they’re *all* shitty people. My brothers aren’t. My aunt isn’t. But otherwise, in my circle, money is more than just what you use to live. It’s your armor, it’s your power, your weapon—”

“You make life sound like a war,” I say.

“Isn’t it?” he asks.

“I mean, *I* don’t think so and I’ve had some battles, but no. In general, I’m just trying to do better than the people before me so that the people after me have something worth taking care of, too,” I say.

“That’s all I want, too,” he says and runs an absent hand up and down the small of my back. His hand is heavy and warm, and I start to feel the first call of sleep.

“The lady at the table told us your family is a big deal in Houston. What for?”

He takes a minute, his hands tightening their grip on my body. He hums contemplatively and sighs deeply before he speaks.

“I’m very wealthy. I have been since I was twenty-five. That alone makes me someone whose name people know. My father died when I was fourteen, and I went to live with my aunt.” His lips twitch slightly like he’s in pain.

“Was this in Texas?” I ask him gently.

“No, it was in Positano.” He runs a hand through his thick, curly hair.

“Where’s that?” I ask.

“Italy,” he says.

My fingers drift down his face when I see the flash of pain in his eyes that the memory of it brings.

“That’s a long way from home,” I say.

“It was. And when I got here, I was so angry. At everyone. I didn’t really know my aunt, and I resented having to come and live with her. I behaved like such a jerk. She sent me to a boarding school after I broke a window in her neighbor’s house and refused to apologize,” he laughs.

“She kicked you out?” I ask

“Yeah.” He scratches his chin; the scrape of stubble under his nails vibrates against my ear, and I snuggle closer to him. His body is so hard, but it yields where I need it to, and I’ve never been more comfortable in my whole life. “We were at real

odds with each other. She didn't know what to do with me, and I didn't know what to do with all of my anger," he says.

"How was boarding school?" I ask.

"Hell. I didn't speak Italian well; I was a loner, and the upperclassmen smelled blood in the water. And almost right away, they tried to make me their grunt. And that wasn't happening," he says coldly. I like that rough edge in his voice. I shiver and move closer to him.

"So, what'd you do?" I ask.

"The first one who got close enough to me got a bloody nose for his trouble," he says with grudging pride.

I nudge him and tighten the hands that I have wrapped around his waist. He's talking about it like it was no big deal. I can tell that now, it's not. But I can't imagine what he must have been feeling then. My heart aches for him. How can someone have so much and yet ...

"So, you fought your way through school?" I ask him.

"Didn't get the chance. I was expelled when I broke the French ambassador's son's cheekbone," he says grimly.

"Holy shit." I grimace.

He starts to pull his hand back.

I hold his arms in place to stop him. "Please don't stop touching me; I like it. A lot," I say quietly.

His arms tighten around me, and I relax again.

"Did you hear about my ex? I'm assuming that gossip has made its way here," he says.

I nod.

"What did you hear?"

"It doesn't matter. I don't believe it," I tell him.

"Why not? Because I was nice to you tonight?" he asks in a voice that reeks with skepticism.

"Don't be a jerk," I say.

“I’m not being a jerk,” he pushes back. “I just know what people say. ‘Guy his size ...’”

“Well, my father was five foot, five inches tall, 140 pounds, and he’s the most vicious human being I’ve ever met. He beat my mother until the day he died. His size had nothing to do with it. And it doesn’t have anything to do with my brother who’s the same size and just as brutal. I was bred by a violent man. I lived with violent men. I can smell it. My skin tingles.” I look down at my arms. “The only tingles *you* give me are the kind that feel really good.”

He nuzzles my hair with his chin.

“But ... how did you end up in such a bad place with your ex?” I ask.

He stiffens and then clears his throat.

“I was living in New York after college, away from my family and with my brothers. All four of us in one city. It was ... amazing.”

His sigh is full of nostalgia and I can hear the smile the memory has brought to his face. “I feel a but coming on,” I say when he pauses a beat too long.

“But, I was also in a really dark place. I was almost twenty-five. My inheritance was vesting and yet I still couldn’t go home. I’d have the money, but none of the responsibility that made it mine. And I was obsessed with being ready to take the helm. My aunt always takes blame for introducing me to her. But if I’m honest, I thought finding a wife was the most important thing. Combine that with alcohol, youth, and more money than sense ... and you’ve got a perfect storm.

“I married the wrong woman. We divorced. She moved on. I moved back to Europe.

“Five years later, her luck ran out and she was trying to get more money out of me. She came to my house one evening and I refused to let her in. She banged on the door for an hour. She only left when I told her I was calling the police.”

“Why didn’t you call them the minute she showed up? This sounds insane,” I ask.

“Because I was, as always, thinking about what that would look like for the family. It ended up being a disaster anyway,” he says.

“So, you’ve been in the position for how long?”

“Since I turned thirty, two months ago. It’s been a total disaster. My uncle and stepmother have spent the last sixteen years making a mess of it. So, first order of business is trying to climb through all the shit they’ve piled on top of us.”

“Ha, just like a turd blossom!” I wiggle my fingers against his ribs.

“I’m not ticklish,” he says dryly.

“How boring.”

“Listen, I like the idea of that nickname, but I can’t see myself calling you anything that has anything to do with shit.”

“Well, I don’t need a nickname. I’m good with you calling me by my name.”

He watches me with pursed lips. His eyes narrow and then he holds his wrist up so the face of it is in my line of sight.

“See those stones? Can you tell if they’re real?”

I drag my finger over the halo of diamonds on his watch’s face.

“I can’t tell. I don’t think I’ve ever seen real diamonds in my life,” I admit and peer at them.

“What’s your first impression?” he asks.

I examine them again. “They’re pretty, but they kinda look just like the stones in a ring I bought myself for Christmas at Macy’s,” I muse.

“I think unless you’re an expert, you probably can’t tell them apart from other clear stones.”

“So why do people pay so much for them?” I ask.

“They’re rarer than most stones, stronger than most, too. So, yeah, there are lots of things that might look like them, but

when you test their strength, they'll show you why they're worthy of the price tag."

His voice is roughened by exhaustion, but it's soothing. Everything about him is; his voice, his hands, his body, the way he touches me—it all feels right.

It's almost six o'clock in the morning, and we've been talking all night. The buttery morning sun peeks through the dark green wooden shutters that are ubiquitous to all of the villas along this stretch of coast. I watch the dust motes dance in the rays that fall on the tangle of white sheets that we've cocooned ourselves in. It's also a reminder that a new day is here and that in a couple of days I'll be on a plane back to reality.

"That's how I'd describe you," he says and my eyes snap back to him. He's staring at the face of his watch still.

"How?" I ask.

"A diamond. Well, durable, rare, stronger than you look—a treasure." And when he says those words, I think how right they feel.

"I agree," I say, and then flush with embarrassment. "I'm not vain," I say defensively.

He disentangles himself from me, and I land with a small bounce on the soft mattress we're laying on.

I find myself looking up him. He's propped his head on his fist, and he's watching me.

"There's nothing wrong with vanity, Confidence. I've never met a woman more entitled to her vanity than you. I'll call you ... just that, *Tesoro*." His fingers trail up my arm.

"That's what you called me tonight when you were being rude," I remind him.

"I didn't mean it then. But it turns out that it was portent." His fingers skim my shoulder and trip up my neck before they delve into my hair.

"I like that, even though you're just trying to make up for being such a dick tonight," I tell him dismissively. But inside I flail, flutter, and swell with pleasure.

“Yeah, I am,” he says slowly.

I laugh at the surprise on his face.

“Is that rare?”

“Yeah, I’m not usually worried about making up for being anything. Most of the time, out of either necessity, obligation, or a combination of both, I’m forced to make hard decisions, to speak harshly to people I respect, to say no to people I love. But, right now, I feel like I can just be myself. And *remorse* is something I’m glad I can still feel. It reminds me I’m human,” he says a little absently, like he’s thinking out loud. His fingers skim—with no real agenda—up and down my side. “So, *this* is just because it feels right to say that I’m sorry.” He focuses on me again, and when our eyes connect, we click into place like well-oiled gears and just look at each other. He’s got a mole—tiny and the same color as his skin—on the left side of his mouth. His five o’clock shadow is heavy and rides up his cheeks. The light from the lamp overhead cuts between and lights his face so his lashes make shadows on his cheeks. I trail my fingers along the shadows and say, “Thanks for apologizing.”

He sighs.

“I wish I could go to the beginning. When I saw you in the hallway outside my room, I should have dragged you into my room and kissed you,” he says slowly.

“But, I wouldn’t change a thing. I mean, that kiss would have been awesome. But everything that’s happened since was like a prelude to all of this. I’ve gotten the chance to know the man behind those lips,” I say suggestively.

I lean up and kiss the tiny frown that’s marring his lips away.

“And?”

“And now, this kiss is going to be something much better than awesome ... it’ll be honest,” I say. I brush my mouth against his and I feel it in my core. Sexual tension inside of me. I’m *dying* to be with him.

“I like that,” he says, then leans down and kisses me back. His lips are soft and insistent on my mouth, and I open for him.

The pads of his long fingers scrape my scalp and his thumbs cup my jaw while we kiss. It is achingly tender, and with each press of our lips, my desire for him blooms even bigger and brighter. Our tongues do an erotic slide and rub that makes my toes curl. I've kissed my fair share of men, but this is different. It doesn't have an agenda. It's not foreplay. It's just a kiss for the sake of it. He groans into my mouth and bites my lower lip before he sucks on it. Heat floods my body. My heart rate rises. This kiss is everything. He's my river. I am drowning in him. And, I don't want to be rescued.

"Your mouth ... it's so fucking sweet," he whispers before we're kissing again. His hand slides from my hair down my back, grips my ass, and works its way back up to grasp the back of my neck and hold me in place while we share a kiss that's far beyond anything I imagined a kiss could be. Heat is licking at my skin; I feel like I'm on fire. I sink my fingers into his hair and nibble on his lips before I break our lip-lock. I drop kisses on his chin and underneath.

A yawn cracks my jaw and surprises me so much I almost choke on the air I inhale.

"Well, glad to know my kiss bored you to sleep," he says dryly.

"More like it wore my jaw out," I say and yawn again.

He yawns, too, then groans and pulls me into a bear hug. "Let's sleep. I have a call at 9:00 a.m. and then I'll be working for the rest of the day."

He nestles his head on top of mine, tucks his hands underneath me, and pulls me flush against him.

I laugh at the way he's cocooned me.

"I would never have guessed you grew up sleeping with a binkie. You're a pro at the full body wraparound snuggle," I say.

"Binkie?" he asks sleepily.

"Binkie. That's what we call security blankets, stuffed animal, your mama's T-shirt. You know, something that you hold because it helps you sleep."

“Well, clearly, I’m a natural at the full body wraparound, because I can confirm, you’re my very first one.” He drops a kiss on the top of my head and sighs, deep and content before his breathing evens out.

And I lie there and let myself enjoy what I know will go down as one of the best nights of my life.

Chapter Six

Lovers

Confidence

“Woah, yeah. Hayes, this is a full 180 from where you were last night. Last night you said, and I quote, ‘I would have fucked her, but I could never have brought her home.’” My brother Dare peers into the FaceTime screen on my phone.

I bristle. “I didn’t say that,” I say.

“Actually, you texted it, but either way, that’s how you described her. And now ...”

“Things have changed, and I need to know who she is,” I tell him.

His one-eyed squint full of skeptical amusement, he asks, “Who are you and what did you do with my older brother? Mr. I’ll – never — date — seriously — again?” Dare frowns.

“Listen, I need to get in there. I just wanted to see if you could get me the background check without me having to use official channels. If you’re just going to talk shit, I’ll talk to you later,” I snap at him and run my fingers through my hair.

“Wait, at least let me give you some advice. Because if nothing else, you know you’re moving too fast, or else you wouldn’t have called me,” he drawls.

“It *is* too fast. But I need to make sure this isn’t another Renee situation. Can you get it? Or not?” I fix him with a stony glare. He rolls his eyes in defeat but pushes back one more time.

“Why don’t you just get to know her yourself? Don’t freak out because you actually like her. I mean, it sucks that she’s ‘unpolished and unbred’—”

“Hey, I didn’t say that,” I protest.

“That’s what you said it boils down to. And if you’re really worried about *her pedigree*, maybe you’re not ready to be with anyone right now.”

“I don’t give a shit about her pedigree. And don’t be dramatic, Dare.” I dismiss his rebuke.

“Hayes, a *background check* is fucking dramatic. And it’s dishonest. What’ll you do if she finds out?”

“How would she find out?”

“Well, hopefully, when you realize what a dick move it was and tell her,” he says.

“I’m glad you’ve finally found a moral compass, Dare. How about you practice using it before you start lecturing me about honesty,” I say sarcastically.

He laughs. “I’ve always had a good moral compass. Just not when it comes to my own life.”

I frown at him.

He sighs and shakes his head. “Why don’t you just trust what you feel, He-man?” He uses the nickname he gave me when our parents first got married. I lean against the wall and scowl at him.

“Because, I don’t trust *myself*. Not anymore. I just inherited the keys to a kingdom, Dare, and whoever I’m with will have access to them. I need to be *sure*. If you can’t do it, I have two other guys I can call,” I tell him flatly.

He sits up and takes a deep breath with his vape pen in between his lips. “I got you, bro.” He says it with barely tepid enthusiasm.

“Somehow, that doesn’t inspire confidence, Dare,” I mutter.

“Yeah. Well, I said I’d do it. I didn’t say I’d pretend to enjoy it. I hope once it comes back, you’ll find a way to tell her and apologize.”

“Sure, any other advice?” I ask sarcastically.

“When you fuck her, only kiss her once and make sure when you come you aren’t looking her in the eyes.—”

“I do not need any advice about how to fuck, Dare,” I tell him and grimace in annoyance.

“I only meant until you get the background check results and can confirm that falling in love with her is safe.”

“Dare ...” I growl impatiently.

He winks. “I’ll never lie to you. I know your bark is worse than your bite. And I’m your brother. We’re BFFs forever,” he chirps in a high-pitched voice.

“Shut up and get me the info,” I snap, and I hear his laughter when I press the end call button.

I got a call from the office in the middle of the wedding ceremony. I stepped out of the tiny seaside chapel to take it and I’ve been gone for more than an hour. I had been more than ready to go find Confidence, but I needed to call Dare first.

I walk back to the terrace where the tent has been set up for two days. During the day, the flaps are raised, and you can see clear to the horizon.

Tonight, it’s pouring rain outside. And the curtains are tightly closed against it. The ceiling is pitch black and blanketed with thousands of rows of twinkling lights in the shape of stars. Huge, lush trees with golden, round imitation fruit hanging off them line the walls and act as cover for the seating alcoves tucked into the corners of the space. There are flowers everywhere that complete the look. It sets a beautiful scene. Yet, it all fades into the background when I finally see her.

Nothing in this room is nearly as beautiful, original, or fresh as Confidence. I’ve thought of nearly nothing else since I laid eyes on her in the hallway.

Her golden spun hair is swept off her neck and face and piled in a mass of curls on the top of her head like a crown. She’s got some sort of jewelry interspersed in it and the stones fire like diamonds when they catch the lights from overhead. The thin white straps of her dress cling to her shoulders, but they look like they’d slip off at the slightest provocation.

A gust of wind.

The gentle nudge of my nose.

In the hungry grip of my teeth.

The lights overhead reflect on her bare back like a cloak of diamonds. How fucking appropriate.

I keep my eyes on her as I approach and watch the movements of her back and the elegant sway of her neck as she laughs at something. I can't wait to press my lips to that sweet, fragrant skin.

Her hand slides up to caress the very spot I was just fantasizing about. Her fingers linger there and her head lolls slightly. And like she can sense me, she turns her graceful neck until she's facing me.

The smile on her face when she sees me feels too good to be true. We hold eyes as I walk up to the table.

Am I being a fool?

Does it matter if it's just going to be a few days of fun?

Will a few days of fun be enough? I push aside the unease that pings in my chest at that thought.

Conversation stops when I get to the table. I smile at them, greet a few by name. Their response is universal and reminds me why I sit by myself. They all congratulate me on my chairmanship and a few ask for a meeting.

When I've finally done my social duty, I smile down at Confidence. "Good evening." A small dimple indents the middle of her right cheek. I run the tip of my finger over it and trace the underside of her lip. Her skin feels like the softest velvet. She blushes and tucks a thick strand of curls behind her ear and smiles wide.

"Did you rest this afternoon?" I tip her chin up with my finger and her delicate throat bobs.

Oh, yes. There's *something* about her.

"Yeah, I did. How was work?" she asks. Her blue eyes catch the light and glimmer with desire. I stroke her shoulder and fiddle with the thin strap of her dress.

“I wanted to come and see you, but—”

“Excuse me, Mr. Rivers.” A hand taps my sleeve, and I look down at the man sitting next to her. “Yes?” I glance down at him in irritation.

He gives me a wan smile and sits up straighter. “I just wanted to introduce myself. I’m Giovanni Caselli.” He nods at Confidence. “I’m this young lady’s escort tonight. I met her in the bar—” I immediately tune him out.

“Would you like a drink?” I ask Confidence. She shoots a worried glance at her companion and then back at me. “Maybe a limoncello, but it can wait. You just got here,” she says.

“Mr. Caselli, if you would,” I look down at the third wheel and scowl. “I’ll have a whisky soda.”

He only hesitates for the blink of an eye before he stands up. “Oh, it would be my honor to fetch you a drink, Mr. Rivers,” he says. His thickly accented English is perfect and he bobs up and down. “Please feel free to use my seat while I’m gone.”

Fucking coward.

I lean in and whisper in his ear, “*Invia un server con i nostri drink in modo da poterti concentrare sulla ricerca di un altro posto.*” Send a waiter with our drinks and find yourself another seat.

His eyes widen at my directive, but he nods, bows to the rest of the table, and with a furtive, “*Ciao*” in Confidence’s direction, he darts off.

“What did you say to him?” she asks with a disapproving laugh. I drop down in the seat next to her and grab the leg of hers and drag it over.

“I thanked him for keeping my seat warm,” I say with a shrug. My eyes sweep the rest of the table, and a few of the eyes trained on us zip away. But a couple actually gawk for another second before they bend their heads together to gossip.

“Why is everyone staring?” she whispers, her eyes wide as she looks around the table.

“They’re shocked that I’m sitting here. I haven’t had a plus one in five years. For me, these events are about business. It’s a chance to catch people with their guard down, make a deal that would be impossible to hatch in a boardroom.”

“So, you don’t have business this time?” she asks.

“Yeah ... You,” I say.

She laughs. “You’re so smooth when you want to be,” she teases.

I pick up her hand and place it in my palm. She stops laughing and wraps her delicate fingers around mine. Her nails are painted a light pink. They’re short, simple, but so fucking pretty. Just like her.

“But I can’t seem to stop touching you,” I say quietly and look back at her face.

Her eyes sink their hooks into me and reel me in. I go willingly. I want to backstroke in those baby blues. Her full, red lips are parted and soft.

She’s practically drooling.

“Does it turn you on?” I ask, half teasing, half pleased as fuck.

She’s good company. I feel completely comfortable with her. Like I do with my brothers, and a very small handful of friends. She’s smart and funny. And she looks at me and just sees a man she’s attracted to. Not what I can do for her.

It’s bad timing. I have so much on my plate. I have no idea what will happen when the wedding is over. But, I know that I’d like to see her again. Is she even thinking about it, or is this really just the weekend fling she talked about last night?

“What are you thinking?” she asks.

“This and that,” I say vaguely, but I add a smile so she doesn’t pick up on the prickle of unease in my gut

I trace her finger absently and think about what I said to Dare. It’s true—it would be seen as a *misalliance*. But, it wouldn’t

be. There's nothing I've seen that says she's not amazing. I want to explore what we've ignited this weekend.

"What are *you* thinking?" I ask.

She raises her eyebrows in amusement. "Just that I'm sure everyone would be shocked to find that underneath your Duke of Midnight persona, you're really an introvert who creates distance to prevent being disappointed."

"I have no idea what the Duke of Midnight reference alludes to, but the rest is essentially correct," I admit with a shrug. I am very well aware of all of my shortcomings and of my character. The way my past experiences have shaped the way I build relationships. I see them as just part and parcel of who I am.

"*Duke of Midnight* ... It's the title of a book I read a few years ago. A historical romance where, by day, the duke is an autocratic and powerful member of parliament. By night, though, he was a sort of protector of the poor—Victorian England's version of Batman. Anyway, no one would have guessed that his motivations were all about avenging his parents' murders and not about being the most powerful duke in the world. It's such a great book. And after yesterday, I think you'd be just like that if circumstances called for it." She smiles.

I hear Dare's voice in my head when she does exactly what he suggested I try—trusting how she feels and what I've shown her to decide if I'm worth knowing. I feel my first niggle of guilt about ordering that background check.

I swivel the small stack of delicate gold rings that adorn her middle finger.

She's told me about losing her job. If there's nothing more scandalous in her past than that, then it would be a good indicator that there won't be anything scandalous in her future. After Renee, I won't take any more chances with the women in my life. My responsibility is to make sure I pass on a legacy worth fighting for to the next generation. My personal desires come second to that.

My brothers have talked themselves blue in the face trying to convince me that I should date again. I've ignored them. They have the luxury of doing whatever they want. As long as I'm alive, it's my responsibility to continue the family name. Have children, grow what we have—to continue funding medical research, continue investing in the city that made us who we are. And to steer us in the direction of being what we've always been. Leaders, contributors, powerful, and respected.

The tickle of her fingers tracing my knuckles draws me back to the moment. I glance up at her face to find her watching our joined hands, lost in an internal conversation of her own. I watch her unobserved and lose the ability to breathe.

She's more beautiful than anyone has the right to be. And the longer I look at her, the more I'm sure she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Her lush lips are coated in an obscenely sexy, slick, red lipstick. Her cheeks shimmer with what looks like gold dust. How fitting, since she looks like a very sexy fairy. Her dress is white lace confection that's stark in contrast to the smooth tanned skin of her chest and arms. Her hair sits in a blonde knot that kisses the nape of her neck and I'm jealous of it. I imagine closing my lips over that spot and whirling my tongue over it before I sucked her hard enough to leave a mark.

She's still staring at our hands and her lips lift in a quirk.

She traces the network of veins that cross the back of my hand.

"You've got such big hands," she says absently.

"Yours are so small," I respond.

I feel eyes on us, and when I look back at the table, their eyes all dart away like roaches when the lights come on. I should give them something to make their gossip worth it.

"Let's dance," I say.

"I thought you didn't dance," she says.

I answer by standing up and holding my hand out to her.

"May I?" I ask with a formal bow.

She giggles, but pouts and points down at her booted foot with a frown. The large plastic boot that's holding her sprained ankle in place sticks out of the bottom of her long, flowing, white lace skirt.

"I can't dance on it; walking is about as good as it gets."

"You can if you're standing on my feet," I tell her.

Her eyes widen with surprise and her mouth drops open in a happy smile. She stands up, grabs my hands, and beams up at me.

"That's the nicest thing, but I'm not exactly small and this boot—"

"You're tiny," I retort.

"I'm short, but I'm certainly more than a small handful." She starts to sit back down, but I put a hand at her waist and pull her gently into my chest.

"Well, it's a good thing I have these big hands, isn't it?" I murmur in her ear. I lead her slowly onto the dance floor and point down at my feet.

"Climb on." I hold out my upturned hands to her.

She gives me a slightly skeptical smile before she says, "Okay. But you better not let me fall," she warns and then she puts one foot on top of mine.

"Never," I say and tighten my grip on her waist.

The song starts to fade and the next one starts.

"Oh, my goodness, is this Elvis?" she asks as she places the ball of her silver ballet-slipped foot onto my other.

"He's very popular in Europe," I say and smile as the strains of the song "Can't Help Falling in Love" start to play. I look up to the ceiling of the tent and thank my dad for the sign.

I slip both of my arms around her waist and draw her into me. The bodice of her dress has a V down the front that stops a few inches above her belly button. The one in the back is just as deep and twice as wide. She looks like an entire meal tonight.

I slide one hand up the expanse of velvet skin of her back and wrap the other around her waist.

“Slip your arms around my neck,” I murmur. She does it slowly, her eyes on my mouth as her fingers link behind my neck.

Now, we’re chest to chest, hip to hip, thigh to thigh, and cheek to cheek. Elvis is crooning about wise men and fools. This unexpectedly wonderful woman amazes me. And I can’t help but nod in agreement when he sings, “some things are meant to be.”

I lean in, brush a kiss across her soft, pliant lips. The touch pulses. The air is vibrating with attraction and the pull between us is a living thing.

“Do you feel that?” she asks, her voice full of innocent wonder.

My short beard brushes the soft, sweetly fragrant skin of her cheek.

“Yeah, I do.”

“I think it’s the air and the water. It’s so beautiful here,” she says softly. She drops her head on my shoulder. I glare down and her eyes are closed. A small smile pulls at her lips.

“I think it’s us,” I whisper in her ear and drag my lips to that dimple and drop a kiss on it. “You’re beautiful.”

“So are you,” she replies with a drowsy smile, and I laugh dismissively. I step back and forth, my hand at her waist tightening to hold her flush against me.

“Not one single person has ever called me that before.” I laugh.

Her eyes pop open and cast a haze of desire that traps me in its azure net. My heart jerks in my chest, and the laughter dies in my throat.

“Then, they must not have been looking at you at all,” she whispers. Then, she takes my big hand into her much smaller, much prettier one, puts it to her delicious lips, and drags a kiss across my knuckles.

I'm moving in a small circle of slow two-steps. The music blends in with the rest of the background noise, and all I hear is the beating of my heart and the thud of my racing pulse in my ears.

There's a storm brewing between us. It's loud and it builds in a slow stream of tension that's permeating the air.

I feel it in my racing pulse.

I feel it in the tingle at the base of my spine.

And when she sways into me, *she* feels it in the ardent pressure of my rock-hard dick between us.

"Oh my God," she gasps, and twines her fingers into the hair at the base of my neck.

Without a single thought for propriety or gossip, I bend and slip my arm under her knees and lift her in my arms.

A loud cheer goes up in the crowd as I shoulder my way through the dance floor and out of the tent.

"Oh my Lord, what are you doing?" she asks in a whoop of laughter as she tightens her arms around my neck.

"I'm taking you to the closest room with a door. When we get there, I'm going to throw up that skirt and take off whatever's underneath it and fuck you," I growl before I kiss her hard and fast.

We step into the carpeted lobby of the villa and scan the room until I see a swinging door with the light off inside. I head straight for it.

"This is crazy," she gasps into my neck. "I feel like I'm on fire, Hayes. I've never ... I don't know what it is." She starts to squirm.

"I do. It's whatever fucking pheromone you're secreting. It makes me want to beat my fucking chest and rut with you while everyone watches," I say and kick the door open. I set her down before I feel around for a light switch. The bright fluorescent bulb flickers a few times before it floods the room with light. It's a utility closet with a waist high counter running down the middle.

“Perfect,” I whisper.

I wrap my arms around her waist and hoist her up, the voluminous layers of her skirt crushed in my hold. I stare at her face for just a second and I’ll never forget the way her eyes burned with need right before I took her mouth in a kiss I’d been thinking about for almost twenty-four hours.

She opens like the beautiful flower she is and my tongue slips into her sweet, warm mouth.

She’s like nothing I’ve ever felt.

She feels like mine.

So much like mine.

For tonight, at least, she will be.

I drop her onto the work bench and break our kiss. I shove her lace skirt up to her waist and her hand falls to my belt. I slide my hand up her thigh. “Your skin is so... soft. May I?” I ask.

She growls. “Please. Just touch me.”

I kiss her again and press my palm to the damp, heated slip of silk between her legs. I pull it so it slides between her lips. She moans into my mouth and unzips my pants.

“Please hurry. I want you inside me so badly, it hurts,” she moans.

I slip my hands back in between her splayed thighs, and I play with her pussy. I slip a finger inside her, rub her wetness up her slit and rub her clit. She lets loose a broken sob when I pinch it at the same time that I nip the tender skin on her throat.

“What are you doing to me?” She pants and throws her head back. It hits the wall behind her.

“I’m about to fuck you until you come so hard and loud that they’ll hear you in the other room.”

“Yes. God,” she groans and leans forward to wrap a hand around me. She strokes up, and I thrust up into her hand.

“I want you so badly,” I growl and grab a handful of her ass and squeeze it until I’m sure my fingers will leave an imprint.

She moans, and her legs spread even farther apart.

“Then fucking take me,” she says impatiently.

I pull her off the bench and turn her around.

I lift her skirt and expose her round, luscious ass. I slap it, and she jumps. But then her hips loosen.

“Let me fuck you how I know you need.” I slip my fingers around the soaked piece of fabric that’s drawn between her lips.

“Yes, please...”

“Why did you even bother wearing these?” I slip two fingers inside her and press up.

“Because, I imagined that you might want to rip them off,” she says and shoots a satisfied grin over her shoulder. I give the silk scrap of fabric a sharp tug, and they give up their hold on her body and fall into my hand. I stuff them into the pocket of my shirt. I push her legs even farther apart and thrust three fingers inside her. Her back arches and she groans into the table top.

“Your pussy is fucking unreal.” I swivel my hand and she pulses around my fingers and rotates her hips.

I pull out of her and fish a condom out of my pocket. I roll it on and spread her wetness from my fingers all over it.

“I want you so much,” she moans.

“Then, get your pussy on my dick, *Tesoro*,” I say and pull her back onto me. She thrusts back and starts fucking herself. I watch my dick glide in and out of her and wonder if I could build a shrine to her cunt. I grab her hips and slam up on her next downward slide. She screams, loud enough that it carries out into the hallway and mingles with the sounds of conversation on the other side of the door.

“Do you like that I’m fucking you where everyone can hear?” I whisper in her ear.

I slide the strap of her dress down and I pull down the bodice. Her round, full-as-fuck, pink-tipped breast spills out.

“Yes,” she pants in my ear.

“Why?” I rain kisses down her throat and bite her shoulder, nudging her entrance with the head of my cock.

“I want them to know I fucked my dream man tonight,” she croons, and I laugh.

“Dream man?”

She turns her head over her shoulder and holds me in the sweet snare of her azure gaze. “Yes. My dream man. Who looks like a king and fucks me like I’m his queen. Who is so fierce and so raw on the inside that he bleeds everything he’s feeling straight into his eyes,” she pants.

My heart stutters to a stop at how sure she sounds and how good it feels to be *seen*.

I lean down, press a kiss to her mouth, and start fucking her again. She breaks the kiss and presses her face into the table with a deep, satisfied moan.

I sweep her few errant curls off her shoulders and press my mouth into the slope where her shoulder meets her neck and press forward with hard, shallow thrusts.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.” The feeling of being balls deep inside her is indescribable.

I *feel* like a fucking king.

I surge forward and drive her into the table. Her booted foot makes contact with my shin, and I ask, “Are you okay?” without slowing my rhythm. She nods. I fist my hand in her hair and pull a fist full of her hair back. I press our cheeks together.

“Jesus, you feel like a goddamn dream. I want to watch you come,” I pull out of her and turn her on her back. I thrust back into her in one long, hard push of my hips.

“Ahhhhh,” she wails and I get to watch the achingly beautiful expression on her face when my name pushes up her throat

and out of her mouth in the sexiest whimper I've ever heard.

I push even deeper.

"Yes, sing for me, *Tesoro*," I coax her. Her facial expression ebbs between ecstasy and pain, and then to bliss while I fuck her. My hand is grasping her thigh and her arms are flung wide on the table.

I pull the straps of her sleeves down so that both of her breasts are exposed to me. I bite down on one of her hard, pink-as-the-inside-of-a-seashell nipple and she starts to cry my name over and over. I focus on the satin fist her pussy is making around my cock. I lose myself in her cries and race toward the relief I need like I need air.

I already want her again.

I bury my face in her neck, hold her succulent ass with one hand and hold the other flat against the wall beside her head.

She presses her warm, soft lips to my ear and flicks her tongue along the shell of it. "There's a hurricane swirling inside of me," she whispers.

"That's *me*," I tell her between small nips at her throat.

"I'm coming apart," she moans.

My breath hitches. I pull back and look into her limpid, breathtakingly bright eyes. She touches her open mouth to mine and kisses me softly.

"It feels so good, I don't know what to do." Her breath comes in short puffs.

"Like I've never ..." She trails off.

"I know; it feels too good to be true, right?" I stare into her eyes and the naked desire in them, the honesty in her gaze, moves something inside of me.

Yes, I *like* her.

"Like ... I'll never, ever get enough," she says in a low, but strong voice.

Her eyes light with a fierceness before her mouth is back on mine. She grips my neck, twines her fingers into my hair and pulls herself up my body.

Her legs tighten around my waist. I let go of her ass and press my other hand to the wall. "I want to make you come," she groans just as she lifts up and slams back down on my cock.

She squeezes me in rhythmic pulses that shoot pleasure straight to my balls. Like a slave following his master's command, I start to come in a rush that blindsides me.

My knees buckle and I close my eyes against the suddenly unbearably bright light in the room. She rides me through my orgasm and slips a hand in between her legs. "I can't come without my clit," she pants before she starts rubbing between her legs.

"Let me," I breathe and stand up. I take the condom off and toss it in the trash can next to the door. I spread her thighs and admire the sweet, wet, swollen pussy I just finished fucking. I bend and squat until my face is right where it wants to be. I lick her from the tender spot above her pucker all the way to her clit, and I pull it into my mouth. I suck hard, soft, flick my tongue, nip with my teeth until I know what she needs. And then, I eat her until she comes. Her hands fist in my hair even while she squirms away from my mouth. I press my palm to the center of her stomach and hold her in place and suck her clit until she screams my name. I want to beat my chest and throw her over my shoulder.

I stand up and stare down at her.

She's slumped against the wall like a rag doll. Her hair is spilling free of the pins she used to put it up and now curling strands lay tousled all around her shoulders.

"That was ... " She sighs and eyes me lazily out of half-open eyes.

"Yeah, it was ... crazy," I say and tuck my shirt back into my trousers and fasten them.

She pouts.

I tug her dress straps up over her shoulders and cover her breasts.

“You’re killing my dreams,” she complains, a frown puckering a swollen, sultry mouth.

“What dreams are those?”

“Ones where you’re not getting dressed and pulling my dress back in place,” she says in a sexy tone.

“It’s bad enough that I carried you off the dance floor and fucked you in a utility closet with a door that doesn’t close properly,” I remind her.

Her face flashes a hot red and she sits up and crosses her arms over her chest and looks over my shoulder at the door.

“Oh my God, it’s a swinging door, Hayes. What if someone saw us?” she asks.

“Then, they got a fucking great show,” I say and run the tip of my finger over the gentle slope of her lips.

“I’m only getting dressed so I can carry you up to my room. I think walking through the lobby would turn our tryst into *flagrantre delicto*.”

“In what?” she asks

“It’s Latin. Translated literally, it means a blazing offense,” I tell her with a smile. “These days it’s sort of synonymous for walking around in a state of undress.” I start to lift her and she stiffens and puts her hands on my bicep to stop me.

“I can walk. You can’t be carrying me everywhere,” she says. Her brows are drawn and she looks ready to argue. I kiss her, and she melts against me. I scoop her up and hold her to my chest, and her arms go around my neck. I take one last sip of her and then break our kiss. A satisfied smile stretches across her sexy lips and the protest she put up a second ago is gone. I kick the door open and step out into the hallway and start toward the rear of the villa.

“The elevator is that way.” She points a graceful finger in the opposite direction.

“We’re not taking the elevator,” I inform her.

“Why not?”

“It’ll take too long.” I wink and start up the narrow stairs to my room. “I’m in a hurry.”

Chapter Seven

Andiamo

Confidence

“That was so beautiful, Hayes.” I watch in awe as his fingers skip across the ivory keys of the piano and then stop.

“Thank you. My aunt Gigi taught me, and even though my hands are big, it came naturally.”

We’re seated at the piano, and Hayes is peeling back even more layers. He plays the piano beautifully. “So, this is like your last hurrah, too?” I ask with a waggle of my eyebrows.

“I wouldn’t have thought of it that way, actually, but you’ve definitely put the hurrah into this trip.” He waggles his thick brows back to me and gives my hand a squeeze.

“Well, I’m glad I could be of service.” I snuggle into him. We’re waiting for our airport shuttle in the lobby. Our flights are a couple hours apart, but we’re heading to the airport early to avoid the larger crowds leaving later this afternoon.

Cass is asleep on the little divan in the corner. Her black fedora is pulled down over her eyes and she’s got her sunglasses on.

“She had a good weekend.” Hayes nods in her direction.

“So did I,” I say. “Who would have known that you are such a Renaissance Man, Hayes.”

He presses a finger to my lips and looks around the room. “Shh... I like them being a little afraid of me.” He laughs and I admire the way his shirt bunches around broad shoulders when they shake with laughter. I want to soak up *every* detail.

“I can’t believe we’re leaving today. It’s been amazing.” I drop my head to his shoulder and link my arms through his.

“I want to see you again,” he says suddenly and my happy heart leaps in my chest. Warmth suffuses my body and I’m surprised at how elated I feel. But, I don’t question it. None of it. This weekend has been magical and full of surprises. Hayes is the most magical one of all. I’ve never had such an instant and tenacious connection before.

“I would love that,” I agree softly.

He reaches up and pulls his phone and a pair of black-framed glasses out of his breast pocket.

“Let’s look at our calendars,” he says and slips the glasses on his nose.

“Your glasses are hot,” I say, admiring the profile.

“Right.” He rolls his eyes dismissively. “First, what’s your number?”

I rattle it off and he puts his in my phone. “What’s the rest of your summer like?” he says.

“Mine is pretty open,” I say cheerily. Inside, my stomach knots when I think about the absence of job interviews, or anything else, on my calendar.

“I’ll be in Houston next week, I could fly you in,” he says.

“Fly me in?” I question, and I feel the first prickle of discomfort.

“Yeah, you said Arkansas? I can send a plane,” he says nonchalantly, his eyes still glued to his phone, his fingers flying across his keyboard.

“I can fly myself to see you.” My pride is bruised a little.

“Why would you do that? You’re not working, right?” he asks quizzically.

“Why did you get a job instead of living on your family’s millions?” I ask him.

He pauses his typing and slides his gaze sideways in my direction.

“What?” I ask when he doesn’t say anything.

“That’s hardly the same. It’s just a quick flight,” he says slowly.

“To *you*, it’s just a flight. But this is my first time out of the country and only the fifth time I’ve ever been on a plane. It took me four months of dedicated saving to afford the flight from Memphis to Austin when I left for college,” I tell him. “I’ll never see a flight as *nothing*. And given the way things between us got started, I couldn’t even imagine you buying me a plane ticket—or anything else.”

He stares at me for a long moment. His gaze is assessing, and I can practically hear the wheels spinning in his head.

“Fine,” he says. “Then I’ll come visit you.”

“Okay ...” I clear my throat. “I’m telling you it’s probably not anything like what you’re used to.”

“I’m good at getting used to new situations,” he says pensively. His fingers drum the piano keys lightly and make a tinkling melody that is so contrary to the heaviness in his voice.

“I just moved back to Houston, started a new job; it’s been fine.” He sounds like he’s trying to convince himself.

I nudge his arm lightly with my shoulder. “You sound thrilled about it.” He smiles absently but doesn’t look away from the keyboard. “I don’t know what I am,” he says and shakes his head slightly. His lips quirk, and when he turns his head to look at me, conflict has muddled his normally clear gaze.

“What do you mean?” I rub up and down his arm.

“It’s strange to step into the role as the head of a family that I don’t really know. I was born to it, but that doesn’t feel like enough of a reason. Does that make sense?” he asks.

I turn fully now and wait until he does the same and we’re face to face.

I trace the uneven bridge of his nose and gaze into his keen, green hazel eyes while I try to find the words to answer him.

We only met two days ago. We bonded during a highly stressful moment. I was terrified on that ledge. I know how

lucky I was. If I'd fallen on another part of that path, I wouldn't be sitting here. That *he* was there feels like a very significant detail. One that, despite being mainly a coincidence, I think it will change the course of my life. I overshared a lot on Friday night. I don't regret it. Yet without the rush of adrenaline from that evening and with our separation looming, my feelings aren't as sanguine as they were yesterday.

I'm grateful for the serendipity that brought us together. But, lightning doesn't strike in the same place more than once.

I'm glad we didn't walk out of here and leave our reunion to fate. A tangible chemistry courses between us. It carries with it an effortless ease, an immediate comfort and mountain of physical attraction. He's powerful, brilliant, passionate, decisive, honest, funny, *and* he's kind. He's shown me all of that and it's only been one weekend. What would it be like to spend a whole week, month, year with him? I can't wait to find out. I have a feeling. *Just* a feeling... That *this* man could be *my* man. So, I decide I'm going to fake it until I make it happen.

I stand and extend my hand. "Let's go out onto the terrace. It's quiet and private." He nods and smiles up at me for a beat before he takes my hand into his and stands up.

We step out onto the red brick paved balcony. It's another beautiful, if unpredictable, day. Puffy light gray and white clouds dot the powdery blue sky, birds are chirping, the sea rolls and crashes, and the breeze blows lightly around us. From here, the menace of the rocks that I fell from is obscured by a blanket of pine trees. The beach below is beautifully kept and the water is crystal clear.

He stands behind me, wraps his arms around my waist and drops his chin on my shoulder. I cover his hands with mine and try to memorize the way it feels to have him surrounding me. He sighs—it's not a heavy sigh, but it's *not* one that says, "I'm content."

"I'm listening, Hayes," I say into the silence.

“Yeah, I can tell.” His voice vibrates from his chest and resonates against my back. I feel the gratitude in his words, even though he didn’t express it explicitly.

We speak with our brains. People hear with their hearts.

“I’ve been preparing half my life for a job that I don’t feel even close to being ready to assume. My father, and then my aunt, told me repeatedly that I have something important to do with my life. And now, it’s one of my strongest desires,” he says.

“I think that’s what everyone wants,” I say.

“No.” He shakes his head and his chin brushes my hair. I nestle tighter against him and his hands come off the rail and wrap around me. It’s the most possessive yet tender embrace. “Some people just want to *be* important. There’s a difference. I’m learning it now. I’m seeing it in you. Everyone I know is pursuing glory for themselves. Money for *themselves*. Prosperity for *themselves*.” His arms tighten around me. “You’re talking about preserving things that benefit your entire community. That’s how I want to think about my family. If I only have this finite time to make my mark, then I want to do it in a way that matters. Like you said, make it count for more than just time spent,” he says.

“Yeah.” I nod, but inside of me, something is blooming. He listened to me. He thought about what I said and found value in it. I think this man might be a unicorn.

He tilts his chin in the direction of the horizon and says, “Those men who sailed out past what looked like flat earth and kept going even though they weren’t sure they wouldn’t fall off—they’re the people I admire. They conquered the earth and then laid claim to it,” he says.

“There’s no conquering the earth,” I scoff.

“Tell that to *them*.” He nods at the horizon again.

I turn to face him. His eyes are bright and beautiful and just looking into them steals my breath. But I force my mind back to the point I want to make. “Maybe it’s because I grew up on the river. No levee we’ll ever build is strong enough to hold

back more rain than the human mind can imagine. Mother nature is merciless. It made me realize how really insignificant we all are,” I say.

“You’re only insignificant if you leave nothing worthwhile and lasting behind,” he pushes back.

“How do we measure what’s worthwhile? Who decides that?”

“What does history record?” he asks.

“Are you saying that if we don’t write down what happened here this weekend you’ll forget it and it won’t mark a moment in your life that will influence how you make decisions in the future?” I ask.

“No, I’m not saying that. And that’s a very nicely-made point,” he says with respect in his voice. I shrug and turn back around to look out at the horizon.

“Until you’ve been overwhelmed by life—found a wave you can’t surf, a mountain you can’t scale, a river you can’t cross—it’s really hard to understand how small you are,” I say.

“I guess ...” he says.

“If I hadn’t seen how mother nature gives not one whit about even the best laid plans of men, I may not be sure either. To watch that happen is humbling, heartbreaking, and transformative. We don’t *conquer* anything. We just have use of it for a short while, but those trees, they grow back.

“Those monuments? They need men to write their existence into history. On the other hand, the acts of bravery and kindness those horrible events inspire may not make it into history books. But they will pass from generation to generation by word of mouth. And when people hear about them, they’ll get goose bumps,” I say.

“So, instead of conquering, I should be thinking about contributing something lasting,” he muses.

“That’s for you to decide. But it’s what *I* hope for. That I’ll do well enough with my life that when my story is told or *read* ...” I drawl and he laughs. “That people will *feel* something.” I sigh and his arms tighten around me.

“If you really want to make a difference, you don’t have to chase horizons; just look around you and do something that calls you,” I tell him.

I touch the pendant around my neck. “This necklace?” I touch the small pendant at my throat.

“Yeah. I like to think of it as your fishing hook,” he teases and I smile.

“It was the very first thing I bought for myself when I won that case. It’s a reminder that I may just be a drop in the bucket, but it only takes one drop to overflow it. Little old me ... I did something. We *all* can,” I say.

We stand there quietly for a few minutes. “I’ll get off my soapbox now,” I say sheepishly.

“I like the way you look up there,” he says quickly and presses a kiss to my cheek.

“That’s because you’ve only had one weekend of it,” I joke.

“I think if I’d had any more, I’d be trying to find a way to keep you right where you are for as long as I could,” he murmurs in my ear. And my heart that’s been tripping all weekend finally gives up the ghost and falls.

Chapter Eight

Sure Thing

Confidence

One Month Later



“You miss me?” I murmur softly as soon as the call connects.

“Too much.” The words, enveloped in Hayes’s fatigue-roughened voice, deliver a delicious jolt to my heart.

“I miss you, too,” I say and hug my pillow tightly to my chest and inhale the lingering scent of him on it.

“I’ll be back next week, and I think I can come up on Thursday, so we’ll have an extra day.”

I feel a pang of guilt that he’s the one doing all the traveling.

“I can’t wait until I can come and see you ...” I start and then trail off because I know what he’s going to say. This is our constant argument.

“I can’t wait for that either. Say the word. I’ll make it happen,” he says and a yawn escapes.

“Do you want me to get us a hotel in Memphis next time?” I ask him and do the math in my head really quickly. I should be able to swing it even after I pay Mama’s rent for the month.

“No, I like staying at your place,” he says. He sounds sincere. But I’ve seen pictures of the house Hayes grew up in, in Houston and the villa he lived in with his aunt in Italy. Our double-wide is clean and cozy, but it’s a huge step down in terms of the luxury he must be used to.

“My bed is so small. Don’t you want a weekend without your feet hanging off the edge?” I ask.

“Nope. That small bed means you can’t roll away in the middle of the night. In fact, when we get a bed, I think we should make sure it’s not too big,” he jokes.

“We’re getting a bed?”

“Yeah. We are. One day. And in the meantime, I’ve never slept better than I do in yours. With you beside me.” My heart is ... it’s going wild. Every word he says is kryptonite. I’m falling so hard for him. He talks about the future like it’s a given.

“You sound so sure.”

“I am. I’d lay good odds on us,” he says easily.

“I would, too.” I sigh. I’m so happy, it’s surreal. We’re such an unlikely pair. Our paths should never have crossed. But here we are. There’s something really right about us together. His visits have been so easy. Not a moment of awkwardness. My mother loves him. The people he’s met in town think he’s some sort of rock star and he’s nothing but gracious and patient with their questions about what he does. He brought

Tripp, my neighbor's nine-year-old, a new fishing rod this weekend because he overheard him talking about his being broken last time we were down at Harps for groceries. He's brought my mama every book on Abraham Lincoln he can get his hands on, and they sit and talk outside together every night after dinner.

"Your mother home?" he asks.

"Yeah, she has a night off," I say and then nearly crack my jaw on the yawn that follows my words.

"Get sleep, my little treasure. I'll call you in the morning. Tell her hi for me," he says.

"Okay. I will." I never know what to say in return because Hayes's family isn't around. I know he's close to his brothers but he talks to them less often than we see each other. "Sleep well," I tell him

"Sweet dreams."

And then he disconnects.

When I drift off a few minutes later, it's with my pillow cradled in my arms, a smile on my face, and a song in my heart.

Chapter Nine

WILD RIVER

Hayes

One Month Later

“All of these rivers—St. Francis, the White, and the Arkansas—come together and empty into the Mississippi from this delta,” Confidence points out to me.

“So, it must have been booming once,” I say and look around at the dead downtown of Amorel. There’s the one church building that looks like an ice sculpture that’s melting and the two long park benches chained to the ground in front of the town’s police station.

“It still is,” she tells me. She’s been idly running her fingers through her hair and she slips the end of her ponytail in between her smiling lips.

“Yeah, all of these abandoned buildings scream a booming town.” I laugh and she bumps me with her hip in reproach.

“No, but the blues festival that still happens every single summer does.” Her voice is tinged with defensive love and brims with pride.

“You love it here, don’t you?” I ask her.

“I’m proud of its persistence,” she answers after thinking for a minute. “It’s seen every boom and survived every bust since it was settled in the 1800s. But ... the river has given it a constancy. It’s made the soil here some of the most fertile in the world. Most of the forests have been cut down, but look at how ardently what remains still grows. There’s only a small fraction of people who live here when you compare it to before.”

“Where’d they go?” I ask.

“To the city for jobs. Like me.” She shrugs and leans back into me.

We’re driving back to her mother’s house after a day spent sightseeing or maybe just seeing. This is my fifth trip here in eight weeks. It’s the first time we’ve ventured beyond her small town. She drove us out in her mother’s beat-up, old Oldsmobile Delta 88. I’m driving us back. The front bench seat that lets her sit right next to me is the only thing that has made driving around in a car with sponge and wires poking out of the seats, no air conditioning and a barely-functioning radio through the swampy Mississippi Delta bearable.

We roll over the railroad tracks that seem to run through every town in this part of Arkansas and turn onto her mother’s street.

“The place still calls me sometimes, my love for it ... This is where blues was born,” she reminds me for the hundredth time. I just smile and nod, grateful that the sun is setting and taking the punishing heat with it. I glance at her. I’ve noticed that when she’s happy, she tucks a lock of hair between her lips. Today, she’s done it so much I’ve lost count. She gazes out of the window as we drive into the wooded area where her mother’s house is.

“The delta is the soul of the South. And while the rest of the South is looking to become the ‘New South,’ we still own our past. Can’t forget that the same time that we gave the nation the blues, we also harbored the KKK. And then, in the sixties it was a steaming cauldron of social change. So, yes, we’re flawed, but we persist.”

We fall silent for the rest of the drive. It’s nearly a mile down this dusty road, lined with white clapboard houses that sit on at least half an acre of land each.

“Do you think you’ll want to come back here and settle?” I ask her, and my throat closes around the question because I’m desperate for the answer to be a very firm *no*.

“It’s home. But, it’s also got so many bad memories. Between my father and the river, living here was like having a devil at my front and hell at my back. As much as I love our way of

life, I've never felt like this is where my life was supposed to take root," she says. "The first flood I was old enough to remember was when I was twelve. I saw how we were left holding nothing, and it made me want to do what I could to make sure that next time we'd do better than just barely survive. I think I can do that more effectively outside of here," she says without hesitation.

The knot in my throat unclenches, and I smile down at her as we roll into the parking spot under her mother's covered carport.

"I understand that," I say simply. Because I do. It's how I used to feel about returning to Houston permanently. But now, I can see how much potential the city has.

I push the gear shift into park, unbuckle my seat belt, and give her a kiss. She cups my neck with both of her small, strong hands and kisses me back. Her mouth tastes like sunshine and water and trees and smoke. I pull her onto my lap until she's straddling me. "You're so sexy when you're up on that soapbox," I murmur against her lips.

"Yeah, well my convictions give me the feels ..." she jokes.

I don't laugh. "I know, and *that* gives me feelings, too," I say, refusing to use that ridiculous slang.

She hums and rolls her hips in my lap. "Hayes ..." she drawls lazily.

The storm door at the back of the house slams against the wooden frame and startles us both.

"You two better get out of there like that before Sheriff Tommy sees you." Her mother's distinctive raspy drawl reaches us through the open window.

Confidence jumps so high she hits her head on the sagging ceiling of the car. "Ow," she complains and rubs it while she climbs off me.

"Go on." The door wrenches open, and I look up at her mother's ever present, good-natured smile.

“Hey there, Ms. Dorothea, you look nice tonight.” I smile back.

“Don’t try to charm me, you handsome devil,” she chides.

“I’m not,” I insist and take her hand in mine while I climb out.

“Well, why the hell not?” she asks and then cracks herself up laughing. I walk over to the other side of the car and pull the heavy door open for my girl.

“Hey, Mama,” Confidence calls as she slides out. She mouths a silent *thank you* before she leans over the top of the car to face her mother.

“Hey yourself, baby. I’ve got Bingo, and I’m gonna be late, so I’ll see you later.” She smiles at her daughter without moving to get into the car.

They are mirror images of each other. Except for the deep lines that bracket and shape Dorothea’s tanned face, they could be twins. Thick blonde hair, vibrant blue eyes, small but generous mouths. They’re even the same height. But where Confidence is shaped like a classic coke bottle—all curves, tits and ass—her mother is as spare as a reed.

“Hayes is leaving tomorrow,” she reminds her.

“I know he is. I’ll see y’all for breakfast.” She winks at both of us before she gets in her car.

“I’ll be back at the crack of dawn, so y’all should get to bed early so that when I wake you up, you don’t feel like you’ve been hit by a two-by-four,” she calls out of the open window before she turns the key and the powerful engine roars to life.

“Last one in the hot tub brings the beers,” Confidence calls out to me as she runs toward the house. In a blur of tanned limbs and blonde hair with a huge smile on her face, she disappears inside.

* * *

“It’s about time,” Confidence shouts when I step out onto the deck.

“Says the girl who wore her bathing suit all day. Some of us had to change.” I scowl at her, hand her a beer, and step into the huge hot tub on her mother’s deck.

She takes a swig of the beer, and some of the cold foam dribbles down her chin and lands on her bare chest. “Ooooh, that’s cold,” she purrs and casts her head back slightly, her eyes gazing downward at me suggestively. As if I need any suggestions. I lean down and lick it off and then drag the tip of my tongue up the damp, salty skin on her neck.

“Mmm, you smell like everything I love about this place,” I tell her and drag her onto my lap.

The bottoms of her bikini are crammed between the two firm, with-just-the-right-amount-of-cushioning ass cheeks that fill my hands.

“And what’s that?” She straddles me, presses her chest against mine and wraps her arms around my neck. Her breasts spill out of the sides of her skimpy bikini top and the slide of her skin against mine gets me hard right away.

“Smoke, water, trees, clean air,” I murmur in her ears.

She sighs and throws her head back to gaze up at the sky that covers us like a black, diamond-encrusted blanket. I nibble on her neck and run my teeth along her throat. A tiny shiver ripples over her body, and she drops her head onto my shoulder.

“I hated having to move back home a couple months ago. I’m still dying to get out of here, but seeing it again through your eyes has made me appreciate it all so much more.” She sighs

and rolls those talented hips over me before she slips off my lap and into the water.

She reaches behind her, and a few seconds later her bikini top floats to the top of the water. She reaches into the water and pulls my already hard cock into her hands. I grip the sides and I lift my hips so I float right above the seat I'd been resting on. Her thumb swirls around the dark red, swollen head that pokes out of the water

"I'm all in favor of blowjobs, but it's not worth your life, " I tease and thrust up into her hand.

She smiles a secretive, pleased smile before she releases me. She pushes her juicy, firm breasts together and then slides forward and captures my cock in the tight channel she's made between them.

"I'll do you one better," she says, her accent stronger with her drawled promise. She presses her lips to my swollen head and slides up, at the same time that she opens her mouth and takes me into her mouth while she uses the water and her breasts to create a sensation I've never even imagined before. I groan and grab the sides of the hot tub to keep from sliding under. "Holy shit!" She keeps her eyes on mine while she moves up and down in the water.

"Hold them," she gasps and nods to the sides of her breasts. I put my hands there and she moves hers to cup my balls. She rolls them lightly in her hands, her up and down slide never faltering, her mouth sucking the head of my cock with her every downward stroke of her breasts.

"I'm going fucking crazy," I groan and stroke her nipples with my thumbs.

"That's the plan," she gasps and then she proceeds to make sure her plan succeeds.

"You're amazing," I breathe out.

"You make me feel like I can do anything," she says, and I start to come. Without any warning, spurts of cum shoot out of my cock and splatter on her chin and her cheeks before she closes her mouth over me and takes as much of me as she can

into her mouth. My fingers dig into the abundant flesh of her tits, and I only realize how hard I'm pressing when she winces.

"Fuck, I'm bruising you," I say.

"Yes," she gasps. "I want your bruises." I buck up into her mouth. She sucks the head of my dick one more time before she slides up my body. When we're face-to-face, she says, "I want to look in the mirror on Monday and see your fingerprints on my skin and remember how it felt when you put them there." My pulse jumps in my throat. I cup her cheeks and caress them with my thumb. Her bright eyes, the ones I've seen in every dream I've had for the last two months, are fixed raptly on mine, and I decide to go for broke.

"I'm about to ask you something," I tell her.

She stills the up and down movement of her hips. "You're going to ask me something?" she says quietly.

"Yes, I am," I say softly. I drag my thumb across the lips I've been kissing all day.

"I want you to move to Houston," I tell her. "Come live with me."

Her breath hitches, and she drops her face into my neck.

"I haven't found a job yet, Hayes," she responds mournfully, and there's an instinctive tightening in my chest.

I knew this is what she'd say. I force myself to relax. But, I can't do anything about the urgent beat of my heart. It wants this too much. *Need* it too much.

"I can help you with your job search," I remind her.

"I shouldn't *need* help. I have an excellent resume. I'm *the* fucking expert in a whole practice area," she says, and her voice is full of frustration that cuts at me. "There's not a single environmental law practice worth anything that'll hire me. I think I've been blackballed," she fumes.

"If you would let me make a call—"

"No, Hayes. I don't want that," she fusses at me.

“Is your pride more important than being with me?” I ask her quietly.

“That’s not fair. And I shouldn’t have to choose,” she shoots back, pulling herself back from me.

“Life isn’t fair. And I don’t see why it’s a choice. Why does your pride take a hit from letting the man who loves you help you? Wouldn’t you help me if I needed it?”

“As if you’d ever need my—” Her eyes widen and her hands cover her mouth.

“You lo-*love* me?” she stutters through the finger she pressed to her lips.

Her wide, blue eyes are full of surprise. They glitter in the gloaming light and the ire that was in them from our argument is gone. Joy—unfiltered, unadulterated, replaces it. She’s fucking beautiful right now, and I wish I had my phone so I could capture her like this.

“Of course I do. I’m sorry you’re surprised by that,” I say and lean in to kiss her soft, pliant mouth. She doesn’t kiss me back, so I pull back.

“You don’t need to say anything,” I tell her quickly. And I mean it. I know Confidence loves me, too. Of *that*, I have zero doubt. So, I go back to the subject that I’ve prepared to stand my ground on. “Just tell me you’ll think about moving,” I add.

She smiles, but there’s still hesitation there.

“I will think about it, but first I want to visit. Meet your family. Is that okay? Just feel like things are more certain. Do you understand?” she asks.

“Are you not sure ... still?” I ask, unable to quell the irritation.

“About us, of course, I’m sure,” she says, and her hands cover mine. She tries to reassure me with her smile, but I don’t return it.

“You’ll never understand, Hayes, how badly I need to get there on my own. I know you’re not him. I know you’d never

humiliate me like that, but I also need to be able to feel at peace when I lay my head down at night. That will come from knowing that I got a job because I deserved it and not because anyone helped me,” she pleads with me to understand.

And, I do understand. I just don't like it.

“You lying next to me without me having to think about what time we're leaving for the airport the next day would go a long fucking way to doing that for me,” I snap.

She snags her floating dark green bikini top and smiles up at me. “Come here,” she says and steps out of the tub.

“So, I'll visit?” she asks and I look up at her. Her eyes are pools of blue destiny, and I can see my future in them.

“Yes, but please let me send my plane,” I say.

“How about you just buy an economy class ticket?” she asks, and I stop and place my hands on her shoulders and turn her to face me.

“You're going to have to be comfortable with the fact that I have money. I'm not ashamed of it. I'm going to spend it. And sometimes it will be in frivolous ways that are simply about making my life simpler. We grew up differently. My world is different. And there are parts of being in it that aren't always comfortable, but they're necessary.”

“Necessary for what?” she asks.

“To preserve order. To preserve the legacy my ancestors built. To repair the damage that's been done by the vacuum of leadership my father's death created.”

“What will *your* legacy be, Hayes?” she asks and crosses her arms over her chest.

“I don't know. It's larger than me. My family, what I do with my time as head of it will be here long after I'm gone. And my stewardship of it will determine its future. When I was a boy, my father used to recite a line from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Have you read it?”

“No, only *Romeo and Juliet* in high school,” she responds.

“*Antony and Cleopatra’s* basically the same story but with adults and in a historical setting. Anyway, my father would recite this line from it and tell me that it was the way any great leader thought about their responsibility.” I close my eyes and recite from memory.

“‘Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have Immortal longings in me.’ She was talking about dying for what she believed in. But I think of it as believing in something that will outlive you and making sure it does your name justice”

“My uncle has forgotten that. He’s been thinking about right now for so long, he’s lost sight of the future. The next few months are going to be intensely focused on trying to correct its course. But I want to focus on you, too,” I say.

“I’ll visit. With the intent on scoping it for a move,” she says.

“You’ll like it,” I say.

“I don’t doubt it’s a place I’ll like very much,” she says and smiles at me with a plea for understanding in her eyes.

“Fine,” I say and let it go because I don’t want to fight about it anymore.

“Now, come on—I have plans for you.” She pulls me to standing. “Don’t let me forget to drain this in the morning. Mama uses it almost every night she’s home, and I’d hate for her to be soaking in your cum tomorrow night,” she says and then she saunters off, that round, sweet ass completely bare as her bikini nestles into the hot crevices of her body.

Speaking of places we like very much ... I catch up with her in three strides, snag her around the hips, and hoist her over my shoulders.

She starts to pummel them right away. “Put me down,” she shrieks through a giggle. “This is *my* seduction, Hayes Rivers.” She wiggles and rolls.

“Oh, my *Tesoro*.” I tighten my grip on her and smack her ass just hard enough that I know she’ll be distracted by the sting and turned on by the promise in it. “This seduction is all me,” I tell her and open her bedroom door. I toss her onto the pile of crumpled sheets on the bed.

I pull my cock out of my shorts and run my fist up the length. Her tongue darts out and she swipes it across her pink, plush lower lip.

“Take it off. All of it,” I command.

“Yes, baby.” She spreads her legs so she’s on full display.

“For the rest of the world, you’re strong. Everywhere else, you’re untamable. But here, you’ll let me have whatever I want, won’t you?” I ask.

“Yes, anything,” she says.

“God, I want to fuck you in public so everyone can see what I get to indulge in every night.” I cup her ass in my hands, then without another word I slam into her and nearly pass out from how wet, hot and hungry her pussy is. She closes around me and her back arches off the bed, “Yes,” she moans low and deep in her throat.

“You love me, Queen?” I ask her and slam into her again. The entire length of her voluptuous, beautiful, body slides up the bed.

“Yes, King,” she groans, but the king is garbled by another groan. I pull out, throw her legs over my shoulder and close my lips around her clit and suck.

She tastes like chlorine, salt, sweat, and mine. And I eat her like she is. She holds my head in place, as if there’s anywhere else in the world I’d be right now besides in her bed, between her legs—eating her fruit and drinking her ambrosia.

I flip her on her stomach, pull her by the hips until her ass is in the air. I grab the bottle of lube by her bedside and pour it over her sweet pucker. Then, I slide a finger inside just to my first knuckle and she bears down on me like she knows what the fuck she’s doing.

“You like that?” I ask. She whimpers and nods, sending her thick curls adrift over her shoulders and down her back.

That’s my girl.

I slide another finger inside her, stretching and coaxing her open. She moans low in her throat. “Please, I want you,” she

cries into the pillow.

I pour more lube over her, coat my dick and then replace my fingers with it. I press forward and probe her sweet, tight pathway to nirvana. I watch a bead of sweat wind its way down the center of her back. I lean over her and catch it on my tongue.

“Haaaaayes!” She calls my name like she’s making a wish just when I slip past the first tight ring of her ass. She moans, and the sound catches in her throat on the beginning of a sob.

“Does it hurt, *Tesoro*?” I whisper in her ear.

“So good,” she moans and nods, her fingers clutching the sheets convulsively. But she bears down and opens for me. I press a kiss to the center of her back and grip her hips.

“Good,” I grunt and bury myself to the hilt. I snake around her thigh and find her clit. I swirl the tight bud under my thumb and the slick evidence of her arousal coating my fingers nearly makes me blow my load.

“Take all of it.” I roll my hips. “And you’re going to love all of it, just like you love all of *me*.”

“Yes. *So* much.” She groans her agreement like she’s pledging her life to me, and I fucking want her to.

“Show me how much,” I wrap my hand around her throat, hold her hip with the other and fuck her like she’s mine to break.

And I *want* to break her. In a way that only I can put her back together again. When she comes, it’s with curses and my name on the back of a scream that rips out of her throat. Her body trembles uncontrollably and she collapses on her stomach; I think *this* could be the answer to world peace.

I flip her onto her back and lick my way up past her hip bones, swirl my tongue into her belly button, and I put my hand in the center of her chest and feel that strong, bold heartbeat. I slide farther up and replace my hand with my lips and then rest my head against her breast bone, so that her heartbeat mingles with the rush of my own in my ear.

I can't believe how much I feel for her. How much I've felt since I met her and how tied my entire future feels to hers.

Chapter Ten

RIVERS RECKONING

Hayes

“Welcome to Rivers House.” Poppy, our head of household staff smiles warmly at Confidence as we approach her in the foyer. She’s standing there like an army general waiting for her troops to fall in line so she can give them their marching orders. She’s holding her ever present black spiral notebook. A key chain hangs off the belt of her black service dress. She has one of those faces that never shows its age. She could be thirty or she could be fifty. The threads of silver in her dark hair is the only clue as to which end of that spectrum she falls on. Her warm, but restrained smile doesn’t falter once as she watches us approach.

“Ms. Ryan, I’m Poppy Patterson. I’m the house manager and I will be at your disposal while you’re our guest,” she says smartly.

“Thank you. This is incredible. Please, call me Confidence,” she says and extends her hand to shake Poppy’s while her other one squeezes my hand tightly. “I’m really happy to be here,” Confidence gushes. My stomach knots, and I wonder how long that will last.

“Excellent.” Poppy’s smile broadens for an instant before her more efficient one is back in place. “Your rooms are ready, and one of the boys is delivering your luggage now. Mrs. Rivers sends her apologies. She’s out for the afternoon but looks forward to meeting you at dinner tonight,” Poppy explains to Confidence.

“Where’s everyone else?” I ask, relieved that Eliza isn’t here.

“Your uncle and aunt drove out to Brenham today. They won’t be here all weekend,” she says with a glance at her notebook. Thomas is such an asshole. He thinks his little decampment is

a slap in my face because I asked everyone to be here for Confidence's visit. Gigi's back in Italy, but she will be back next month.

"Dare is in town, but we haven't seen him." Poppy continues down her list. "But we expect him to be here tonight. His mother has suspended his credit cards. That usually lures him in," she says with a short smile. I look at Confidence and know that behind that even smile on her face, she's got to be thinking that this is totally fucked up.

Fucking Dare.

"Okay, we're going up until dinner. Thanks for the updates," I say and start to move past her quickly.

"Dinner will be served promptly at seven. Call down to the kitchen if you'd like to take refreshments in your room between now and then, but the dining room won't be available for you until dinner. The staff is setting up for this evening," she finishes.

"If you'd like to have your dress steamed or pressed while you're waiting, just dial down to the laundry and someone will come to collect it," she says to Confidence.

"Hayes, your suit is already pressed and in your wardrobe for tomorrow. Mrs. Rivers asked me to remind you that you're dining with the Bains, the Barras, and the Hassans. I've emailed you some general background information so you can read it before dinner," she reads from her notebook.

"Thank you, sounds like everything is in order," I say.

"As always," she says brightly.

"As always," I agree readily.

"Please let me know how else I may be of assistance," she says before she turns to Confidence. "Enjoy your stay," she says with a slight bow before she turns and heads toward the service wing of the house.

"Wow, is it a special occasion? You didn't tell me dinner was an event," Confidence whispers and glances back over her

shoulder as if she wants to be sure no one is following us up the stairs of my family's house.

"It's not. Friday dinner is always like this. We dine with business associates and friends every Friday. Eliza and my aunt Mae usually plan the guest list, but it's nothing special," I say casually despite the knot in my stomach.

"Sounds intense," she says with a grimace.

"Yeah, well ... my family is intense. And this house doesn't help. It feels like a crypt. I spent half my life here. But I can't wait for my house to be ready because I hate living here."

"Ouch," Confidence squeaks, and her hand flexes in my grip. I realize we've stopped walking and I stare blankly at her.

"You're going to break my hand, Hayes," she complains but her eyes are full of concern as well as pain.

"Shit, baby, I'm sorry," I say. I drop her hand and sit down on the stairs just like I had as a boy when I hadn't known where in this house I would be safe.

"Are you okay?" she asks and sits down next to me.

The steps in the house are as long and wide as park benches, and I used to sit on them and read, write, listen to music—whatever. And yet, this whole house feels like a strange place.

"I don't know. I've been back for almost six months and it still feels like I'm a guest. This house ..." I glance around at the ostentatious ceiling and walls full of art that have no meaning to me. "I don't think it can ever be home. At least, not with all of these people living here. To them, it's free accommodation and they're not the least bit interested in how or why we spend so much money and time to maintain it."

"If you're not going to live here, do you think you could sell it?" she asks. I rear back in surprise.

"Of course not. I couldn't sell it. It's my family's home," I say sharply.

She looks surprised, too. "I'm sorry, I just ..." She puts a soothing hand on my shoulder.

“God, I’m sorry. Yeah, there’s just so much going on, *Tesoro*.” I stroke her cheek.

“I’m sorry,” she says, her face full of worry, and I feel a flash of guilt for my outburst. This isn’t how I hoped our visit would start. But I can’t lie to her, so I tell her. “I’ve been stressed out thinking about you being here. My family is complicated. We all coexist in this space. But none of us really like each other. I’m worried about you seeing that,” I confess.

“Why? You’re not them. Why would I hold it against you?” she asks. The question pisses me off.

“Because you’re only here for a fucking visit,” I say through a clenched jaw. “I want you to stay. But you’re not sure. And now my fucked-up family is going to scare you off. “

This is hard for me. I don’t do this—opening up—but with her being here, seeing her in the context of this house, devoid of warmth and love, I realize that what I’m offering her may not be enough.

“Is that what you think? That your family could scare me off?” she asks, incredulous.

“Not that I would fucking let you go. But, I don’t know how to do this. I don’t even know how to say all this romantic shit without sounding like an asshole, Confidence,” I say, and she giggles.

“It’s not funny,” I snap.

She sighs and stands up.

“Take me to your room. I want to show you something,” she says and holds her hand out to me. I take it and use it to pull myself up.

I open the door to my room and she starts to strip. My cock stirs at the sight of her smooth, tan skin and the swell of her tits.

“Good idea, I’ll fuck you until you can’t walk. Much less, run off,” I say and start to take my clothes off, too.

“Hayes,” she says from underneath the T-shirt that’s covering her face. “Sex isn’t always the answer,” she reprimands.

“Why not? It sure as hell feels like an answer,” I joke. Only partly.

“I want to show you something,” she says again and then turns her back to me.

“You see?” She looks over her shoulder at me expectantly. I scan her back and then I see it. My eyes snap back to hers. She’s grinning from ear to ear, those plump lips parted to reveal her white, bright smile. Her eyes are full of triumph.

I look back to her lower back, in between the Dimples of Venus is scrawled *ADORO IL FIUME*—I love the river—in the same font as my family crest.

I kneel down to get a closer look and run my fingers over it. Gooseflesh erupts on her skin. I press a kiss to her lower back and stand up, turning her to face me.

“What do you think?” she asks.

“You did that for *me*?” I ask at the same time.

“I love it,” I respond.

“Just for you,” she says, and we speak over each other again.

She cups my face in her hands, and whispers, “*Ti amotu sei il re del mio cuore.*” You’re the king of my heart.

I can only stare at her while my heart races happily toward the edge of the cliff called Confidence and takes a flying leap.

“You learned Italian?” I ask dumbly, too shocked to say anything that makes any semblance of sense.

She laughs. “Well, not entirely. But enough for my big reveal,” she says.

“You tattooed my family’s name on your body?” I ask stupidly.

“Well, yeah,” she says, and I don’t hear any regret or doubt in her voice. “I’ve never really been in love before, Hayes. Not until you. Not until now and I figured I should commemorate it. Because this love ... it’s everything. You’re everything. These last two months, you’ve shown me so much. Taught me so much. Shared so much with me. And I don’t want you to

worry. I'm the surest thing in your life. I love you. I want to move. I'm ready to live my life. I'm ready to take a chance. You're my lover, my brother, my father, my friend, my person. I need you. It's not you I'm unsure about. It's life. Nothing your family does or says will change how I see you," she says, and when she kisses me, I almost believe her.

Chapter Eleven

FLOOD

Confidence

I don't dance now, I make money moves. Cardi B's "Bodak Yellow" bursts into my brain and I wake up with a gasp. I grab my phone and glance around the room. I'm alone. When my gaze drifts to the west-facing bay window, my heart lurches into my throat. My phone, forgotten, falls silently onto the thick down comforter of the bed. I slide off the bed and walk over to the window for a closer look.

The wind is having its way with the huge walnut trees that line the drive of Hayes's family home. They're waving violently back and forth, hurling their leaves into the air with terrifying speed. The rain is falling in sheets that look like liquid glass. The wind is blowing it sideways, too, and it's sheeting against the window.

It looks like the world is ending.

The rain started just when I landed this morning. I knew a storm was brewing in the gulf, but I hadn't really paid attention because it was supposed to miss the delta. When I stepped off my flight and saw the gates packed with stranded passengers because flights out were being cancelled, I started to worry. I hate storms, and I'd forgotten that Houston, though always spared the brunt of the wind damage, always got a lion's share of the rain when storms came into the part of the gulf where the city sat. Having a port had made it the powerhouse trade behemoth that it was. But being that close to the water also meant that its flat landscape, the bayou that ran right through the city—and its below-sea-level altitude—made it ripe ground for the kinds of floods that most other major cities had managed to design away.

My phone starts to ring again, and I dash back to pick it up. That's Cass's exclusive ringtone and I know her parents'

Meyerland neighborhood floods.

“Hey, you okay?” I ask without saying hello.

“Oh my God, Confidence. Thank God you answered,” she wails and dread fills me. “I’m so scared, I don’t know what to do.” She sobs into the phone.

“Where are you?” I ask, but I already know.

“My parents’. I came last night because they didn’t want to leave their house, and I didn’t want them to be alone.” Her speech is muffled like she’s covering her mouth.

“What’s happened?”

“We woke up this morning, and there was maybe three inches of water in their house. This neighborhood always floods, but not their house. Never. But it did today. And we did our best to get all of their art and electronics up on top of the dressers, on top of appliances. And we thought if the rain slowed down we could get out.” Her voice breaks, and she starts to sob.

“Cass, where are you now?” I ask, trying to keep my voice calm and my mind clear. They need solutions, not hysteria.

“At the neighbors’. TB ...” She sniffles “We had to swim here. My mom almost drowned us because she was freaking out.”

“What do you mean, swim?” I ask, horrified.

“Are you not watching television? We have more than five feet of water in the house,” she shouts into the phone.

“No, I’m sorry. I got in super early this morning, and I passed out. Cass, are you safe at your neighbors’?” I ask. “Aren’t they a one-story house, too?”

“They have a loft,” she says.

“Oh, good,” I sigh in relief.

“But there are twenty- four people up here. It’s small. And my mother doesn’t have her insulin,” she says, and her voice pitches in an awful spike as her panic rises.

“Okay, well, the rain will stop and the water will recede, right?”

“Yes, but not in time. There’s one bathroom, no power, and all of these people.” Her voice has dropped again and breaks on the last word

“What can I do?” I ask

“I don’t know ... nothing,” she says sadly.

“Cass ...” I shove my hand through my hair and stare helplessly at the wall.

“It’s okay. I just wanted you to know where I was. Someone’s called the city, and they say they’ll try to send a boat around before it gets dark. But once it gets dark, they’re not going to keep the rescues up. I need to get her out of here,” she says. Urgency coats her voice, and my stomach wrings in my gut while I fret about what to do.

“Listen. Save your phone battery. Let me go find Hayes. I’ll see if he can do something to help,” I say and pray I’m not over promising. But I know she needs the lifeline of hope I’m giving her, too, so I inject my voice with confidence I don’t feel.

“Oh TB, that would be great.” She sounds giddy with relief. “I’m so worried about my mom. And my dad is sitting in a corner sort of talking to himself. They’ve lived in that house for almost forty years, and in just a few hours, it’s nearly gone.” Her voice is barely a whisper when it breaks on that last word.

“Oh, babe, I’m sorry. Let me go and see what I can do,” I say and then hang up before she can respond. My fingers tremble and my stomach feels like it’s hooked to a hot air balloon.

I dial Hayes and hold my breath, praying he’ll pick up.

“*Tesoro*, I’m in a meeting,” he says in a hushed voice after the third ring.

“Cass just called. Her mother doesn’t have her insulin and the city is sending boats ‘round for rescue, but they’re going to stop when it gets dark,” I say.

“Excuse me, I have to take this,” Hayes says, and I hear the murmur of voices behind him before a door closes.

“Where are you?” I ask him and rummage through my suitcase for clothes. My muscles protest when I bend over and I can’t believe that a few hours ago, I’d been folded in half, trapped between Hayes’s incredible, huge muscled arms while he drilled me into the mattress and made me come so hard I know that the whole house must have heard me screaming his name.

“Oh.” He sounds like he needs to stop and think about it. “I’m downstairs. I’m having an executive team meeting,” he says. “Wait. *Sugar Land’s* flooding?” he asks.

“No. She’s at her parents’ in Meyerland,” I explain.

He lets out a long, low whistle and says, “Shit. We’ve had it on in the background nearly all afternoon. It’s a fucking disaster. I don’t understand how this city hasn’t done something to stop this from happening every fucking year. And why those people keep rebuilding in the same spot,” he says disgustedly.

“Her parents’ house has never flooded before. Never. This isn’t a regular storm, Hayes. And even if it had been, I don’t think assigning blame to anyone right now is helpful,” I snap at him.

“Give me an address; let me make some calls,” he says.

“It’s nine-zero-nine-nine Indigo, off Chimney Rock on the eastbound side,” I tell him.

“How the hell do you know which side is the eastbound side?” he asks.

“I’ve heard her say that before, Hayes. Can you ask me these questions later? Please make that call.” I’m practically yelling.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay,” he says softly, soothingly into the phone.

“Don’t try to calm me down, Hayes. I’m not going to calm down. Cass sounded scared. I know you don’t understand how urgent this is because you’ve never been forced to try and stay afloat in water you have no choice but to swim through. But every second counts. Please. Make that call,” I say through gritted teeth and then hang up.

I start to throw my jeans on but realize there's no point in getting dressed. I don't know anyone in this house, and I have no clue where Hayes is in it.

I sit back down on my bed and stare at my hands. A minute later, my phone rings. "King" flashes on my screen, and I pick it up before it has a chance to ring again.

"*Tesoro*, I spoke to my contact at the mayor's office. They're going to add her to the emergency list, but they may only be able to take the people who absolutely need to leave," he says in a rush.

"Okay." My answer comes out in a stuttered sigh as I try to think about what I can do. I know Cass and her dad will go crazy if her mom is taken and they can't go with her.

"Listen to me. If they can't take your friend, I'll go get them myself when I'm done. My brother Beau's truck is parked at the house while he's away. It's one of those monster trucks and it's lifted more than six feet off the ground, and it'll get through that water. It only seats five; we'll only be able to take three other people."

"I can stay home to make room for one more," I say immediately. "If the rain doesn't stop and they're not rescued, they'll end up spending the night on their roof and I can't even imagine that for Cass," I say.

"Okay." He blows out a breath and says, "Let's hope it doesn't come to that. That truck is a nightmare to drive on a dry, clear day, but if the city doesn't come through, I will."

* * *

FOUR HOURS LATER

"Oh my God, TB, thank you so much," Cass cries and throws herself into my arms as soon as she and her parents trudge into the foyer. They're soaked, but safe. I look over her shoulder

and take in the six other people Hayes brought with him. I only recognize Mr. and Mrs. Gold, Cass's parents. The other three are a small, pretty woman and two children, a boy and girl, who, judging by their appearance, are between the ages of ten and twelve. The girl is as long and skinny as a beanpole, and her big eyes scan the room in amazement. Her mother puts a hand on her shoulder and says, "Stop staring," and then smiles apologetically at me. I smile back and turn my attention back to Cass.

"Where's Hayes?" I ask her.

"Parking the truck. He dropped us off first. You should have seen him, TB," she says, wide-eyed. "The police put a blockade up on the street to stop any more rescue attempts. He drove straight through it. He backed up right to the front door and even though he only had enough seat belts for—"

"What is happening here?" A woman's voice, as cold and clear as a bell calls from behind us. I jump, and right before I turn around, I see the little girl's eyes nearly bug out of her head with fear before she ducks behind her mother's legs. The little boy's eyes narrow, and he steps in front of his mother and his sister.

"Uh, hi," I say and wave at the redheaded, Jessica Rabbit look alike, down to the red dress wrapped around her impossibly exaggerated curves and bright red lipstick. She stares down at me with hostile eyes and frowns.

"Who are you?" she asks through her pinched lips.

"I'm Confidence Ryan," I say and try not to sound like I want to piss in my pants.

"I don't care what your name is, girl. I want to know what you and this ragtag mob of interlopers is doing standing in my foyer?" she shouts and the little girl starts to cry.

I let go of Cass completely and walk toward her. "I don't know who you are, and I'm sorry that you're walking into an unexpected scene, but we are all guests of Hayes—" I start.

"Hayes?" she asks like she has no clue who that is.

“Yes, Hayes.” I cross my arms over my chest and eye her suspiciously. “Who are *you*?” I snap at her.

“I am Mrs. Eliza Rivers and this, you little guttersnipe, is my house,” she responds haughtily. Then, she pulls a small pearl handled revolver out of her purse and points it squarely at my chest in a grip that tells me she knows how to hold a gun, but no idea how to aim it. I don’t move, but my heart is sprinting like a hare running from a hunter. I stare at her, beyond shocked.

Behind me, pandemonium breaks out. I can’t hear anyone clearly, but they’re all shouting. The children are both screaming. Cass grabs my elbow and tugs me backward.

“TB, let’s go,” she says, her voice a desperate whine.

“Go where?” I shake her loose. I take a step closer to the woman pointing her gun at me and look her square in the face. “This is not *your* house, and it hasn’t been for a long time. I am Hayes’s guest. So are these people, including the children you’re pointing a weapon at.”

Her expression falters briefly and then she tightens her grip on the butt of her gun. “How do I know what you’re saying is true? Where *is* Hayes?” she asks, her voice slightly fretful. I want to turn around and assure the people behind me that everything will be okay. That she’s about as harmless as a fly. But I don’t dare take my eyes off her. Because she is actually very dangerous. Especially with her clear lack of practice.

“He’s parking. He’ll be right in. Please, put the gun down; you’re scaring the children,” I say in a voice that I hope is deferential and conciliatory.

“Well, that’s what they get for scaring *me*,” she says and I recoil at her callousness.

“You are a *monster*,” I gasp before I can think better of it.

“You bet your ass, I am,” she says jauntily.

“Eliza, what’s going on?” Poppy’s voice sounds from over my shoulder, and I still don’t dare turn around but sigh in relief that someone who can vouch for me has finally arrived.

“I’ve told you to address me properly in front of guests, Poppy,” she snaps. “This *girl* says she’s Hayes’s guest along with all of those people. I know nothing of it, so I’m exercising my right to stand my ground,” Eliza explains as if it makes perfect sense.

“Do you pull guns on every unexpected guest in your home, Mrs. Rivers?” This comes from Cass’s father who hasn’t said a word since they arrived.

“No. Only the ones who very clearly don’t belong,” she returns.

“El—Mrs. Rivers,” Poppy interjects and rushes past me to stand in front of her on the stairs. “You knew Ms. Ryan was visiting. I informed you that Mr. Rivers was bringing back guests to stay for the night because of the flooding,” she says. She stands right in front of the gun and puts a hand on it.

“Poppy, be careful,” I call to her.

“It isn’t loaded,” she calls back to me without turning around.

“What? Are you kidding me?” I yell and start for the stairs, too.

“Why did you tell her that? You idiot!” Eliza shouts. Poppy’s yelp of pain is a beat behind the crack of Eliza’s palm against her cheek. The room’s incredible acoustics meld the two sounds together in a sickening rhythm.

I skid to a stop right at the foot of the stairs.

What the actual hell is going on here? Did she just slap another grown woman?

“We’re leaving,” Mr. Gold says and I finally turn around to look at the poor people who have escaped one nightmare only to find themselves in the middle of another. And I’m sure they’re thinking they’d rather take their chances with mother nature than deal with this insane woman.

He’s standing guard in front of everyone else. I catch a glimpse of Cass’s face and she looks green. I can’t believe this is happening. “I’m sorry. Your rooms are ready. Please, let’s just get you dry—”

“We’ll get a room at the Ivy for the night. Confidence, you’re welcome to come with us,” he says gravely, his dark gray eyebrows drawn in extreme concern as he surveys the scene unfolding in front of him. “In fact, I would like to insist that you do,” he says. I’ve only met him once before at our law school graduation, and I was struck by how gentle and quiet he had been. He’s a small man—so much like my father, I’d thought. But without the sadistic spirit that inhabited him. What must he think of me right now? And of Hayes?

Hayes. I’d forgotten all about him.

“Where in the world is Hayes?” I ask when all other words fail me. I pat my pocket and curse my decision to leave my phone upstairs when I rushed downstairs.

“Confidence, we’re leaving. I just ordered an Uber and he’s only two minutes away,” Mr. Gold says again, and this time, his voice is firm and commanding. “Tell Mr. Rivers thank you for rescuing us. We owe him a huge debt, but we don’t want to impose, and clearly, it’s not a good time.” He nods pointedly at the insane woman standing on the stairs watching the chaos she just created with a pleased, smug smile on her face. Poppy has disappeared in the five seconds since I looked away.

“An Uber?” I exclaim. “Bu-But, I have your rooms ready. I didn’t even give you the towels,” I say, completely dejected and helpless to stop the situation from spiraling. I point to a stack of towels and a thermos of coffee that Hayes’s housekeeper, Matilda, gave me to bring down with me.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Hayes asks, and I look over to see him standing in a doorway that I hadn’t noticed beneath the stairs. The rain has had its way with him. But unlike the rest of the soaking wet people in the room, he looks more like a sea god than he does a drowned rat. His hair clings to his forehead in dark wet waves and water runs down from one of them, through his dark gray T-shirt, and it’s plastered to his body like a second skin. His jeans, the same. His eyes sweep the room, moving from each one of us to the next when he doesn’t see whatever he’s looking for on our faces.

“Mr. Rivers, I was just saying that we’re so grateful for your kindness. You were heroic today. But we’ve decided to head into Rivers Wilde for the night,” Mr. Gold, clearly the group’s designated speaker, says. “We have Carly’s insulin, and little Micah has his inhaler. So all we need is a dry, warm place to lay our heads,” he says.

“And I told you, you could do that here,” Hayes says quietly and walks over to me. “What happened?” he asks.

No one says a word.

“Eliza, what happened?” He squares his gaze on her, and even though I’m not looking at her, I see the moment he gets to the gun. His face turns white and then blood suffuses his cheeks and looks like the top of his head might pop off.

“Did you point your fucking gun at my woman?” he asks, and his voice ricochets off the walls of the house’s cavernous space in a terrifying echo. The little girl starts to cry again, and my stomach cramps into a knot. This is beyond disastrous. I can’t imagine how Hayes lives with people like this.

Eliza’s face never loses its smugness, but she starts backing up the stairs.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you, Hayes Rivers. You’re lucky I didn’t shoot her,” she says, and then like the rat she is, she turns and runs up the stairs.

“I’m so sorry. Perhaps it would be best for you to stay somewhere else tonight. But I have a suite of rooms at the St. Regis. The road between here and there is clear, and I’ll have our driver take you over,” he says to the crowd, but he doesn’t look at me. “I’ll go make arrangements.” And then without another word, he turns and leaves the room.

Chapter Twelve

Need

Hayes

“I’m sorry about last night,” I say as soon as I walk into my bedroom. Confidence is halfway out of bed and stills mid-motion. She wraps the sheet around her bare body and sits back down, her profile to me as she stares ahead for a beat and then turns to face me.

Her eyes are flat and cold, and I could kick my own ass for the way I behaved.

“For what? For not warning me that your stepmother had no clue I was coming? Or for not warning me that she’s a lunatic who’s fucking packing heat?”

I groan silently, guilt gnawing at my gut. “*Tesoro*—”

“Or,” she cuts in, her voice hard as nails, “is it because *after* she pulled a gun on me, my best friend, her family, and small *children*, you promptly disappeared and haven’t been heard from since?” she asks.

“I’m sorry. I needed to clear my head. I went for a drive. Yesterday was intense, and I meant to come back, but I passed out in my car and just woke up,” I tell her. I don’t tell her that I drank half a bottle of Jack Daniels and then threw it all up before I passed out. She looks like she’s ready to murder me.

“This is not what I expected when I came to visit, Hayes,” she says, and my stomach sinks. That goddamn Eliza and her crazy ass antics yesterday.

“I know. The storm threw everything off. Going out to get your friends ...” She drops her head into her hands and falls back onto the pillows. Her sheet falls, revealing her perfect, spilling-out-of-my-hands, marshmallow-soft, pink-nippled breasts. And like an addict whose poison is being served up to him on a silver platter, I start walking.

“Thank you for that,” she groans. “Good Lord. What the hell? This trip ...” She sighs just as I get to her side of the bed.

I stare down at the goddess in my bed. This nymph who has me under her control. She’s like nothing else I’ve ever known. Brave, kind, honest, funny, sexy, and so fucking brilliant. She’s the catch of the century, and she’s mine.

For now.

I close my eyes at the stab of pain in my chest that accompanies that thought.

There’s something that happens when I see things through Confidence’s eyes. She reveals my blind spots, and while I’m glad to know the places where I was failing in the basic human decency department, what will that mirror reveal when she holds it up to my family. So far, it’s revealed dysfunction and division. I’m afraid that when she leaves here in a couple of days, she’ll think less of me, and I’ll think less of me, too. I want to sanitize everything. To hide the ugly. But I’m going to be asking a lot of her. She needs to see exactly what she’s getting into. I just have to hope that when it’s over, she’ll still want me and all of the baggage I come with. And if she does, I hope it’s not because she thinks my money will make up for it.

I feel guilty for having that last thought. She’s nothing like that, and I know if I end up sleeping under the 610 Freeway, she’d be sleeping with me. I love her. She loves me. I want to show her that I can take care of her more than just financially.

“King,” she calls softly. Her hand comes up to grab mine, and I finally look at her face. She’s the most radiant woman. She’s got this peace about her that’s there even when she loses her cool.

“Yes?” I ask and trace one of her pretty nipples with the pad of my thumb. She sighs and smiles. Her eyes fall to half-mast as her nipple stiffens under my touch.

“Yesterday was crazy. Everyone was on edge because of the weather. But, I wish we could press the reset button on all of

this.” She sighs. I push aside the thought that the weather had nothing to do with Eliza’s behavior.

“Come on, I need a shower; I need to eat you. I need to fuck you. Let’s do all three right now,” I say.

She smiles and lets me pull her up to sitting. Then she unbuckles my jeans, unzips them, and pulls them down at the same time as my boxers. My dick is hard and her mouth is hot when she wraps her lips around it and sucks the head at the same time her tongue flicks the slit. I pull my shirt over my head and fist my hands in her hair while she works her magic with her talented tongue. When I can’t wait for her anymore, I let go of her head and slide out of her mouth.

“Get up here,” I gesture for her to wrap her legs around my waist and she laughs her deep, throaty laugh before she does what I say. I put my hands on the curve of her waist where it flairs into her hips and lower her down onto my hard-as-a-rock dick. I walk us like that into the bathroom, and I step into the shower, press her against the wall and start to fuck her. Her hands fly up above her head and use the wall at her back and my dick to hold her up. I turn on the water and hiss when the cold spray hits my back and starts beating down on us. “Hayes.” She moans my name and I fuck her harder.

“I’m going to make you come,” I say and throw my head back into the spray of water before I lift her off my dick and put her on her feet.

I drop down on my haunches, spread her cheeks and flick my tongue over her tight puckered asshole. I keep it there, push in a little and trap the now warm shower water on my tongue and then slide down to her pussy and put her clit in my mouth with the water around it and bite it.

Her knees buckle, but the shower muffles her scream. I find that I don’t like that at all. I reach up, turn the water off and press my hand into her back to bend her in half. She braces on the wall and I slip my cock between the warm, wet lips of her pussy and drag it back and forth.

I slide up and into her in one smooth, easy stroke. She gasps and slaps a hand on the wall. I grip her hips, slide one hand to

her clit and rub.

I dive into her.

Pull out.

Thrust up.

Drill hard.

Fuck her fast.

Then, I slow down and make love to my woman until she comes.

She screams my name and creams all over my dick, bucking her hips and clenching her trembling thighs so that when I start to come, my hips are trapped in the cradle her body has made for mine.

“You’re going to end me,” I groan.

“No baby, this is where you begin,” she pants, and when I pull out next, she hops down, whips around and falls on her knees.

She cups my balls with her hand and fists my pulsing dick with the other and puts me into her mouth and sucks me so hard her lips hollow.

I push her hair back off her face, and she looks up at me. Her eyes water when my dick hits the back of her throat, but she doesn’t quit. *I love you*, I mouth down and she winks before she closes her eyes and hollows her cheeks.

When I come, she catches what she can on her tongue. I pull her up, turn the water on and rinse her clean.

By the time we get out of the shower, we’re right again. I’m hoping that tonight’s dinner won’t be a disaster. I mean, it’s just food and a few friends. What could go wrong?

Chapter Thirteen

Let Them Eat Cake

Confidence

“I’m so glad he didn’t cancel.” The woman next to me looks down the table to where Hayes is sitting. “These flood watches are so tedious,” she says to me like she expects me to agree with him.

I force the sincerest smile I can muster. I’m sure it looks more like I’m suffering from a bout of constipation. And the churning of my stomach says that if I’d been able to put anything in it since this morning, I might actually be unable to evacuate it from my body.

Tedious is the very last word I would use to describe this dinner or this day. I can’t believe that, on my first visit to Houston, the weather has taken such a huge turn for the worse. Hurricane Harvey has dumped historic levels of water on the city of Houston. The flooding has been catastrophic for a lot of the city. And yet, here we sit.

The dining room has a glass dome in the center and the clatter of the driving rain against it reminds me of the way it beats down on the corrugated metal roof of our mobile home.

I push the food around my plate as my appetite refuses to cooperate. I’ve never heard of, much less eaten, some of the things they’ve served today. I’ve always been an equal opportunity eater. But today, not even my mother’s chicken fried steak could tempt me.

“Where did you say you were from?” The woman who hasn’t bothered to introduce herself demands.

“I didn’t,” I say and smile. I refuse to accommodate this woman’s snobbery. If she wants to know, she’ll have to introduce herself like a normal person would.

“Oh. Well.” She smiles coldly. “I’m Davina Bain. Our families have dined together for almost twenty years,” she informs me and then glances around the table with distaste.

“Though, I have to say that the quality of the attendees has been diluted since Hayes got back. He was raised in Italy. And in the countryside or something dreadful.” She frowns disapprovingly. “I heard he’s taken up with some nobody he met in Europe.” She says it like it’s a total scandal. “Anyway, you’re such a pretty thing. Who are your people? A girl that looks like you is exactly what he needs to soften up his image,” she says and look at her like she’s an alien.

“Did you really say that?” I ask and she must mistake my anger for something else because she pats my hand.

“Don’t mind all the talk about him hurting that girl,” she says, her smile thin and empty. “He’s richer than Croesus. It’ll make a couple of black eyes a year worth it.”

It takes Herculean strength to keep my hand in my lap when all I want to do is slap her. I’m reminded of something I learned from the sharp bite of my father’s rage. There are devils walking around in skin that makes them look like normal human beings.

“Who are your people?” she asks, her eyes scanning the table while she sips her soup.

“I’m Confidence Ryan,” I tell her. “I’m from Arkansas. I’m the nobody he met in Europe,” I inform her with a smile. And I enjoy the momentary flash of panic in her eyes as she realizes who she’s been talking to. It’s gone as quickly as it came and in its place is a smug, disdainful frown.

Her eyes, once friendly and bright, dim. She sniffs as if something distasteful wafted into her nose.

“Well,” her eyes flick over me as if she’s trying to find what she missed in her initial assessment. “At least you look the part,” she says before she turns away. Dismissing me in a way that feels eerily familiar. It’s reminiscent of the way Hayes looked at me that night in Italy. Like I’m beneath her. That memory still makes me queasy. Being with Hayes’s family and

friends tonight has made me queasy. I look around the huge table. Almost everyone is engaged in a one-on-one conversation. Except Hayes, who's watching me with a scowl. His stepmother made the seating chart—who has a seating chart for regular dinner?—and when Hayes took his place at the head of the table, I was unceremoniously asked to vacate the seat next to him for Mr. Jones and shown to a seat all the way at the other end. Hayes didn't say a word. Between that and the rain, I feel stressed out on a level that has me wishing I could go for a run. And I hate running. With a passion.

“You understand, don't you? It's protocol,” his stepmother said as she led me to my seat. I didn't answer because I knew she didn't really care if I understood. She'd made her feelings about me plain when I saw her right before dinner. She leaned in, pretending to hug me and whispered in my ear, “Don't get too comfortable. I'll be damned if the next Mrs. Rivers is another nobody from nowhere.” Then she'd pulled away and smiled brightly and said, “We're thrilled to have you, dear,” loudly enough for everyone to hear.

I don't know if I'm going to tell Hayes any of this. What would be the point? He can't do anything about it, and I can see that he's trying hard to continue the tradition of his family. Even if they are dumb and useless ones.

We haven't had a moment alone since we came down for dinner. And now, I've been dismissed as lacking by a woman who spent the first forty-five minutes of dinner telling me all about the piping for her new window treatments.

“Most of them are fine,” the woman next to me murmurs in my ear.

“Excuse me?” I turn to look at her. She's a pretty woman in her late sixties with skin the color of hazelnuts, eyes the color of coffee, and a warm smile.

“But some of them are a bunch of stuck-up assholes.” Her whispered words are colored with humor. “We're only invited because the previous Mr. Rivers and my husband were friends. It's only since Hayes got back that we decided to come at all.

Trust me, honey, you'll be glad they don't talk to you," she says with a wink.

"I like you." I stick my hand out. "I'm Confidence. Yes, that's my real name," I say before she can ask.

"I'm Mary Hassan, and what a fantastic name," she compliments sincerely.

"Thank you," I say in kind.

"Well, I know a little something about sitting at tables you weren't exactly invited to, so I can empathize," she says. "And, I have three grown daughters. You look about their age," she says. And I think how lucky those girls must be.

Those girls are lucky to have a mother whose eyes light up when she talks about them.

"Do they live in Houston?" My heart jumps in hope that maybe I'll make some new friends.

"No. My oldest and her husband are in DC. My middle and youngest both live in the UK," she says.

"Wow, that's amazing. I just took my first trip out of the country this summer. I can't imagine living overseas. What took them there?" I ask.

"My baby got a job; she's a lawyer—"

"Oh, me, too," I say excitedly.

"Are you? I should introduce you. They'll all be here for Christmas. Just three more months," she says happily.

"I'd love that. I'm moving here. My best friend lives here actually, but I would love to meet more people," I say gratefully.

"You'll love them. My middle is married to an earl and lives in England," she tells me proudly.

"Really? What is that like?" I ask, looking around this room and thinking I can barely handle these entitled rich people. How would I deal with aristocrats?

“She had a hard time with some of the people in his circle. She’s not what a countess looks like over there, but she’s won them over now,” she says.

“That sounds like a hard transition,” I muse.

“It was. But for her husband’s sake she worked her way through it. And now, she’s just like one of the locals. She even teaches a coding course at the local high school,” she says. I smile at the pride in her voice and reach for my drink to avoid having to speak.

Hayes is no earl. But around here, he’s like royalty. And given my less-than-warm reception, I’m worried about being his partner. I think that’s where we’re going. He wouldn’t have asked me to move in with him if he didn’t think so. I wouldn’t be considering it if I didn’t, too.

She touches my arm. “I saw you come down with Hayes. You make such a beautiful couple.”

“Thank you so much.” I glance down the table at him just as a man dressed in one of the dark blue valet uniforms rushes into the open doors of the dining room and bends to whisper in his ear.

Whatever the valet says can’t be good. Hayes’s jaw clenches, and his brow furrows. Then, he tosses his napkin down on the table and stands up.

“Excuse me, everyone,” he says. I watch him in hopes that he’ll make eye contact with me. He doesn’t.

I war with myself, watching the door, and unsure whether or not to follow him. Mary touches my arm again and I glance at her.

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “What were you saying?”

My eyes dart back to the door for a second and when I look back to her, she’s smiling sympathetically.

“That’s one of the benefits of being someone’s other half,” she says. “You don’t have to wait for them to say they need you. You just go because you know they always do.”

She cocks her head to the door. “See you later,” she says.

We share a smile, mine full of gratitude for this unexpectedly kind woman being here tonight. I start to stand up and she touches my arm.

“We own Palmyra, it’s a Middle Eastern Restaurant in Rivers Wilde ,” she says. “Come visit me, I’m there on weeknights.” She squeezes my hand and I squeeze hers back.

“Oh, that’s my favorite! I’ll come see you,” I promise.

“I’m so glad he has someone like you. He’s going to need you.” She nods at the empty seat at the head of the table.

I want to ask her what she means but at the moment, I’m more concerned about Hayes. I walk out of the dining room, and the weight of the stares on my retreating back are heavy. The whispers are loud and I’m sure everyone is wondering who the hell I am. I want to turn around and yell, “I’m his,” but that would just delay. And something tells me I need to get to him as fast as I can.

I step into the hall and look both ways down the long, dark passage. I have no idea where he went. I’m turning left when a loud crash of glass has me turning right. I run down the hall. Muffled, but loud voices spill into the dark around me.

“You can’t keep doing this, Dare,” Hayes says.

My hand freezes on the door knob. This is his younger brother. The one Poppy mentioned earlier.

“I didn’t realize I couldn’t come to my own family’s home,” the other man slurs.

“I didn’t say that. I just wish you would lay off the alcohol and only God knows what else you’re putting into your body,” Hayes says, his voice tight with restrained anger. “Confidence is here, and I’m trying like fuck to make sure she wants to come back.” I know he’s been on edge about my visit. But it’s jarring to hear the anxiety so clearly in his voice.

“Well from what you told me, it sounds like she lives in some shit hole mobile home in the middle of nowhere.” I’m startled by how much he sounds like Hayes. The drunken slurring of his words is the only way I can tell the difference. That, and the ugly insult in his tone.

“Shut up,” Hayes snaps.

“I’m sure she got one look at this place and realized she hit pay dirt. She isn’t going anywhere. Trust me,” he says.

The words and the ease with which he flings them feels like a lash across my heart. Is that what everyone thinks?

“Dare,” Hayes says, the warning in his voice making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I’m caught between wanting to go in and needing to hear how Hayes will respond.

“Oops, I forgot. You fucked her and forget you begged me to run a background check on your little gold digger” Those words hit me like scalding water. I cover my mouth to muffle my gasp of pain.

“Dare, don’t say another fucking word—”

“What? Only you can say she’s good enough to fuck but not good enough to bring home,—” he starts before his voice abruptly cuts off and the sickening sound of crunching bone fills the air.

“You broke my nose, you asshole!” the drunken voice screams before more glass crashes to the ground. And the telltale sounds of a tussle—grunts, curses, furniture scraping the floor, glass shattering—fill the air. I open the door and see two men, both big and tall, on the ground in a hopelessly well-matched tussle.

I know I should call for help, or step in to stop the fracas. Yet, I do neither of those things. Instead, I just watch the two men fight. My eyes remain on Hayes, the man I love. He still looks exactly the same, but at the same time, so different.

I can’t move.

I can’t breathe

He ordered a background check? He knows every ugly thing about me. Anger, betrayal, and fear whirl. My head spins as those thoughts mingle with the sounds of chaos. The sounds of my childhood. Of furniture breaking, grunts of pain, the crunch of fists, the slap of skin on skin. I’m caught between the devil and hell—I don’t know which direction in this house

of horrors to turn. But somehow, I manage to run until I get to our room. I sit on my bed and try to figure out what the hell I'm going to do.

* * *

I've just started to drift off when our bedroom door opens. My eyes snap open and I stare unseeingly at the wall as I wait for him to say something. He slides into bed with me. I can smell sweat, blood and liquor on him. His body is cool, the stubble on his face is slightly damp as he presses his cheek to mine and wraps his arms around me. A fraught and angry energy emanates from him. And like the fool I am, all I want is to soothe him. I lift his knuckles to my lips and kissed the sore, stiff, red joints..

He turns me around, and without saying a word, kisses me.

We make love for an hour, maybe more. We find a calm that always exists in the sanctity of our bodies' communion. When we are together like this, it's easy to forget that anything else matters

We roll out of bed and shower at 2:00 a.m. I kiss his bruises without asking how he got them. He accepts my kisses without offering any explanations. We go back to bed and do it all over again. I fall asleep on him, sated but dreading the reckoning the sunrise will bring with it.

Chapter Fourteen

Pride

Confidence

My phone beeps with a new email and I look over at my window and see the first hints of sunlight peeking through my curtain. Hayes stirs beside me and I decide to ignore my phone. I snuggle into him. “Good morning,” I whisper into the back of his warm, muscled shoulder.

“Morning,” he mumbles sleepily, his arm snaking behind him to pull me closer. “I need to tell you about last night.” His voice is partially muffled in his pillow, and he turns to face me. His eyes are clear, and I realize he’s been awake longer than I realized.

My heart falls. I’m dreading what I know I must say. What I *must* do.

“I already know,” I confess.

His muscles tense. “*What* do you know?”

I gaze at him.

I love him.

But I can’t be with someone who thinks those things about me.

I push out of his grasp and sit up and pull the covers over my chest. I stare at my fingers, twirling the rings the way he does all the time.

“You know why I wrote that thesis?”

“Huh?” he frowns, his brow furrows at the abrupt turn in our conversation.

“I wrote it because I love the river. But I wanted to protect my people from the destruction it always causes,” I choke on a sob.

“Hey ... baby.” He starts to sit up and put his arm around me. I shake my head and climb out of bed, taking the sheets with me. I sit on the large window seat, and a tear splashes on the blue gray fabric I’m cocooned in. The tiny moist spot bleeds to form a quarter-sized stain. I wipe at my eyes with a brutal pass of my hands.

I take a shuddering breath and stare at my hands while I try to collect myself. Growing up, I watched year after year as the river banks swelled when the rain overwhelmed it. And its lazy, tranquil flow would transform into a beast. It laid waste to every single plan, hope, home, heart that was in its path. When it receded, it would leave everything covered in mud and dirt. Some things would never recover. Like me. Now, I look back at him. He’s watching me with a perplexed expression on his face.

“I know rivers, but you made me forget the danger. I forgot to cage my love for you. And now, I’m drowning in it,” I whisper.

“Confidence, you need to stop speaking code. Tell me what the fuck is going on?” He raises his voice in frustration. “Why are you crying? And why can’t I touch you?” he asks, his voice even louder, and he sounds as angry as I feel. I glance at him and it pisses me off that he doesn’t look panicked or worried.

“You’ve ruined everything!” I shout, suddenly overwhelmed with anger, sadness, disillusionment, despair.

“You need—”

“I don’t *need* to do anything,” I say in defiance.

“Yes, you fucking do,” he snarls.

I cross my arms over my chest. “I’m not saying I thought this was going to be forever. But over the last couple of months, I’d let myself imagine the possibility ...” I say while I throw my charger, laptop, phone, and books into my shoulder bag.

“Okay.” He shrugs. “What’s changed since you fell asleep on my cock six hours ago?”

Of course. It's always about sex with him. I shake my head and slip my feet into my shoes. I can't even look at him.

Queen.

I love you.

Respect you.

All lies.

"You ordered a background check on me?"

His face pales. My stomach falls.

"Because I'm 'hot enough to fuck, but not good enough to bring home'?" my lip curls in a sneer

"Who told you that?" he asks and my heart sinks.

"Well, at least you're not denying it." Fatigue makes my sadness heavy and suffocating.

"I didn't mean—"

"I can't believe you talked about me like that," I say, my traitorous voice breaking. The warmth of his hand resting on my shoulder suddenly feels like a branding heat.

I step away. "Don't you fucking touch me," I snarl.

"Confidence, what the *fuck*?" he demands.

My stomach cramps and I hug my arms around my middle.

My heart is sick.

I'm sick.

How in the *world* could I have fallen for this shit again?

I *tattooed* this motherfucker's name on my body.

I square my shoulders, drop my hands and straighten up so I can look him square in the eye. "I *heard* you last night. I followed you when you left because I thought maybe you needed me," I tell him and watch his face fall.

He groans and for the first time since I've known him, I see fear in his eyes. My own fear feeds on it. The ache in my stomach sharpens. Things are about to get worse and I'm

scared by how viscerally I feel the loss already. I've fallen so thoroughly and irredeemably in love with him. Just in time for him to break my fucking heart.

"No," he says sternly. "You've got *all* of that wrong. I ordered it before we were together in Italy. Weeks later when it showed up, I couldn't remember why I thought I needed it. I never opened it."

"You didn't?" I ask and I feel a flicker of hope that maybe I misunderstood.

"No," he sighs. "I decided I could overlook everything that was wrong about us. Your lack of money, your lack of a name. I already knew about the scandal surrounding your career," he says.

I pale. But I set my jaw and narrow my eyes at him.

"You've *overlooked* them?" I ask, almost daring him to repeat himself.

"Yes. I decided it didn't matter," he says like he's being a benevolent ruler. Like he's looking down his nose at me.

My hackles shoot straight up. "I didn't ask you to overlook *anything*," I hiss.

He comes to stand in front of me and reaches for me. "No," I say quietly.

"Let me explain." His voice is thick and gruff. Angry.

Fuck him.

I won't look at him. I can't.

The heaviness in my body is only outmatched by the ton of pain in my heart.

I turn to face him.

"I may not have a name. Maybe I didn't know where Positano is or what some random Latin words mean ... or whatever." I narrow my eyes at him and stab the air with my finger. "But, I'll tell you what. My mother worked her way up to manager at a small plant in Tennessee at a time when it was *really* hard for women to do that. *While* she lived with a husband who

treated her like a punching bag and a son she was afraid of. And she put up with that shit for *me*. She worked a second job to help pay tuition to put *me*,” I say, pointing at my chest, “through college. And law school. Because she looked at me and saw what you and the rest of your stuck-up friends fail to see. *All of my potential.*”

I wave my hands in the air around my head, my fingers pointing down to my body. His expression is one of pure shock.

“I was raised to treat everyone with respect,” I continue. “I was raised to be proud of my integrity, my loyalty and my kindness. My name means something because I’ve *made* it mean something.”

“Confidence,” he growls.

“You don’t have the *right* to say my name,” I snap and his eyes widen. “I’m not going to let you or anyone else look down on me because I don’t have money and my last name isn’t on a stadium or museums or a hospital somewhere.”

“Fucking hell, Confidence,” he grinds out.

I ignore him.

“You’ve had everything handed to you. And yet, here we are.” I fling my arms wide in a sweeping flourish that covers the whole room. “In the same place. At the very same time. Who’s slumming?” I sneer. “And who’s leveled up?” I give him a hard, challenging look. “Who should be looking down on who?”

“I don’t look down on—”

“The one who’s here because she worked, scraped, and beat back the crabs trying to pull her back into the barrel?” I take a step closer to him. “*Or* the person who’s here because he was lucky enough to be pushed out of a gold lined pussy?” I give him a disdainful head-to-toe assessment.

His eyes narrow, his jaw flexes and he rears back. “What did you just say to me?” he hisses.

“Did you let the pretty dresses, law degree and good table manners fool you?” I ask. “I grew up with a trucker hat turned to the back, jeans tucked into my muddy hiking boots, a hunting rifle slung across my back and a bowie knife tucked into my waist. I’ve been thrown to the wolves and I have killed every. Single. One. Of them.” I am aflame with indignation.

“You need to calm down,” he says and has the nerve to reach for me.

“No,” I huff and grit my teeth. “We’re done. You are *never* going to insult me again. You don’t deserve me.”

I shake my head in frustration and then stand up. He moves fast and grabs me by the forearms. He presses his forehead to mine, our noses touch, our breath mingles between us and his eyes burn into mine with possessiveness and determination.

“You’re right. I don’t.” He pins me in place with his eyes “I *know* it. You know it. And yet, here we are. In the same place at the same *fucking* time,” he says, throwing my words back at me. “You take everything I give you. Even when it hurts because you know I’m going to make you come so hard you can’t breathe. You sleep next to me with your fingers linked with mine because you *love* me. We are not even close to done,” he grits out and I try to pull myself loose.

Right now, I’m caught between wanting to sob in his arms and wanting to kick him in the balls.

“Let go of me,” I growl.

“Never. You will not walk away from me because of some bullshit like this.”

“It’s *not* bullshit. I have spent the entire weekend with your crazy ass family and their friends,” I shout back at him and shake myself loose. This time, he lets me go. “Are these *really* the people you want to surround yourself with? You talked about your family doing good. What good does it do to get dressed up for a six-course meal just because it’s Friday? I mean, it’s like fucking Versailles. Your city is drowning and you’re dressed up because it’s *Friday*.”

I hurl my words like bullets and when his face turns red with anger, I know I hit my target. He grabs my wrists and pulls me back.

“You overheard me and Dare last night, but you still let me fuck you. Were planning to leave me when we woke up?” he asks angrily.

I flush because the way he says it makes it sound ... treacherous. But I shake that off because it's not remotely true.

“I didn't know what I was going to do, Hayes. I was confused!” I shout at him.

“Did you know you were going to leave this morning?” he asks me coldly.

“Yes,” I answer. He flinches.

My family is no prize and has its fair share of shit. But I don't want to live like this. I didn't escape the frying pan just to jump into the fire.

“I mean, maybe if that craziness with Eliza had felt like a fluke, or the dinner guests hadn't made me feel like something a dog dragged in from outside. Or knowing that your brother thinks I'm already measuring for drapes and counting your money. But I don't want to live in chaos with people who hate each other—and who hate me. I mean, she slapped the housekeeper!” My arms fling out in front of me. His hands take the opportunity and grab hold of me. I don't fight him. I

“I'm not them,” he grinds out.

“But you are. You can't help it. They treated me the way you did the night we met,” I say with a stony glare.

He flinches.

Good.

“You have to forgive me for that. It can't be the reason you walk away,” he says.

“It's not the only reason. Everything that's happened this weekend. I don't want to fight in the place where I'm

supposed to be safe. I want a calm, quiet home. Those are my reasons.” I want to cry because all I want is for him to hold me.

“There’s a much better reason for you to *stay*,” he insists.

“Like what?” I ask impatiently.

“You love me. I belong to you,” he whispers, and I close my eyes on a pathetic whimper. He strokes his nose alongside mine. A tear rolls down my cheek.

“You belong to me,” he says before he crashes his lips on top of mine. He snags my lower lip between his teeth and sucks it, bites it. My fingers slide into his hair, and his tongue slips into my mouth. I let him taste me while I drink as much as I can handle before my body throbs for more. And then I gather tufts of his hair into my hands and yank—hard.

“Fuuuuck!” he roars and breaks our kiss.

I scramble around the bed.

“I belong to *myself*,” I snarl. “And yes, I kneeled in front of you and took what you gave me. But, I will *never* kneel for you again.”

He looks angry, but I still see that fear and I hate it. “You better not walk out of that door,” he says.

“Or *what*?” I hiss.

We face each other. His bed is like a battlefield between us. I press my knuckles into the mattress and lean toward him so I can look him in the eye one more time. There’s real distress in his that shakes my resolve. Damn him for making me love him so much.

“I am *not* afraid of you. How could I be? When you were so afraid of *me* that you needed a background check—” I say.

His face is pained. “I’m sorry—”

“You should be,” I snap. “But not for me. I’ve survived worse than a man who’s too blind to see that I’m the best thing that will ever happen to him.”

My heart tugs at the nearly gray pallor on his face when I turn to pick up my things. With each piece of clothing I throw into my bag, my resolve grows. I face him again. He's watching me, his face thunderous and his body perfectly still.

"I'm leaving," I tell him.

He shrugs. "You'll be back. And I'll be waiting."

"Right," I scoff dismissively and zip up my suitcase.

"You're *mine*. My queen. What do you have without your king?" he asks coldly.

"*All* the power," I say with an equally icy tone and smile.

Then, I walk away from him.

Part II

Chapter Fifteen

The Return

Hayes

I careen through the winding and nonsensically narrow street of the Rivers Estate. The rows of manicured shrubs are nothing more than blurs of dark green as I run yet another stop sign.

On a street without a single intersection.

In a subdivision with only one house.

It's just one example of the lack of planning and the sense of entitlement that's created the mess I've been cleaning up since I took control from Uncle Thomas.

It's been eighty-seven days of inconsistencies, complaints, and so much fucking disappointment, that I'm starting to forget what it feels like to be satisfied.

A flock of baby geese step into the road just two hundred and fifty feet ahead of my speeding car. I slam hard on my breaks to stop in time. My high-performance Maserati protests with groans, shrieks, and sputters. I struggle to hold my steering wheel straight to stop the threatening spin out that's pulling my tires to the right. The acrid stench of burned rubber and the uncertainty of whether I had ten geese crushed beneath my car congeal like cooled grease in my stomach.

I peer out of my window and breathe a sigh of relief when the gaggle waddles past, completely oblivious to the havoc they nearly wrecked and how close their lives came to ending.

"Where's your sense of survival, you idiotic animals?" I chide them as I pull past them and hook a right up the dark, concrete tiled driveway. The rows of pink flowering bushes on either side were planted by my mother the year before she died.

I'm surprised Eliza didn't pull them up. She tore out the rose garden my mother planted within months of marrying my father. I pull up the drive and park under the huge carport that should have been knocked down years ago. I throw my car into park and give myself a minute to collect my thoughts before I walk into the house.

Built at the turn of the twentieth century by my great-great-grandfather, Jeb Rivers, it's one of Houston's oldest homes. As my uncle likes to remind anyone who will listen, at nearly twenty thousand square feet that sits on two and half acres of land, it's also one of the biggest and most expensive homes in the city.

Houston's nearly one-hundred-mile sprawl means that even as we get close to edging Chicago out of the number three spot on the list of America's largest cities, there's a seemingly endless supply of land that keeps home prices down. That forty-million-dollar price tag would buy a six thousand square foot penthouse apartment in New York City, max.

It's why Houston's wealthy can indulge in more cars, food, theatre and retail therapy than their wealthy counterparts in other cities. And indulge, we do. I stare out at the expanse of lawn that's bisected by a ground level fountain with a pool full of koi fish. The estate boasts a citrus grove, rose gardens, a tennis court, Olympic-sized infinity pool, and is surrounded by hundred-year-old trees. But after Confidence's visit, when I look at it, all I see is a tomb where our family's skeletons live. If I had my way, I would tear it all down.

A sharp rap on the passenger's side window of my car startles me out of my daydream. My uncle, the Crypt Keeper himself, is peering in at me. His thick silver eyebrows are drawn down over his thunderous dark eyes.

He doesn't look like an old man. He looks like an old villain. One that threatens to eat children when they make too much noise. His wide, thin-lipped mouth is moving, but my blissfully soundproof car keeps the assault from reaching my ears. I savor the quiet in my car long enough to take three deep breaths before I step out of the car into a jarringly different atmosphere.

“You’re late. The team has been gathered for more than twenty minutes,” he says. He’s got the kind of voice that’s powerful without being loud. But, the power of that is lost on me. I know that he’s nothing more than an empty vessel for delusion and resentment.

“Well, since the meeting couldn’t start without me, I’d say that I’m right on time,” I tell him. “And if you had held this meeting in the office instead of here, it would have started twenty minutes ago,” I tell him. We step in the gargantuan foyer and start up the stairs to the room that’s always used for Kingdom business. Swish’s old office.

“You forget that you’re talking to your uncle, Hayes. I will have your respect,” he says from behind me.

I stop and turn to find him standing on the bottom step, hands folded behind his back, an expectant look on his face.

I walk back down so I’m one step above him.

“*You* forget that you’re talking to the head of your family,” I remind him. “If you want my respect, you better set about trying to earn it.” I turn and start back up the stairs. “The mess you’ve made of things has left us vulnerable on too many fronts and has lost you any built in credibility I gave you because you’re my uncle. You’ve done a piss poor job,” I say over my shoulder.

A lawsuit filed by a group of tenants whose homes were damaged in the flood last month is just the latest in a pile of shit that’s been landing on my desk for the last three months. I’ve spent nearly all of my time as chairman of the board putting out fires. It’s meant to be a figurehead position, but with an incompetent and corrupt executive team, I’ve been forced to take a more hands on approach. None of them like it, but I don’t care.

“The lawsuit is what we called you here to discuss,” he says, still behind me as I push open the doors to the room that’s decorated like a nineteenth century country club. Whatever traces of Swish there were in here are gone. I want to hurry and get out of here.

“Gentlemen, please have a seat,” I say to the three men who stand when I walk in.

I sit down at the head of the table. “Tell me what’s going on with this.” I look at Rich Jones, the current head of operations.

He slides a folder over to me and opens the one in front of him.

“There are twenty-five thousand units that are included in the class; they represent an annual revenue of about three hundred million dollars to the Real Estate Investment Trust. Our investors expect those dividends and profit shares.”

“What’s this got to do with the flooded-out apartments?”

“Well ...” he tugs at his collar and looks around the table at the other two 80-year-old incompetents who had helped him and my uncle destroy Kingdom one bit at a time.

They all stare down at their laps.

Cowards.

“There are two main issues in their complaint. The first is that some of them were evicted without notice. The units took on water, but we disagreed with their complaints that there would be any significant problems with people living there once they dried out,” he says.

“What was your disagreement based on?” I ask.

“Huh?” His eyes dart to his left again.

“You’re on your own here, Rich. They’re not going to jump in and save you.” I hook my thumb at the two other men. “Tell me.”

“It was just what we thought,” he says in a high nasally whine that makes me wish hitting people wasn’t illegal.

“But some of ‘em left without notice, and we didn’t know if they would be back. There were plenty of people looking for places to rent so we filled the vacated units right away.” He shrugs his shoulders, eyes wide with complete bafflement at how what he’s saying could be construed as fraud and theft.

“It says here you emptied occupied apartments and threw away personal belongings after residents were gone for less than seventy-two hours? Is that allegation true?”

“Yes, but we thought they were moved, and we needed to turn those units over to people who wanted to pay,” he snaps defensively and wipes a drop of sweat from his forehead. I shake my head in disgust.

I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone and text my PA Muriel that I want her to find an executive search firm. It’s time for me to build my own team. I’ve had enough indulging my uncle’s ego and treading lightly.

“Well, we’re going to settle this case. And we’re going to make these people whole again. I want a report on the actual damage costs. They’re suing us, seeking general and pecuniary damages. Our exposure at trial is unlimited. This isn’t hard. Let’s give them a little money for their troubles and send them on their way.” I stand up to leave.

“On Monday, I want a list—a comprehensive one—of all other potential liabilities you’re aware of. Even if it’s just a repeated customer complaint. And I don’t mean just in real estate, I mean throughout Kingdom. I also want a report of our philanthropic spending in the last ten years. I’ve received disturbing reports about our failure to support efforts that were pioneered by the Rivers family,” I chastise them.

“The zoo doesn’t need our help any longer. Why should we continue making such huge bequests?” Eugene Kinder, the CFO, chimes in from his chair.

I’ve never liked him.

“That’s not for you to decide. I want those reports by the end of the week.” I stand. The four men all stand and offer their disingenuous farewells.

“Uncle Thomas, will you walk me out?”

I wait for him outside the door. I scan the vaulted tray ceiling. The ivory-colored, intricately-carved crown molding runs along the perimeter of the room.

A huge crown sits in the middle of the letters R and K. Rivers Kingdom. That's what this used to be. That's how people have referred to us. But *we* have never called ourselves kings. Not until my uncle's reign.

He joins me in the corridor. "Yes, what would you like to discuss?" His tone is formal, his eyes wary as he waits for me to speak.

"Poppy refuses to remain on staff as long as you or Eliza reside in Rivers House," I inform him.

"Well, we'll be sad to see her go," he says and adjusts the cuffs on his shirtsleeves.

"She's not going anywhere. I've told her that you will be moving out," I inform him.

His eyes nearly bug out of his head. His lips pucker like he's sucked a lemon and he seems incapable of speech. So, I continue. "In two months, members of Denmark's royal family will begin an extended occupancy at Rivers House. Poppy has arranged to have the house cleaned and the rooms prepared, so you and Aunt Mai will need to make other arrangements for accommodation. Eliza has already been informed that she will need to vacate the house," I say.

He blinks at me, his face flushed red with embarrassment. But he manages to unstick his lips, and he fixes me with a judgmental stare.

"Aren't these sort of details and message deliveries below your station, nephew? Or are you finding these more mundane and administrative tasks better suited to your capabilities?" he asks, smugness at his dig spreading across his withered face.

I shake my head in disappointment. "I'm not such a slave to my pride, *Uncle*, that I couldn't deliver a message that might have felt callous coming from someone who doesn't know your personal situation," I tell him.

He has the decency to look ashamed.

"Thomas, I'm not here to rub my leadership in your face," I say to the top of his bowed head.

“Why are you here? If not for the glory of it?” he snaps. His resentment is unmasked and fully evident in his eyes. I feel a pang of pity for him. He’s never been happy with his position in the family.

“I’m here because it’s my responsibility to make sure that the next heir receives a legacy that’s worth preserving.”

“As if it isn’t now? I have been a wonderful steward of this family’s interests,” he protests.

“Ah, yes, the ever-growing pile of lawsuits from clients, customers, and partners alike say that,” I retort.

“Of course they’re unhappy. They want us to live like we’re commoners. They want to pretend they’re our equals. I stopped that. You want to settle with these people? Why don’t they go find better jobs, so they can afford better than some flooded out apartment? We are not a charity. We are a business. If they think it’s not fit for human occupation, fine. They should go find somewhere else to live.”

“Those apartments are not fit for any human occupation. The reports are damning. Would you want to live there?”

“I would never be forced to make that kind of choice,” he sniffs.

“How do you know? Don’t you have the ability to put yourself in someone else’s shoes and imagine what it would be like if you were in them?” I ask in muted outrage. I just don’t understand where this man’s heart is. How he and my father were both raised by my grandparents is a mystery.

“Why would I want to imagine being them? How vulgar,” he says with a sniff of disgust.

He’s a lost cause. I just need to completely declaw him and then I’ll strip him of all his power and mandate his retirement from the board.

“You had fifteen years to do what you would. You sent me away. You made sure I stayed away. Perhaps you hoped I’d never come back. But here I am.”

“Yes, here you are,” he says with barely disguised malice.

“And here, I’ll stay.” I reinforce it with my own undisguised dislike. “You need to get used to it. Stop trying to undermine me; stop trying to make me feel like I have less right to be here than you do. I’m sorry you weren’t born first. But you need to start thinking about what your life could be,” I say with a heavy sigh.

He doesn’t respond. He just stares straight ahead in stony silence, his face completely mottled with his pent-up anger.

“I’ve rented you a unit in the Ivy,” I tell him weakly as I stand.

“No, we will not stay there. It would be an insult to the family’s honor,” he blurts through woodenly clenched teeth.

“How is it an insult?”

“They aren’t fit to be our neighbors. They’re commoners. That land was part of our dynasty,” he spits.

Loathing floods me in a rush of heat, and I don’t hide it when I look at him.

“We sold them that land. We took the money from it and made ourselves rich again. They even named it after us in a show of good faith. This one-sided feud is ridiculous. I’m not going to perpetuate it anymore.”

“My father would shudder to see how you’ve degraded our dynasty,” he says.

I’ve had enough of his shit. I step into his personal space and look him in the eye.

“It’s a family, not a dynasty. *We* are commoners. Being richer than all of the monarchies combined doesn’t make you one by de facto. And thanks to your inability to delegate or manage the business yourself, we’re perilously close to being in debt. We’re just regular people. We’ll never reclaim any of the land we sold to the Wildes. If you’d had any real sense of what we needed, you would have embraced them.”

His face mottles, and his already thin lips compress to leave what looks like a white gash where his mouth should be. He

leans forward, as tall and straight at age eighty as he'd been at sixty.

"We are kings in our own right." His lips barely move. His eyes are hard and intense. "I will never embrace those bourgeoisie hippies who don't know the meaning of the word 'empire'. The Riverses had assets on which the sun never set. The legacy you speak of is one that was built with my grandfather's bare hands. And now you're kicking me out so some royals can come and rent this house? Like it's a fucking hotel?"

"It's certainly not a home. And I'm done wasting resources to try and make it feel like one just so you have a free place to live. I've offered you an option. If you'd rather use your fixed income to rent a place elsewhere, you're welcome to do it. But, either way, you and Aunt Mai and Eliza will have to be out of here by the time the embassy tenants are moving in."

"I won't go," he says quietly.

"Yes, you will," I tell him.

"No, I won't. You'll have to have me forcibly removed," he says.

"Fine, if that's what you want," I say with a shrug.

"I'll call the press," he says, scrambling up to his feet when I start down the hall.

"You do that. I'll make sure to set my DVR to record your dramatic exit when Channel 11 airs the story." I give him a two-finger salute and walk around to get back in my car.

"You'll ruin the family's reputation," he calls.

I make my dispassion plain in my expression.

"You've done a fine job of that yourself. Let me know what you'd like to do regarding leaving the house. I really have no problem being the bad guy. Everyone already thinks I'm a villain, why not get something in return for the headaches that come with that."

I drive down the winding road and watch the estate whiz by. When I was a boy growing up here, I never imagined I would

come to think of it as a burden. A reminder of those ugly days after my father's death and the years I spent being a punching bag for self-important assholes and an ATM to any pretty girl who would give me the time of day.

I approach the private entrance to Rivers Wilde and the tension I'm carrying starts to dissipate.

The gate lifts and I drive into the enclave, established by the Wildes before I was even born. This community, developed on land that was in my family for nearly one hundred years, is one of the most sought after addresses in Houston.

The huge golf course stretches for three miles on one side of Wildewood Parkway. The grand country club rises from behind its gates like a palace. I pause at the forked road and go right to the cluster of sky-scraping residential towers called the Ivy. The glass and brick structures loom over the copse of trees planted around them. As I approach the four-lane circle drive, the guard who sits in the middle of it waves in greeting and the wrought iron gate starts its slow ascent.

"Evening, boss," Sammy, our valet, greets as he pulls my door open. "Your dinner's been delivered and is ready to bring up as soon as you call."

"Thank you." I grasp his outstretched hand, and he smiles when he feels the money in my hand.

"Will you be needing your car again, or should I park her for the night?"

I glance at the sky. It's clear and blue, but the orange tint of the clouds signals that it's dusk.

"No, leave her out. I'm going out before dinner," I tell him and head inside to change. On my way up, I call Remington Wilde. I haven't spoken to him since that day sixteen years ago. But from what I've heard, even from people who don't like him, he's a straight shooter. An honest man and a legendary attorney already. He's grown Wilde Law into one of the largest in the country and has made his name as Assistant Attorney General in the Civil Rights Division at the Department of Justice by the time he turned thirty. He's back home after his

grandfather's death left him the head of the family. He's built the Civil Rights Division of Wilde Law incredibly fast. And his firm is representing the class that's suing us.

"Mr. Wilde's office," a crisp, British accented female voice answers after the first ring.

"Is Mr. Wilde there?"

"He's not available, may I take a message?" she asks immediately. Fucking gatekeepers.

"It's Hayes Rivers," I say.

There's a beat of silence, and she says, "Mr. Rivers, please hold for Mr. Wilde," and then there's a beep and Remington comes on the line.

"Who the fuck is this?" he says, just like he did that morning we met. I burst into unexpected laughter, and he joins me.

"What's up, kid?" he asks.

"I'm going to give you that, because these days, I'm good with being younger than you, especially since we're playing at the same level now," I say.

"You can't even *see* my level." He laughs. "You just got back into town, and you're *already* talking shit," he says.

"Just telling you how it is," I say.

"You have no clue how it is. You need to come kiss the rings of the men who've been running Houston while you were eating pasta on a beach in Italy," he quips. I laugh. I'd forgotten that he was a cocky asshole. I haven't seen him again since that day we met in the clearing. But it looks like not much has changed.

"I got your letter," I say and don't take his bait.

"No hard feelings, man," he says unapologetically. "But you've got to know that what Kingdom is doing is very wrong."

"You're preaching to the choir. I'm not calling to give you shit. I'm about to do you a huge favor," I tell him.

He whistles low and long. “Well, shit. Maybe I should sue you more often.” He laughs.

“You in the office early tomorrow?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says.

“I’ll come to you,” I say.

“You better bring coffee,” he says, then hangs up.

He’s an asshole. But I like him. And I think he’s going to be receptive to what I have to say tomorrow.

This lawsuit, since it landed on my desk, has been nothing but a headache. But now it’s presenting me with a multitude of opportunities. I want to hold Kingdom accountable, but I know the board and executive committee will never back me on it. So, I’ll find another way. This company is rotten from the inside out. If I’ve got to kill it to save the family name, I will. What’s left isn’t worth the paper its letterhead is printed on. And I want the family foundation that I control to be the source of the Rivers family influence.

And, I know just the lawyer to do it.

Confidence still isn’t talking to me. She left my house that day and spent a couple of days with Cass’s family in Rivers Wilde before she left for Arkansas. She refused to see me. I followed her home, and she made it very clear I wasn’t welcome.

It’s been a month and she’s returned every email and text I’ve sent with the same message, “I will never forgive you.”

I know she thinks she means it.

I mean to make sure she has no choice. Because living without her isn’t an option for me and this distance has only made that more apparent. It’s time to take control of this situation.

Chapter Sixteen

Kings Meet

Hayes

“Can I have two coffees to go? One black. One with two creams and one sugar” I ask.

“Ah, you made up with Ms. Confidence,” the man behind the counter says brightly as he rings up my order.

I’m in the middle of reading my email from Amelia, my new lawyer, and almost drop my phone at his words.

This is only my second time here. I peer at his name tag that says “Lo”. “How do you know Confidence?” I ask quizzically.

“Oh, that girl was in here making juju dolls out of stirring straws with her friend for a couple days after the storm. They were all named after you,” he says and then laughs at whatever he sees on my face.

“What’s a juju doll?”

“Ah, that’s what we call them in Nigeria. Maybe here you call them voodoo? Like the Creoles?” He laughs.

“Oh. She made voodoo dolls and named them after me?” I ask and then glance behind me to see who was snickering.

The group of teenage girls all look away when I scowl at them.

“Yes, my man. My wife has been mad at me. But I’ve never had a doll made in my honor,” he says and hands me back my credit card. I’m so dazed I don’t even remember asking for it back.

“Thank you,” I say absently and stick it back into my pocket.

“And she took her coffee just like that, two creams, one sugar. So, I thought maybe one of those was for her.”

“No. Unfortunately, it’s not.” And I realize that I’ve been drinking my coffee like this since I met her. All of these subtle ways I’ve started to compensate for her absence in my life. I yearn for her in a way that claws at my insides.

“Well, we hope she forgives you soon and comes back. We liked having her around, and she loves my lattes,” he says boisterously.

“Okay,” I say, weirded out that he even cares.

I want to ask him to tell me more, but it’s too pathetic. So, I just smile. “Well, if she comes back, I’ll definitely make sure she has one every morning.”

“Don’t worry, son. It’ll be okay,” he says. I raise my brows to show that I’m not as confident as he is.

“Listen—in Rivers Wilde, we look out for each other. It’s that small-town nosiness imported to Houston. You’ll get used to it,” he says.

“Lotanna, that line hasn’t moved since I went back to get more scones. Let the man get on with his day, *cha*” a petite, dark haired, very pretty woman whose name tag says Sweet calls as she walks through the swinging doors off the side of the bakery’s main dining room.

Her accent is identical to his, so I assume that she’s from Nigeria, too. “Sorry, Mr. Rivers. Lo loves gossip. He reads Ms. Regan’s column every morning and she wrote about you two a lot in the last month.”

“Regan has a column?” Regan Wilde is Remi’s twin sister, and as far as I know is married with two kids and a journalist on a local channel.

“Well, we suspect it’s her. We all just call it Regan’s column. It’s a sort of ...”

“Poison pen,” her husband provides the word she was searching for.

“Nasty, if you ask me,” Sweet says.

“No one asked you. It’s great,” Lo says enthusiastically. “Our very own town crier. Anyway, we’re all rooting for Ms.

Confidence to forgive you, Mr. Rivers. Let us know,” he says and hands me my drink.

I walk out of there and cross the small footbridge that leads to the office park of Rivers Wilde.

I thought moving to a big city would rid me of the curse of nosy Italian mamas that plagued the small village I had lived in with Gigi. But instead, I’d moved into what was essentially a small town and everyone is invested in what’s happening with Confidence and me. I’m just glad my office is downtown, twenty minutes away, tucked safely in the old Chevron Tower. And far away from the constant questions that only remind me that my girl isn’t talking to me and that I have no way of making her. Well, until yesterday.

“You’re late,” Remington Wilde says as soon as I step through the sliding glass doors of his office.

“This is all very man in the high castle, Wilde. Most executives work from home these days,” I tease.

“Good for those motherfuckers. The can-be executives. I’ll be a leader and show up to the office every fucking day.”

“You take everything as a challenge,” I scoff.

“Yes. Because I’m addicted to winning. And *you’re* late,” he says.

“No, I’m just not early.” I stick my hand out to shake his and we share a good-natured grin.

“So, you’re finally back and in charge?” he asks, his dark eyes narrowed in naked skepticism.

“I’m back,” I say before I unbutton my suit jacket and sit down across from him.

“I know you’re not living in that old castle up there, are you?”

“No, I bought a place in Rivers Wilde. It’s almost ready. Until then, I’m living in the Ivy,” I tell him.

“How do you like it?” he asks.

“I like it fine,” I say noncommittally.

“If by ‘fine’ you mean you like the good people, excellent food, world-class amenities, and being in the most convenient part of Houston, then I’m glad to hear it. Rivers Wilde is a tastemaker and so many have tried to replicate what we did. But there’s not another community like it in Houston,” he says.

“Cut the sales talk. I’ve already been brought down by one of your sales ninjas. And, *I’m* here to sell *you* something,” I tell him.

He chuckles and quirks his lips proudly. “Our sales team is the best in the country. We still use my dad’s training manual for our sales force. Almost thirty years later it’s still turning out fucking soldiers on our sales team,” he says and nods.

“You hungry?” he asks and nods at the menu.

“Nope, and I’ve got a chimichurri steak frites being delivered from Moxie’s at 12:30. I’m saving myself for that baby,” I joke.

“From what I heard, that’s the only thing you’re calling *baby* these days,” he says and takes a sip of his drink. He grins at me mischievously from behind the lip of his cup. Confidence’s hasty departure from my house and her decampment to Rivers Wilde for the remainder of her stay was clearly the subject of rampant gossip.

“I can’t believe you have time to listen to gossip.”

“Oh, I don’t. But my twin, Regan, she lives for it and you two were the talk of the town after she was seen fleeing your house in the middle of a fucking hurricane. That sounded like some drama. And your stepmother sounds like a nut job,” he says.

“Fuck off,” I gripe.

He bursts out laughing. I watch him with a bored expression.

He wipes his eyes. “I’m done,” he says.

“Good. Because it’s actually a perfect segue about why I’m here. Your lawsuit, the flood victims? You need to hire them the best lawyer you can. Kingdom is pulling out all the stops

because they don't want their other tenants to get any ideas." I get straight to the point.

"What? Are you turning traitor on your own company?" he asks and laughs.

"It's not my company. But the foundation has exposure. I'm trying to limit it," I say shortly.

"You live here. So, you know what my uncle has done. And I'm trying to find a way to work around his stooges on the executive committee. I think they'd be willing to settle. I want to make sure that my first act as chairman is to settle this case," I level with him.

He assesses me for a few seconds. "So, you're telling me you're not going to be Mr. Same Shit Different Day?"

"I'm telling you that there is shit I'm not willing to attach my name to," I say honestly.

"I'm listening," he says and leans back, confident that whatever I'm about to tell him, he's already got a stronger hand than I.

But he can't. Not when he doesn't know all of the cards in play.

"You need a *fucking good* lawyer. I saw that Jimenez asshole listed as the attorney of record. He's going to fuck it up for your clients," I say.

"He's one of the best litigators in the country." He swats away my comments with the shrug of one shoulder.

"Are you personally overseeing this matter?"

"No, but I am watching closely. I'm the one they came to. I just can't take it on right now," he says.

"Well, let me tell you that Jimenez doesn't give a shit about them. That's going to matter because he'll give them terrible advice and tell them to take whatever Kingdom's offering."

"Okay, I don't have time to launch a search right now, Rivers. But thanks for the advice." He rolls his eyes.

“I’m not here to give you advice. I said I have a favor,” I reiterate slowly. “I know a lawyer. The one who won that huge insurance settlement for those people in the delta.”

“Ohh yeah, I’ve heard of her. Some weird-as-fuck first name, like Contracts or something, right?” he says.

“Her name is Confidence Ryan, asshole,” I say.

“You know her?” he asks with an impressed, suggestive smile.

“Yeah, I know her. She’s my girlfriend. The one you were teasing me about.” I say it and ignore the flashback of her telling me she’d never forgive me.

“Oh, shit. Regan never said her name. I had no idea. You want me to hire your girlfriend to be the lawyer for a class action lawsuit against your company?”

“It’s not my company. And I’m trying to save the small piece of it that is mine. So, yeah. I want you to hire her. She’s the best,” I say honestly.

“You know she’s not just well known because of that case. Her old firm put the word out about her, man. I heard she tried to fucking gank her last boss,” he says with a laugh.

“You’re wasting my time,” I say dismissively.

“You’re wasting your own time. I don’t want a PR nightmare on my hands by hiring some chick with a short fuse just cause you’re pussy whipped,” he says.

I ignore the jab and cut to the chase.

“Why did you take this case, Remi?” I ask him.

“Because this is *my* city. That flood, some of the images I saw, will haunt me for the rest of my life. It’s been a month and we’re seeing stories of families getting back in the homes. But those are the people with good fucking insurance and savings. And Wilde Law is no different from any other Wilde World enterprise. We serve the Houstonians that a lot of people have forgotten about. Not because we’re bleeding hearts, but because we’re them. The underdogs. My grandfather was the son of Irish immigrants, my mother the daughter of Jamaicans who sailed on the Windrush to the UK. They’ve had to

overcome more than you can imagine to get to where they are. And Houston made all of that possible. The people who shop in our stores, the people who eat at our restaurants and buy gas from our stations. So, I took the case because I want to do something good for my people.” His voice brims with passion and I know I made the right decision coming here today.

“Then hire Confidence. She’s the best. That gossip about her is bullshit. You don’t know me well, but if you think I’d let a woman who was less than fucking incredible near my family or me, you’re crazy,” I tell him.

He eyes me with an enigmatic expression and then says, “Where is she?”

“Arkansas. “

“Your girl is in Arkansas? Why?” he asks with an annoying chuckle.

“She lives there,” I say defensively. He raises an *I smell BS* eyebrow.

“And I fucked up when she was here and she’s not talking to me,” I say and take a big gulp of coffee.

His chuckle turns into a guffaw.

I glower at him.

“Sorry, man,” he says and doesn’t sound sorry at all.

“Interview her. With hurricane season in Houston being an annual event, you’ll never be short of work, and she’ll draw clients for you,” I say.

“And I could get her here for you, so you could try to win her back without going to Arkansas?”

“Yes. And I went to Arkansas. Two weeks ago. She pulled her shotgun out and trained it on me. I didn’t get close enough to talk to her.”

He bursts into raucous laughter and claps his hands together.

“Oh, *shit*. Does she have a sister?” he asks.

“No,” I say, unamused.

“So, do you want me to tell her you asked me to interview her?”

“No. She won’t take the job if you tell her that. And I don’t want you to hire her unless you think she’s the best person for the job.”

“I’m too addicted to winning to hire losers. If I hire her, it’s because I know she’s going to deliver the best thing possible for the clients. And Barry is a shit. It would be nice to have someone more invested leading the case. So, yeah. I’ll call her. Get her down here. But we’ll have to disclose your relationship to the clients because they should know. “

“She’s not talking to me. Nothing to disclose,” I say.

“If she wants this job, she’ll have to get over that and also talk to and about you in a professional manner. No domestic drama at the office,” he says.

“Let me just tell you. When you meet her, you’ll think she’s the prettiest thing you’ve ever seen. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg.” I say.

He scoffs.

“You’ll see when you meet her. Just remember that you will have to end my life to get anywhere near her.”

He does that annoying whistle of his. “Damn. It’s like *that?*” he grimaces in sympathy. “Look, if that’s your girl ... you better get in there quick. Nothing more dangerous than a good woman experiencing the world without the aftertaste of whatever bullshit you made her put up with ... if she gets too much of that ... she’ll never take you back,” he taunts, but I detect the whiff of experience in his advice.

The idea of her getting over me makes me feel like I’m having an out-of-body experience. I can’t let that happen. And yet, what does it say about how I’ve treated her if she prefers her world without me in it? I mean, she’s not exactly a constant bundle of fun, but I can’t imagine life without her. The thought of it makes me howl crazy at the moon.

“If she takes the interview, I’ll let you know. But if you asked me not to say anything, then don’t go telling her yourself. I’m

not trying to have her hating me because she thinks I was trying to pull your chain and used her to do it.”

“She’s too smart for that. She knows I would never do anything like that.”

“If you say so, but if that shit hits the fan ...”

“It won’t. I won’t let it. I promise.”

He eyes me.

“So, since I have no clue what the feud is about—and my grandfather’s health has failed so badly that he can’t even tell me—I think it’s time we ended it,” he says.

“Just like that?” I ask, but my respect for him doubles. I like how direct he is. And I like that he’s not interested in a grudge for the sake of it.

“Agreed,” I say.

“I’m glad you’re back. That family of yours needs new blood. Your uncle’s a cold motherfucker. I was a kid when you were, so I don’t remember much about your dad’s time, but from what I understand, it was nothing like this.” He shakes his head, and I’m embarrassed that I can’t say more than a noncommittal, “I know. I’ve got a lot to dig out of and no power; at least, not from the company. I’m just a figurehead. But I have money and discretion on how it’s spent,” I say.

“That’s all the power you need. Where are your brothers?” His pivot is unexpected, but I don’t mind. I’ve said everything I came to. Accomplished everything I needed to. So, I give him the rundown.

“Dare is raising hell in LA. Stone is saving lives in Medellin and Beau is probably high, sitting naked in a Mexican desert playing his guitar to the moon,” I say.

He laughs.

“What about your siblings?” I ask.

“They’re in Houston. Working for Wilde World. Except for Regan. Tyson manages operations for the grocery stores. We’re all grinding. My mother is between here and her place

in Montego Bay. We're good. My grandfather's still holding on," he replies. "So, Italy? With your aunt? How was that?"

"It was good. I learned Italian. No pasta eating on a beach, but Positano is beautiful and she was devoted to me and making sure I would be ready to come back. Even though, it turns out, there wasn't much to come back to.

"Well, make it count, kid. And I'll call your girl."

Chapter Seventeen

Twist

Confidence

“This is incredible,” I say giddily to the very handsome, very charming man walking beside me. “What you described has me salivating. It’s the case of a lifetime. There are so many questions with conflicting federal rulings. This could go to the Supreme Court,” I say and then bite my tongue.

“Yeah, if it doesn’t settle, it has that potential,” Remington agrees.

“I shouldn’t sound so happy at the sound of prolonged litigation, should I?” I ask him sheepishly.

“You wouldn’t be worth the paper that Doctor of Jurisprudence is scrawled on if you weren’t, counselor.” He winks one of his twinkly, wide, lushly-lashed, Milky Way dark eyes at me and I nearly trip over my feet. He smiles as if to say, *yeah, I get that all the time*. I bet he does. He told me his mother is Jamaican and his father is a second-generation Irish American. Well, Jamaica and Ireland should find a way to merge because their citizens clearly were born to procreate with each other. He is the definition of a heartthrob. He even smells good.

We step out onto the main street of Rivers Wilde, and I can’t believe all of this is happening. “I didn’t expect to be leaving here with a signed contract. I thought we’d have several interviews,” I say.

“Well, *I* didn’t want to let you leave here without a guarantee that you’d come back. You’re everything these plaintiffs need, and I’m just glad you’re in a position to start so quickly,” he says, like I’m doing him a favor.

“Being unemployed for nine months finally pays off,” I joke but make sure he hears the genuine gratitude in my voice.

The day he called had been a bad day. I'd gotten another letter of rejection from a firm in Nashville, and I was down to no more than a couple of months' living expenses. I needed a shoulder to cry on, and the only one I wanted was attached to the biggest asshole in the world.

I was on the verge of calling him to yell at him—again—when I got Remington's email. It was my first interview in months. The first application that had even garnered an email exchange. When they asked me to come to Houston for an in-face interview, I had fallen on my knees in my room and cried grateful tears.

And as mad as I was at Hayes, I couldn't pretend that all of my relief was due to the chance at this amazing great job. Some of it was that fate intervened to save me from my stubborn pride.

My heart had been blown to smithereens since I left his house that night.

I grieved in silence. I pretended I was okay. I hadn't been able to tell my mother what happened because I knew that she'd never forgive Hayes.

The thought of that knotted my stomach almost as much as what he did.

I want to forgive him. So badly.

I end every night with a prayer for the grace to let go of my anger. But it eludes me. And as much as I miss him, I can't forget what he'd said about me.

I've spent the last month licking my wounds and clutching my pillow.

Every night it smelled less and less like Hayes.

And the chasm between us grew wider and wider.

Except for in one way, the way we always manage to find each other. And some nights, sleep has come only after I've called him, used his voice and my hands to make myself come and told him to fuck off before I hang up in his face. I'm still so hurt by him. Still so angry.

But, I do miss him.

Fiercely.

I just don't know how to get over "fine to fuck, not enough breeding to bring home." Every time I think about it, it burns.

"So, what do you think of our cosmopolitan suburban version of small-town America?" Remington asks. I stare back at him and smile, grateful my staring off into the distance looked like me admiring the scene instead of me daydreaming about my boyfriend.

I let my eyes sweep the street and smile.

"It's incredible," I say simply and honestly. The enclave of Rivers Wilde, carved out of three square miles in southwest Houston is the kind of place I used to dream about living when I was a kid.

We're walking across one of a dozen foot bridges that straddle the man-made shallow fountain that cuts a straight line through the community. The left northwest corner is a commercial district. It's a miniature of downtown Houston. Skyscrapers and shorter commercial buildings make up the ten blocks dedicated to the Wilde World Office Park.

On the other side of the bridge from where we are now, is the town square. It is the very center of the enclave. It's flanked by two residential communities. On the left is The Ivy. It's a golf course, country club, and a cluster of luxury condominiums in a cluster of sky-scraping high rises.

On the left, The Oaks is a suburban prototype of single-family homes that range from starter homes to million-dollar mansions.

The Market runs along the southern border of the enclave, parallel from the Wilde office park. It's one huge indoor food market. There is a greengrocers, spice markets, fishmongers, butchers, florist, cheese shops, the bakeries, everything has a kosher or halal options. The long lines that snake out of The Market's every day are due to the food counter. Over 700 feet of space dedicated to deliciousness highlights why Houston is one of the places where the phrase "melting pot" is not an exaggeration. From Afghanistan to South Africa and

everything in between, the world's best cooks show off their cultural delights. And people line up to devour it. I had tamales today and they might be the most perfect thing I've ever eaten. They're only open for lunch during the week, but all day on the weekends, and I can't wait to visit.

"Irma's been here since Rivers Wilde opened its gates. And now she's a landmark in her own right," Remington says when I tell him I want to go back. "This is the dream at work. It's a community that's designed to encourage interactions between people who might otherwise see each other as foreign or different."

"That sounds amazing," I say and wish I could find a more eloquent response to his words. But I've never seen a place like this.

"You're actually in for a treat. Don, our resident Cajun, and Tommy, who owns the Vietnamese restaurant in the market, come together for a crawfish boil that the entire community turns out for."

"Crawfish?" I grimace.

"You haven't lived until you have these. Lemongrass and garlic meet Old Bay and jalapeños for the most delicious crawfish you've ever tasted." He groans dramatically and pats his washboard flat stomach.

"Well, I certainly hope you have a gym here, because it sounds like unless I plan on buying a whole new wardrobe, I'm going to need it," I laugh.

"Got that, too. Tae Kwon Do school, Barre, a dance school with classes that use everything from the ballet rail to a stripper pole. And if you just want to work out, there's a regular old sweat-it-out-on-the-treadmill gym, too."

"So basically, if you live here, you never have to leave?" I ask.

"Not if you didn't want to. And that's the point. To make home feel like enough. To create a real sense of community. One that doesn't exclude anyone who really wants to live here. Our housing runs the gamut, so whether you're making forty grand

a year or 400 thousand, there's a place in your budget in Rivers Wilde," he says with the same voice as the guy on the *Price is Right*.

"I'm taking a tour of a unit tonight, and I'm totally excited. This sounds like my kind of place," I gush. I know I sound like a fangirl, but I can't help it. It's out of a dream.

We walk down the wide, clean-enough-to-eat-off sidewalk. Sapling trees are planted in clusters every thirty feet or so. Baskets of flowers hang from the hooks that are fixed to ten feet of brick wall in between the glass-fronted stores that line the street. There's a healthy crowd of people strolling. They stop and speak to each other. I watch as two men shake hands and then sit down on a bench outside of the coffee shop, Sweet and Lo's.

"I had the best lattes I've ever had in my life there," I point it out to Remington.

"Yeah, it's the best in town. Did you meet Sweet or Lo?"

"Yes. Lo is a hoot and Sweet wasn't sweet at all. But I love them," I recall happily.

"Here we are," he pulls open the door with the words "TWIST" scrawled in bright blue lettering on the glass door.

"So, we'll see you in the office tomorrow? We have a face to face with opposing counsel, clients will be present," he says and I find something unsettling in his voice and the way he's watching me.

"TB!" Cass shouts from behind me and Remi's eyes widen in confusion.

I say, "Don't worry. She's not crazy. That's what she calls me." I give him an apologetic smile.

He raises his eyebrows in surprise. "Nickname?" he asks.

"More like an inside joke." I give him a halfhearted smile. His is more of a grimace.

"Okay," he says, and starts to back down the street "See you bright and early tomorrow. We're really glad to have you on board," he says before he turns and dashes back up the street.

“Was that Remi Wilde? Oh my GOD. Do you know what his nickname is?” Cass asks just as I turn to face her. Her face is flushed and her hair is sticking to her face is sweaty strands.

“Yeah, that was Remi. And what was his nickname?” I ask when she doesn’t offer it up.

“The Legend. His mind, his prowess on the basketball court, *between the sheets*,” she chortles and waggles her eyebrows and then moves in for a hug.

I pull back. “I don’t really want those visuals of my new boss, thanks. And let’s just imagine that, hug, okay?” I eye her sweaty shirt. “Did you run from your office?” I ask her and give her a quick up and down.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she retorts, but desists in her attempt to hug me. “It’s hot as fuck and I had to walk for ten minutes to get here,” she says.

“You look like you’ve been walking for an hour,” I quip and grin at her.

“You just wait until you’ve been standing without shade in the middle of the afternoon in Houston, TX for more than three minutes,” she snaps and pulls at her shirt.

“I’ll make sure to avoid that particular situation. Can’t walk around looking like I work in a sauna,” I tease her one more time and am rewarded with a scowl.

“I’m hungry, let’s get a table.” I pull the brass handle of Twist’s glass-paned double doors open.

“Its like a fancy saloon,” she says as we step inside the restaurant. The cool air-conditioned, dark paneled room does look like something out of a western movie. But instead of sawdust littering the ground, there’s a gleaming mahogany brand with the crowned horse logo of Rivers Wilde on the floor right under the wagon wheel chandelier in the center of the restaurant.

Instead of a bar that runs the length of the wall, there’s a stage in the front of the room, complete with a red velvet curtain behind the wall of bottles. There are no seats in front of the gleaming countertop. It’s just two bartenders, one man and one

woman, making drinks and setting them on the bar where waitstaff picks them up. “Shut Up and Drink” is burned into the wood of the bar.

“Wow, I’ve never seen anything like this,” I marvel.

“Hey ladies, welcome to Twist,” a small, dark-haired woman with a hugely pregnant belly approaches us when we step into the main dining room. “Your first time here?” she asks knowingly.

“Yes.” I smile back.

“Yeah, your openmouthed, wide-eyed stare kinda gave it away.” She laughs good-naturedly and then reaches for two menus that sit under a green chalkboard—“open secret” scrawled on it.

“That’s our oxymoron of the day. Well, of the week or whenever someone thinks of one and changes it. Feel free to contribute. Every week, I pick my favorite and the author gets a free entrée,” she says excitedly.

I pick up the chalk and scrawl “bittersweet” while she marks something down on her hostess stand.

“You want a booth or table?” she asks.

“Booth,” we say at the same time.

“Awesome, come this way. And I’m Angie. My husband, Jackson, and I are the managers.” Her soft brown eyes twinkle with pride. I can see why. It’s a wonderfully unique place. Nearly everyone we pass looks up to greet her and tips their heads at us as we make our way through the wide aisle between the tables in the front of the huge space.

“If you need anything, just shout. But your server will take real good care of you,” she says happily and puts the menus down on the stone tabletop of the booth she stops at.

“Actually, I need the ladies’,” Cass says.

“Just walk past the bar and down the corridor. You’ll see it on the left,” Angie says.

“Be right back. Will you get me some water, please?” Cass says and drops her bag on the floor.

“Thank you,” I say as I slide into the curved, butter yellow leather covered seats of the booth and smile up at her. The high-backed seats wrap around the table and we can’t see our neighbors on either side.

It gives us a view of the entire room. I admire how brightly decorated it is. The white brick walls are full of abstract artwork and broken up by large windows that face the picturesque strip of stores that line the street.

The artwork is all whites, blues, and yellows with splashes of red and purple that manage to look coordinated but somehow eclectic at the same time.

“It’s so private,” I say. Angie nods knowingly.

“You make yourselves comfortable and I’ll get your waters and your basket of bread right out.” She puts a hand on her pregnant belly and rubs it.

“Are you okay?” I ask, pointing with concern at her baby bump.

“Yeah, I’m fine, why?” she asks sharply, peering at me with intense anticipation on her face.

“Uh—” I eyeball and wonder why she’s acting like my answer is important. “Well, nothing ... you keep rubbing you’re belly. I was just thinking maybe you were having some pregnancy-related difficulty,” I explain cautiously.

She laughs at the joke she still hasn’t bothered to explain to me.

“Oh. Thank goodness. I was only rubbing it ‘cause I wanted to make sure you knew I was pregnant and didn’t think this was a beer gut or something,” she says and then gasps with embarrassment.

“I can’t believe I said that out loud,” she says apologetically. “Pregnancy has completely removed my already very porous filter. It’s my fourth time; you’d think I’d be over this part. But I hate that I can’t see my feet and this ass is as wide as the

Houston Ship Channel,” she blurts, a pained expression on her pretty face.

I want to laugh but I don’t think she’s trying to be funny. I try to think of some sort of consolation to offer, but I have a feeling nothing I say would actually make her feel better.

“I’m sorry, you probably think I’m so vain,” she says and shakes her head deprecatingly.

“You *are* vain. And nobody is thinking anything except how to get you to stop talking so they can get some food,” a gruff but twangy woman’s voice comes from the booth next to ours.

“Oh, Lord, I’m sorry,” Angie smiles apologetically. “For talking and for Henny’s *rudeness*. Thank you for being nice.” She rolls her eyes at the booth. “Your server will be right over. Glad to have you. Hope you’ll come back.” She makes an exaggerated scowling face at the hidden booth occupant and waddles off toward the front of the restaurant.

“As if anyone could mistake that belly for anything other than another one of your giant babies,” the voice calls after Angie.

“Oh, Henny, be nice and introduce yourself,” Angie calls back without looking over her shoulder.

A gnarled, arthritic hand with perfectly, French-manicured nails comes to rest on the shared top of our booths. Right over the side where Cass would have been sitting.

“You should be thanking me,” the voice comes. I grin when a hand taps the top of our booth.

“Well, are you going to make me shift my ninety-year-old bones out of the chair, or are you going to get up and say hello?” she asks impatiently.

I giggle and slide out of the seat and step to her booth. The woman sitting there looks like she could be a fill-in for Sophia Petrillo on *Golden Girls*.

“Thank you,” I say cheerily.

“You’re welcome,” she says tersely and then looks up at me with a pair of dark brown eyes that are set deep in a face that’s

got so many wrinkles, it's impossible to tell what she really looks like.

"Yes, I know," she says like she's bored. "I look like a bleached prune. You don't need to stare at me like you've never seen an old person," she says.

"Oh, I'm not staring cause you're old, I'm just waiting for you to tell me why I should be thanking you," I say good-humoredly. I come from a town full of crotchety old people whose bark is all lie. And I've never lived anywhere else where your elders 'spank you' even if you're not theirs.

"That girl never stops talking," Henny says. "She runs a tight ship, though. Once *she* gets out of the way." She raises her eyebrows knowingly and draws out that last word. "You'll enjoy every single meal you have here."

"I'm Confidence," I say and extend my hand.

She frowns and eyes me. "You look too young to have hippies for parents," she muses.

"Yeah. My grandparents' generation, I think," I say.

"You *think*?" She scoffs and gives me a disapproving frown. "You kids don't know your history. You should know what generation your elders belong to. Not just yours. I bet you're a millennial. You will be remembered for your selfishness," she chides. I throw my head back and laugh the first real laugh I've managed in a while. She's awesome.

"Glad you think it's funny," she says dryly. "I'm here every day, if you want more."

Cass walks up just then, looks between Henny and me and says, "Of course, you've already made a friend."

I elbow her and say, "This is Henny."

Henny shakes her head and says, "Sorry, I have a one-new-person-a-day rule. Come back tomorrow." Then she picks up her fork and knife and digs into a huge baked potato that's bursting with what looks like brisket, cheese, sour cream, chives, and butter.

I stand there and watch her for nearly a full minute before I realize she's serious and isn't going to respond. Cass doesn't wait that long before she slides into her seat.

She's gripping a menu when I sit down. "Oh, this place has the nicest public bathroom I've ever seen. It's cleaner than mine. I wish I'd known about this neighborhood when I was moving back. It's like living in the suburbs but in walking distance from all the action. I totally would have bought a unit here."

"Yeah, it's really convenient. And apparently my new boss's family owns all of it," I tell her. She squeals and clutches her menu to her chest excitedly.

"I'm the worst friend. I didn't even ask how it went. I was so excited to see you! Tell me!" she exclaims and stares at me with goopy eyes.

"Oh my God, it was amazing, Cass," I say dreamily.

"And you got the job!" she interjects excitedly.

I nod and let my grin have a moment of unfettered shine. "They want me to attend a meeting tomorrow before I leave for the case they're hiring me for. I've got some of the publicly available court records to review. So, I'm going to hole up in my hotel and study up so I can be ready. I want to make sure when I get on my flight tomorrow, he's not sorry he hired me," I tell her.

"So, you're going to leave here and not call Hayes?" she asks with surprise.

Hearing her say his name makes me flinch. Beneath the surface of my happiness for every amazing thing that has happened today has been the terrible sensation of how wrong it is that I'm here and not with him. How shallow my joy is without being able to celebrate it with him.

I forced myself to push him out of my thoughts whenever he entered them today.

"So, you're not here because you have a huge boner for Hayes Rivers?"

“Of course not,” I snap and look around the restaurant. There’s a loud din. People speaking like they’re in their living rooms instead of in a public place where anyone could overhear.

Just like home. God, I think I love this place.

“Hello? Are you listening?” Cass snaps her fingers in front of my eyes.

I turn startled eyes back to Cass. “Yes, I am. And that’s not why,” I lie.

“Yeah, right. He’s worn you down, and you got a lucky break with this offer. Two weeks ago, you would have never accepted it,” she pushes.

“Two weeks ago, I had enough money to live on for another month. Now, I don’t. It’s also right up my alley. This is a developing area of law that I kind of pioneered,” I tell her. “But, I would have taken this job anywhere in the world.”

“Aww, you should see your face. I don’t know how the hell you managed it with him, of all people, after somehow avoiding it for so long.” She shakes her head at me incredulously.

“Avoiding what?” I ask just as our server approaches with the water and bread baskets.

“Being completely head over heels in love. Wanting something more than your pride,” she says.

“Welcome to Twist,” our server interrupts as she bounces up to our table. Her wide mouth parts to reveal a perfectly straight smile that’s contagious. She’s slightly out of breath and leans on the table in mock exhaustion before she stands up again.

“I’m Kemi, I’ll be your server today,” she says and brushes a braid that’s falling over her eye out of the way before she pulls a small spiral notebook out of her apron pocket. “What are you ladies drinking?” she asks.

“I’m fine with water,” I tell her, wrinkling my nose at the menu. I hate having to decide what to eat.

“The hell she is. We’re having champagne with lunch,” Cass says, giving me a fierce scowl that dares me to argue. I don’t. I

want to be excited ... I wish I didn't feel so heartsick at the same time.

"Wonderful," Kemi chirps and scribbles on her notepad. "What are we celebrating?" she asks as she writes.

"She got a job! A great one, and she's moving to Houston," she tells her and slides her eyes over to me and smiles proudly.

"Well, then, this calls for our special. It's a grilled Tilapia on top of a bed of the most delicious rice you'll ever have," she says.

"That sounds a little heavy for lunch," I say. I ignore how my mouth waters at the description. I've been eating my feelings, and it was not my imagination that my breasts are fighting with buttons in a battle for liberation that I think one more donut will tip in their favor.

"You should eat your heaviest meal for lunch, actually. So it's perfect," Cassie says.

I smile at her helplessly. "Well, my breakfast was pretty good, too," I admit.

"We'll have it," Cassie says to Kemi.

"You're in for such a treat. It's so good. The owners pick the week's special and announce it on Sunday night. It's always an amazing fusion of cuisines. I can't wait to hear what you think," she says.

Her enthusiasm is catching, and I wiggle my shoulders in excitement. "Can't wait, thanks." I smile at her.

"Awesome! Shout or wave if you need anything. Your food will be out in about fifteen minutes," she says and saunters off.

"You need to talk to Hayes," she says, and my heart thumps in my chest. I shake my head and look down at my hands.

The sounds of the restaurant clang around us, scrapes of forks on cutlery, bursts of laughter from the tables, the scrape of chairs being pushed away from tables. The dining room is devoid of any food smells. It smells nice, almost like a spa, but

subtler. I'm sure if my stomach wasn't caught in my internal conflict, twisted by pangs of longing, churning from the fear that's become my constant companion, the atmosphere would be soothing.

"You okay, TB?" she asks when I don't respond and don't look up.

"No," I admit, annoyed at myself. "I miss him. I hate him. I love him so much, I don't know what to do," I confess, still looking at my hands.

"I have a feeling he feels the same way," she says kindly.

"I know—" I whisper.

"Talk to him. Don't leave town without seeing him," she says.

"You don't understand. I don't *want* to forgive him because I miss him. I want to forgive him because I believe he sees my worth. And not just because we have great sex or he likes the way I look on his arm. I won't be another man's project or trophy. Or whatever I am to him," I tell her.

She quirks her lips in sympathy. "Oh, honey. You're the only one who doesn't see your worth ..." she says and I rear back in surprise and hurt.

"What does that mean?" I eye her.

Her eyes soften, and her smile turns a little sad.

"It means if you did, you'd know that the only way anyone would look at you and see anything less than the amazing woman you are is if they're an idiot. And Hayes Rivers *isn't* an idiot. Yeah, he said something stupid to his brother. But he didn't know you from Sam when he said it," she reminds me, again.

I chafe at her defense of Hayes, of how right she is and how wrong she is. I rub a finger over the spot on my temple where a small headache is suddenly blooming.

"I would *never* ever insult him like that. I wouldn't look at him and see anything less than the human being he is. Yes, he's handsome. He's got a hot body. He's got pots of money and he's got power. I didn't look at him and wonder if he got rich

by ripping people off or assume that because he's a big guy those things about him and his ex were true. I wondered if he would be tender and caring, constant, proud, honorable, determined, and convicted and smart. Those things have nothing to do with his money."

"You're deluding yourself," she says dismissively.

"How?" I chafe at the words.

"The wealth he was born into has shaped all of those things. Just like the poverty you were born into has shaped yours." She puts her hands up, palms facing me when I start to speak. "Hear me out, please."

"As if I could stop you," I grumble.

"I get it. You were raised to be proud of who you are. Not what you have. He was raised to believe the exact opposite. All of that honor, pride, conviction? They all fuel the need to protect the *things*—his name, his money, his position," she says.

"Yeah, but at what cost?"

"Whatever it takes, is what I'm sure he'd say," she shrugs. "You're such a hypocrite," she says.

"Excuse *me*? Is it Thursday or is it *Shit on Confidence Day*?" I ask.

"Isn't your whole career based on you wanting to preserve a way of life? What have you done to protect it? What wouldn't you do?" she asks.

I cradle my forehead in my hands and try to process what she's saying through a different filter.

"It's amazing that *he's* who you've fallen like this for. I always thought you'd need a man who would let you have your way. You're so stubborn. But you've met your match in him. I'm glad he's making you think. And I'm glad he's strong. I think it'll be good for you to not have to carry the whole world on your shoulders, TB," she says.

She covers my hand with hers to silence me.

“It’s okay to be vulnerable,” she says quietly. “It’s okay to let him close enough to hurt you again. But you have to want him more than you want your pride, TB,” she says.

“My *pride*?” I bristle at her characterization. “It’s not pride. It’s self-preservation. I didn’t have anyone to stand between me and the bad guy. I have always stood in the breach myself. And I love him *so* much that if I let him, he could really ruin me.” My confession pours out of me and I feel breathless having said it.

“I know ... And I didn’t mean to dismiss that. You just can’t let fear lead you.”

“What if he doesn’t want me the same way? What if when he gets to see all of me, he finds me lacking?” I ask and reveal the real source of my anxiety.

“Ask him. Call him before you go.”

“And say what? Can you help understand how I keep ending up with men who want me in bed, but don’t think I’m fit to be on their arm in public?” I ask quietly. Tears of shame burn my eyes.

“First of all, he’s *nothing* like Nigel. He respects you and he’s crazy about you. It was so obvious when you were here even with all the madness that happened. And you should have seen him driving that *truck*, through all that water. He did that for *you*.” She fans herself. “It was so ... If you weren’t my friend ...” I give her a warning look and she winks.

“*Shiit*. You need to spend some time in those Tinder streets and you’ll know how lucky you are,” she says.

“How’s Tinder?” I ask. “I’m sorry I’m talking about myself non-stop,” I apologize.

“You don’t need to apologize, there’s nothing to tell. I thought I met my soulmate, again. He showed up to our date in scrubs, told me he was a doctor and hadn’t had time to get home before our date.” She takes a long sip of her water.

“What kind of doctor?” I ask.

“The kind that also works the popcorn machine behind concession stand at Edwards Theatre in Greenway Plaza,” she deadpans. I choke on the water in my throat. I cough and blow my nose and she just shrugs.

“It’s a jungle out there and you’re over here hanging out with Remington Wilde, Hayes Rivers, and complaining.”

“I’m not *complaining*,” I croak out when I’ve recovered from my fit of laughter.

“I just hope you won’t lump them together. Nigel and Hayes. They’re not the same,” she reiterates. Her expression is serious again.

“They’re not,” I admit. “I didn’t love Nigel. Without Hayes ... I’m just going through my daily motions. But inside, I feel like I’m falling to pieces,” I confess.

“Oh, Confidence,” Cass sighs, her voice soft and sympathetic now.

“I don’t even know how it’s possible to feel like this after three months.” I put my face in my hands and groan. “And my family...”

“And I’m glad you’ve met someone who can help you so it doesn’t swallow you whole. You have so much on your plate. You do a lot for your mother,” she says. I frown at her.

“Of course I do. And I always will. It’s just me and her. She’s done so much for me. I owe her,” I remind her.

“But you also owe yourself,” she insists.

The waitress sails over, a huge tray on her shoulder and saves me from having to answer.

Chapter Eighteen

Naked

Confidence

“Can I come in?” I force myself to ask Confidence when what I really want is to shove past her and ask her what the fuck she thinks she’s doing.

She stares at me, her hair hidden in the towel she’s fashioned into a turban on her head. The rest of her isn’t hidden at all. She’s got on a light pink bathrobe that clings to her in all the right places and rubs me in all the wrong ones.

“Why the hell are you answering the door half naked?” I demand.

She crosses her arms over her chest defensively and glares up at me. “Why are you banging on my door at ten o’clock at night?” she whispers furiously and glances down the empty hallways before she grabs my arm and tugs me forward. “Come inside. The last thing I need is a complaint for disturbing the peace.”

I step into her hotel room and turn to face her.

“Why are you answering the door wet and nearly naked, *Tesoro*?” I ask again, my anger at the sight of her surpassing the initial insult that brought me here.

“I am not naked. I was getting out of the shower when you started pounding on the door. I wanted to stop you before you woke up my neighbors.”

“You’re very concerned about your neighbors,” I look around the spare room of the extended stay hotel. “Why are you staying here anyway? Remi couldn’t have put you up here. He has a block of suites at the Ivy’s executive suites his firm uses for interviews.”

“First of all, how do I know I’m here, and that I’m here for Remi? Secondly—not that it is *any* of your business—he let me choose my hotel and they’re reimbursing me. This one is fine. And third, I’m concerned about my neighbors because I think the people right next door are a family who live here. I’ve seen them taking the kids to school every morning this week. They’re asleep. So, keep it down,” she scolds.

Of course, that’s why. She’s a fucking bleeding heart. It’s why I love her.

“I’ll keep my voice down,” I concede right away. “And *everything* you do is my business. Because *you* are my business.”

She rolls her eyes but doesn’t say anything.

“Secondly, Remi’s a friend. But he didn’t tell me you were here. I ran into Gigi’s friend, Henny. Apparently, you’ve been pining over me in public,” I drawl and have to bite my lip to stop my smile when her nostrils flair.

“That old lady was eavesdropping?” she sputters.

“Don’t let her hear you call her that, not if you want to live ... and she did overhear and thought it would be such shame if you left town without even telling me you were here,” I say.

“How in the world did you know where I was staying?” she asks and tightens her belt.

“My assistant spent all day calling hotels near Rivers Wilde until she found you. And enough with the twenty questions,” I snap.

“Fine, then you can leave.” She pulls the lapels of her robe closed when my eyes drift to her throat.

“I’m not. And it’s too bad about your G-rated neighbors. They put a dent in my plans,” I tell her.

“What plans?” she snaps.

“The ones I had to fuck you so hard you’d see stars and scream my name loud enough that they’d hear you across the street,” I say.

Her entire body flushes, and her hands drop from her neckline and rest on her hips. She leans forward and gives me her most disapproving glare.

“*Their* presence has nothing on the fact that my body is closed to you right now. There will be no fucking tonight. And don’t call me *Tesoro*. We’re not that anymore,” she says angrily.

My anger spikes, too, but it’s accompanied by a sting of pain at the way the words flow off her tongue. I know she’s pissed, but it makes me feel like I’ve got a thorn stuck in my side when I hear her say we’re not *that* anymore. I stalk toward her.

“Then what are we?” I ask and rake my eyes over her body. Her robe is damp and I can see the shadow of her nipples.

“I don’t know, Hayes,” she lies.

“Let me fuck you. You’ll know, then,” I whisper and her eyes widen and she tenses up again.

“That’s not the answer to everything,” she says.

“Take that off.” I nod at her robe.

“No,” she says and tosses her head in defiance. Her towel unravels and falls half off her head, exposing some of her hair. She reaches up to stop its slide and I take a step toward her.

“Don’t, Hayes,” she says, her voice low with warning, but her lips remain parted and her eyelids flutter.

My dick gets hard because I know what that look means. Her gown may be drying off, but her pussy is wetter than it was when she got out of the shower.

“Take it off, *Tesoro*,” I say softly now, and take another step toward her. I’m close enough to grab the belt of her robe.

“I want to. But, I *can’t*,” she says, like the words ache when her tongue forms them. She gazes at me, her eyes limpid with need. Understanding dawns.

“You want *me* to take it off?” I ask.

She nods, two sharp ticks of her head and I do an internal fist bump even though I keep my expression neutral. I see the need

in her eyes. Want is coming off her in waves. It's slamming into mine and envelopes us in a haze of longing.

I smile at her, a wolfish grin that says I know I'm going to have what I want. The flat of my hand cups the space right below her belly button and her shoulders lose the tension they've been holding.

I watch her face.

She watches my hand.

Her rapid breaths send my hand on a rollercoaster of swells and dips as it glides up the center of her abdomen. Her muscles flex and ripple under my touch.

"Does that feel good, my little treasure?" I ask her quietly

She closes her eyes and nods. "Better than anything has ever felt in my life," she confesses.

I splay my fingers as they pass between her breasts and wrap them gently around her throat. Her pulse races under my fingers.

"*What* aren't we?" I ask again.

She opens her eyes and gazes at me. My tigress—her eyes are ablaze with intensity—and yet, I feel how vulnerable she is right now.

"We're not ..." She licks her lips and her throat convulses against my hand.

I lean and press my lips to hers. Our eyes stay open and hers start to melt.

I taste everything I've been deprived of for the last month and groan.

"What aren't we?" I ask her again and tug the belt of her robe. The silk ribbon gives easily and her robe falls open. She gasps—a harsh, uneven breath—and sways forward. She still hasn't completed her sentence, but the look in her eyes tells me everything I need to know.

"We're everything, Confidence." I kiss her again; her lips cling to mine when I pull back.

Fuck yeah ...

“Tell me what we are,” I command her before I swoop down to place an openmouthed kiss on the hot, fresh, soap-scented skin of her neck.

“We’re lovers,” she whispers and lifts her arms to twine around my neck.

“We’re fighters,” she says and puts her hands on my belt buckle and unfastens it.

“We’re hunters,” she breathes into my mouth as she unzips my fly and my pants fall.

I grab the full, lush cheeks of her ass and hoist her. Her legs wrap around my waist and I lower her down onto my cock.

“We are each other’s,” I say and lift her off and lower her again.

“Oh my God,” she gasps.

I walk us back to the huge window and press her back against it.

“Yes. Your god. Your king. Your man. Yours,” I say, driving each point home with an upward thrust into her delicious pussy. “Say it.”

She shakes her head. “You haven’t earned it,” she pants. I grin into the hollow at the base of her neck and fuck her harder.

“You feel that?” I ask and press as deep as I can.

“Yessssssss,” she cries and her fingers cling into my back, seeking purchase as she starts to come unglued.

I nod. “That’s how deep I’ve buried myself in your heart. You love me. You can’t turn that off, and I won’t let you pretend you have.”

I spin her around and lay her down on the bed. I pull out and kneel next to her.

“Suck me,” I say and fist my hands in her hair. When she wraps a hand around the base of my cock, I hold her head in place and feed her slowly. She swirls her tongue around the tip

and hollows her cheeks and sucks me off. My fingers loosen their grip and sift into her hair.

“You give the best fucking head, Confidence.” I fuck her face and she takes it like it’s hers. She holds my gaze and starts to finger herself until her eyes flutter closed. I glance down her body and watch while her finger slips between the bare, fat lips of her pussy. She moans around my cock and the back of her throat vibrates against my head.

“I’m going to come,” I groan.

She sits up and grabs my ass, sucking harder. Her blonde hair brushes the front of my thighs. The sight of her holding on, determined to take what I’m about to give her, sends me over the edge. She takes everything I shoot out, swallows and sucks me until my knees buckle and it takes the concerted effort of every muscle in my body not to fall over.

“Fuck,” I groan when she finally lets me slip from her mouth. I reach for her, but she rolls out from under me and runs to the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

“Hey.” I sit up and walk over to the door. I turn the handle and it’s locked.

“No, please, don’t,” she says, her voice breaking.

I touch the door and shake the handle.

“My world feels like it’s crumbling without you, Hayes,” she sobs. “But I am so mad at you and I don’t trust you to take care of me the way I know I want to take care of you.”

I bang my head on the door lightly. Queens shouldn’t cry.

“Please, open the door, *Tesoro*.” I’m nearly begging.

“I’ve got to keep my head together for tomorrow. I *need* this job. I can’t afford to be focused on you. I need you to please keep your distance until you can show me you want more than just to fuck me until I feel better.”

“That’s not it—”

“Please. Tomorrow is a really important day,” she implores.

It feels wrong to walk away. But, I want to give her what she's asking me for. At least for now.

"I'm not giving up on us," I tell her. "I know I've got a lot to learn, but I love you. And we are fucking worth it, Confidence."

Her silence is my answer and I feel sick leaving her conflicted in the bathroom of a shitty hotel. But I also know she can take care of herself.

So, I get up.

"Call me tomorrow," I say. The door vibrates when, I assume, her head falls back or forward onto it.

"I will, please. I need tonight, Hayes. If I mess this up...I just can't do this now. Please." She sounds tired and so distressed.

My feet feel like they're weighed down with one hundred pounds of resignation as I walk to the door and leave.

Chapter Nineteen

Expert

Confidence

“What are you doing out here?” Remi’s amused voice startles me. I look up from the paper I’m reviewing and shake my head. He’s all the way at the end of the hall where the elevators are. I get up as he starts walking and try not to look like I’ve been pacing my bedroom all night and pulling my hair out the whole time.

After Hayes left, I calmed myself down, got dressed, and crawled into bed with my work. I’ve never been more grateful for a job in my life. But when I opened the case file and started to review it, my stomach had fallen to my toes. Hayes’ company is the respondent. After my experience at Lancaster, I can’t afford another bombshell about my love life. I know it’ll mean I can’t work on this case and that it might even cost me this job, but I knew I had to tell him. I’m so mad at myself for letting a man fuck up my career, yet again.

“Is the room locked?” Remi comes to stand in front of me. He looks like a taller, darker, more handsome Harvey Specter. Every single woman in this office looks at him like they all wished their name was Donna. Except for me. And not just because my heart, body, soul, and mind belonged to another, but because I would never even entertain the thought of being with a man who was in a position of authority over me. Not again.

“No. They’re all in there. Ms. Swanson and Ms. Gauthier are in the room next door. I asked them to wait there for you, because I wanted to talk to you before we go in,” I say.

Remi cocks an eyebrow at me and says, “You’re talking really fast. And can your talk wait until after the meeting? “

“No. It can’t,” I say and then take a deep, calming breath.

“You okay?” Remi’s hand rests on my shoulder and frowns down at me.

“I wanted to tell you ... I don’t know how to ...” I say and cover my mouth when I realize my tongue is tied. I’ve been practicing what I’d say since the minute my alarm went off last night, but now the words are trapped by fatigue, humiliation, and anger.

“This case. I can’t be part of it. The defendant, Kingdom. My boyfriend—” I shake my head in annoyance at myself. “It’s ... my ex-boyfriend,” I force myself to say.

“*What* is your ex-boyfriend?” Remi asks and looks down at me, his expression mildly baffled and I force the words out.

“Not what, who. It’s Hayes Rivers. I see he’s going to be here today. Your client won’t want that kind of conflict in their attorney. I can’t ... and I understand if that means there’s no position here for me. But I just—”

“I know about you and Hayes.”

My jaw drops and he chuckles. “I’m not running an amateur shop here, counselor. It was one of the first things personnel told me when we started checking your conflicts,” he says.

I gawk. I’ve been bracing for him to rescind his offer. I spent the evening practicing my reaction and crying so that I would be all cried out when it actually happened.

“If you don’t say something, I’m going to send you home. A tongue tied litigator is worse than not having a lawyer at all.”

My heart leaps in hope, but like I do with everything that feels too good to be true, I squash that feeling and pressure test it..

“Hayes and I are...unresolved. He’s...determined.”

Remi laughs. “That’s his middle name.”

Some of my skepticism wanes. “You *really* don’t care about Hayes and —”

“I don’t.” His tone is uncharacteristically clipped. “Normally, I might. I avoid romantic drama in my own life, I certainly don’t want to be a party to anyone else’s. But this is an

extraordinary case. Our clients deserve the benefit of your expertise and your very intimate knowledge of their circumstances. You're the best. And that's all I care about."

Relief floods me and I expel a shaky breath. "Thank you for your faith in me," I say sincerely. He's a legend. A known taskmaster who doesn't accept anything but the very best from his associates, and exactly the kind of attorney I want to learn from. "I won't let you down."

He smiles and pats me on the shoulder. "I know. I've followed your career. I know you had a missteps, but you being so upfront about this just confirms what I saw when I looked past that stuff."

I return his smile despite the flare of pure, white-hot fucking hate in my chest when I think about how Nigel's cowardly, selfish actions will follow me for the rest of my career. But I guess it's best to go ahead and get this conversation out of the way, too. I steel myself and just say it."

"I know you've read a lot of things, but the way it was reported isn't even close to the truth." I hold his eyes even though I wish the floor would open and swallow me whole.

He shakes his head. "You don't need to explain anything. I know Lancaster, and now that I've met you, I know you wouldn't throw your career away over some bullshit like that. And I can promise you that this firm doesn't punish people for speaking the truth and doesn't harbor predators, no matter who they are."

I don't trust myself not to sob, so I just nod my head.

He glances at his watch and down the hall toward the elevator and frowns. "I don't know where Barry is, I hoped we could put our heads together before the meeting, but he's late and we need to get started. I'll be honest and tell you he wasn't thrilled I hired you."

I grimace. "Yeah, honestly, after my round with him, I surprised you did."

"He's this office's hiring partner. But this is my firm. Today, he's going to try to show me *and* you that you're in over your

head. So it might be best if you just observe today. Because I won't step in to rescue you if you stumble."

I straighten my posture and smile with appreciation. But my spine is tingling. I love being the underdog. It makes victory so much sweeter. "Thanks, Remi. I'll watch my step."

He reaches around me, unlocks the door and pushes it open. "After you, Counselor."

* * *

A woman, with the most luscious head of thick white hair I've ever seen in my life and is seated at the table with her laptop and finishes typing something before she looks up. Her face is breathtaking. High forehead, high cheekbones, almond-shaped, dark brown eyes framed by dark, swooping brows that are keen and intense. And her skin, the color of cinnamon, is completely unlined and belies the age her hair and expression attributes.

"Amelia Patel," she says in a light, pretty voice that makes me think she must have a beautiful singing voice. "Counsel for the defendant, partner at Harvey Brooks," she adds. I know who she is. She's the preeminent authority of mass torts, and I was less than generous when I wrote about her a few years ago. She smiles expectantly when I don't respond right away.

She has no idea who I am, but the minute I say my name, she will.

"I'm Confidence Ryan," I say. Her smile disappears and she drops my hand as if she's realized she's petting a snake and turns to face Remi without saying another word.

I glance at him, and he gives me a wide-eyed *what was that about?* before he turns to address her.

"Confidence is our new Of Counsel. Ms. Ryan is just observing today. We just hired her yesterday and we're still in

the on-boarding process, but all her conflicts cleared yesterday, so I wanted to bring her in on this conversation, since she wrote the jurisprudence on it,” he says. I swell with pride.

I smile awkwardly because after his introduction, there’s really not much for me to say.

“That’s very impressive,” Hayes says and swivels around in the chair with the abnormally high back that’s been turned to face the window.

A rush of gooseflesh runs over my body and a cold dread blooms in my stomach. I bite back my gasp and smile, even though the effort makes my face ache. I knew he was going to be here, but it’s still hard to feel comfortable given everything that’s going on between us.

“Ah, I didn’t see you, kid,” Remi says good-naturedly and walks over to Hayes, who stands up. His eyes cut to mine and his expression is completely unreadable.

“Nice view, Wilde.” He nods out the window. It overlooks the green of Rivers Wilde, and from here, with red and white awning and sparkling clean streets, it looks like something out of a postcard.

“It is.” Remi smiles, and I want to knock their heads together. “Glad you’re here, actually. We have our new lawyer here today, it’ll be good—” The door behind us opens and Barry, the Partner who is acting as lead lawyer for the case, hurries into the room.

“I’m sorry I’m late, Remington,” he says without addressing anyone else—not even the clients. They both stood up when he entered the room, and he dumps his briefcase, a box of files, and his coffee onto the table and mutters to no one in particular, “This fucking traffic is a killer,” and they sit down. His toothy grin turns into a thin and insincere smile when he looks at me.

“Oh, I didn’t realize *she* was joining us,” he says to Remington without addressing me.

“Her conflicts cleared, and I figured this would be a great place to get her feet wet and maybe give her a chance to give input when she gets back,” he says without any sign of irritation at Barry’s barbed words.

“We don’t need her input,” Barry says dismissively.

“Why don’t you need her input?” Hayes asks, and I stifle a groan at the tone in his voice. I wish he would look at me so I can give him a warning look. I don’t want or need him fighting my battles for me.

“Because I think we should settle,” Barry says easily, missing the thread of warning in Hayes’s voice. The clients both gasp, “What?”

“Trust me,” he says in a patronizing voice before he turns his wannabe megawatt smile on Hayes. “Mr. Rivers, I’m Barry Jimenez, the lead attorney for the class,” he says and walks over, his beefy hand extended and his chest is puffed out like he’s walking into a boxing ring.

Hayes eyes him and then his hand for a moment just long enough to be awkward before he shakes it. “We’re glad you made the time to come today and we’re fully prepared to discuss settlement. I know that’s what you want and I think it’s in everyone’s best interest.”

“We haven’t discussed this,” Remi says.

“That’s not unusual. I don’t discuss case strategy on every case with you.” He pushes a lock of his messy brown hair off his forehead, and I think he might be attractive if he wasn’t such a jerk.

“I think we should go ahead and settle.” He finally addresses his clients and reiterates with a little more deference in his voice.

“I know she’s an ‘*expert*.’” He makes air quotes around the word, and I dislike him even more than I did yesterday. His dismissal of me sets my teeth on edge. “But like I’ve been saying since her interview, I’m sure she wrote a great paper in law school, but in actual practice, I just don’t see how her contribution will be valuable.” He waves a hand in my

direction and Hayes's lips thin and curl upward in a menacing scowl.

Barry continues to jump on the thin ice he's standing on, oblivious that he's courting danger. Watching Hayes get offended on my behalf pisses me off, because no one has offended me more than he has. And unlike loving him, the world of big law is a jungle I feel perfectly capable of navigating and defending myself.

Remi looks down at the two clients and says, "Could you excuse us, please? I'd like the lawyers to have a chance to talk before we go on. I apologize, but if you two could just wait in the small room you were in before we came in, I'll come get you when we're ready."

One of the women crosses her arms over her chest and sets her chin. "Why doesn't *he* have to leave?" She points at Hayes. "Isn't he a client, too?" she asks. I like her. I'm glad she's not taking their shit.

"I'm leaving, too," Hayes responds. He walks over to the women and offers each of them an arm. His face is solemn, his smile sincere when he says, "Ladies, let me escort you out. Let's leave the dirty work to the lawyers." Ms. Gauthier, the older of the two smiles prettily, her cheeks flush as she stands up and takes the proffered arm.

"Jo, he's trying to sweeten us up so they can do us wrong," Ms. Swanson says and grabs her friend's elbow and tugs her free of Hayes.

"But I want him to sweeten me up," Jo says and pulls free of her friend. She smiles up at Hayes and takes his arm and bats her eyelashes up at him.

"Your wish is my command," he says smoothly. He holds his elbow out to Ms. Swanson again and says jokingly, "Come on, I don't bite." His smile is so charming that it makes my fool heart flutter.

They walk out of the room, and when Hayes walks past the head of the table where I'm standing, our eyes meet. The air rushes from my lungs. There's unmistakable, naked desire in

his eyes. It's territorial and so intense it feels like his hand is around my throat. I flush hot when I remember the way he had me last night.

He smiles and winks subtly before he continues walking.

When the door closes behind him, Barry pounces. "They're offering more money than most of these people will ever see in their lives. Litigation is going to be expensive, and this is a pro bono venture. There isn't much to discuss. I've got a trial coming up and I would like to focus. And maybe I could use Ms. Ryan for the document review there." He says this as if he's doing me a favor.

"Document review? You can't be serious," I gasp before I can stop myself.

Everyone's eyes fly to me, and I feel an immediate pang of regret and close my eyes briefly. But then, I open them and look him in his eyes. Because, truth be told, he's not wrong. I don't think I'm the smartest person in this room. About this topic, I know I am.

"I'm dead serious. I know Remi hired you. But, I made no secret of my opposition. You've got baggage, you think you're the smartest person in the room, and you clearly don't know how to be seen and not heard," he says in rapid fire succession like he's been holding it in.

I glance at Remi and he raises an eyebrow like he's asking *you gonna let him get away with that?*

I look around the room and wish I had a button to press pause. Inside, I'm fuming. But I won't let that show because this is how the best lawyers earn their stripes. Barry Jimenez is one of the best litigators in the country. He's won the Department of Justice's Silver Eagle Award twice. He's only one of a handful of people to ever do it. And he's doing to me what was done to him. I know if I back down, he'll lose any respect he has for me.

I remind myself that he's my boss. When I respond, I say, "I reviewed the settlement offer, and I disagree," I say simply.

“Thanks for your opinion,” he says. “Let’s get started,” he says and pulls open the file folder.

“Gentlemen,” he says to all of us and nods at the table. Lucky for me, I’ve never waited for an invitation to sit at any table and I won’t start today.

I sit down, open my file and start looking over the notes I made.

“So, we’re giving everyone six months and a five thousand-dollar voucher for furniture and clothes, right?” Barry ticks the broad terms off the list on his fingers.

“That’s right.” Amelia nods.

“I think that sounds very generous,” Remi says, and my eyes fly to him. He meets my gaze, and challenges, “Tell me why I’m wrong.”

“Yes, *Coincidence*, tell us why all of our years of experience should yield to your law review article,” Barry says snidely.

I eye him and let the scorn I’m feeling show.

He’s my boss, and I respect his career, and I don’t give a shit about him making fun of my name. If anything, it shows how unoriginal he is. But damn if I’m going to sit here and be quiet while he screws our clients.

“My experience may be ten percent of yours when it comes to sitting at tables like this one. But when it comes to the way the law treats uninsured, non-property-owning survivors of natural disasters, you’re not even a speck in my rearview mirror. I’m not going to sit here while you sell the people who entrusted their entire futures to you and this firm down the proverbial river,” I say. “Excuse the pun.”

“Tell us how giving them more money than they’ll ever see is selling them short? You think years of litigation while they sit in limbo is helping them?”

“I think giving them what they deserve, something that makes them whole instead of something that’s essentially a basket of fish with no way to catch more.”

“This flood will affect them for generations. Homes were lost. Valuable, irreplaceable things are gone. Their children are traumatized. They need some sort of therapy or something to help them work through some of the trauma we are supposed to be helping them.”

“Therapy? Give me a fucking break, Remi,” Barry says in exasperation.

“Remi, this feels like amateur hour,” Amelia says and I flush. “You’re putting a foal who doesn’t know how to walk into a pasture full of hungry wolves,” she says derisively.

“Amelia,” Remi says in a warning tone.

“My client and I are leaving. We will send a final settlement offer. You tell us what you think. We want to make people whole, but we’re not paying for more than that,” she says. She gathers her dark leather Gucci briefcase and strolls out.

“Conscience, we’re not talking about my children. Their children are conditioned in a way mine are not,” he says, and this time I decide his intentional flubbing of my name is actually a Freudian slip. I’ll happily be their conscience. And the champion of the people who aren’t here to make their voices heard.

“How, exactly?”

“They live in neighborhoods where crisis abounds,” he says.

“Have you been to their neighborhood?” I ask the question of everyone at the table.

Both of them—Remi included—shake their head no.

Disappointment settles heavily around my shoulders. “Why not?” I ask.

“We’ve seen pictures; that’s sufficient,” Barry says.

“That is *not* sufficient,” I snap. My voice is sharp, but I find it reprehensible that no one has even been there.

“Sorry, who the *fuck* are you, even? Why are you doing more than getting me coffee at this point?” Barry says suddenly. His temper has apparently broken free of whatever was caging it.

“Coffee? Who are you talking to?” I ask him—suddenly incensed. Propriety is forgotten.

“You,” he points at me, his teeth bared.

Remi stands up and comes between us.

“Listen, I’m not here to be a referee. Barry, this isn’t dictatorship. But, Confidence, I think we should at least entertain an offer. Let’s see what they come back with,” Remi says and the stony glare on his face doesn’t leave room for any push back.

The conference room doors open and hits the wall behind it so hard it bounces off.

“You’re fired,” Ms. Swanson says when she bursts into the room.

Barry glares daggers. “Look what she’s done,” he hisses and points at me accusingly.

“No, I’m talking to you,” Ms. Swanson says to Barry. “You are fired. We want her. You don’t care about us. We’ve been talking and we don’t want to settle. We want someone who will do what’s right and not what’s easy. And if we can’t get her, then we’ll go somewhere else, and try to convince them to hire her over there. But either way, you’re fired.” Then she turns and storms out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

“You know what? Good luck,” Barry snaps. “And Remi, just a heads-up since you’re clearly too blind to see it, but Hayes Rivers is fucking her. Or at least, he wants to.” His eyes rake over me with a lascivious, angry light in his dark eyes. “And maybe you do, too, because I don’t know why the fuck you hired her.” He gathers up his files and briefcase and storms out of the conference room.

Remi shakes his head and looks at me as he starts toward the door.

“I’ve got to leave for the day. I have a client to see. I’ve got some questions I need you to answer. And consider yourself the new lead counsel for this case.”

“You’re not going to fire me?” I breathe out in a rush before I can stop myself.

“No, I’m not,” he says like he can’t believe it himself. “You better be worth all this trouble.”

Relief—rich and hot—floods through me, and I wonder if this is how people who receive a reprieve from death feel.

“I promise I—”

“I run at seven a.m. every morning,” he says abruptly and that shuts me up and brings my eyes to his face. He’s frowning at me.

“Good ... for you?” I say when he doesn’t elaborate.

“Very good for me. And, while I’m running, I want to be reading your answers. I’ll expect them in my inbox by then. You’re down a team member, so plan on being here all night, Ryan,” he says and then he’s gone.

Chapter Twenty

Settling

Hayes

“You can’t go in there, Mr. Rivers.” The frantic voice of the woman sitting at the desk outside of Remington’s office calls after me as I walk right past her into his office.

“Wilde, what the hell—” I stop in my tracks. He’s not alone. Confidence, that asshole who’d talked to my woman like she was beneath him, and two men and one other woman are sitting huddled around the small conference table in front of the corner window of his office.

“Rivers, what the hell?” Remi stands up and looks over my shoulder.

“Mr. Wilde, he just walked right past me,” the woman says from behind me.

“Rachel, it’s fine. Just shut the door behind you,” he says to her before he looks back at me.

Confidence is watching me like a deer caught in the headlights.

“What are you doing here?” Remi asks and I look back at him.

“You rejected our settlement offer. Last week when we met you seemed ready to entertain it. Do you know how hard I had to lobby to get them to agree to the terms we presented? You will not get a single dime more out of us,” I warn him.

“Oh, yes, we will,” says Confidence as she stands up.

The other man slams his hand onto the table. “Remi, I am not going to sit here and watch this shit. You hired this person over my objection. You’re letting her pilot this and she’s decided to go full kamikaze.”

“Barry, we’ve discussed this.” Remington’s voice is low, but it’s got a thread of steel in it that raises my already high esteem of this guy even higher. It says more than the four words he spoke.

But Barry’s rage has blinded him to the danger.

“No, she wants to stick it to her ex, so she’s using this lawsuit as a weapon,” he spits out.

“I’m not her fucking ex,” I say.

“Okay, fine, her former fuck buddy, whatever,” he spits. I turn to him and look at him more closely. Who the fuck is this guy?

“What the fu—”

“Barry, you’re about to cross a line,” Remi says and shoots me a warning glance.

“You’ve already crossed one, Remi. I know this is your firm, but I’m a partner, too. And I won’t sit here and watch all of you be hypnotized by a nice ass and a smile,” he says.

“You better shut the fuck up,” I growl and Confidence stands up, her shock apparently worn enough to loosen her tongue.

“Hayes, I don’t need you to fight my battles—”

“Remi, this is highly inappropriate. You shouldn’t have hired her in the first place. But to assign her to this case—it presents a clear conflict of interest.” He cuts her off and rakes his eyes over her body in a way that nobody but me is allowed to look at her.

I walk over to him and get in his face. “You’ve got one more time to interrupt her, insult her, or look at her,” I growl.

“Or what? You going to beat me up?” he asks. “I heard you like to do that,” he says with a small smirk.

“All of you, stop it!” Confidence shouts angrily. Her fists are balled at her sides, her shoulders are hunched, and she’s squeezed her eyes shut. “First of all, stop talking about me like I’m not here,” she says. “You’re arguing about who gets to have their way. Who gets to decide. And while you’re doing that, people are living in limbo *at best*. At worst, they’re

sheltered in homes with walls breeding mildew. They are terrified that their children are breathing mold spores when they put them to sleep in the only home they can manage to find for them.” She slaps her hands down on the table and leans forward. She looks between us.

“They’re not greedy, grasping idiots that we should pay off so we can get back to defending white-collar criminals and helping banks find new ways to screw their customers,” she hisses. She looks at Barry and shakes her head. “Do you think I want your job? I don’t. There’s a whole slew of things you know more about than I can ever hope to, but *this* is my specialty. And the size of my tits, the color of my hair, or the man I love, have nothing to do with any of it. This is not about you and how you feel about women or me,” she snaps. She is vibrating with passion, and she’s never been more breathtaking than she is right now.

I’m struck by the certainty of a few things. One, this woman loves me. She’s trying to forgive me. But, I also know that if her clients end up with less than what they deserve, her estimation of me will always suffer for it. And my estimation of *myself*, as a man who is worthy of leading this family—with *her* by my side—into a future we can be proud of, will suffer too.

She looks at Remi and her voice softens. “Thank you for taking a chance on me. Thank you for trusting me with this,” she says and then glances at me.

“But, I will not work in an office where you allow your employees to talk to people like he’s been speaking with me. So, if this is the culture of your firm, then as soon as this case is over, I’ll be resigning,” she says gravely.

“Confidence—” Remi starts. But she’s already turned to me.

“Hayes. What Kingdom offered is woefully insufficient to compensate the victims of the company’s negligence and disregard. You have suits that cost more than what you’re offering the individual families.”

She casts her damning eye over me again. “If you can afford to buy clothes like *that*, you can afford to make those people

truly whole. And that's not going to come with some cookie cutter settlement in hopes that this will go away quickly. Because that's all that money is designed to do." She condemns me with her honesty. What I see in her eyes is much more than disappointment. It's disenchantment. Distance. I feel my first real pang of panic that she knows that I'm not good enough. That she really won't forgive me. The thought grips my gut in a fist of fear. My collar is suddenly too tight and I can't think of a single thing to say in my own defense.

She shakes her head at all of us. "None of you have even been to the sites. Or even talked to the people whose lives you're discussing.. They're just some figment of your imagination right now," she chastises us.

"You know what, I've had about enough of this. This is a business," Asshole says in a harsh dismissal of everything she just said.

But Confidence is not easily dismissed, and while on her soapbox, with her shield held up in protection of someone else, she is persistence personified. "You're *wrong*," she insists. Her voice is bolstered by her conviction.

Asshole's eyes narrow.

So do hers. And so do mine. My chest tightens and I tense and keep a close eye on him. His animosity for Confidence is rolling off him in waves. If she's concerned, she doesn't show it. She keeps pushing.

"*This* is the practice of law. *We* are lawyers. Social engineers. Or least, we should be. We are here to ensure the best possible outcome for our clients. And you want to settle because you don't think they're worth the price of seeking justice on their behalf," she accuses him.

He leans toward her. Her lip curls in disgust when he speaks, his voice is a snarl.

"You're damn straight. I am not going to worry about people who, when they die, no one will care. We represent people who are captains of industries and who will be remembered

forever. The fucking flood didn't go far enough, as far as I'm concerned."

The woman at the table, a thirty-something blonde in a nondescript black suit, gasps.

"Jimenez," Remi calls his name. That thread of steel is now a fully woven rope.

"Yeah?" Barry responds as if it's an imposition to do so.

"How long have you worked here?" Remi asks.

"Five years."

Remi actually looks surprised. "Already? Damn, time flies," he says.

"Yes, and I care about Wilde Law. I'm not going to stand by and watch the firm undermined by what amounts to some sort of affirmative action hire. I know we wanted more women at the table, but let's hire them for the size of their brains, not their breasts." He shoots a venomous glance at Confidence and a rush of anger pushes me to my feet.

Both Confidence and Remi say my name at the same time.

I look to find them both watching me. Confidence with a wary alertness, Remi with anger I know isn't directed at me.

"Then, one of you better do something about it," I say and sit down.

"Barry, we'll be sure to give you an excellent reference. You're fired. Effective today," Remi says.

Barry's jaw drops, but he doesn't make a sound.

No one does.

The room had been quiet before, but now, you could hear a pin drop.

Remi turns to look at the blonde. "Mila, can you take him down with you? I'm adjourning the meeting. We'll regroup later."

"Wait, you're fucking firing me? For what?" Barry sputters, regaining his composure.

“For violating conduct clauses in your contract,” Remi says simply. His eyes hold the same steel as his voice.

Barry’s face crumbles. “I just bought a fucking Porsche and a put a deposit down for a pool,” he says.

“Nice priorities,” I say under my breath, and Remi shoots me a glare. I shrug unapologetically.

“I don’t deserve to be fired!” he shouts, his eyes wide. He looks around the table for support, but everyone, except for Mila and me has their face conveniently buried in a phone or iPad.

“You’ll get a month’s severance for every year you’ve worked here. With all of your experience and seniority, you’ll have a job in no time. Mila will make every resource we have available to you in pursuit of that. But you can’t work here any longer. It’s just that simple. I’m sure you understand.”

He lifts his head slowly and looks between the two of us wordlessly. His expression, completely blank.

“Barry? Are you okay?” Confidence asks. Her expression goes from concern to worry as she takes in the slack look on his face. Her voice triggers something in him because all of the sudden, his jaw tightens and his eyes focus their burning anger on her.

“Think you’re so clever, don’t you? Think you’re going to win a fucking prize or something for your stupid case? I can’t wait to see you fall flat on your face,” he says with a voice so cold and vicious that Confidence flinches and takes a step back. It takes every ounce of restraint I possess not to walk over and throw him out of the window.

“Barry, please stop making threats,” Mila says, sounding mildly bored. “I’d hate for you to leave with a police escort instead of on your own. But you better believe I’ve got my finger on security’s number.” She stands, folds her hands over her chest, and watches him impassively.

“Oh, I’m leaving. I wouldn’t give you two feminazis the satisfaction of seeing me really lose my cool,” he sneers.

“And you keep your shitty severance. I’m calling a lawyer. I’m going to take you to the cleaners, Remi,” he spits as he starts walking.

When he slams the door behind him, the windows of the conference room rattle from the force.

“What an idiot,” Mila says and walks over to where Confidence slumps over in her chair. I start toward her. She looks at me and shakes her head, no. Her blue eyes are glassy but unwavering.

“Are you okay?” Mila asks, peering down at her in concern.

“I’m fine,” Confidence says and swallows hard. “Violent men and I don’t mix,” she says with a nervous laugh. But I see the tremble in her hand when she pushes an errant curl behind her ear.

I want to kill that man for putting that there. I hate that I can’t walk over, put an arm around her. I hate this distance. I’m done letting it grow between us. It’s time to bring my woman home.

Chapter Twenty-One

Unexpected

Confidence

“That line outside is incredible,” I say, wide-eyed, to Remi as we stack the clothes that have been folded and sorted by gender and size into the bins lined along the 500-yard-long convention center room. The volunteers are all busy at work setting up their stations for the doors to open at eight o’clock. “They did a great job getting the word out and there are shuttles all day for people who need it,” I tell him.

“Yeah, the Rivers kid is putting his money where his mouth is, that’s for sure,” he says and reaches for another box of clothes the organizers just dropped off.

“Why do you call him ‘kid’?” I ask a question that’s been burning at the tip of my tongue.

“Because when I met him, that’s what he was. And now, because it annoys him,” he says with a laugh. I laugh along.

“You knew him when y’all were kids?” I ask, my curiosity about how his family’s community is named after another family.

“No. Our families have been neighbors for thirty years now. When they bought the land from the Riverses in the oil bust in the 80s, the name of the development was one of the terms of the contract. And they hated having to sell part of their empire to a bunch of fresh-off-the-boat immigrants who made their money selling plantains in the hood,” he says.

“Plantains in the hood?” I chortle.

He chuckles. “Yeah, we lived in one of the parts of the city that was like a food desert. No good grocery stores. Just corner stores—Popeyes, Church’s Chicken, Shipley’s Donut Shop, if you were lucky. So, my grandfather saved the money he made painting houses and opened Eat!. That was our first business.

And who knew that grocery stores that catered to every single palette it could source for would be so popular?”

“Well, apparently your grandfather did,” I say. They have three hundred and fifty stores in Texas and about two dozen in northeast Mexico.

“Yeah, and he and my dad founded Rivers Wilde. My mom’s brainchild was Wilde Restaurants, Crick Crack being the very first,” he says.

“Wow, it’s amazing you’ve done all that in one generation.”

“Yeah. We’re kind of ambitious. And Houston is the most fertile ground for ideas that are all about the hustle. My mother’s Jamaican, so she’s got to have at least three jobs or she feels like she’s being idle,” he says.

“What about your dad?” I ask.

“He’s dead,” he answers in an uncharacteristically flat, hard voice.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“No worries, he has been for a long time,” he says, with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Anyway, so I met Hayes once—because our families were enemies in a way that felt like a law. And then I ran into him in this little patch of land between our properties on the day of his dad’s funeral. I called him kid. He didn’t like it, so I did it repeatedly and now he’s back and it’s just stuck.”

I laugh, but I don’t feel like laughing. I miss Hayes. Like crazy. And I haven’t seen him since that day in our office when I turned down his settlement offer. When this event was announced a week ago, I realized what he’d been busy doing.

“How are you guys doing?” he asks.

“We’re not. But it’s fine,” I say, and wish that was true. Fine is the last thing I am.

“Does he know that?” Remi asks, and his eyes are trained over my shoulder. I turn and see Hayes walking in.

His scan of the room comes to a screeching halt when his eyes land on me. He smiles and starts toward me. My heart leaps in anticipation. I haven't seen him in two weeks.

A man steps in his way and starts to talk. The reluctance he shows to look away almost makes up for the fact that he had to stop.

"All right, folks. It's eight o'clock and the doors are opening. Man your stations!" a woman shouts over a bullhorn and I almost jump out of my skin in surprise.

"My brother Tyson will be here, and he's going to switch out with me at eleven a.m. And I'll be back at one o'clock. When you need someone to step in for you, let me know and I'll find a volunteer."

"Okay. But I think I'll be good. I brought snacks and I'm ready," I say and rub my hands together in anticipation. Today feels like the first time I'm actually doing anything meaningful for my clients.

After we rejected their settlement offer, the case was assigned a court date. In the meantime, I'm doing my interviews with my clients and preparing for our first hearing that's six weeks away.

Right now, it feels like we'll never get the mountains of records that we've requested. Kingdom, the corporation, is doing everything it can to stall. They asked for six weeks to even produce the documents we've asked for. So, we've filed for a continuation to give us time to review them. When I say *us*, I'm talking about my little team of four. One of whom hates my guts. And while all of this is happening, the people in the class are struggling to get their lives back together and are living in limbo.

The Kingdom Foundation, directed by Hayes, organized a clothing and book drive. The donations poured in. Today is shopping day for the families. I got here at 6:30 to help set up, and the line had already started forming. I catch a glimpse of Hayes disappearing in the direction of the picture section. But before I can call after him, the doors open and the people file in. We're in the boys' section, "Size twelve months to four

years” in the store, and before we have the chance to speak to each other again, our first customers stand at our table. Instantly, I recognize the boy from Hayes’s house the night of the flood. “Hey there,” I say.

“Hi.” He smiles brightly.

“Do you remember me?” I ask.

“Yeah. Of course. And thank you for volunteering today,” he says like he’s reciting something memorized and just remembered he needed to say.

“You’re welcome. What nice manners,” I respond.

“Well, this *was all* my idea,” he beams.

“Was it?” I ask and look over his shoulder to make sure no one’s waiting to actually be served. “You must be very proud of how it’s all turned out then,” I say jokingly.

He nods. “Yeah, the first time Mr. Hayes came to visit, he asked me what I thought folks needed and I told him clothes for school,” he says and my heart actually jumps.

“M-Mr. Hayes came to see you?” I ask, saying each word slowly, so that I can make sure he doesn’t misunderstand me.

“Yeah, well, more than once—and not just me. We went around and met with lots of people,” he says.

“What types of meetings?” I ask skeptically.

“Him asking questions about their living situation, families, and asking everyone to give him an idea of what they needed to feel comfortable. I took notes and he even paid me for my time,” he says proudly.

“Wow, well, that sounds awesome,” I say and smile. And this time, there’s not a well of pain behind it.

“Anyway, I just wanted to say hi. And thank you for being here and being the reason Mr. Hayes even came to visit us. He told us you suggested it,” he says.

A peal of laughter propelled by relief bursts from my throat.

“Did he? That’s awesome,” I say.

“He’s pretty cool.” The young man nods.

“See you later.” He waves and walks off.

I feel like crying at what I just heard, but I also feel completely giddy. For the last two weeks, my coffee order has been ready and waiting for me when I walk into Sweet and Lo’s. I’ve had flowers on my desk every morning, my lunch delivered every afternoon. My car washed while it was parked in the garage of my office. Hayes has been relentless in his attempts to woo me.

But this ... done not to woo me back, but because he’s a good man trying to do right is the first thing he’s done that makes me feel like maybe he sees me. That he’s not just trying to convince me, but that he’s doing it for himself, too. That thought makes me unbearably happy. I brush my tears away and turn around just in time to greet my very first customers.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kneel

Confidence

“I’ll have the meatloaf sandwich,” I say to my waitress.

“Oh yeah, great choice.” She smiles widely. “It’s delicious.”

“Everything here is delicious,” Tyson says. His dark brown eyes twinkle with mischief, and he says, “including some of the diners.” He grins and then winces. He glares at his older brother. “Remi, yo,” he says in a comically, high-pitched voice while rubbing the side of his head that his brother just slapped.

“Stop talking to her like she’s one of those THOTs in that little fan club of yours,” Remi says without looking up from the menu.

“Yo, can I help it if they love me? I mean, maybe if you stopped and smelled the roses instead of trying to be some sort of superhuman legend, you’d get some of that love, too,” he says.

I look back between the brothers and shake my head. “Can you guys please stop bickering? The car ride over was enough of that to last me a lifetime. I’d like to have some quiet with my air conditioning and beer, please,” I say.

“See, Remi, she likes me.” He winks at me. “Can you stop getting in between us?” He drags his chair close to mine. “Excuse me, miss, but you’ve got some dust on your arm,” he says and brushes the remnants of our afternoon off my arm.

“You’re such a flirt, Ty,” I say with mock disapproval.

“Only with the prettiest girls,” he says and winks. His gaze drifts over my shoulder. I don’t think anything of it until I see a gleam of mischief. He slings an arm over my shoulder, and I jump in surprise and then relax.

This is how he talks to everyone. All day, his contribution was keeping the people waiting in the incredibly long lines in a good mood. And he's good at it. Charming, funny, and very nice to look at. It made me feel better. Now that we've rejected the settlement offer, things with Kingdom are moving at a snail's pace. But, this week there was a break in the clouds for our clients whose homes were beyond simple repairs. Remi took me to the land on the outer barrier of Rivers Wilde where Habitat for Humanity is going to be building homes for the residents.

A shiver passes over me and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and I feel Hayes before I see him. Before I can turn around, I *hear* him.

"Remi," Hayes says in greeting and his voice ricochets through me like a canon's boom.

My heart leaps into my throat. His proximity is frying my circuits and I can't even remember what I was talking about or doing two minutes earlier.

"Ty." His voice is less friendly when he addresses Tyson.

Remi slides over and says, "Join us, Rivers."

He does and sits down right next to me.

"Confidence," he says quietly, and I shoot him a sidelong glance. I wish I hadn't.

The annoyed expression in his eyes is tinged with longing and it hits me in the center of my chest. His light gray T-shirt blends with the color of his eyes, and with the dim lighting of the restaurant, they look almost green today.

His gaze moves to Tyson who has moved closer to me since Hayes sat down. He lifts his eyebrows in his classic *what the fuck do you think you're doing?* look.

I give him a *why do you think you have the right to ask?* glare.

"Rivers, I have to tell you, I think I'm in love with her, so I might need you to back off," Ty says good-naturedly. "You gotta watch out for him. He's the most committed bachelor in town," he whispers to me.

“Tyson, please remove your arm from my woman’s shoulder,” Hayes says in a deceptively calm voice. I bristle at that.

“I’m not his woman,” I say.

His body tenses and he growls, “Like hell.”

“Well, one of you is clearly very confused.” Remi laughs.

“It’s not me,” I say.

The next second, Hayes’s hand wraps around my bicep, and he’s pulling me out of the booth.

“What in the world are you doing?” I yelp.

“You two don’t break anything,” Remington calls after us. I turn around and give him a look of complete bewilderment.

Why is he laughing?

Why isn’t he calling the police?

“Hayes, let me go.” I slap at his hand. He doesn’t even look at me.

He pulls me down a long corridor, pushes open a door and switches on the bathroom light.

“What the fuck was that?” he asks.

“What the fuck was *what*? I’m not the one who just dragged me through a restaurant.”

He crosses the small room in two strides and pushes me up against the sink. Not to intimidate or scare me. He’s never been able to do either. Not since the night we met.

“You’re not my woman? Are you fucking serious, Confidence?” he asks angrily.

“Hayes, what do you think—?”

“That was a rhetorical question,” he growls and cuts me off and leans toward me.

“Not for me,” I lean forward, too.

He shakes his head at me like he can’t believe what he’s hearing and takes a step back. He shoves his fingers through his hair.

“At least you’re consistent,” he mutters under his breath, but the bathroom has great acoustics and it bounces off the wall and hangs between us.

“What does that mean?”

“It means you know how to hold a grudge. And I’ve given you space to do it,” he says.

“You’ve given me *space*?” I gape at him.

“Yes,” he snarls and steps closer to me. “But there are fucking limits. And you clearly don’t understand them.”

“Oh, I understand *just* fine,” I seethe.

“No, you don’t,” he says through gritted teeth. “Because if you did, you wouldn’t be telling another man that you’re not my woman. While his arm is around you.” His eyes narrow, and his hands grip the sink on either side of me.

“Hayes—”

“You must have completely forgotten who I am.” His eyes darken and he leans into me.

“How could I?” I snap.

“Then, did you forget who *we* are?” He leans against the door and turns the little knob in the handle. His eyes are blazing as he strides toward me.

“I won’t tell you how that felt. But trust me when I say you wouldn’t have liked being in my shoes.”

I flush and glance away from his eyes. I can see the hurt there, and as mad as I am at him, it’s the very last thing I want to do to him.

“*Tesoro* ...” He grips my chin and turns my head until he traps my eyes with his. They are full of determination, and they hold me in place.

“I know you’re pissed. You have every right to be. But, don’t get Tyson’s ass kicked because you want to hurt me,” he growls.

Worry tickles the back of my throat.

“As if you’d go around beating up people because he was flirting with me.” I dismiss his threat.

He leans in and puts us nose to nose, and then he rubs the tip of his against mine.

“I absolutely fucking would,” he whispers, and I’m caught between a swoon and pang of worry.

I pull my chin out of his grip. “This isn’t a Kristen Ashley novel. You’re not Dax Lahn. I’m not Circe,” I snap.

He blinks and shakes his head in confusion. “I have no idea what that means.”

“It’s a book. And all I mean is that I’ve been trying to move on and you won’t let me.” My voice is stiff and lacks conviction. But it’s just a reflection of what’s happening inside of me. I don’t even believe myself anymore.

“Don’t fucking talk about moving on. Not when you don’t mean it,” he says.

“How do you know what I mean?” I gripe.

“You knew when you took this job that I was going to be here. You came anyway. I don’t think you did that because you’re moving on,” he pushes back.

“I took it because I needed it, and it’s perfect. If it had been in Alaska, I would have taken it.”

He rakes his eyes down my body. My white blouse feels thin under his heated gaze. I shift in my shoes when he lingers on my hips.

“You’ve missed me,” he says.

“I haven’t,” I lie.

“If I touched your pussy, what would I feel?” he asks.

“That’s one question you won’t be answering tonight.”

“I want to touch you.” He dips his head and kisses my cheek. His hand grips my hip.

“You’ll feel better when I’ve made you come,” he whispers against my cheek.

He moves so fast that my ass is up on the edge of the sink before I can protest.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asks. His finger trails up my leg and stops at my knee. Blood rushes in my ears, heat pools between my thighs.

“Of course not,” I breathe.

His fingers slip under the hem of my shorts and I grab his fingers.

“But I’m going to ask you to anyway.” His eyes fly up to mine in surprise, but there’s no anger there. In fact, I think what I see is respect.

“Why?” he asks and stands back up.

If it could speak, my vagina would be cursing me out.

“Because what I want isn’t what I need, Hayes.”

“Why are they mutually exclusive?”

“I don’t want to just be your partner in bed,” I admit.

“Oh, *Tesoro*,” he sighs and drags his nose across my temple before he moves us back to facing each other. He cups my face in his hands and presses a soft kiss to my lips before he pulls back.

“There’s not a pussy in this world I’d fall on my knees for. Not even yours,” he says, the fierce love and tenderness in his eyes stealing my breath.

His eyes never leaving mine, he continues. “But for this, *Tesoro* ...” His palms cover the space between my breasts and my heart kicks against the wall of my chest, desperate to find its way into the hand of the man it loves.

“For the love of the most brilliant woman I’ve ever met.” He kisses me again. “I would spend the rest of my *life* on my fucking knees.”

And then, my big, strong, beautiful man brings my entire world to a halt. He drops to his knees in front of me. On the floor of the public restroom.

“Hayes, get up.” I tug his arm. “Please.”

He grips my hips and presses his face in between my legs and inhales.

“Goddamn.” His groan vibrates against me and moisture blooms beneath his mouth and nose. “I love the way your pussy smells. I fucking miss the way it tastes. I’m dying to feel it gripping my cock.” He rubs his nose against my clit and pleasure skitters, like the kiss of butterfly wings, all over my body.

I thread my fingers into his thick, silky hair just as he leans away and stares up at me with that same fierceness.

But now, it’s laced with need.

He has the look of a predator, and I wish he would hurry up and catch me.

“I want to plant my flag there so that everyone knows it’s mine. But, it’s not even in the top five of my favorite things about you, Confidence. And it’s certainly not the only thing I want.” He looks up at me through his honest, smart eyes, and the rest of the world falls away.

“Oh, Hayes ...” I trace the line of his strong brows and sweep down the slope of his nose.

“I want your fire. I want your courage; I want your loyalty. I want your anger, your disdain, your disappointment.” I brush a lock of hair off his forehead. “I want your smiles. I want your laughter. I want you fighting for my team. And yes, I want your pussy. Every day.” He squeezes my hips, and I want to give him everything he’s just asked me for.

But ...

“I can’t.” I shake my head, caught between my fear and my love and feeling like neither one of them are serving me well right now.

“You won’t,” he chides me gently, but with real reproach in his voice. “But I understand.” He cuts off my protest. “You want to protect yourself. But you can’t. Not from me. Not from us.

It's all or nothing. And as long as we're alive, it will never be nothing."

"Hayes, don't ..." I pull back slightly and shake my head. I don't know what to say.

"I know," he says with real regret in his eyes. "I fucked up. But, I am not that asshole who treated you like you were nothing. I'm not ashamed of anything except that something I did made you feel like you were less than the miraculous person I know I'll never deserve," he says.

My hand comes to my chest and my fingers clutch the front of my blouse. "Oh, Hayes," is all I can manage.

"But, I need you to understand—" His eyes go from pleading to demanding in a blink.

"That you thought I was hiding something?" I interject.

"No," he says sharply. "That I'm responsible for my entire family. Not just the ones that are alive right now. But the ones who will be alive in a hundred years. I just had to keep the estate intact because I lost sight of that once and married someone who I barely knew."

"Well, I'm not her," I remind him.

"I know that ... and I knew it in Italy, too. By the time the report came, I didn't care what it said."

"Why not?" I ask.

"I already knew everything that I needed to know about you. You're the woman who leans in when most people lean away," he says. I want so badly to throw my arms around his neck and tell him it's okay. That I see him, and that I'll always lean in.

"I'm going to show you why us. *How* us. I'm asking for a lot. Your future. Your love. Your loyalty. Your body. Your children. Your life," he says. "But I'm offering you the same things in return."

Tears sting my eyes and I search his. All I see reflects my own feelings.

“I want you to be my partner. I’m not taking no for an answer, not when I know you feel the same way,” he says.

He reaches up and swipes a tear off my cheek with the pad of his thumb.

“I miss you,” I admit.

His eyes flare. “It’s about fucking time.” Fierce need replaces the tenderness, and he surges to his feet. Without pausing, he steps between my legs and pushes my knees open.

“And I’m going to let you go home without fucking you. Even though I know you want me to.” He chucks me under the chin.

“But let me tell you, when we’re right and we’re back, I’m going to wreck your pussy. I’m not good with words, baby, but when I fuck you, I feel like you always know what I’m saying.” He grinds into me.

“But let me speak your language for a minute, so that when I tell you that I love you, you don’t just hear it. You understand it. And you don’t question it,” he says.

“I know you love me. I do ...”

“Then let me show you just how much.” He takes my hand in his and puts it to his lips. “Let me show you what you’ve shown me,” he says softly.

“What’s that?”

“What it’s like to be part of a team that you can trust. That won’t let you down,” he says.

“Give me a chance. Please.” He comes as close to begging as I’d ever like to hear him again.

“Okay,” I acquiesce. “But you better not fuck it up.”

“Oh, I intend to fuck it up, but in the best way possible,” he says and then he kisses my blues away.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Biased

Hayes

“You’re early,” Confidence groans, one eye open, but squinting. Her hair is tousled all over her head and her face is creased with the indentation from her pillow. She looks like every single fantasy I ever had as a boy and everything I thought I’d never have as a man.

I hold up the white wax bag full of pastries and wave them in front of her face.

“Breakfast,” I say and drop a kiss on her warm, sleep plumped lips and step inside of her apartment.

“The place looks like nobody lives here,” I say as I look around at the blandly and sparsely decorated space. “Where did you get this couch?” I ask as I drop onto the gray loveseat. Besides the glass coffee table, it’s the only furniture in the entire space.

Well, except her bedroom. Not that she would let me in there. But the door is open, and I can see her sea of white comforters and pillows strewn all over the queen-sized bed in the center of the room.

“Ikea,” she grumbles.

“Sleep well?” I ask and start unpacking the bag.

“Uh, not really,” she says, and with a resigned sigh she sits down next to me. She draws her knees to her chest and hugs them. Her pink tank top pulls tight across her back and I watch her shoulder muscles flex when she rolls her neck as if trying to loosen it up. I slide my fingers under the drape of her hair and caress her nape until I find the knot of tension. I start to rub it and she closes her eyes and moans.

“That feels so good,” she whispers. I don’t respond. I just watch her. The skin under her eyes is dark, little lines bracket her frowning mouth. She looks tired and stressed.

“Why aren’t you sleeping well?” I ask. Her eyes open and she looks at me wearily.

“Because I’m afraid I’ve given my clients bad advice,” she says and then jerks her head to the side. “Ugh, what am I doing?” she says in a harsh whisper to herself. “I can’t be talking to you—of all people—about this.” She sighs. “I’m losing my mind; I’m so tired. And Barry getting fired has turned into a nightmare. Word has gotten around, thanks to Barry spreading it, that I asked Remi to choose between him or me. And that’s earned me a flock of ...” She trails off, searching for the right word.

“Enemies?” I offer and press deeper against the muscle in her neck.

She lets her head loll backward, and her hair spills around my hand. It’s warm and soft and my fingers immediately start to close into a fist to capture it. I want to yank her head back and kiss her like I should have when I walked in. But I relax my hand when she closes her eyes and groans.

“*Enemies* may be a little strong,” she says and then chuckles ruefully. “But only a little.” She shakes her head and sighs. “This is why I hated my last job. No one cares about anything but their careers, their egos, kissing the ass of the person they think can help them. And it’s like everyone here has forgotten why we practice law,” she says, her voice full of frustration.

“You’re being awfully judgmental. They’re practicing law, too. Everyone, even white-collar criminals and profit-driven, billion-dollar companies deserve a fair defense,” I push back.

“I didn’t say they didn’t. Everyone is entitled to whatever protections and remedies the law affords. But working in areas of law where there’s no money to be made is so disheartening,” she says.

“Why? I thought you were doing some good?”

“Well, we would be if law firms like Wilde did it for more than the tax write-off. Our clients are too poor to even keep a roof over their head, much less pay for our very expensive, very well researched advice. But that’s what we promised them. I wouldn’t want them to be worse off than they would have been if we hadn’t brought the suit at all,” she says and worries the inside of her lower lip.

“How’s that possible? They’ve got you,” I say.

“*I’m* not enough. Wilde is committing minimal resources to their pro bono cases. But this one is different. The implications of its outcomes are huge. Precedent setting potential, and it’s barely staffed. So I’m doing the work of four people because I can’t leave legal research that is going to determine what our brief argues to second year law students. This is too important. And no one else seems to think so,” she snaps bitterly, and I feel the same guilt I felt when she challenged us the day Barry was fired.

It got me thinking about what I came home to do. What I wanted the legacy of my leadership for my family to be. Did I want to reaffirm our roles as society leaders or did I want to do some good for the city that had made us rich? Did I want my name on a stadium? Or did I want to build schools? Affordable, quality housing, fill food deserts with grocery stores?

I’ve decided—and I wanted to show her, instead of tell her—what my plans were.

“What more ideal conditions would exist for it than with Wilde Law? They have deep pockets and nice office space and yeah, it’s a tax write-off, but you didn’t see other firms clamoring to take the case for free in the first place. They do good work. They have some of the world’s best legal talent to choose from,” I say and hand her one of the kolaches from Sweet and Lo’s.

“Yeah, but they don’t dedicate those resources, people, or money that the case deserves because they think their clients should just shut up and be grateful,” she says resentfully.

“You’ve got a chip on your shoulder about this,” I say and she nudges me with that shoulder.

“Hey, watch out—that thing is heavy,” I tease her. That earns me a fierce little scowl.

“I do not.”

“You do. And you tend to paint wealthy people into shapes that are distorted by your bias for, and dislike of, them,” I challenge her.

She lets go of her legs and plants her feet on the ground. Her mouth opens in an affront, her eyes wide with offense at my word.

“I am not biased,” she says in a high-pitched, loud voice.

I laugh. “Chill, it’s okay. We’re all biased. You just don’t know it. Because you’re walking around thinking that you’re being judged for being poor. You wear it like it’s Joseph’s multi-color cloak. Your suffering is not more valid because you didn’t have money at the same time, Confidence,” I say and her face turns red.

“And yes, I agree that I have an obligation to the people whose money I’ve collected in the form of rent. But you’re a lawyer, so you know that the way this plays out won’t have anything to do with what my beliefs are. It’s not a personal decision, it’s a business one. And the business will do what is best for it. It’s not going to pay them more money because we feel sorry for them,” I tell her.

“They are not *them*. They are us. A country is only as strong as its poorest citizens, Hayes. So you should feel sorry for *us* as a nation because *we* are poor. And it *should* be a personal decision. This is not about contracts to rebuild. This is about Kingdom admitting that they have contributed heavily to the catastrophe their fellow Houstonians find themselves facing, and we will, in equal measure, contribute to the mitigation of the damage,” she shouts at me.

“I agree,” I say grimly.

“God, Hayes... I’m sorry,” she says and covers her mouth with her hands. “This is inappropriate. For me to be discussing

this case. And I understand about your hands being tied. I get it. You can't commit Kingdom to terms that are completely against its interests." She drops back down and rests her head on my shoulder. I wrap my arm around her and pull her into me.

"I wish I could snap my fingers and have them make different decisions. But, I can't."

"No, I know ..." she says as if she's trying to convince herself as much as me.

"Maybe I'm being crazy. I'm committing career suicide by being the architect of a case that could change the way insurance companies, cities, governments, and banks treat people who have been the victims of natural disasters. I'll never find a job in this industry again," she says.

A lightbulb goes on in my head, and I sit up.

"What are you thinking?" she asks.

"You could always come work for me," I say.

"No way," she says with an incredulous laugh. She looks at me sideways. "And have *you* signing my paychecks?" she groans, but with a laugh and right then, I know we're going to be okay. We always have this. Our ability to talk. Connect, argue, challenge each other and yet find humor in the midst of it all.

"Why not? Think about it. The foundation could create a legal defense fund that you could run," I say. She starts to cough.

I hop up to get her some water.

I pull open her fridge and it's completely empty. "Where's all the fucking food?"

"I don't have any," she croaks defensively.

"Not even a bottle of water?" I ask, incredulous. She shakes her head and her coughing subsides.

"Who doesn't have water?" I ask, and walk back to the couch.

"Me. I haven't had time, and I'm barely here. And when I am, it's just to sleep," she confesses.

I want to tell her that she should be sleeping in my bed, that she was supposed to be living with me. But I'm not going to ask her again. I want her to be the one to say it.

She yawns and eyes the pastries I've spread out. "Thanks for the ... croissants, but can we go out for coffee? I want to get a latte from Sweet and Lo's. They're delicious, Hayes," she says brightly. I'm glad for the subject change because it was getting too heavy.

"Croissants? These aren't *croissants*. They don't even remotely resemble them," I say and pick up the éclair shaped like a piece of bread.

"This," I say dramatically while I rip the dough in half, "is a kolache." I put the two halves under her nose. "Lo style," I add and her eyes light up and she sniffs the fragrant steam wafting under her nose.

"Who would give such a magical smelling miracle such a terrible name? What the heck is a koalachee?"

"You're mispronouncing it. And it was brought here by the Czech immigrants who settled in Texas. I would say I'd take you to the Kolache Factory, because growing up that's all there was. But Sweet's in Rivers Wilde is next level."

"Mmm," she moans and licks her lips. "Gimme." She snatches half from mine. "What is this magic?" she drawls excitedly.

"It's grilled chicken, eggs, and potatoes wrapped in this dough and baked," I tell her and she takes a huge bite and swallows greedily.

"Is this a Houston thing?" she asks.

"More like southeast Texas. No one else anywhere I've lived has ever heard of them," I tell her.

"Oh my God, that chicken. Does it have ... curry or something on it?" She smacks her lips together, and I frown at her in mild disgust.

"What's all the smacking for?" I ask.

She smirks and smacks louder. "I'm country, Hayes. We smack our lips when something tastes this good. This is Czech

food?”

“Well, the concept is. But, Sweet’s pastries are all made with a flavor of her home country, Senegal—that’s in West Africa. And Lo, his real name is Lotanna, is her husband. He’s from Nigeria, and he’s the reason that Sweet doesn’t give away everything she bakes and makes,” I tell her.

“I love their coffee; can’t wait to actually eat there. Let me get dressed and we can head out,” she says and stands and hurries to her room. And instead of following her like I want, I pull out my phone and call Gigi.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Sweet and Lo

Confidence

Haye holds open the glass paned French doors of Sweet and Lo's. "After you."

"Thank you," I answer absently. I'm distracted by the sensory delights that started when we approached the bakery. I pass it every day on my way to work, but haven't had the time to stop. But the smell of sugar, butter and coffee that fills the air around it always makes my mouth water. But as I step around the glass window between the door and the dining room that reads, "We Bake the World.", my foodie soul is dancing a jig at all the delicious promises the scene before me is making.

The cafe's abundance of windows, on both the front street facing side and the left wall that opens onto a small garden where people are seated reading and talking, give it a warm airy feel. It's packed with people, and the only thing louder than the concentrated murmur of conversation is the whirring of the coffee grinders, the hissing of steaming espresso makers, and the background music that's too low to make out clearly, but loud enough that you know it's there. I eye the huge chalkboard behind the small hostess stand ahead of us. The menu is written in neat cursive and lists everything from pastries and sandwiches to omelets and salads and specialty breads.

I crane my neck so I can see above the heads of the people clustered and waiting to be seated in the smaller-than-comfortable waiting area. My stomach tightens, as if to remind me how long it's been since I ate. Hayes is scanning the dining room and I tug his arm to get his attention. "Think we can order and take it to go instead of waiting for a table?"

"Nope," he smiles and turns back to the dining room.

“Why not?” I complain and tug his arms until he looks down at me.

“My aunt is meeting us. She’s here already seated. Come on.” He drops that bomb then takes my hand and turns us toward the young woman smiling and waving at us from the hostess stand.

We take a few steps before I can gather my wits and pull my hand out of his and stop dead in my tracks.

The person behind me slams into my back and the sharp edge of his shoulders poke my back and the toe of his rubber-soled shoes scrape against the backs of my heels. I spin around just in time to see a very old, frail looking woman falling backward.

I cry out, my hands over my mouth in horror. She sits right where she fell, flat on her ass, her spindly green floral-painted legging covered legs sprawled in front of her like a newborn foal.

I reach down to help her up and glare at Hayes who’s just made it back to my side. He looks between us with an expression of complete bewilderment on his face.

“I’m so sorry,” I say and reach down to cup her elbow. She swats my hand away and says, “I can get myself up. I look old, but I bet you I could beat you in a race around the block.” Her voice, thin and frail, says otherwise. But she hops up in one quick, acrobatic movement. “See? Right as rain,” she says proudly.

“I’m Sally, Sally Turner.” She says her name like it’s a compliment. She’s got to be eighty years old. Her face is covered in a spray of freckles that even kiss her eyelids and lips. Her eyes, a sparkling dark brown, are full of mischief and her smile is disarmingly youthful.

“Are you okay, Sally?” Hayes asks as if he’s been saying her name his whole life as he puts a hand at the small of both of our backs and ushers us out of the way of the customers trying to get to the booth.

“Oh, I’m fine. I was just distracted by the specimen of man meat ahead of me.” She nods at Hayes and winks. “You’re Hayes Rivers. Nice that you finally came down from your tower to visit us,” she says.

Hayes, as unflappable as ever, doesn’t correct her and say that he’s actually been spending a lot of time in town. Instead, he smiles roguishly. “I heard this was the place to come if I wanted to find a pretty girl to talk to. Of course, I came to see.”

She throws her head back and laughs delightedly. “Oh, how wonderful, and you’re charming, too. Those Wilde boys pretty things up nicely. I’d say you’re about to add something better than pretty,” she says and laughs again.

“I’ll leave the prettying to the Wildes and my woman.” He slips a hand around my waist. Her eyes roam Hayes’s body like someone contemplating what part of their steak they’d like to eat first.

“Either way, we can always use another fine piece—”

“Uh, I’m so sorry I stopped like that; I’m glad you’re okay.” I interrupt her before she says any more.

“Oh, if I’d been looking where I was going, I would have seen ya,” she says. “This your fella?” she asks.

I glance at Hayes; he’s grinning from ear to ear. My heart flutters. He’s a goddamn dangerous combination of overbearing and sweet.

I’m addicted to him.

I get near him and I lose my mind. I miss being his woman and everything that comes with it and I’m so close to giving him whatever he asks for. Close. But ...

I smile serenely and say, “Not quite,” to Sally. His hand tightens around my middle.

“Well, if you’re not sure ...” She gives Hayes a suggestive sidelong glance and wink.

I laugh.

She looks back at me with an indignant glare. “Honey, if I was just twenty years younger, you wouldn’t be able to *fight* me for him. They don’t make men like this anymore. I suggest you get *sure* real quick.” She winks and strides off into the restaurant.

“Yeah. Get sure quick, *Tesoro*.” Hayes’s lips brush my ear, and his breath makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and my insides quiver. His hand slides along my waist and comes to rest on my abdomen. It takes up almost the entire space, and when he pulls me back into him, I feel like I’m melting.

“I miss you touching me, baby.” I let my head fall back and rest on his shoulder.

“Hayes Garfield Rivers, you are in *public!*” An irate voice from ahead of us breaks the trance and we jump apart.

“Gigi,” Hayes says and steps around me toward the dark haired, hazel-eyed beauty who but for the fact that he called her his aunt, I would never believe was old enough to be.

She glares at him. “Don’t you dare use that voice on me, Hayes,” she scolds even as she throws her arms open to welcome his hug. I watch as she embraces him, smacks his shoulders and then wraps her arms around him. He lifts her off her feet. Her eyes, closed from the instant they touch, pop open and they’re assessing and shrewd as they run over me from head to toe. She’s dressed in a navy skirt topped with a white tailored shirt with a patent-leather, nude-colored belt cinched around her Audrey Hepburnesque waist. Suddenly, my cut-off shorts feel both too casual and too short. My white camisole, too revealing and my flip-flops, downright disrespectful.

When our eyes meet, I smile my best smile and thank God I tied my unruly hair back so that at least I don’t look *completely* unkempt. My shoulders sag with relief when a smile—warm and real—blossoms across her face.

She disengages herself from Hayes and comes toward me, arms outstretched. “Well, *Hayes*, look what you did. She’s as pretty as a picture,” she says to him as she wraps me in a hug

that smells and feels like comfort and love. It makes me long for my mother. I wish she could see this place.

“I’m Gigi, Confidence,” she says warmly. “I think we’re going to be great friends.” She hooks an arm through mine.

* * *

Hayes doesn’t let go of my hand when I try to tug it free of his. He draws it into his lap and holds it there with the other one on top of it. I look at him to demand it back, but my words die on my lips.

He’s laughing at something his aunt just said. His head is thrown back, his teeth gleaming, his eyes closed, and I can envision my future. What life could feel like if I spent it with him. Happy, holding hands, with family who fusses, but forgives. In nice suburban cafes that smell like bread and coffee. And where everyone is welcome, especially me. So, I don’t pull my hand back. Instead, I squeeze his and rejoin the conversation just as our server comes and takes our orders.

Hayes jumps slightly and then lets go of my hand.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. My hand feels cold without his sandwiching it. He fishes into the pocket of his jeans and pulls out his phone.

“I’m sorry, I’ve got to take this. I’ve been expecting this call for two days,” he says. He slides out of the booth and strides toward the entrance.

I watch him go. His sky-blue polo neck T-shirt bunches across his broad shoulders as he turns to squeeze between the tightly packed tables. His jeans sit low on his hips and hug that fine ass of his.

“I don’t blame you, sister,” Sally calls from a couple of tables ahead of us.

I jump slightly and blush at being caught ogling. I look at Gigi and smile. She doesn't smile back. In fact, the friendly light in her eyes disappears completely. My throat convulses in surprise and dread.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"I need to ask you some things, right now before Hayes comes back," Gigi says the minute he's out of earshot.

"Okay ..." I say and glance toward the door at Hayes.

"I have a check in my purse for one million dollars. If I gave it to you, would you leave and never bother Hayes again?" she asks.

Shock renders me paralyzed. I think if she whistled, the air she pushed out would knock me over.

"What?" I ask, offended, incredulous and for some reason, a little afraid.

"I could go up to three million. And I will. If you'll take it," she says.

Her expression is completely neutral. I can't believe she can be so calm after what she just said.

"Are you kidding me? Why would you even ...?"

"Name your price," she says.

My heart slows to a hard, slow thud.

"What?"

"I'll give it to you. *If you'll take it,*" she says slowly, like there's something she's trying to tell me without saying it directly. But my blood is boiling and I don't have the time or inclination for her games.

"I most certainly will not," I say and grab my phone from the table and reach to pick up my purse.

She puts a hand over mine to steady it.

"I'm sorry if that offended you. But it's not personal," she says.

“As if it could be anything but personal,” I say without a thought for who I’m talking to.

“Confidence, Hayes is all that’s left of my family. He’s also, underneath that shell he wears, desperate for a place where he feels like he belongs. I will use my money, I will lie, I will offend, and I will do whatever to help him find it. After what he’s gone through with that ex-wife—” she says unapologetically.

I lose my cool.

“I bet you never offered her money to leave him alone, did you? Why? Because she wasn’t a nobody from nowhere, right?” I say angrily. I throw my napkin onto the table and lean in so that I can lower my voice. I am not going to let her bullshit ruin this lunch for Hayes. I glance over my shoulder and see him pacing in front of the restaurant, deep in conversation. I turn back to his aunt.

“That woman is criminally idiotic. I can assure you that *I* am not. Money is nice. But I don’t want more of it than I need,” I tell her.

“Yeah, right,” she says dismissively.

“I know it’s hard to imagine people not worshiping the same money god as you do,” I say.

“How dare you?” she asks.

“How dare *you*?” I shoot right back. “You could have just asked me how I feel about him.” I’m angry and surprised by the sting of tears in the back of my eyes.

“Oh, I don’t need to ask to know it’s obvious. But in my experience, love isn’t ever enough, so I want to know what else you want from Hayes.”

“I don’t have to prove myself to you,” I say indignantly.

“You’re right,” she says crisply, her eyes narrowing on me. “But, let me tell you, If any of the things you think he’s good for are comfort or financial security, then that will prove itself, too. I’m just trying to save us all a little time and a lot of heartbreak,” she says coolly.

I don't know whether to storm off or hug her.

"Gigi?" Her eyebrows shoot up in surprise at the gentle deference in my voice.

"May I call you that?" I ask.

"Of course, you may," she says archly.

I nod and smile politely. Then, I take off the gloves.

"You've known him his whole life and you're still putting a price tag on him. And I've only known him for four months, and I already know he's priceless," I snarl.

"How dare you?" she gasps.

"You're going to have to stop saying that. I dare because no one is in charge of me *but* me." I point at my chest. "Yes, I want him to spoil me," I say, and she smirks knowingly. I wipe it right back off. "With *respect, loyalty*, and free and exclusive access to his glorious body. But, I can finance *myself*," I say through gritted teeth.

"Well then, why are you two doing this dance where you're not together? What are you holding out for?" she asks in frustration. I can see how much she loves Hayes; I can see how worried she really is for him. So, I decide to ignore her disrespectful questions and innuendos and put her mind at ease.

I sigh and search for the right words to describe Hayes and me right now.

"I love Hayes. More than I've ever loved another man. Ever. But, we're in a really weird place. He hurt me, and I'm trying to forgive him. Forgiveness doesn't come easily to me. But I'm trying," I tell her.

And I am. I know he said what he did before he knew me. But honestly, I'm bothered by the fact that he would say it at all. My parents didn't do a lot right by me. But, they raised me in a place where I was surrounded by a lot of other people who did do right by me. I wouldn't be who I am today without those people. They are my family. Even though I'm not there, that town, its people, and its future is the wind beneath my

wings. I love them. I take my role as their daughter, sister, friend seriously.”

“What happened?” she asks.

“He insulted me,” I say.

“So?” she asks.

“So, when someone insults me, I feel like they’re insulting the people I love, too. And I won’t let anyone do that. Not even the man I want to spend the rest of my life with,” I say to her.

“The rest of your life?” She gasps. “Are you ...?” Her throat bobs.

“No, not yet,” I say. “But he loves me. I *will* forgive him because I can’t live without him,” I confess and my heart flutters as I say it out loud for the first time. I am certain of those things and they are the reason I’m here.

She grabs my hand across the table and her eyes shine with tears.

“Oh, my dear,” she says. I snatch my hand back.

“No,” I shake my head. “I’m not your dear,” I say plainly.

She pales a little.

“I know you were just trying to protect him. But have some faith in his judgment. And be honest with me. I hope this is just the beginning of our relationship. We should begin as we mean to go on. If you play games with me, we can be relatives, but never friends. I would much rather be friends, so please just say what you mean. And mean what you say,” I ask.

I watch her face and wait for her to respond. I hold my breath, very aware that I may have just made an enemy out of the one relative Hayes seems to hold in high regard. Besides his brothers.

She stares at me in complete disbelief for a full minute. I start preparing to explain to Hayes why I made his aunt cry or storm off or throw water in my face. Then, she lets out a hoot of laughter that sends several heads turning in our direction.

“Well, will you look at that,” she says, tears in her eyes and a huge grin on her face.

“Look at what?” I ask.

“He found you,” she says and digs into her food with gusto.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Laid Bare

Hayes

“Tell me about your aunt,” Confidence asks as soon as we’ve parted ways with Gigi. The question stumps me for a second. Not because I don’t want to talk about her, but because I’d already moved on to what I wanted to show her.

“I want to hear more about her,” Confidence says, and my heart warms because she sounds like she really means it.

“She’s everything. The reason I don’t have issues. The reason I can accept and give love. She took me in when no one else wanted me. And she put up with my shit and hasn’t held it against me,” I say and smile as I think about the way Gigi and I knocked heads when we first met.

“You love her,” she says it like it’s a question.

“Of course, I do,” I say and pull her down one alley off Rivers Wilde’s main street.

“Come on, I want to show you something.”

“What are we doing here?” she asks as we step out on the other side and onto a footpath that leads to The Oaks.

“I’m picking up my gate passes and my car. I want to show you my house.”

* * *

“You bought this house?” Confidence gasps when we step inside the two-story foyer of the red brick house nestled in

between a row of other two-story red brick houses that make up this picturesque cul-de-sac on Wildetree Lake.

“Yes, I bought *this* house,” I respond and take her hand and start for the stairs. “When you see the view from the master bedroom upstairs, you’ll see why,” I tell her, and my excitement builds with each step up the staircase.

“This is beautiful, Hayes,” she says and glances around the house. I follow her gaze, and I have to agree. About a tenth of the size of Rivers House, this is a house that already feels like home.

“I like it,” I say, intentionally noncommittal.

“Like? How can you just like it?” she screeches and pulls her hand out of mine. She runs it up the Cherrywood stair rails and sighs. “It’s like the dream house on my Pinterest board,” she says.

“Is it?” I ask.

But I know it is. She showed me the first time I went to visit her. When I saw the pictures of this place on my realtor’s site, I knew I was going to buy it. When I came to visit for the first time, I knew right away that this would be my home. Now, I hope she’s going to feel the same way.

“I want to show you something and then I want to tell you something and then I want you to be as mad as you want about it. But when you’re done, I’m fucking you. And when we leave this house later, we’re going to be back together.”

Her eyes widen and her jaw drops before she composes herself. “Hayes ...” she starts, her voice full of fight. I yank her to me and kiss her quiet. Her lips soften and her arms slip around my neck and she kisses me back like she’s been missing it as much as I have.

It feels so good, but I force myself to stop kissing her.

Her eyes are glazed with desire; her plump lips pout when I pull back. “I’ve told you about that caveman shit,” she grumbles, but nestles into me.

“Yeah, you told me.” I press a kiss to the top of her head and wrap my arms around her.

“But, that’s what I become when I think about you. You’re mine and I’m not going to act like you’re not. Not for one more day.” I breathe in a good whiff of her hair that’s tickling my nose. She smells like sunflowers and rain. So clean and bright and strong.

“Come on.” I put an arm around her waist and lead her to the bedroom.

It, along with the rest of the house, is fully furnished and decorated.

“This room is kind of ...” Confidence looks around and searches for the right word to describe the explosion of white, yellow, and peach that is my bedroom. “I would say feminine, but that feels like a massive understatement.” She laughs and looks around.

“Do you really sleep in that bed?” She points at the white, four-poster bed with yellow drapes flowing from the top of it.

“Gigi took my ‘do whatever you want’ too literally,” I explain. “But don’t worry, baby, I plan on getting rid of it before you move in,” I say.

“Hayes, give you an inch ...” she says.

“Oh, *Tesoro*, by the time we leave this house tonight ...” I look at my watch and note that it says eleven a.m., “I would have taken ten miles and put in a request for another hundred. You can say no, but I want you to look me in the eye and tell me you don’t love me. Because that is the only way I’ll let you go,” I tell her.

She dips her head and hides her face, but I know my girl. She always puts a lock of hair between her lips and presses them together when she’s happy but doesn’t want to show it. She’s holding the end of her ponytail between her fingers and is holding it to her mouth for a moment before she looks up.

“And you need to stop telling me what’s going to happen and how I’m going to feel and what you’re going to do with me,” she says irritably.

I've pushed enough for now, and in a few minutes, I'm going to have a real battle on my hands, so I change the subject and steer us to the big bay window at the back of the bedroom.

"Look." I point over her shoulder into the distance.

"Oh wow, we can see all the way to the Habitat for Humanity project site." She puts her hand on her throat.

"Have you been out there yet?" I ask.

"Yeah, once. Just this week. I think it's awesome that Wilde World is giving up that parcel of land for its development," she says, and I smile.

"That's not Wilde World's land," I say as nonchalantly as I can.

"Yes, it is. It shares the wall with Rivers Wilde," she argues.

"I know. You know that the land Rivers Wilde is built on all used to belong to my family, right?" I ask.

"All of it?" she asks.

"Yes, all of it. That land beyond the wall," I say and point to the short stone wall that was built to divide the land. "All of that still belongs to us," I inform her.

"What?" she turns around to face me. "You own all of that? Habitat for Humanity is building on your land?" she asks.

"No, they're building on *their* land. I donated it to them. Nearly fifty percent of what's left. One thousand acres for their project," I say.

"You ... *gave* it to them?" she squeaks. Her head swings wildly back and forth between the expanse of green pasture land that's one of the most unique things about Houston. Urban and rural blend within feet of each other. And it's self-contained, but with easy ingress and egress to streets that are the major traffic arteries of the city make the location ideal for commuters going to all of the major commercial centers in Houston. The Galleria, downtown, Greenway, Katy, Sugar Land, The Medical Center. She stares at me for a few minutes, her face tight with concentration as if she's looking at a puzzle that makes no sense.

“What?” I ask.

She frowns. “It’s just that there’s a dissonance between your actions and words, Hayes. Last time we talked about this, you were shocked that we wouldn’t accept a settlement. Now, you’ve committed your family’s resources to doing exactly what you refused to do last week.”

“Well, it was actually almost two weeks ago, and then, I hadn’t been to see any of the properties. I hadn’t met Matt and Jasmine and their ten-month-old who couldn’t go anywhere without the machine they use to treat his asthma,” I say.

“I heard about your visits,” she says. “Your little notetaker was very proud of himself.”

“He’s a good kid. And after those visits, I decided to make that donation. Some of those units should have been condemned before the flood.” I shake my head as I remember the rubble and debris that still lay strewn in the parking lots of these units. It’s a disgrace and I couldn’t sit by while they suffered.

“Does Remi know that? Why wouldn’t he tell me that?” I ask.

“Because I asked him not to. I wanted to tell you myself, and I didn’t want you to know until I thought you were ready to hear it,” I tell her.

Her eyes narrow slightly. “Why do you get to decide what I’m ready for?” she asks.

“Because I’m the decider,” I say, mimicking George W. Bush’s infamous words.

“Oh, really?” she asks and crosses her arms over her chest.

“Yes. That’s what I do. I make decisions that I think are best for myself and my family. Sometimes they mean I will have to hurt the people I love. Not be candid with them. Move them around like pawns,” I say.

“How do *you* feel about that?” she asks, surprising me with how soft her voice is.

“I feel fine about it. I’m not impulsive, Confidence. When I act, it’s after long deliberation. There have been moments in my life where I didn’t think, where I just acted, and I hurt

people without any really good reason. The ends didn't justify the means."

"You should hear yourself, Hayes. You're a stage five control freak," she says, but her voice is completely devoid of recrimination. In fact, I hear shades of pity, and I don't fucking like it.

"I have to be," I say tightly.

She holds her hand out to me and I step forward and take it.

She brings it to her lips and brushes the back of them in a sweeping motion. She looks up at me through her lashes, and I'm struck by how every time she looks at me, her eyes nearly lay me flat.

"You can't control people, Hayes," she whispers, and a knot tightens in my chest at the distress in her voice.

"I'm not trying to control anyone. I just take opportunities when I see them," I say and before she can cut me off, I tell her what I've been dreading. "Like when I realized that Kingdom wasn't going to do anything they weren't forced to when it came to the tenants, I knew Remi would need the best lawyer on his team."

"What do you mean?" she asks and then her eyes widen and her mouth falls open.

She drops my hand. "You didn't," she says quietly.

I'm shocked she hasn't guessed already. She jumps to her feet. "If you say that you asked Remi to hire me, I am going to walk out of this room, and if you try to stop me I will scream at the top of my lungs until someone calls the police," she yells.

Fuck.

"I didn't ask Remi to hire you," I hedge.

"But?" she bites out between her clenched jaw.

"But, I did bring you to his attention," I say.

She growls and balls her fists.

“Why, Hayes? Because you wanted me here so badly that you’d persuade your friend to give me a job I wouldn’t be considered for otherwise? How do you think that makes me feel? After everything I shared with you, you know that is the very last thing I would want,” she says and starts for the door.

My arm whips out like a lasso and I draw her to me.

“No, you aren’t leaving,” I say. “And scream because the closest house is three empty lots away. And you’ll be screaming for nothing because you know I will not hurt a hair on your head to keep you from leaving,” I say.

She looks pointedly at her arm, where my hand is cuffed around it.

I let go.

“I’m not holding you, but you’re not walking out of here over *that*. You needed a job. This one was perfect for you, and Remington already had your resume. He just needed someone to vouch for you. And I did,” I say. “But you know him now. Do you think he would have hired you because his friend asked him to? His twin sister works somewhere else because he won’t hire her,” I remind her.

Some of the fight flows out of her.

“Why didn’t you tell me, then?” she questions. Her voice is raised to a near shout, her eyes are pools of conflict. She’s angry, hurt, but she also ... understands.

“Because you are so fucking stubborn, *Tesoro*,” I say in exasperation. “You would have cut off your nose to spite your face and spit in Remi’s the minute you knew I was involved,” I say.

“I would not have,” she says.

“Liar,” I taunt her.

“I would not have. Not everything is about you,” she says.

“Liar,” I say again.

“Stop saying that,” she says angrily.

“Stop lying,” I say.

“You are not a mind reader!” she yells now. She’s practically vibrating, but with something much more potent, vibrant, and transformative than anger. It is relief and acquiescence. She’s relenting.

I press my advantage.

“You and I are cut from the same cloth, molded from the same earth, sky, water, and fire. I *can* read you.” I trace a line down her forearm.

“Did you do this because you wanted me to take you back?” she asks and points out at the development.

“Partly, yes. But not just because I want you on my arm and in my bed, but because I need you by my side,” I say.

“You do?” she asks, and I laugh at the surprise in her voice.

I nod over at the window, at the land. “I could have sold it. It’s some of the most valuable land in Texas. But, what’s the point of enriching my family and living in a walled off castle when the rest of the world is burning or in Houston’s case, drowning. But I wouldn’t have considered it if I hadn’t met you. At least, not as quickly,” I admit.

“So, you did it because—”

“Because I *knew* it was the right thing to do. The only thing I *could* do. You said this should be a personal problem. And you’re right. When I think about what I want the legacy of my times as head of this family to be, I find that preserving it isn’t enough - not just for the sake of it, anyway. That land has sat empty for two hundred years. It doesn’t flood, the only real expense of it are the property taxes, and because it was a donation and they’re a 501(c) (3), it’s a nice tax holiday for all of us. So, win-win,” I say with a shrug.

“My brother is on death row. He killed my father during one of their drunken rages,” she blurts out suddenly and I freeze.

“What?” I say because I don’t know how else to respond.

“Yeah, the one named Fortune,” she says.

“What happened?” I ask her.

“There was a terrible storm that night. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have been home,” she says, her tone a little wistful. “When they were both drunk, I couldn’t bear to be under the same roof. But the river was already swollen from rain a few days before, so it was flooding. I was trapped in the house, and they were fighting. Over the last beer. Fortune had opened it and Daddy snatched it from him. The bottle broke, and Fortune stuck the edge of it into Daddy’s neck and he bled to death right there while my mother and I hid under the dinner table,” she says dimly.

I convulse in horror. That’s unimaginable.

“I love where I come from, but I could never live there again. I was trapped between two terrors and it was only when one was gone that I was able to escape the other,” she says, her eyes distant and dull.

She’s drawn her knees up to her chest, her heels rest on the edge of the window seat cushion and her feet are dangling off the edge. Just then, I can see her as a young girl, sitting on the edge of a river bank, her long hair hanging off one shoulder as she looks over it at the danger behind her. Her toes being tickled by the water while she listened for the danger at her front.

“Did he hurt you?” I ask, even though I absolutely do not want to know if he did. I know that if she says yes, I will never rest well. Knowing someone hurt this woman, and I will never be able to make them pay.

“Of course, but he also made me stronger. I always fought back. I never took my beating lying down,” she says, and I want to go and find her brother and spare him the comfort of that needle.

“Well, am I free to go?” she asks quietly.

“Free to go where?” I ask, truly confused.

“Don’t you want me to leave? Isn’t this exactly the kind of thing you’d wanted to know and avoid when you ordered the background check?” she asks.

“For a smart woman, you’re pretty damn obtuse,” I say. “I told you why I ordered it, and that by the time it came through, I didn’t care what it said,” I remind her.

“And you care now?” she asks quietly.

“Did you not hear me earlier?” I ask and place my hands on her shoulders.

“Which part?” she says. Her smile is small, but it’s there, for the first time all day. I skim her arms and the sweep of all of that unbelievably soft skin at my fingers makes me want to take her clothes off and pull her supple body against mine and show her what my words have failed to.

That I need her constantly.

That she owns me as completely as I own her.

That I love her endlessly.

“The part about you and me being made from the same combination of elements. About you being mine?”

“Still?”

“*Tesoro*, knowing, didn’t change anything. In fact, it just showed me how alike we are.”

“Why? Are your relatives murderers, too?” she asks, and shoves her hands through her hair and looks up to the ceiling in despair.

“Maybe?” I shrug and think about it quickly. “I don’t know,” I say.

“Well, then, they’re not. If you had a murderer in your family, you would know it, trust me,” she says.

“Then, I don’t know that I would care. You’ve been shaped by the river, learned more from it than you did from the man who spawned you. You are not him. You have shaped me,” I tell her.

“Ha, right!” She laughs. I ignore her and press on. “You know the Mississippi River starts in Minnesota, right?” I ask her.

“Of course, I do,” she says.

“Well, at its mouth, it’s narrow enough that you can walk across it in less than a dozen steps,” I say.

She looks at me, eyebrows raised in question.

“You’re like that river. At least in the way you’ve affected me,” I say.

“How? Easy to cross?” she says morosely.

“Stop pouting.” I chuck her under the chin. “I mean that you *started* like that for me. A pin prick sized drop of water on the very still waters of my life. And the minute you touched me, you caused a ripple that blurred everything I thought I was certain of. The way I saw myself, my obligations, my future. And now, just like that river you love so much does, it winds its way south, you rush through me, and I’m *drowning* in you.” I kiss her quickly.

“I’m all for you loving me, but it’s not worth your life.” She uses the very same joke I made that night in the hot tub and I laugh.

“Actually, I can breathe deeply for the first time in a long time. I know we’re from totally different worlds, but I feel like we’re also from the very same one. We love our family—not just the ones who were born of our blood. My brothers, Stone and Beau, aren’t biologically related to me at all,” I tell her. “You’re not the daughter of a sadistic drunk and the sister of a killer. I’m not the scion of a line of philanthropic, but short-sighted men and faithless women. Our legacies—what we choose to leave of ourselves in this world—is up to us.”

She sighs...

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” I ask her.

She purses her lips and then she blows out a breath. “I don’t talk about it. No one in Amorel does. It’s our collective secret. We all like to pretend that Merle—that’s my dad—never existed and that Fortune is already dead,” she says quietly.

“And I’m ashamed of what they did *and* how I deny them. But to acknowledge them is to remind everyone not just that my brother killed my father, but about the blood that runs in my veins. It means something that it’s part of my history. And, in a

way, that's more than just a random moment. That it shaped me. Reduced me. Just like the river. Just like I thought Nigel had done. Just like I was afraid you'd do if I gave you another chance," she says. I grasp her chin, a little more forcefully than I need to and turn her face toward mine.

"There is nothing that could reduce you. You wear your name like a crown, and it's one of the truest things about you," I tell her.

She sniffs dismissively. "It *feels* like a joke. And I'm afraid sometimes that it is. My brother Fortune is going to die on a table with a state-sanctioned, poison-filled needle in his arm. My brother, Happiness, ran away before he was thirteen. I can't imagine that his life has brought him much of his name's meaning." She shakes her head.

"Well, first, I think you're giving your parents a lot of credit. Your mother, I will say, seems lovely. But fortune teller didn't seem to be one of her skills. They gave you a name they liked. You've made it your own. You can decide that what you've done with your life is worth less than some whim by your parents twenty-seven years ago. But you would be lying to yourself," I tell her.

She looks up at me through her long lashes and smiles.

"You *believe* in yourself. Enough to see beyond your current situation and reach for more. That's more than I can say for myself. I didn't consider that your interest in me could be more than all of the things that I've used to define myself. But, I swear, by the time we left Italy, I knew I didn't care what it said, and I knew that I could trust you," I say. And then I add the part that has been a more recent revelation. "I know that one of the reasons that people think of my money when they look at me is because that's what I show them. I started changing that after your visit. If I wanted more from people, I had to give more," I say. "You asked me about wanting more from my experiences than money could buy."

"Oh Hayes," she says wistfully.

"What?"

“Thank you for speaking so my heart could hear. I don’t want to be bought. I don’t want to be wooed with flowers or nice trips. I want to be wowed by you living your best life. Because I want to live mine, too,” she says.

“Let’s do it together.” I pull her off the window seat and carry her toward the bed.

“What are you doing?” she cries. “I’m still talking ...”

“Well, when you’re done, you’re going to put your pussy on my dick and make it dance,” I say. “I just want to get you in position.”

“Aren’t you mad that I didn’t tell you sooner? How do you not have any more reaction than this?” she asks.

“I already knew,” I admit and then brace for her reaction. Her body tenses and I just hold on tighter.

“You knew?”

“Yeah. After you left that day, I read it. I wanted to know what spooked you so badly,” I say.

She glares at me.

I smile at her.

Her glare falls apart and her mouth trembles before she covers it with her hands.

“You have the heart, spirit, and courage of a queen. I’m proud to know you. Proud that you love me. You’ve taken something and made it into nothing,” I say.

She rolls her eyes. “You’ve got it backward,” she says exasperatedly.

“No. I don’t. I’m telling you that you have taken something that *should* have reduced you, changed you, trapped you, maybe even erased you, and you have made it something so insignificant that you can leave it out of your life story and no one will know it’s missing,” I explain.

The light in her eyes changes. It softens, becomes more luminous and she relaxes in my hold.

“You really don’t care?” she asks.

“Of course, I care. But not in the way you think. I’m sorry you lived through that. I care that you think it’s something you should be ashamed of.”

“I worry sometimes that it’s in my blood,” she whispers and clouds roll into her eyes. So, I sit down on the bed with her still in my arms.

“What is?”

“That violence. Not because I feel inclined to it. But because I always know when it’s coming. Will I pass it on? Will it suddenly rear its head?” She sounds dejected.

I squeeze her a little.

“My grandfather was a cruel man. Everyone acts like he walked on water because he donated money for a hospital and because his name was Rivers. But I know what he was. My father, for all of his failings, raised me to believe I am my own man. He sent me to Gigi to make sure Thomas wouldn’t ruin that. And as much as I resented it then, I’m very grateful for it now as an adult. Because I can see that left to Thomas, I’d probably be just like him. Forgetting that my name is more than an access card for us. It can also be one for others. There is no such thing as a generational curse. There’s intent and action.”

“Then why do you feel responsible for what Kingdom has done? Why are you spending this money and time on the flood victims?”

“Because I can. Because it’s a chance to correct the course, and I’m taking it. I’m not trying to raise people from the dead, *Tesoro*. Just trying to fix things going forward.”

“What if I make the same mistakes they did?” she asks.

“I hate to break it to you, *Tesoro*. But, you have your own flaws to worry about. You’re stubborn, impulsive, and for all your instincts about violence, you seem to walk into danger all the time. Like falling off cliffs that you go walking down at night.” I tap the tip of her nose with my finger.

“Don’t touch my nose; it’ll make me sneeze. And thanks for the praise.” She shoves my shoulder lightly.

“Tell me mine,” I ask.

“Your flaws?”

“I know ... you probably have to think really hard about it,” I joke.

“You’re possessive, cynical, and suspicious,” she says without missing a beat. I let out a bark of surprised laughter, and then I kiss her softly.

“And you’re perfect. And mine,” she adds.

A cloud breaks over us. Sun streams in, and it feels like the return from a long march, and I’m so glad to be home.

When I break the kiss, she cups my face and sighs my name.

“Yeah, that’s better. Next time you say my name, though, I want you to scream it,” I say, then stand up and throw her onto the bed.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Thunder

Confidence

I land on Hayes's mattress with a small bounce and little shriek. My heart is thudding as I push my hair out of my eyes and see him looking at me like I'm the very last meal he'll ever eat.

His nostrils flared, his eyes hot with desire, and his lips are flushed. Mine tingle, sending signals to him that they want to feel him. All of him. I've missed him more than I can say. Sex was one of the ways we communicated.

We would say "I love you," "I hate you," "I'm scared," "I'm angry" when we fuck. And now, I'm hungry to know everything he's kept from me in the time we haven't touched each other.

"*Tesoro*," he says huskily and pulls his shirt off. I can't believe all of that is mine. He pulls his jeans off, too, and the most beautiful cock in the world peeks out of the top of his boxers.

"Come here." I crook my finger and he lies down next to me. He slides one of his strong, warm hands up my thigh and cups my pussy.

"Fuck, you can never ever keep this from me again," he says and pinches my clit. I gasp loudly, sharply, and I rock into his hand as heat and wetness fill my panties and I press against the warmth of his palm.

He dips his head and takes my lips with his and I sob at how perfectly right it feels to have my lips in the sacred embrace of his.

"I love you so much," he whispers into my mouth. "I never want to be away from you, *Tesoro*. Never." He grabs the front of my blouse and yanks until the straps give ... the fabric

sliding down my body sends a rush of anticipation across my skin like a river of electric shocks.

“I love you, too,” I say urgently, desperate to get these words out of the way so that I fall into his kiss and drown in the river of emotion he’s swept me away on. He gives me what we both need. He cups the back of my neck and rolls us until he’s lying on top of me, and then he slams his mouth onto mine and pushes past my lips and sweeps my mouth with his tongue. He kisses me like that and I can’t breathe. I don’t want to. I want to die with him stealing the breath from my lungs. I want to drown in him.

When he drags his lips off my mouth, he takes my lower lip with him and holds onto it with his teeth. The sting of his bite feels so good. Just like everything he gives me. Even when it hurts.

He drops his forehead onto mine. Our chests heave in unison, we breathe nose to nose, open mouth to open mouth. His eyes are shining and they hold me in a trap so exquisitely loving that I feel like I’m floating.

“I would cross galaxies for you, swim every ocean, fight dragons,” he says and his hands push my skirt up around my waist. He pushes my panties aside, wets his fingers by pressing them into my mouth and then slips his hand between us. He skims my clit with the edge of his blunt finger nail and then slides three of his big fingers into me.

I cry out at the sharp bite of my flesh stretching. He pushes them in, pulls them back out, and bends his head to my breast.

“I love seeing you like this. Your pussy is so goddamn tight, *Tesoro*.” He captures my nipple through the lace of my bra. He bites it and flicks the sensitive flat of it with the firm tip of his tongue.

I’m chanting his name and he finger fucks me harder, bites my swollen nipple and tears leak from the corner of my eyes as my orgasm breaks with no warning.

“*Ti amo tanto*,” he says against my chest and I feel the reverberation of his words in my heart.

“I love you, too,” I respond.

He kisses his way upward. His mouth is wet, his breath hot as his breathing grows more ragged.

“*Sei la mia anima gemella,*” he says as he parts my thighs.

“And you are mine,” I respond.

“*Non posso vivere senza te,*” he says and slides into me with one, deep, powerful thrust forward of his hips.

“You’ll never have to live without me,” I assure him

He grips the headboard.

“*Ti fotterò così forte,*” he growls.

“I don’t know what that means,” I moan when he pulls back out.

“It means I’m going to fuck you so hard ...” He bites his lip and tightens his grip on the headboard. I’m mesmerized by the flex and bulge of his big biceps over my head.

“So hard that what?”

“Let me show you,” he says and he thrusts up into me so hard my whole body slides up the mattress and the headboard rattles.

“Let me ride that wave, *Tesoro,*” he pulls back out of me and I smile wide, lick my dry lips and gaze up at my god of sin, my Duke of Midnight, my renaissance man, my heartbreaker, my heart fixer, my everything.

I’ll never stop falling in love with him. We make *magic* together.

I want to hold my breath and stop time. The feeling I have, of being enough, of being loved for all that I am, with no desire to change anything about me. With more than acceptance of the baggage I bring—with pride. I want him and this forever. Right now though, even that wouldn’t be long enough for me.

“You make me so fucking crazy.” He puts one hand on my hip and starts short, deep, hard, fast and my eyes roll to the top of

my head at the intensity of his fucking. I feel like I'm being consumed.

“Sei il tesoro più prezioso che ho trovato e che vorrei custodire per sempre”

I have no idea what that means, but I remember the first time he called me *Tesoro*, and my heart swells. I flash back to the moment I fell in love with him. It was that night on the ledge when I was sure that I was going to die.

And my heart, facing its potential demise, made a decision. If he hadn't been there, I wouldn't have made it off that cliff. And since that night, he's owned my heart. That river will roll over the delta whenever nature commands her to without any regard for the best laid plans of mice and men. And Hayes, *my* river, will roll over me. And I will love him through it all because my heart has chosen him.

“I would rearrange the universe to have you,” he says, and his body flexes over me. The muscles in his shoulders and arms flex under the smooth golden-hued skin that covers his beautiful body, and his thrust is so deep and hard that I'm sure he'll split me in half.

His chest heaves and he thrusts up again.

“Rearrange *me*,” I sigh and he thrusts even harder.

“Shatter *me*,” I beg and he fucks me hard, his arms and chest flex and ripple over my head, and when I come in the most spectacular explosion of tension I've ever felt, my whole world distills to the moment that would make this act between us a covenant—a promise.

He grunts into my neck and drills me into the mattress.

Yes, I will never get enough of this.

He lifts onto his knees and grips the headboard, his lower lips trapped between his teeth, his body moving like a machine between my thighs—fast, hard and unrelenting—until he throws his head and shouts my name between grunts.

He pulls out and spurts on my stomach and thighs. “I claim you,” he pants, before he slides back into me.

Our come mingles and smears between our sweaty bodies. I lift my hips and press us together. My orgasm's aftershocks are still sending dancing, shimmering shivers of electricity through me.

Then Hayes drops his big body onto the bed next to me, and a huge cracking sound is our only warning before the entire bed collapses beneath us.

We lay on the sunken mattress and stare at each other before we burst out into laughter.

Then, as if in response to our mirth, the splatter of rain starts to beat on the window.

"It was raining during our first time in Italy," I remind him.

"Because thunder only happens when it's raining," he croons the hook to the Fleetwood Mac classic in my ear. "And I promise you, this is the only place where we'll make this kind of noise. In our home, there will always be peace, You'll always be safe," he whispers and pulls me into his arms.

And then he rolls me over, slides back into me, and we make a storm of our own.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Surprise

Confidence

Two Weeks Later

“Hey, I’m heading to Sweet and Lo’s after my appointment at Blush. Want to meet me for coffee?” I whisper in Hayes’s ear. His eyes are closed, but he’s been awake for at least five minutes. I heard the change in his breathing when I stepped out of my bathroom. I let him pretend, though, so he could watch me. I got dressed right in front of him. His broad, sun-darkened, muscular shoulders twitched when I slipped my panties on, but otherwise, he hasn’t moved.

I inhale the scent of his sleep and sweat and our sex, and I want to get back into bed with him. But I have an appointment at Blush where it’s very hard to get an appointment. It’s one of Houston’s premier hair salons. The hair stylist, Tanaka, is one of the most sought-after stylists and colorists in the country, and she had a cancellation four weeks ago that bumped me up on the waitlist. And no way am I missing it, not even for a morning ride on Hayes’s gloriously thick dick.

“Yeah, I’ll meet you.” His sleep-roughened voice is sexy, and the way his mouth moves as he forms his words is something I could sit and watch all day.

“What time?” he asks sleepily into his pillow.

I glance at my watch and do some quick math. “Maybe around eleven a.m.?” I say.

One of his eyes pops open and he peers at the alarm clock by my bed and flips over, wide-eyed to stare at me.

“Are you having a quadruple bypass? Why does it take four hours to get your hair done?” he asks. I smack his shoulders, and then my hand goes back for a more tender caress of the skin that’s wrapped around the love of my life.

“I don’t have time to explain. Go back to sleep. You put in some good work last night. You must be tired.” I stand to leave.

His long, sculpted arm darts out, and he wraps his fingers around my wrist. I lean in for a kiss and think if I skip my stop for coffee, I’ll have time for a quick little something—not that there’s ever been anything quick and little about sex with Hayes.

The thought of coffee turns my stomach so violently that I pull back right before our lips touch and sit back down.

“You okay?” he asks. His eyes are only half open, and those beautiful wild hazel eyes, are full of real concern.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I don’t know what the hell, I just felt a little sick when I thought about coffee, which is crazy cause I can’t imagine how I’d get through the day without it.”

“Get back into bed, and I’ll give you the other thing you can’t get through the day without.” He tugs me back to him.

“No. If I don’t get this appointment, I’ll be in a bad mood until I get my hair done by her, and that’s at least a month away, if I’m lucky,” I tell him grouchily, but only because his offer is so tempting.

“I think your hair looks amazing,” he says.

“Because you’re a man and you’re fucking me. You probably don’t remember what color the hair on my head is unless I’m standing in front of you,” I joke and stand up again.

“I’m insulted. You have no idea how much time I spend thinking about your hair. Wrapped around my fists when you’re on your knees in front of me. Draped around my hips when your lips are wrapped around my cock. Falling down around me when you’re riding me ...”

“Not when it’s blowing in the wind while we stroll?” I ask and shake my head in feigned disappointment

“What fun would that be?” he asks. His grin is so wide and happy. I snap a picture of him with my phone and stare at it a beat before I look back at him. His eyes are sparkling, his

morning stubble is dark and heavy, and his smile is full of contentment that I put there.

“No fun at all,” I agree before I turn to leave.

“Come back to bed,” he calls after.

“Now way. I can’t be late for this. I’ll see you soon. Bye.” I chuck a peace sign at him and then walk happily out the door.

* * *

“Well, well, well,” the dark-haired, olive skinned, handsome man behind the reception desk at Blush drawls in the most beautiful baritone I’ve ever heard.

I stop and look over my shoulder to find who he could be talking to. Because it can’t be me. There’s nothing interesting enough about me to warrant that intrigued look on his face. There’s no one there. I turn back to face him and plaster a confused smile on my face. “Are you talking to me?” I ask.

His jaw drops. His eyes bug out of his head, he slaps his cheeks and then he shrieks.

Loudly.

I spin on my heel to get the hell out of there.

“Wait, wait, wait,” he calls in that baritone again and in a display of super human speed, he’s behind me with a hand on my shoulder, stopping me.

“Where are you going?” he asks with an amused chuckle.

“Why’d you scream?” I ask him angrily and fold my arms across my chest while I wait for him to respond.

“Because you look like Jayne Mansfield, who is like, my favorite actress of *all* time, and then you open your mouth and sound like Dolly Parton, who is my favorite *singer* of all time,” he explains.

“I love and respect Dolly like any good Southerner, but I do *not* sound like her and I don’t know who Jayne is.”

He actually steps back, grips his chin thoughtfully and studies my chest, “Hmmm, I’m telling you. If we brightened up that blonde all over and gave you one more bra cup, you’d be a dead ringer,” he says.

“This is probably the strangest conversation I’ve ever had in my life,” I say.

“It’s not strange.” He pouts. “They’re my idols. It’s like Dolly Parton and Jayne Mansfield had a baby and sent her to deliver me from an ordinary existence.” He claps his hands together repeatedly in my face.

I smile and step around him.

“Oh, I *see*. You’re crazy.” I point at him with a knowing smile.

“Totally, sister, and I ain’t afraid to show it.” He winks and then we both laugh.

“I’m Noé.” He sticks out his hand to introduce himself.

I shake his big, warm, very soft hand. “What hand lotion do you use and where can I get some?”

“Oh, it’s my own special blend,” he says with a wink, and I pull my hand out of his.

“Are you making a sexual innuendo that implies that your special blend is your spunk? ‘Cause, if so, that is so nasty,” I say.

“Nasty? Oh, sweet baby Jesus. You said *nasty* and you sound just like Dolly! Please tell me you’re a customer and you’re going to come in at least once a week.” He throws his head back dramatically.

“I might come back once a week if this is the reception I get. I feel special,” I say with a cheeky smile.

“You *are* special. And hot to trot, too. But, we can’t stand here gabbing all day. Tanaka is a stickler for time, even for too-hot-to-trot blonde bombshells with great tits.” He gives me an

exaggerated wink and grin, grabs me by the elbow, and leads me to the receptionist desk.

I'm totally charmed by him. People who can talk to anyone amaze me.

"What time is your appointment?" he asks as he leads me back to the reception desk.

"It's at seven-thirty. Color, cut, and blow out," I say, excitedly.

"Okay. I'm going to need you to fill out all the paperwork again," he says and hands me a clipboard.

I look down at the stack of papers and recognize the first one. "I filled these out online when I made my appointment. Why did you have me do it if I was going to have to do it again?" I say and look at him quizzically. This is one of my biggest pet peeves, so my good humor fizzles.

He frowns sympathetically, either ignoring or missing my irritation. "I'm sorry. But your submission was all messed up. Your name was off, so we thought there might be other errors. I made the executive decision to delete it and have you do it again." He pats my hand in more misguided sympathy. "Since we're worried about the time, just fill out that top form, okay? You can do the rest while you're under the dryer with your foils." He winks.

I purse my lips but fill out the form quickly. "Filling out redundant forms will not get between me and the magician who's going to be like the miller's daughter in *Rumpelstiltskin* and turn this hay into gold," I say and then cringe at the high-pitched fangirl tone in my voice. "Sorry," I mutter to Noé without looking up at him.

"No problem, Dolly. She's a legend and we get people in here acting like they're about to be baptized. You're tame. For now. Wait till you get done with your hair, you'll be like one of those television pastors. It's why our advertising budget is zero," he says proudly.

I hand him the paper, and he frowns. He blinks up at me and then looks back at the paper and says, "Your name is Confidence?" he asks.

“Yes. I know it’s unusual, weird, whatever. But it’s mine,” I say.

“I erased your e-submission because I thought it was an error. What a fucking fabulous name,” he says.

“Thank you,” I grin.

“But, I’m still calling you Dolly ‘cause that is how I’ll always think of you,” he says.

“Fair enough. There are a lot worse things than being named after an idol,” I agree.

“Okay, come on back. Let me get you settled in Tanaka’s chair. We book our clients so everyone has thirty minutes where they have her exclusive attention. Since it’s your first time, she’ll have a lot of questions. I’ll get you some champagne to sip while you’re chatting,” he says.

“I was thinking more like coffee,” I say and then swallow down the saliva that floods my mouth at the word. “Or maybe something that’s more suitable for morning consumption,” I say.

“I’ll add orange juice to your mimosa,” he says and walks me back to the room where one chair sits facing a full-wall mirror. Next to it is a small stand cluttered with flat irons, brushes, and bottles of product.

“Have a seat. Tanaka will be here in less than a minute.” He pats my shoulder lightly and turns to leave. “I’ll be back with your mimosa. I squeeze the juice fresh, so it will be a few,” and then he disappears through a door in the back of the room.

I stare at myself in the mirror. Do I really look like Dolly Parton? I mean, I’m blonde, short, bigger-than-average breasts, bigger-than-average ass, tiny waist that I inherited from my father. My hair is unruly, but that’s because I haven’t washed it in two days and haven’t brushed it in a day. My bare shorts-clad legs dangle several inches off the floor, the toes of my Top-Siders barely skim it when I try to reach. My stomach grumbles, and I put a hand over it. I should have eaten breakfast. I wonder if I could bribe someone to run across to

Sweet and Lo's for one of their ridiculously perfect almond croissants.

"Hey, I am Tanaka," a loud, lyrical voice sings, yes, sings at me just before a very tall, very beautiful woman steps through the same door Noé had left through. She looks like Tara from *True Blood*, even down to the black leather jeans hugging her endlessly long legs.

"Hello ... " I do my best Adele impersonation.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," she shakes her head. "Only I sing," she says pleasantly, but firmly.

"As it should be," I admit.

"Your hair is a disaster," she scolds. "What a waste of beautiful cuticles. You do not take care of it," she says and picks up a few strands of my hair. She pulls a little magnifying glass out of her pocket and holds my hair under it.

"What is this color at the end?" she demands, dropping the lock of hair unceremoniously before taking a step back to eye me closely.

"That's my color. I've just got through growing out a terrible brown I got from some online company that has since disappeared."

"Are you saying that's your natural color?" she asks, disbelief plain in her voice.

"Yes, it is. Why?"

"I've been trying to mix a blonde just this shade for the last six years, and I've never managed to get it quite like this." She picks the hair up again and strokes it. She slides her hand closer to my roots and says, "*This* color, though, it needs some help. I saw you want a color, cut, blow out?"

"Yes," I say.

"Okay, well, you've got such heavy hair, I think we should cut about five inches from the back and maybe seven from the front," she says casually.

“Um, no. I was thinking maybe half an inch off the ends,” I say.

“Well, if that’s what you want, there are about eight chain hair salons within two miles of here. Go there. *They* can do that. You do not need *me* for that,” she says, and I jump out of my seat.

“No, I don’t want to go there. But I don’t want to cut all my hair off,” I say.

“Why not?” she asks like it’s a true puzzle.

“Because that’s not what I had in mind, and you can’t expect me to just say okay when you’re talking about cutting my hair up to shoulders,” I say.

“Trust me. If you do not like it, I will do your hair for you every single week for a year and not charge you a single cent,” she says.

“Really?” I ask in surprise.

“You will love it. But yes, in case you’re truly an idiot, I will abide by my word and put up with having a person with bad taste in my chair every week for a year without getting paid a penny,” she says.

“Okay, although somehow that doesn’t sound like it would be very much fun,” I say.

“Oh, it would be a lot of fun. I do *not* take orders. I style what I see. The heads of hair that lead you here are all my vision—not what those men and women walked in and demanded. So, if you want to keep this long towel of hair on your head, you can go find someone else to help you with that. But I will never give you another appointment, so think carefully before you leave,” she says.

“God, you’re ruthless,” I say. I look in the mirror. I lift my hair off my neck and turn my head to look at my profile.

“It wouldn’t be that short. Your neck isn’t long enough to make that flattering,” she says.

“Please think nothing for my tender feelings, pick me apart, I can take it,” I say.

“Did you come for flattery or because you want to walk out of here looking like the very best version of yourself?”

“The latter. I’m ready. Do what you will.”

“You’ll be happy. My motto is if you leave pretty, you’ll come often. And I’ve only had two clients in twenty years leave here unhappy. And they were both insane.” She says this with a straight face.

“I’m ready. Do what you will,” I say in resignation.

“Excellent.” She claps her bejeweled hands together. I look past her into the mirror and say a silent goodbye to my hair.

“Let me ask you some questions before we go ahead with the color,” she says and pulls a small piece of paper out of her pocket. “DOB, April 25, 1990.” She glances up at me. “You need to start using eye cream. You’ve got the beginnings of fine lines that no twenty-eight-year-old should have,” she says and then glances back down.

“Yeah, just have at my ego, I wasn’t going to use it today, anyway,” I say.

“That was just advice from woman to woman. I’ve got melanin on my side, but I’ve been using eye cream since I was fifteen. I’m forty-five and look the same age as you,” she says with a shrug. “If you want to age terribly, feel free to ignore me,” she says.

I smile stiffly and make a mental note to visit Sephora before the weekend is out.

“When was your last period?” she asks. “You left that blank.” She points at the paper when I don’t answer.

“I didn’t realize that was a required question.” I frown.

“Well, there’s all this hysteria about pregnancy and hair dye, so I always ask to make sure you’re not possibly pregnant because there’s a general consensus that you don’t dye your hair until the second trimester,” she says.

“Well I’m on the pill, so ...” I say.

“Okay, great, so when was your last period?”

“Hmm, let me see. I keep track of it, so let me go see when I last wrote it in,” I say, and I pull my phone out of my purse and look at my calendar. And start scrolling.

I scroll back to September, scan the calendar and realize there’s no entry for the week my period usually shows up.

“Huh,” I say and go back to August and see the same. I look back at July and see the dates.

“Um, July 28th,” I say. And when she just stares at me, I throw my head back against the chair.

“No. I’m *not*,” I say unequivocally.

“Why? Are you celibate?” she asks.

“No, but I’m on birth control,” I say, and it sounds more like a plea than a statement.

“Then that baby really wanted you to be its mama.” She points at my very flat stomach and shrugs.

“How can you sound so cheery?” I snap.

“Cause I’m not the one who’s unexpectedly pregnant,” she says.

“I’m not pregnant,” I insist.

“Well, one way to find out.” She turns around and yanks open a drawer on her little stand of tools. She turns around and holds up a pregnancy test.

“Why in the world do you have pregnancy tests in your drawer?” I ask and stare at her wild-eyed.

“Ain’t I a hairdresser?” she asks impatiently. “Do you know how many times a week I see that deer-in-the-headlights look that’s on your face right now? I ask this ten times a day. Just go back to the bathroom and get it done.”

“No. I am not taking a pregnancy test just because I forgot to write down my period last month,” I say and put my hands up to ward her off. How is it possible for my stomach to feel heavy and flutter at the same time? My heart is racing, and my skin is tingling. I can’t even think straight.

“Okay, but I can’t color your hair today,” I say.

“Of course, you can,” I cry in desperation. This can’t be happening.

She sighs. “Let me be more deliberate with my word choice,” she says slowly. “I *won*’t color your hair today. Not unless you pee on that stick, and it’s negative,” she announces.

“Okay, fine. Don’t color my hair. I’ll get the cut and the blow out,” I say and watch her drop the test back in the drawer. I have a moment of regret where I think I should have just taken it, but I can’t do it.

Noé walks in with the mimosa on a small silver tray he’s carrying like it’s a tray of crown jewels.

“Good Lord, did you grow the oranges yourself?” she asks.

“So sorry, I had to run out to Randall’s to get the oranges. We were out,” he says and he drops the mimosa down in front of me. I pick it up and start to take a sip and my stomach grumbles. And I know I’m not pregnant. But I put it down because if I am, it would be very irresponsible to drink it without having proof. The thought of a baby—Hayes’s baby—inside of me makes me dizzy. But, at the trailing tip of the whirlwind of disbelief, panic, worry, doubt, and surprise is a bolt of joy.

Hayes.

His baby. I close my eyes and see a bundle with silky chocolate curls and glittering topaz hazel eyes.

“Come, let’s go back to the bowl,” she says and starts to stand me up.

“I’ve changed my mind,” I say before I can talk myself out of it. “I want to take it,” I say and stick my hand out.

“Okay, here you go,” she says and then points me in the direction of the bathroom.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Distracted

Hayes

“Hayes, good morning,” Amelia’s graver-than-normal voice makes me wish I had ignored her call. I finish tying the laces of my sneakers and sit down on the bed.

“Your voice makes me think there’s nothing good about this particular Saturday morning, so let’s just cut straight to the chase,” I tell her.

“Your uncle and stepmother are mounting a petition to have you ousted as chairman of the board,” she says.

“You’re kidding,” I say and drop my forehead into my hand. That rat faced motherfucker. I’ve been treating him with kid gloves. But they’re about to come off.

“Hayes?” Amelia calls my name when I don’t say anything more.

“Can they do it?” I ask.

“Well, yes. Clearly, because they have,” she says.

“No, I mean, is there a way to remove me? I thought it was a position I held until death,” I said.

“Normally, that is the case. But there’s a clause for removal if you are unfit to hold the role. That is the clause they have evoked,” she says.

“Unfit?” I breathe into the phone in complete indignation. “In what way? By what measure?” I demand.

“By reason of illegitimacy,” she says slowly. Meaningfully.

“Illegitimacy?” I ask.

“Yes. Hayes. They’re demanding a DNA test and I would suggest you comply without any protest.”

“I don’t understand,” I say. “A DNA test for what? That would only help them if I wasn’t my father’s son,” I say angrily.

Amelia is silent.

“Are they implying I’m not my father’s son?” I demand an answer, but my throat is dry and my heart is beating faster now.

“That’s *exactly* what they’re implying,” she says.

“Based on what?”

“Based on what they say is a discrepancy between your mother’s medical records and death certificate. I don’t know what that means, do you?” she asks pointedly.

“Of course not. That’s ridiculous. I’ll take the DNA test today. Shut this shit down now and then I’m done playing nice with him,” I say.

“Okay. You can be done playing nice with him. But Hayes, is there any way at all, that the paternity test could come back anything other than what you expect? This is an extraordinary move they’ve made. If it’s a Hail Mary, it’s a hell of a gamble.”

“I have a birth certificate with my parents’ names on it. I have the same blood type. I look just like my father and my grandfather. This is ridiculous. It’s an attempt to embarrass me. Send me the details on when and where I can take the test. The sooner the better and I want those results expedited.” I glance down at my watch. I’m late meeting Confidence, and I almost want to text her and ask her to meet me back at her place, but I’m not going to let this asshole ruin more than he’s already tried to.

“I’ll send you the court order. I advise you to go to a random lab instead of your doctor for the test. Just to avoid any questions about tampering or manipulation of their process.”

“Fine. I’ll be looking for it. I’ve gotta go,” I say before I hang up.

I should have thanked her. That couldn’t have been an easy call to make. My mind is reeling. My uncle must really hate

me to have done this. A paternity test. It's ridiculous.

And yet ... my mind is not easy. I have a kernel of dread in my gut that I will ignore until I don't have to. But it's burrowed itself into the lining of my life; its sharp, thorn-like tip burns as it embeds itself into the story of my life. And with every step I take, it burrows deeper and it feeds on years of being denied my rightful place at the head of this family. I've been too soft. I've been distracted by my feelings. I feel a wash of shame. I've had my eye off the ball trying to win Confidence back. I should have seen this coming. I let a woman pull me off course once, and I lost pieces of my legacy that my father scarified for. And I'm letting it happen again.

"But, she's not just a woman," my better angels remind me. I ignore them. I can't let this happen again.

I rush out the door, already late to meet Confidence but slowing my steps because I'm not ready for what I need to do. When I think of what my uncle's shit is about to cost me ... the kernel in my gut pops and the blooms are soaked in shock, resentment, and rage.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Too Late

Confidence

I glance at my phone for the third time. Hayes is never late. But, it's Saturday. I was a little nebulous about the time, he just erred on the other side of eleven o'clock. I turn around and look at my hair again. She didn't do a permanent color, but she rinsed it with a golden blonde that makes it look like spun gold in the light. She cut it so it skims my shoulders. I feel naked and cold. But my face looks more ... I don't know ... visible.

I'm pregnant.

I stare at my reflection and try to see how I'm different. I must be different. Right?

Hayes and I blended our cells together to create a miracle. I think I'm in love already and all I've seen is a blue line. Hayes's DNA has coalesced with mine. That little amalgamation of us has burrowed into my womb and will take from me, blood and marrow. Teeth and bone. And a life will grow from it. I'm falling in love at the speed of light with a blue line. I do what I have been too afraid to since I took four pregnancy tests in the bathroom of Blush. I laugh.

I want to wait and get a blood test before I tell Hayes, but I'm not sure that I can. There's not a single solitary cell in my body that expects him to be anything less than jubilant when I tell him. We are in such a good place. The litigation with Kingdom is moving along, but so are his side-by-side efforts to help alleviate the suffering of his tenants while they're in legal limbo. I've watched him write checks from his personal account this week that, no matter how much money he has, must have stung a little. But he's smiled every time he's paid for something that makes their lives easier. And he's doing it all anonymously. He doesn't want the attention, and he doesn't want to cause any friction with Kingdom's board. It has just

been one more thing about this man who makes me feel like he would move mountains to be with me. I feel the same way.

I can't wait to tell him what we've done together.

"Well, look what we have here," a voice from beside me calls, and my blood freezes in my veins. I turn my head slowly and take in the tall, dark blond, handsome man whose beautiful smile hides a black, devious heart.

"Barry," I say flatly and curl my lip in disgust.

"Confidence," he drawls like he's making a joke.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"It's a public place. Or did you have the entire town blacklist me?" He glowers at me.

"I didn't have anyone do anything. You running around ranting about feminazis and conspiracies did that."

"That mouth of yours is only good for one thing. And talking isn't it," he says.

I roll my eyes at him. "Was that supposed to offend me? Make me cry? Make me care?" I ask with contempt and malice and disgust. "You're pathetic," I spit at him.

His expression loses any pretense of charm, and he pushes himself off the window he was leaning on and walks over to me, clearly thinking he can intimidate me.

"You didn't think I was pathetic when you worked for me," he says.

"No, I didn't. But I was also clearly suffering from a clear case of extreme slumming. I'm all better now and I see you for exactly what you are," I say with a smile. I turn and start down the narrow alley that runs between Blush and Twist. I stop as soon as I realize I'm walking away from people. Away from the light and out of sight. I can hear him rushing to catch up with me. It takes everything I have to not run. I try to reach into my purse for my phone so I can call Hayes, or 9-1-1. But, my hands are trembling.

I smell it on him like I did my Dad. He's in the mood to hurt someone, and I just walked down a fucking alley. His hand closes on my arm and spins me around to face him.

"Let me go, Barry!" I yell, and he hustles me farther down the alley.

"I'm just getting started." He leans forward and puts his face in mine. "And maybe if you ask nicely, once he's done with you, I'd be willing to give you a—" My hand flies out and up before I can stop to think. The crack of my palm against his cheek and the burst of white-hot pain at the contact make me feel like I detonated a bomb.

He grabs my wrist with one hand and my chin with the other. "You fucking bitch," he grinds out into my ear. He presses his body into the back of mine and I hate myself for the sob that escapes me when his erection presses into my back. He presses his lips to my ear and whispers, "You're lucky you've got that body. Why don't you show me what you showed Wilde and Rivers that's got them so hot and bothered over you?" He grinds into me, and I scream. Loudly enough that it bounces off the dark, stone walls. He covers my mouth with his hand, but not before I can bare my teeth and bite down on his palm. I almost gag at the musty, salty taste of his skin in my mouth. But it does the trick. He lets go and I break into a run. I only get two feet before he's got me back in his iron tight grip.

The skin on my arm burns as he struggles to hold onto me. I kick him and scream, at the top of my lungs, "Hayes!" before his hand is back over my mouth and his hot breath all over my face. "You think he'll care what happens to you?" He throws me against the wall and steps between my legs. "I'm going to fuck that cockiness right out of you," he says and starts unbuckling his pants.

And I start fighting for my life. His hand is still pressed to my face, and now he's pressing so hard that I can't open my mouth to bite him or breathe.

I kick, punch, fight, slap. I might as well be fighting an eight-foot wave. He completely overwhelms me. I close my eyes and wail in my throat and beg God to make it stop. I feel his

penis, hard and heavy, pressing against the bare skin of my inner thigh, and I think about Hayes and my baby and I want to die. I sob helplessly into his hand and hope he kills me when he's done. I left Arkansas to escape violent men, and he's managed to find me anyway.

A loud roar comes out of nowhere and cuts through the ringing in my head and then, I'm falling. His body is yanked free of mine, and I land with a thud on my ass, and look over to see Hayes on top of Barry. His fists are flying and making contact with sickening thuds and crunches of skin and bone. "You motherfucking piece of shit!" he yells in between his arm's wild swings.

I run to him, to try and make him stop. I'm afraid he'll kill him. But he's in a rage and doesn't hear me. I run back to the top of the alley and scream for help at the top of my lungs before the tsunami of emotions overwhelms me and I faint.

Chapter Thirty

Helpless

Hayes

“I wanted to talk to you before you went out there. Confidence is waiting,” Amelia says.

“What is it?” I ask and finish buttoning my shirt. I’m being released from the courthouse jail where I’ve spent most of the day.

She sighs and leans back against the wall. “Well, I have good news and bad news. What do you want first?” she asks.

“The good, please,” I say. “Maybe the sun will explode as soon as you’re done with the good news, killing us all in the process. And you’ll never get a chance to tell me the bad news.”

“Are you *drunk*?” she asks after a beat of silence.

“I’ve been in jail. The only thing I’ve had to get drunk on is the clusterfuck juice of my life. Give me the good news first,” I repeat.

“The DA isn’t pressing charges against you.”

“I wish he would,” I snap.

“Hayes, that is your anger talking,” she says like I’m being tedious.

“I want as many opportunities to tell the world what a piece of shit Barry Jimenez is. And if standing trial for defending my woman would give me just one more chance to tell everyone, I’d do it.”

“A trial would be a disaster for you right now. All of the rebuilding of the Rivers name will go down the drain,” she minds me.

“I don’t care,” I say.

“You should,” she snaps. “Here’s the bad news. Your uncle has petitioned the board for your removal, without regard for the DNA results,” she says.

“The fuck he did!” I shout and spin around to face her. “What? How? Can they do that?” I ask in alarm.

“Yes. They can. There’s a clause added by your grandfather about thirty years ago that gives them the right to do this.”

“What does it say? This clause?”

“In the event that the actions of the chairman materially damage the social standing of the organization or cause a negative light to be cast on the family’s reputation that their ability to lead the board could be questioned or challenged. Your uncle and stepmother are doing that.”

“Is this about that asshole who attacked my girlfriend?” I ask angrily.

“This is about you having to be pulled off him after breaking his ribs, his nose, and knocking out one of his teeth,” she explains.

“Well, the DA hasn’t pressed charges,” I say.

“But Mr. Jimenez is suing you civilly, Hayes. For a lot of money,” she says.

“I don’t really give a shit about the money. You think I was going to stand there, watch him put his hands on my woman, try to rape her, and just kindly ask him to stop? You’re out of your mind, and he’s lucky I didn’t fucking kill him. If I ever see his ass again, I might,” I tell her.

“Don’t say that out loud. Because if he ends up dead, whether he had a heart attack or died in a plane crash, you won’t be able to stop the rumor from suggesting you had something to do with it. You have extraordinary power. Access to an almost limitless amount of money. It wouldn’t be far-fetched to think you’d dispose of an enemy and try to make it look like natural causes. So, do not talk like that to *anyone*,” she says.

“Fuck that motherfucker and the law that allows him to turn himself into the victim here,” I spit out.

“Well, now he’s cooperating with your uncle. And they are coming for you hard. I’m going to file for a temporary restraining order on the action to remove you. I don’t expect it will be granted, but at the very least it will force them to present whatever evidence they have against you in their little coup d’état. That is what this is. It is full out war. They want you gone, and they’ll do it by any means necessary,” she says.

“I think you’re overreacting. They want money, not my life,” I brush her off.

“Don’t dismiss it. It’s not just money. It’s control of the entire Rivers family line and future. They want it. I want you to keep your head down. And you’re going to like what I have to say next even less,” she says.

“That is a very high bar you just set. What could be worse?”

“I want you to put some distance between you and Confidence,” she says.

“Fuck. No,” I say immediately. I feel a flush of guilt when I remember that I had even considered the same thing myself. I close my eyes to push down the rage that threatens to consume me when I remember the scene I walked in on. Her against the wall. Him between her legs. Hurting her. My stomach roils.

“No way. Are you kidding? You want me to stay away from my woman so that punk ass uncle of mine can have what he wants? No fucking way,” I say.

“No, I want you to stay away from her, so he can’t use her to get to you. He knows she matters to you, and that makes her a target. Make him think you’ve broken up. Just until it goes away. The petition he filed has rules. I’m filing the TRO today. It’ll be denied. We’ll have seven days to respond. Just think about it,” she urges me in that intense whisper she does when she’s trying to be persuasive. But I don’t need persuading.

“I’m sick of this, and I’m ready for it to be over,” I tell her.

“Good. We’re going to need to spend all week getting our response together. Now, the DNA results will come back

before then, and depending on their outcome—”

“Why do I get the impression, Amelia, that you’re worried about the results?” I cut her off.

She stares at the floor. Her silence is alarming.

I press her.

“Tell me. Now,” I say. “What do you know?”

“Nothing, Hayes. I don’t know anything. But I’m worried because Swish told me something before he died—*right* before he died.”

“What?”

“He said, ‘Hayes is his ...’ and that was all. I don’t know what ‘his’ meant. I didn’t even make anything of it because he was so close to the end, and he’d been in and out of consciousness for two days. I have always thought they were the words of his dying mind. Until ...”

“Until my uncle brought this up.” Understanding dawns. “Shit. You think somehow, he raised me as his own, but I’m not?” I ask her.

“Honestly, until today, I did think just that. I was sure that the test would come back proving you were not your father’s son. But him filing this second motion, to have you removed, says he’s not one hundred percent sure of his position. Otherwise, he would just let the DNA test results take you out. That’s why I want to try and buy you as much good will as possible. If you are his son, then I want you to be able to fight the other charges. It’s important that you maintain an unimpeachable public reputation.”

“No, I need to focus on maintaining my unimpeachable *private* reputation. The woman I love and who I plan on asking to spend the rest of my life with was almost raped today. I don’t care if I get to be the chairman of the board of a company that would turn its back on people who have been harmed by its negligence. I don’t. That will not be my legacy. I have my own money. I have my own fucking name. And I have a woman who I love more than anything that I need to keep safe. I need to focus on that right now,” I tell her.

“I think distance could keep her safe. And you, too.” I dismiss her and decide to end the conversation because I’m desperate to get to Confidence and see how she’s feeling. I take my keys, phone, and wallet from the small envelope they brought in with my clothes.

“Let me know what the DNA test says, Amelia. But honestly, I am about done with this family and its shit. I’m not the head of it. I’m just the next in a line of men who have been puppets controlled by the whims of a man who has been dead for a hundred years. That doesn’t make me a ruler or king or leader. I’m just filler.”

“Hayes, don’t make hasty decisions.”

“I’m not making any decisions. For once in my life, I just really don’t give a shit,”

I tell her and walk out.

She’s waiting on a bench by the back door that leads to the exit. She’s curled up, her legs tucked underneath her, her hands wedged between her thighs. Her head is bent. She looks so small, and as I get closer the bruises he left on her become visible.

My gut knots. The door slams shut behind me and she looks up in my direction, her eyes wide at first and then softening with relief when she sees me.

“Hey, baby,” I say as I start toward her. She jumps off the bench and runs toward me. Her arms are pumping, her hair flies behind her, and her face is a mask of determination as she launches herself into my open arms.

“Hayes,” she breathes my name into my neck. She’s trembling and squeezing my neck so tightly that I almost can’t breathe. But I would rather die than let her go. My heart is in my throat as I stand there with her in my arms. Her heart thuds against my chest and she cries quietly. Her tears soak my t-shirt and I feel frustrated at my powerlessness.

“I’ve been so scared, Hayes,” she whispers against my neck.

“I’m so sorry, *Tesoro*.” My ribs feel two sizes too small for my body.

She's been alone all day. I hate that she felt a moment of fear. I hate that she had to worry about me on top of all of that.

I walk us out just like that to the SUV that Amelia ordered for me. It's nearly two in the morning and the few reporters who are still hanging around waiting for me to be released are snoozing when we step out. They all wake up when the door closes, but the driver has the door to my car open and we're inside before more than a few camera flashes catch us.

As soon as the door closes, I raise the privacy screen. I try to put her down on the seat next to me, but she won't let go. She's trembling. I cup her face and find her cheeks wet with tears.

Cold dread fills me. I thought I'd gotten there in time.

"Baby, did he ...?" I can't bring myself to finish the question.

"No." She shakes her head. In the dark of the car, I can't see her face, so I reach up to turn on the overhead lights. She puts a hand on mine and says, "please, don't,"

"Why?" I bring my arm down and cup her cheek. She nestles her face and her breath brushes my skin in warm puffs. "I'm just so happy to be with you. That you came for me. It was fucking awful. I haven't been that scared in a very long time," she whispers.

"Oh, baby." I feel so fucking useless.

"So, thank you, Hayes. You've saved me twice now," she says and then climbs down from my lap. She rests her head on my shoulder and by the time we're pulling up to the valet at The Ivy, she's fast asleep. I carry her up to her apartment.

She doesn't stir as I put her in bed. I lock her door behind me and tell the doorman that no one should be allowed up without her okay. Then, I get into the back of my waiting car.

In the dark of the car, I cry. Like I haven't since I was a boy. Not a sobbing cry, but hitched breaths and watery, greedy gulps of air, while my chest heaves under the weight of everything that has happened in the last twenty-four hours. By the time I get home, I'm spent.

Chapter Thirty-One

Wounded

Confidence

Since the terrible incident in Rivers Wilde, my life has been lived in hectic, noisy spaces that fall between crying jags, snatches of fitful sleep, police interviews, and worry. I went to work that Monday, despite my bruises and aches. I had nothing to be ashamed of, and I had a lot of work to do.

The pro-Barry movement has lost most of its members. But, the few loyal ones who don't seem to care that he tried to rape me in broad daylight don't try to hide their contempt. On top of that, we hit a real roadblock in the class-action suit against Kingdom. The class is divided. A lot of them want to settle. And there's talk about them breaking away to form their own suit.

Oh, and I'm officially pregnant. I went to see my doctor after getting slammed up against that wall and they did a blood test. It's official. I'm due on the 28th of May. I'm ten weeks along and I have an ultrasound picture tucked into my purse. Hayes and I have been talking every day, but that's it. He's been busy every time I've tried to see him. I thought he needed some space like I did. But, now I'm worried that he's avoiding me.

While he had been in custody after his arrest, Amelia had filled me in on what happened that morning and why he'd been late to meet me in the first place.

The memory of that night, knowing that he's alone while dealing with what happened in the alley as well as the prospect that he is not his father's son, has torn at me and kept me awake every night since I saw him.

I was starting to feel frustrated because I had been through an ordeal, too—a big one, and I didn't have my best friend's shoulder to cry on. I was pregnant and hadn't told him because I hadn't had the chance to. He hasn't answered his phone all day.

Amelia called me this evening to say she had the DNA results but couldn't reach Hayes. She said she was headed to his house, so I asked her to bring me with her. And here we are.

"This isn't a good idea," Amelia says for the fourth time in the last two minutes.

"Maybe not. But if things go wrong, I'll handle it," I tell her.

"You can't handle a man that size. What if he loses it again?" she asks.

I reach up and punch on the overhead light in her car.

"If you make one more comment about Hayes that implies he's a danger to me or dangerous at all, I will make sure he fires you," I tell her.

Her eyes narrow and she leans forward. "I've served this family for years. Swish himself trained me. I'd like to see you try to get rid of me," she says coldly.

"No. You wouldn't," I tell her honestly. "I don't hold back when it comes to him. And if you believe any of that shit his ex-wife spewed about him, you don't deserve to lick his boots, much less to be on his payroll," I growl at her.

Her eyes widen and she leans back. "I'm glad you've got so much backbone. You're going to need it. I don't know what's in that envelope, but if it's not good, things could get ugly," she says somberly. Her eyes are so grave and my heart sinks.

I glance up at Hayes's house. There are no signs of life inside. But I know he's there and I need to get to him.

"Let me just say this—since you don't seem to know—he would never touch me or anyone who couldn't defend themselves against him. He's not a bully or an abusive man. Sure, he's an asshole sometimes, but that's how he's managed to survive in this cesspool of humanity he was born into. I'm

his second chance. He's mine. No matter what the results say, we'll be fine because that's what we do. I've been preparing myself, it'll be okay. You can leave."

"Okay," she says quickly, easily, and with a touch of relief.

"Okay. Give me the envelope and then get out of here. I'll find my way back or Hayes will bring me. Either way, tomorrow we get to work on taking that uncle of his down," I say and wait for her to nod.

"God help the person who comes up against the two of you. You're like two sides of the same coin," she says, her voice full of marvel.

"That's right," I affirm, glad that she finally sees it. "God help them."

I open the car door, turn around to give her one last reassuring smile and say, "I'll see you tomorrow."

I decide to knock first. But after three knocks, with two minutes between each, there is still no answer. So I use the key and let myself in.

The house is quiet. The ticking of a wall clock, the hum of a subzero fridge, the whir and click of the air conditioning coming on and the chirp of what sounds like hundreds of cicadas fill the otherwise still, dark house.

"Hayes," I call. There's no resounding echo, none of the certainty that comes knowing that you're heard, even if you're not seen. I feel my first real prick of worry for him. I should have come sooner.

"Hayes," I call out again and start up the stairs. The carpeted runner silences my footfalls, but the wooden steps still creak every other step. It's silent upstairs, too. There's a light peeking around the frame of the door that leads to his master bedroom. As I get closer, I hear his snores. I push the door open and my anger spikes.

Lined up along the foot of the bed are four empty bottles of Jack Daniels. I watch him. Even in his sleep, he's strong and powerful.

His brows are relaxed, his stubble-covered jaw is still strong, but not so rigid. His lips are parted and soft. For the first time, I see the little boy who grew up without his mother in a house that was managed like a chessboard. Manipulations, lies, and death blows.

I spend a few minutes watching him and then pick up the glass of water by his bed and throw it at him. His eyes pop open in surprise. I step back when he starts to shake his head back and forth to get the water off and wipes the water out of his eyes before he looks up at me. His eyes are murderous.

“What the hell?” he yells at me.

“You tell me!” I give him the full force of my anger, too. “I’ve been trying to reach you for days,” I seethe.

“I told you I needed a few days,” he grumbled.

“I knew you needed some time to think. And I walk in here to find you living like you’re a frat boy on spring break.” I point at the bottles lined up on the floor.

“Stop screaming,” he moans and cradles his head.

“I’m not screaming. Even though I should be. You fucking abandoned me, Hayes!” Now, I raise my voice.

“I didn’t,” he groans.

“And you abandoned yourself. We have shit to do. Shit to discuss.”

He covers his face and groans into his hands.

“You threw water at me, Tesoro,” he grumbles.

“Yeah, I know. Because I’m the one who did it,” I say with dry sarcasm. He scowls, completely unamused.

“I just needed a couple of days,” he says miserably.

“Hayes, what the hell have you been doing in here? Are you high?” I ask him.

He sits up straight and shakes his head. “I don’t know where my phone is. I haven’t seen it since the ...” He winces as if he’s in pain and says, “since the fight.”

“How did Amelia reach you then?” I ask

“The house line, like she always does. It’s an encrypted line and she’s unduly paranoid, so she always uses it to talk to me when it’s urgent,” he says. And then he shakes his head and looks at me with real confusion in his eyes.

“What the fuck is wrong with my family?” His voice is etched with pain and my heart aches for him because I don’t have any answers to that question.

“I don’t know. But, we need to talk.”

He sighs.

“I know that you have more shit going on right now than most people deal with their whole lives. But you’ve also got more power, privilege and wealth than those same people can dream about. And with all of that comes all the obligation. More money, more problems, right?”

He nods.

“So, get off your ass and put on your streetwise hat, because your uncle is playing dirty,” I tell him.

“No kidding.” He sighs and rubs his hands tiredly over his face.

“We have to think like desperate people who don’t have safety nets or moral compasses,” I tell him.

“You sound like Amelia,” he grumbles.

“You should do whatever she tells you to do,” I say.

“You’ve changed your tune. I thought she was a ‘vulture,’” he says.

“The board meeting is in two days. No atheists in foxholes,” I say.

“Do you mean my enemy’s enemy is my friend?” he asks.

“Whatever. We have a lot of work to do!” I snap impatiently.

His expression has morphed from slightly annoyed to happy.

“Why are you smiling? Do you like getting chewed out by me?” I ask.

“I don’t know what chewed out means, but it sounds like it could be hot,” he says.

“Hayes,” I huff.

“That morning, when he attacked you. I was coming to break up with you,” he says.

I freeze and stare at him. Tears, hot and unbidden, fill my eyes. My breath is trapped in my lungs, and I can’t speak.

“I wouldn’t have done it,” he says quickly and rushes to stand by me. When he puts his hands on my shoulders, I lean into him.

“But why?” I hear myself say in a voice that I don’t recognize. It’s thick with hurt.

“I had just gotten the call about the DNA test. I was angry and thought I had let Thomas get away with too much because I’d been distracted,” he says, not quite meeting my eyes now.

“By me?” I ask.

“Yes. But by the time I got there, I knew there was no way I could give you up. The sun rises and sets in your eyes, Confidence,” he says. My heart starts kicking again and my tears dry.

“But walking into that, seeing him on you. I thought ...” He swallows thickly. “I’m sorry. So sorry that I wasn’t there. I’m so fucking sorry that he put his hands on you. That I was late,” he sounds so distressed.

“Hayes, why didn’t you just talk to me? Is that why you haven’t left your house? You’ve been avoiding me?” I ask.

He laughs darkly. “No. I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from going to that fucker’s house and setting it on fire,” he says. I grab his hand and squeeze.

“I was scared that day. But I’m okay now.” I tell him. “I just want us to focus on what we can control. And we have to get ready for this meeting. It’s only two days away.” I feel desperate suddenly to lighten the mood. I’ve spent four days in a state of complete anxiety and it’s taken its toll. As much as

I'm dreading the rest of our conversation, I'm glad we have it to talk about.

I lean back on the window sill and he sits on the bed watching me with a smile on his face.

"What are you smiling at?"

"You," he says, his gaze growing more intense. "You're my everything. And I want to be your everything," he says intently.

"You are my everything, baby," I assure him.

My heart is in my throat.

And, in his eyes.

"I'm thinking about myself, my future, my responsibilities so differently because of you," he says and my heart swells. "So, yeah, I'm worried about the DNA test. But that's not what has given me nightmares. It's that I've done anything to hurt you or allowed anything to hurt you." His eyes are glittering with fire that speaks of loyalty, constancy, and forever.

"I know, baby ..." I say and want so badly to put him in my pocket and protect him from everything that's coming this week. "I feel the same way."

"You're my priority. Because you are my future. You have a view of the world that I want to use as my lens for the rest of my fucking life. Even when it feel like it's do or die, I know that you and I are a sure thing."

"Never doubt that," I say.

He runs his hands through his hair. "Everything feels so complicated, except for us."

"I don't care if I'm not the heir. I don't care if they remove me. The only thing I need is you." He stands up, naked as the day he was born. Even soft, his penis is beautiful and thick. His whole body is beautiful and thick. I let my eyes feast on him, and when I get to those eyes—those fucking eyes—I blurt out, "I'm pregnant."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Truth

Hayes

“You’re what?” I ask and sit back down on the bed, only briefly registering the cold, wet sheets bunching under my bare ass. I’m dazed and a million questions and emotions flood me as I try to recover from the curve ball she just threw at me.

“Hayes.” She walks over to me, her blue eyes crinkled in concern. “Are you okay?” she asks and then lays a hesitant hand on my shoulder.

“Did you say you’re pregnant?” I ask, dazed, but fuck me, also praying to God I wasn’t hearing things.

She nods, her eyes wide, her blonde brows raised in uncertainty.

Relief, joy, gratitude rush through me like a current and washes away my hangover, my dread and my regret.

I jump off the bed and sweep her into my arms. “Marry me,” I growl in her ear.

She throws her arms around my neck. “Of course I’m going to marry you.” She laughs happily and presses a kiss to my cheek.

I pull back and stare at her. “When did you find out?” I ask.

“Today,” she beams. “I had a blood test.”

“How far along?”

“Ten weeks,” she says, and I squeeze tight before I remember myself and let her go.

“You can hug me,” she says.

“I don’t want to hurt *el bambino*.” I put her down and kneel in front of her and press my cheek to her stomach. “There’s a

baby in there,” I say in complete wonder and awe.

She runs her fingers through my hair and says, “Hayes, we have so much we need to talk about. I wasn’t going to tell you about the baby until later, when all of this was over, but then you said all of that romantic stuff and it just came out,” I say.

“So, what you’re saying is that you’d like to table this conversation?” I ask and stand back up. I lean in to kiss her and she leans back.

“Nah, you need a shower and a toothbrush,” she says and jumps out of my grasp.

“Go do that and then come down and let’s talk.”

* * *

I walk into the kitchen to find her sitting at the table, two mugs on the table in front of her. A white envelope sits on the table in front of her. It has my name and social security number on it. My stomach plummets to my knees. I know right away it’s the DNA test results. But, I ask anyway.

“Is that it?” I ask and nod toward the envelope.

“Yeah, Amelia gave it to me. You have to be the one to open it,” she says, her eyes dry and firm, but full of concern as she watches me closely.

“I’m okay,” I say, and I find that I am. My future is set, because Confidence and I are set. This is just a hurdle I’ve got to clear on my road to where we’re going together.

“You want coffee?” she asks and pads on her bare feet across the travertine tiled floors into the kitchen. “Were you at work?” I ask, noticing her skirt and blouse for the first time. “Yeah, this morning, but then I went to the doctor and then came here.”

I pick up the envelope, rip it open, and pull the paper out.

“Hayes, don’t you want to sit down?” Confidence sounds alarmed. I hear her hurried footfalls as she rushes back to the table, but I just stare at the paper and gather my resolve.

“No, let’s not make an event of it. I just want to know.” I unfold and read what it says out loud. “With regard to the DNA of Hayes Rivers, when compared to the DNA sample obtained from Jason Rivers, twelve of the fifteen DNA markers were a match. This indicated sanguinity but does not indicate paternity. The matching markers follow the patterns we see between nephews and uncles and grandsons and grandfathers.” I finish and look up at Confidence. Her face is pale, and her hand is squeezing her lips together.

“How is that possible? He couldn’t have been my grandfather. He didn’t have any children besides me. So, if he’s my uncle ... then what does that mean? Uncle Thomas is my father? How?” I ask. Her eyes widen and take up almost the entire first half of her face. She’s shaking her head back and forth and her eyes start to fill with tears.

I stand up and walk over to her and yank her hand down. “What does it mean? Say it,” I demand, irrational in my fear and anger. I’m demanding she answer a question she couldn’t possibly. And yet, because she’s so much braver than me, she does.

“Gigi,” she croaks like it hurts for the words to pass her lips.

“No.” I shake my head.

“Who else? Does your father have other siblings?” I ask.

“I don’t fucking know. I didn’t even know Gigi existed until I was fourteen. Anything is possible.” As it starts to sink in, other realities rear their heads. I start to pace. If he wasn’t my father, then his dead wife wasn’t my mother, either. I don’t know the name for what I’m feeling. I’ve grieved for people I don’t know. Who aren’t my parents.

“So, I’m a Rivers, but not my father’s son. Who are my parents?” I ask.

“I don’t ... I don’t know,” she says and I want to shake her.

Or shake this house.

Or shake the world.

I want everyone to feel what I'm feeling. The ground beneath my feet has shifted in a way that's permanent. I will never be the same.

"Confidence. Who am I? Who is my family? *What* is my family?" I shout these questions at her. The horror on her face is too much for me. I turn away from her. I'm talking to the wrong person, anyway.

I pick up the receiver of my landline and hit the second preprogrammed button and press the phone to my ear.

"*Prego?*" Gigi's voice is husky with sleep and I look down at the alarm clock by my bed and realize it must be one or two the morning in Positano. I haven't called her during any of this. I didn't want to worry her, and now I realize she's the only person who can answer my questions.

"Gigi, I took a paternity test," I say.

"Who's pregnant?" she asks.

"To determine *my* paternity," I clarify. I'm met with silence. I look up at Confidence who still looks like she's seen a ghost.

You okay? I mouth and walk to the fridge to get her a bottle of water.

She's carrying my fucking kid.

I crack it open and put it down in front of her and realize that Gigi hasn't made sound.

My heart sinks.

"You knew," I say and Confidence's hand pauses in midair on its way to put her water to her lips.

"Hayes, I—"

"You what? Whose son am I?" I ask her slowly. My heart thuds wildly. My entire body is tingling, and my head is swimming.

"Hayes, it's not that simple—" she starts.

“Yes. It is.” My hand slams down on the table before I even realize it’s in motion. Confidence jumps up and comes to stand beside me. She puts a hand on my shoulder and I want to shake it off.

I don’t want comfort. I want answers.

Gigi starts to cry softly.

“Whose child am I?” I ask her again.

“Hayes ...” She’s weeping loudly now.

So is my queen. I watch her. Want to go to her. But not until I have answers.

“Gigi, tell me. Now,” I ask, and the words taste like ash in my mouth.

“Mine,” she sobs, and I drop the phone.

I don’t remember sitting down, but I must have.

“Okay, Gigi, okay,” I hear Confidence saying, and then I hear the phone clatter into its cradle into the counter.

“My life is a lie. All of it. I’m a lie. I’m ...” Bombs are exploding somewhere inside me. My memories are imploding. My father disappears from the memory of learning to ride a bike. He vanishes from the conversations we had about the birds and the bees.

“You are Hayes Rivers. You’re a brother, a son, a friend, a lover, a father.” She takes my hand and puts it over her stomach.

“A father.” I pull her to me and press my face into the soft, tiny swell in her abdomen.

“I’m going to be okay,” I say. She’s like a shot of valium, and my pulse starts to slow.

“Hayes, the worst is over,” she says, and like the fool I am, I believe her.

Chapter Thirty-Three

HISTORY

Gigi

“I will begin by saying that I am only sorry for the deceit and the fact that I had to live my life pretending that you weren’t mine,” I say slowly and force my eyes to stay on Hayes’s face. I want to look away so badly.

Those green eyes are shuttered and as cold as chips of emerald. Except, those are his father’s eyes and they have never been able to hide the fire that is always burning inside of him. The curiosity, the feeling, the passion, the thirst for better, the compassion, and right now, the anger.

“So, you suffered?” he asks.

I nod. “Good,” he snaps and I smile. Because, there I am. That cold, unforgiving streak that makes me a Rivers *and* him my son.

He’s been a mirror to everything I’ve lost, and yet has reminded me how lucky I was to have had any of it in the first place.

“I did what I did for you,” I continue.

He laughs and my patience snaps. I stand up and walk over to him, plant my feet and stare down at him.

“I know I owe you a lifetime of explanations and apologies, but no matter what I have done, I have loved you first,” I say through lips that are barely moving, and a jaw that is so tightly clenched that I know I’m probably doing some real damage to my teeth.

“Yes, so much that you let someone else raise me for the first half of my life and then lived with me for the second half but lied the entire time,” he says sullenly.

“Hayes, there are some things that are more important than our individual needs or wants. Now, please, I’m here because I wanted to tell you this face-to-face. Will you let me?”

He opens his mouth to speak and Confidence’s hand slides over his and she says, “Yes, he will,” and squeezes his hand when he starts to contradict her.

I misjudged this woman, and I’m so glad that Hayes has better judgment than I do because she is exactly what he and this family needs. And she loves him something fierce.

I smile gratefully at her and sit back down.

“The Riverses founded this city. With our carpetbagging money we came and bought land, financed cotton gins, and gave the Allens money to buy the land that this city is sitting on. And then, we settled here. And in this city we are titans. Power covets power. Above all. Money and fame were never the goal. Power was how you survived. Power was what gave you the ability to execute your vision. And with it came the money, the fame, the access to anything you could ever want.

“Once you’ve tasted it, you never want anything else. That’s how we were raised. When I was eighteen, I had my coming out. It was a silly thing, but a tradition that the ruling families of Houston had started to make sure that the next generation was shaped by the best and brightest.”

“According to whom?” Confidence asks.

“According to the men who saw themselves as masters of the universe. The rules of entry were steep and enforced to the letter. Number one was no new money, which—to the founding families of Houston—was a dirty word. Either way, that was how they kept people from buying their way into the elite club they’d made. This group of people produced governors, presidents, titans. They didn’t want to share that.

“And girls like me? We went to college not to get an education but to find a husband. My parents sent me East to Wellesley College.”

“Isn’t that all girls?” Confidence cuts in again. I smile at her and think that for all her hard-earned street smarts, this girl has

a lot to learn about the family she's joining.

No matter how much she's grounded Hayes, he's still got the blood of ambitious, ruthless titans in his veins. He's not chasing a win in the moment. He will always think about his place in history. Like all of the men who came before him that have dreamt about the eternal sunlight of their glorious time as rulers among men.

"Yes, it is. And all of the men at Harvard, MIT, BU, Brandies, and Tufts knew it. So on the weekends, our parties were packed with men. And that's when I met and fell in love with your father." I look at Hayes "At a party where neither of us were having a particularly good time. I tripped, he caught me, we sat down to talk, found out we were both from Houston and spent the rest of the night falling in love. When we went home that summer, we found out that my family was opposed to the match," I said.

"Is that really a thing?" she asks.

"Oh, yes. In fact, the boys in my vintage would say—"

"Vintage?" Confidence says with a scowl of confusion.

"That's stuck-up speak for 'in the same year at school,'" Hayes tells her quickly. I frown at him before I continue.

"Yes, in my year at school, they would say 'heiress or above only,' and it wasn't something they said behind closed doors. It was a rule. And for heiresses like me, the same applied. My love—he had money, but not the kind that they liked. And there was someone else they wanted for me.

"His family was offended. They decided I wasn't what they wanted for their son. And family, to both of us, was everything. We went our separate ways.

"He married someone else. I moved back East. But then, after my father got sick, I came home. We ran into each other at a fundraiser." I can't help my smile as I remember that night. Seeing him again.

"We made a choice. When we got married, your grandfather disinherited me. Made your fath—" I stop when Hayes blanches. "I'm sorry, Jason, his heir. He was a newlywed,

home from Cornell with his pretty, Beacon Hill heiress on his arm. He married the right girl, from the right family, and she had good childbearing hips—as my father called them,” I recall.

“You moved to Italy?”

“Not then. Your father and I bought a farm out in Brenham. We were raising steer, and I was three months pregnant when he just ... *disappeared*.”

“What does that mean?” Hayes asks in a sharp voice.

“He left early one morning to go into town and just never came back home. It took me a week to call the police because I was sure he’d come back with a story about how his car ran off a cliff and he’d had to camp in the woods and wait for rescue. But after a week, I realized I couldn’t hide anymore. I went to his family. They had no idea where he was and accused me of having something to do with it. They had money of their own; they were smart and they wanted revenge. So, I hid you. Right under their noses. James’s wife’s hips weren’t so childbearing and she was ill. My father had disinherited me, and Thomas was on the verge of being expelled from West Point. We were all such a disappointment to him. The only thing he saw value in was you.

“He refused to reinstate my inheritance. But he would give it to you. If I let James and his wife raise you as theirs. At the time, I thought it was a good idea. I was beside myself with grief and without two coins to rub together. And despite everything, I still believed in the Rivers name and I wanted my son—the true oldest child—to take his rightful place. And Thomas didn’t know. By the time he came home at the end of that term, I was in Italy. James and Ann had their brand-new baby boy in their arms and he was none the wiser. I don’t know how Thomas found out.” I shake my head dismally.

“Well, Amelia has a clue. They obtained a copy of Anne’s autopsy. It says that she’d never given birth. And so, their hope is to prove that I’m illegitimate. They have no idea of the truth,” Hayes says in a low, dark voice that gives me the chills.

I want to rewind, and I want to kill my little brother. He's always been such a selfish pain in the ass.

"I don't know what is wrong with Thomas. He is so resentful of everything and I don't understand it. He says he loves his family, but he's forgotten just like our father did that family is the people who make it up. And the name is only as good as the people who bear it. I'm worried about him. That he would do this. But power is all he's ever wanted. But he's going to be sorry. This is going to open up another can of worms that none of us wants to revisit," I say.

"What? What could be worse than playing musical parents with me?" Hayes asks.

"Nothing could be worse than that," I say quietly. My heart is breaking that this is how he has to find out. But, it's time.

"So ..."

"Your father. His name was Lucas Wilde," I say and wait for the light to go on. His head draws back and his eyebrows shoot into his brow line. He shoots out of his seat and stalks over to the huge mantle over the fireplace in his living room.

Confidence's hand slams over her mouth, and her eyes dart between Hayes and me like she doesn't know where to look.

"Do you mean, the *late* Lucas Wilde?" Hayes asks without turning around to face me. He braces his hands on the mantle.

"Yes. Him," I say.

"The father of Remington, Regan, Tyson? *Him*?" Hayes repeats.

"Yes," I say.

"I thought he died when Remi was a kid," Hayes says slowly.

"No, that's when he divorced Remington's mother and ran off and married me. He was declared dead years later," I answer and find that my defensiveness is still there.

Hayes turns around then. His eyes are dark, red-rimmed and so angry that my heart convulses with the knowledge that it's all directed at me.

“You ran off with a married man who had three children?” he asks me the question I ask myself every single day.

“Yes,” I answer, and when he turns back around, as if the sight of me is too much, I look at Confidence who is staring ahead blankly, unseeingly.

I get up and walk over to stand behind him. “We were in love. And he married *me*,” I plead. “I know it sounds so wrong. I know we shouldn’t have been, but these things happen—”

He turns around again, his eyes narrow slits now. I flinch at the expression in them.

“You know what *doesn’t* happen? You don’t give your kid away and pass him off as someone else’s,” he rages.

“I didn’t give you away,” I cry. I look at Confidence for help, but she’s watching Hayes intently, her eyes reflecting the ache of sympathy inside of her.

Hayes stands up. “Wait. Remington Wilde is my older *brother*?” he asks in abject horror and shock. My stomach sinks and my panic rises. This could be a disaster. But I don’t dare ask Hayes for his discretion. Instead, I give him the truth.

“Your *half*-brother, but yes. You have the same father. Or you did,” I respond and my heart constricts at the thought of Lucas and how much I loved him. How much he loved me, how badly he wanted to raise Hayes and Remi together, even though, in the end, he chose me over the possibility of being with his oldest son.

“And Remi’s mother, grandmother, they all know this?”

“Well. They know Lucas left me. They know I was pregnant. *This* is why they hate us so much. But, they don’t know who you are. *Everybody* thinks you’re James and Anne’s child. I told them and everyone else that I lost the baby,” I say and feel like vomiting at the look on Hayes’ face.

“So, let me get this straight. I am a Wilde and a Rivers. *You* are my mother. I am the true heir because I am the true oldest of the oldest child. *You* are my *mother*,” he repeats.

I nod.

“I want you to call Amelia and make an official statement. Sign it, notarize it, and we’ll deliver it to Thomas’s attorneys. And then, I want you to leave and never come back,” he says quietly. Then he stands and walks out of the room. His back is ramrod straight just like his father’s had been. I watch helplessly as he walks up the stairs, his back straight, without a glance back in my direction.

I look at Confidence, unsure what to say. “He doesn’t mean it,” she says softly. Her eyes are full of pity. I didn’t expect that, not after how I had treated her and what I’ve done to Hayes.

“He does,” I say tearfully.

“You don’t know him well at all,” she says sadly and shakes her head. I’m offended and want to be mad. But, I know she’s right. I just nod. This lie has precluded a real intimacy with my child because I was always afraid of slipping up. I love him. I have been a shoulder to lean on and supportive of all his endeavors. But I also pushed him into marriage with a woman who proved to be treacherous, and I tried to run a good one away.

“Give him some time and some space, but don’t you dare walk out and never come back,” she says.

I give her a watery smile.

“And that statement, please. Send it to Amelia today. The hearing is tomorrow. We’ll want to kill this question now. And deal with the question of fitness alone ...”

She stands there, uncertain a little, and I ask, “Did you have something to say?”

“Does Remington know?” she asks.

“I don’t know, but I don’t think so. No one knew. They were just told to stay away from each other. You know? The dispute over the land was real, but what really put the wedge between us was Lucas leaving his family.”

“Was it worth it?” she asks without elaborating.

“Yes.” I answer without asking for clarification because it was all worth it.

“For the year I had with the love of my life. For the son we made together. For the life our son got to lead. I would do it all again. Hindsight is easy, but it’s what I did, and it was hard. And it took me a long time to recover. When you’re a mother, you’ll know. Doing what your child needs instead of what you or they want is hard.”

“I can only imagine,” she says, and I can’t read whatever’s really in her eyes. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

And only because I know he’s in good hands do I let myself out of their house.

* * *

HAYES

Confidence slides into bed with me and she doesn’t say a word. She lays down so we’re face to face.

“Hey,” she says and takes my hands in hers. She lays them on the soft swell of her lower stomach and whispers, “Here we are. We’re safe in here.”

I close my eyes and make promises to that little life growing inside of *my* life. My love. My everything.

That as long as I draw breath, he will know only love—the tough but yielding kind—from me. That no one would be able to convince me to walk away from him.

That I’m ready to be his father.

That I’m the man his mother needs.

That I know that his inheritance is more than just money and name. It’s our values; it the synchronicity between who we are

in private and who we are when the world is watching.

“Do you think less of me?” I ask.

“No. Never,” she says. Of course.

“Still want to marry me?” I ask.

“Yes, and before I start to show, please,” she says.

“Your wish is my command,” I say. They’re the last words we speak before we fall asleep.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Judgement

Hayes

Two Weeks Later

“Thank God, that’s over,” Confidence says. She steps into my side and slips her arms around my waist. We step out of Kingdom’s office building and out into the bright afternoon sun. The building is casting a shadow onto the big granite courtyard where overworked employees come to escape the air conditioning and their computers for a few minutes.

“Yes, it was ugly for a second at the end, but it’s done,” I agree.

“Will your uncle be okay?” she asks. Bleeding heart.

“He’s going to be just fine. I think retirement in exile on his ranch in the beautiful Texas hardly amounts to hard time for all of the shit he’s pulled over the last year,” I say.

We settled the case today. Kingdom paid damages that were negotiated by Amelia and Wilde Law. The Foundation established a Project School Bell that will deploy mobile classrooms to neighborhoods that are recovering from the flood so their children can continue to go to school close to home while their schools are being renovated. It’s the first in a string of programs that the foundation will fund over the next few months as part of its commitment to the city of Houston. Some of them are being done in conjunction with Wilde Law. When I think about Wilde—and Remi—my stomach contracts painfully. I still don’t know how to tell him that his father is my father. And that his father may not be dead after all.

“Hayes?” Confidence calls my name and bumps me with her hip. I look down at her, and she’s got a concerned look on her face.

“Yes, my love?”

“You okay? You blanked out for a minute,” she says.

“Yeah.” I shake my head to clear it. “Just thinking that we’ve got a lot of work to do. But at least now, I can do it without Thomas around.”

“Looking for ways to undermine you,” she adds. We start toward my car that’s idling on the curb. “The car will take you back to work, if you want,” I tell her.

“Yeah, that would be great.” She rocks up on her heels and presses a kiss to my mouth.

“Thanks for being here today. For being here every day.” I circle my arm around her waist and kiss her back.

“Hayes,” Gigi says from in front of us. She stands up from the bench she’s been sitting on. My heart hurts to see her. I haven’t let myself think too much about her. Last night when Confidence asked me to talk to her, I’d said no. I had nothing to say. She gave birth to me, but that didn’t make her my mother.

I’d said it so flippantly last night, but when I see her standing in front of me, I know it’s not that simple. Like a reel of film on a screen, flashes of our life together in Positano run through my mind. Our fights. The first time we picked figs from the tree we planted together. How she slept in my bed with me the night before I left for college and talked to me all night about growing up in Rivers House.

My stomach churns, and I slide my eyes to Confidence who has gone very still beside me.

“Gigi, why are you here?” I ask her. I don’t want to do this in public.

“Because *you* are,” she says simply. She looks tired. And for the first time, I can see age creeping along her pale, drawn face. Her hands are clenched in front of her and she looks so frail.

“Listen, can we talk—”

“You’re dead, Rivers.” A loud voice booms over the courtyard, and we all turn back to Smith Street to see Barry

Jimenez walking toward me, a pistol in his trembling hand pointed in my general direction.

“Oh my God, it’s Barry,” Confidence calls just as the first shot rings out. I grab both women to put them behind me and hustle them into the building. The armed security man is already rushing out, and after a second shot, Barry is tackled to the ground.

But something happens, and Gigi doesn’t end up behind me. Instead, she slumps against me and cries out in pain.

“Gigi,” I call out and let go of Confidence to lay Gigi on the ground. Her light blue dress is soaked with blood that’s gushing out of a small wound in her shoulder. I pull my tie off and knot it around her arm and press my hand to the wound. She winces.

“We need an ambulance!” I hear Confidence screaming in the background, but it’s muted by the sound of the blood that’s rushing through my ears.

Gigi grabs my hand and pulls me down to her. “Hayes,” she groans, and her eyelids flutter.

“Oh no you fucking don’t.” I shake her and her eyes open.

“Don’t use that kind of language, Hayes, especially not in public,” she says weakly.

“Well don’t you fucking close your eyes after you’ve been shot!” I shout at her.

She laughs weakly. Now I can see how much I look like her.

“God, Gigi.” I shake my head in denial that this is happening.

“Listen to me, Hayes. I know I wasn’t your mother in your heart, but in mine, it’s all I’ve ever been. You have been my every prayer, every dream, every hope. All of my love has always been yours. All I want is for you to be the man you were born to be,” she says.

“Don’t talk like you’re going to die. I’m still pissed at you,” I say.

She reaches up to pat my cheek. Her bloody hand is sticky against my face. “Of course you are. You’re a Rivers.” And then her eyes close.

Epilogue

Gigi

“Just rest, Gigi,” Hayes whispers down at me. His big hand smooths the hair off my face and I have to stop myself from nestling into his touch. I haven’t earned that. It’s too soon. I know that what happened outside his office is why he’s here. I hope it means that I’ll be able to persuade him to stay. To give me a chance to earn it.

“I—” My throat is parched. I had a tube inserted while I was in surgery and the words I want to say are caught there.

“Save your voice, we’ll have time to talk when you’re better,” he says in a voice that’s more soothing than I can stand.

His eyes, so like mine, search my face, and I know he’s looking for clues that he missed. That downward tilt on my right eye that mirrors his. The way my ears curve close and then pull away from my head. Maybe he’s even imagining how he’ll age. Will his jawline hold as firmly as mine? I lift my free hand and circle his wrist. I want to tell him that he gets this loving tenderness from his father. I want to tell him that he’s the greatest love of my life. That I only let them have him because I wanted more for him than I thought myself capable of giving. Instead, I just hold onto my son’s arm and let him look into his mother’s face properly, for the first time.

The creak of the door opening behind us startles both of us. He turns and from the way his posture changes, I know it’s Confidence. He deflates a little because he knows that he can lean on her. I love that he’s found someone strong enough to help him carry the burden of holding our family together. I think that together, they’ll do a better job than my generation did.

She comes to stand beside Hayes and wraps an arm around his waist. She squeezes him and he wraps an arm around her and holds her close. If I died, this would go down as one of the happiest moments of my life. My son is grown up, and even

though I didn't do everything right, I've helped him grow into a man who is capable of love and who's not afraid to stake a claim on something he wants and then do the hard work it takes to make it his.

"Gigi, how are you feeling?" she asks.

I nod.

"Remi's here," she says. My heart plunges to my toes and my lungs constrict. But I nod.

"Are you sure you want to give it to him?" she asks. I let go of Hayes and pick up the letter I have tucked into my side of the bed. I rub the worn paper in between my fingers and nod again.

She smiles, a pained but encouraging smile. "I'll send him in. We'll be outside."

She takes Hayes's hand and they turn to leave. Just before they step through the door, Hayes looks back over his shoulder and says, "I love you, Gigi." Then he's gone.

I watch the door. My heart threatens to burst out of my chest so that everyone can see what a cowardly muscle it is. I clutch the letter that Lucas wrote Remi a few days before he disappeared. I know that this will change everything. That peace will probably never be my companion, but it's time.

Epilogue 2

Confidence

My phone buzzes from its perch on my bedside table. I fling an arm out in the dark and fumble for it. A text message from Hayes flashes and I open it.

“Press Play” And then the next message is a video.

“Where are you?” I type back.

“Press Play” is his response.

“Not exactly how I imagined our wedding night,” I grumble and sit up. I’ve been waiting in our room for an hour.

By myself.

Hayes left to get something he forgot downstairs. I spent the first half an hour getting myself ready. When I draped myself across the bed, I looked like everything I knew Hayes loved. My lingerie is a confection of ice blue lace and satin. My hair smelled like roses and my lips were smeared with cherry flavored lip balm. Now, my hair is a tangled mess, I have sleep in my eyes and I’ll probably want to brush my teeth again before I kiss Hayes.

If I ever kiss Hayes again

“You haven’t pressed play, have you? Stop being mad and watch.” His text says and so I push aside my annoyance and comply.

The video starts and my heart lodges in my throat. I clutch my chest and every drop of irritation I felt seconds of ago disappears.

On my screen, my mother and I are dancing at the wedding. We’re wrapped in each other’s arms. Our heads resting on each other’s shoulders. The look on my mother’s face steals my breath. She’s smiling. Her eyes are closed and she looks like she’s having the very best dream. We’ve been fine since Daddy and Fortune left. But she hasn’t smiled like this since

long before that horrific night. We'd held each other then, too. But we'd been fused together by terror. Tonight, it had been nothing but pure love.

The song, "The Rose" by Bette Midler was her choice. And the slow, repetitive melody on piano and the gently joyous strains of the violins wrap me in the same tender embrace my mother's arms gave me while we danced. The camera zooms onto our faces for the last ninety seconds of the song and I watch as the tears run down her face and drop onto my shoulder. I hadn't felt her tears then and I watch as she composes her face and a bright smile spreads just as the song ends. The scene cuts to a white wall and I blink to clear my vision at the abrupt change in background.

Then Hayes sits down in front of the camera. "So, this is where I've been," he says into the camera. He sweeps his hand over the parts of himself that are visible in the camera. His hair is tamed into waves of chocolate silk again. The broad, bold angles of his cheekbones are more prominent than normal because he's completely freshly shaven. His tuxedo looks crisp and stiff again. When we'd stumbled up to our room after the reception, we'd been sweaty from dancing, and his collar had several smudges of my lipstick on it.

"I was watching that video while you were in the bathroom and it finally hit me what I should give you for a wedding gift. I wanted it to be something that money couldn't buy." He gives me one of his closed mouth, sexy as fuck smiles. His intelligent, oh so beautiful hazel eyes search my face as if he knew exactly where it would be when he was making the video.

"The two of you are what every mother and child should be." He runs a hand through his hair and exhales a breath. "The gesture of you dancing with your mother on what would normally be the father daughter dance is everything I love about you. Your loyalty, your pride, you love, the respect you have for where you come from and your refusal to let anyone dictate what's possible. I can't believe that you're my fucking *wife*. And I wanted to make you something that *you* could want to watch over and over again, too. Especially in the

moments when I've pissed you off and you're wondering how I talked you into spending the rest of your life with me. I'm not the best with words. Especially not soft ones. But for today, I want to record some. Especially since I'm about to fuck you until you can't walk for a week." He grins mischievously.

"You are more than my little treasure, *Tesoro*, you are my big magic. My forever wonder. The Russian doll that never stops surprising me with the depth of your brilliance. And you're the reason I'll never doubt that love *is* power." His eyes pierce through the screen and wrap themselves around me.

I clutch my chest as my heart riots against it and my throat constricts against the tears that are blooming.

"Your love has changed me. You've rewritten my future. Because of you, I know that my legacy will be whatever I chose. If people look at me and see a king, it's because I'm standing next to a queen." His firm, full lips purse around the last word.

"*You* are my reason," he says with a fierce conviction that feels like wind beneath my wings. His eyes soften and his shoulders relax. "The baby that's growing inside of you is just the first of many masterpieces we'll make together. You are *my* river. You've been the making of me. And I hope that one day I'll feel like I've earned the gift of your love. It's my privilege and honor to be your husband. I love you so much. More than I'll ever be capable of expressing. Now, lay back and get ready for me. I'm walking in now."

The door opens and the screen goes blank at the same time. Hayes walks into the room. His bow tie is gone, his shirt unbuttoned completely, and his lightly-haired chest and smooth tanned skin of his muscle carved torso peek out between the gap in the stark white fabric.

"Hey, wife." His eyes are alight with a heat that singe every part of me it lands on. His eyes drag up my body and he pulls his shirt off completely. The flex of the muscles in his powerful shoulders and arms distracted me. When I look back at his face, he's standing right in front of me

“Hey, husband,” I mimic him. I sit up on my knees so I can slip my arms around his neck. His warm hands slide along the swell of my abdomen before the slip behind my waist. He pulls me into his chest and presses his forehead to mine. He closes his eyes and hums low in his throat.

“That was so beautiful,” I whisper against his lips and his eyes open and his gaze tangles with mine.

“You like it?” he asks with a satisfied smile.

I nod my answer when I find that my throat won’t release my answer.

“Good,” he says gruffly and squeezes me close. He buries his face in my neck and nuzzles it with his lips. I tighten my hold on his neck and think I might die from the intensity of the love that I feel for him. And what a way to go. I kiss the side of his face.

“I’ll watch it again. Forever. And not just when you’ve managed to piss me off.” I peck his mouth with a quick kiss to stop him from interrupting me. “I love it. And I love you. I’m the lucky one. I’m the one whose future has been rewritten. I hope you never regret letting me stand next to you. I hope you’re always proud of me.”

“Until my last breath,” he whispers before he kisses me.

Finally.

And what a kiss it is.

His lips are impatient, his tongue insistent, and I open for him. Warmth rushes through me when his tongue sweeps my mouth and I press into him as tightly as my protruding belly will let me.

We get lost in the current of love, triumph and togetherness that has become the river of our life.

Read Remi’s story next: [The Legend](#)

I hope you loved that. I have written a bonus scene, set a few years in the future. If you’d like to read it, click [here](#).

About the Author

Wall Street Journal and USA Today Bestselling Author, Dylan Allen is a Texas girl with a serious case of wanderlust.

A self-proclaimed happily ever junkie, she loves creating stories where her characters find a love worth fighting for. When she isn't writing or reading, eating, or cooking, Dylan enjoys planning her next globe-trotting adventure.

A reformed lawyer, Dylan lives in Texas with her amazing husband and two sons.

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I love to hear from readers! Email me at dylan@dylanallenbooks.com

Are you on Facebook? Come join my private reader group, Dylan's Day Dreamer.

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Flirting with the Frenemy

Pippa Grant

A Single Dad/Brother's Best Friend/Fake Relationship/Enemies-to-Lovers Romantic Comedy

Mission: Survive my best friend's wedding, where I must play nice with my ex and his perfect new girlfriend.

Strategy: Bring the hottest fake boyfriend on the planet.

Target: Grady Rock. Master Baker. Dimples. Muscles. The unicorn of fake boyfriends.

Complication: Wyatt Morgan. My brother's best friend. My sworn enemy. Military man. Sexy as hell single dad. The man I let into my panties for one night of hot hate sex after my ex dumped me before my life fell apart.

And the man who just scared off that perfect fake boyfriend.

By pretending to be my real boyfriend.

I can roll with this though. What's the harm in Flirting with the Frenemy if it helps me get the job done?

Complete my mission and move on.

Or so I thought.

Until Wyatt kisses me again and I start feeling things I shouldn't.

The thing about weddings...nothing ever goes as planned.

Flirting with the Frenemy is a rollicking fun romantic comedy featuring a single dad military man, an irritatingly attractive blast from his past, pirates, cursing parrots, and a wedding gone wild. It stands alone with no cheating or cliffhangers.

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Chapter One

Ellie Ryder, aka a woman in need of more than ice cream to fill the hole in her heart

When I rule the world, peppermint crunch ice cream will be available all year long, because assholes who break people's hearts don't restrict their assholery and heart-breaking to Christmas.

Unless, apparently, they're *my* asshole.

Check that.

My *former* asshole.

I stab my spoon straight into the cold carton that I grabbed at the store on the way here and ignore the twinkling holiday cheer on my parents' gigantic tree in the living room. It's late, so I didn't tell them I was coming over, but I don't want to spend one more night at my house this week.

Alone.

Sleeping in the bed where Patrick screwed me—and then screwed me over—just two nights ago.

Merry Christmas, Ellie. I'm in love with my neighbor.

I leave them a note taped to the coffee pot to let them know I'm here, then stomp down the stairs—softly, so I don't wake them—and turn the corner into the rec room, where I pound the light switch up.

And then almost scream.

There's a lump of a man sprawled on the couch watching a black-and-white movie, and as soon as the lights go on, he winces and throws his arm over his eyes. "*Christ,*" he snarls.

My heart backpedals from the precipice where it was about to leap, then surges into a furious beat all over again. "What are you doing here?"

Wyatt Morgan drops his arm and squints at me. “Oh, good. It’s Ellie. Drop in to rub some salt in the wound?”

I inhale another bite of ice cream while I glare at him, because I didn’t ask *him* to be here, and he’s scowling just as hard as I’m glaring. “Beck’s place is downtown. Go get drunk there.” Even as the words leave my mouth, guilt stabs me in the lung.

Not the heart, because first, I’d have to *like* my brother’s best friend for my heart to be affected, and second, because I’m not sure I have a heart left.

I’m in a shit-tastic mood—who dumps their girlfriend *on Christmas Eve?*—but even in the midst of my own pity party, I know why Wyatt’s sitting in my parents’ basement, stewing himself in beer and watching *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

He doesn’t even roll his eyes at my order to get out.

“Beck’s having a party,” he informs me. “Didn’t want to go. Guess you weren’t invited. Or you prefer to add to the shit pile here.”

He tips back his beer, and another guilt knife attacks me, this time in the liver.

It’s entirely possible he has bigger problems than I do. I lost a boyfriend that I’ll probably acknowledge soon enough—for real, not just in a fit of anger—that I’m better off without.

The courts just handed Wyatt a final divorce decree that means he only gets to see his kid once a month.

If he travels five hundred miles to do it every time.

“Shove it, Morgan,” I tell him. “I don’t kick a man when he’s down.”

“Since when?”

“Oh, please. Like you can talk.”

It’s been like this since we were kids. My brother’s childhood best friend is the only man in the entire universe who can get under my skin and bring out my ugly faster than you can blink, and I swear he takes joy in doing it.

A ninety-five on your math test, Ellie? Why not perfect?

Nice shot, but you're still down by eight.

Who taught you to hold a pool cue, a blind monkey?

And damn if all that taunting didn't make me try harder every single time.

Because when he wasn't taunting me, he was the first one holding out a hand to pull me off the pavement or out of the mud when I inevitably got trampled trying to keep up with Beck and his friends in soccer, street hockey, basketball, and whatever else I swore I was big enough to do with them.

He eyeballs my breasts, and my whole body lights up like the Christmas lights all over downtown.

"You gonna eat that whole carton?" he asks, and he's not looking at my chest.

He's looking at my ice cream, and here I am, getting turned on at the idea that he's finally noticed I'm a woman.

I have issues.

So many issues.

I fling myself onto the couch next to him. "It's loser ice cream, so yeah, I am," I grumble. "Here. Have a bite, you drunk asshole."

Those gray eyes connect with mine, and *dammit*, that's straight lust pooling in my belly.

He's sporting a thick five-o'clock shadow, and even sprawled out on the worn flowery couch in my parents' basement, he exudes power and masculinity in a way I never would've expected from the skinny pipsqueak peeking out from behind his grandmother's legs on the front porch twenty-some years ago.

Or maybe it's the tight black T-shirt, with his biceps testing the limits of the cotton and detailing his trim stomach, even sitting down, and the gray sweatpants hinting at a more substantial package than I ever would've given him credit for.

Plus the knowledge that Pipsqueak Wyatt grew up to join the Air Force as some kind of badass pilot who flies untested

aircraft, which takes a hell of a lot of guts, if you ask me when I'm willing to admit something like that about him.

Which is apparently tonight.

You used to like him, my subconscious reminds me, because it's forgetting its place.

I'd tell it to shut up, that I don't go for guys who don't appreciate me, except isn't that what I just spent the last two years of my life doing?

He reaches for my spoon, and our fingers brush when he takes it. A shiver ripples over my skin. I look away to watch the movie while I hold the carton for him to dig out a scoopful.

George Bailey is arguing with Mr. Potter on the TV, and I can feel the heat off Wyatt's skin penetrating my baggy Ryder Consulting sweatshirt.

I snort softly to myself.

Of course he wasn't staring at my chest. He can't even see it under this thing.

You're holding the basketball wrong, Ellie.

It went in, didn't it?

Yeah, but you could be more consistent if you worked on your form.

Damn him for sneaking into my head. Damn him for taunting me.

Damn him for being right.

Because I did work on my form, and Beck—who's three years older than I am—quit playing ball with me after I beat him in a free throw contest when I was twelve.

He said it was because he was *working on other stuff with the guys*, but I knew my brother better than that.

I *knew* he quit playing with me because I beat him.

Wyatt still took the challenge though. He'd tell me I got lucky when I won. He'd tell me what I did wrong when I didn't.

And I worked my ass off getting better and better until I beat him *every time*.

And then he lost interest too.

I take the spoon from him and grunt softly while I dig deeper into the carton. “You were such an asshole when we were kids.”

He grunts back and snags the spoon again. “*You* were such an asshole when we were kids.”

“You were just insecure about getting your ass beat by a girl on the basketball court.”

“You just hated that you wouldn’t have been half as good without me.”

I take my spoon back and shovel in. My extra-large bite of ice cream makes my brain cramp, but hell if I’ll let him see me hurt.

Not that I can hide it. I know my face is blotchy from crying before I drove over here, and my eyes are that special kind of dry that comes after too many tears.

I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve talked to him solo since he and Beck and the guys graduated high school. He’s changed. His voice is deeper, if that’s possible. His body definitely harder—*god*, those biceps, and his forearms are tight, with large veins snaking over the corded muscle from his elbows to his knuckles—his square jaw more chiseled, his eyes steel rather than simple gray.

And it’s not like he lost custody of his kid because he’s an asshole.

Beck was blabbering all about it at Christmas dinner yesterday. *Dude got so screwed. The military gave him orders here, so Lydia moved first, with Tucker. She hated military life. But then his orders got changed last-minute so he ended up in Georgia, she filed for divorce, and he’s been fighting the military and the courts ever since to get back to where he can be closer to his kid. He’s in hell right now. And if he cuts bait on the military, they’ll toss him in jail for being AWOL. He’s fucked. He’s SO fucked.*

There goes George Bailey, leaving Mr. Potter's office to go get drunk.

Wyatt tips back his beer. A holiday brew. Like that can take away the misery of hurting this time of year. I don't know why he's here instead of taking advantage of every last minute with his kid, but then, I don't know much about divorce either.

Maybe this isn't his Christmas to see his son. Maybe Lydia's being an asshole.

One more bottle sits on the end table next to him, but just one.

Drowning his sorrows with a broken George Bailey.

"I'm sorry about your shitty divorce," I say.

Sullenly.

Just in case he thinks I might have a twinge of sympathy for him. That won't do for either of us.

He sets the bottle down and grabs the spoon again.

"So you're sharing because you feel sorry for me."

"Maybe I'm sharing because I'm not a total asshole."

"But I still am?"

I heave a sigh. I don't want to be sitting here with Wyatt Morgan any more than I want to give in to the urge to go running over to Patrick's swanky condo in the Warehouse district and beg him to give us another chance.

I was supposed to be getting engaged this Christmas.

Not dumped.

And I can't tell if that searing pain in my chest is my heart or my pride.

Or both.

Probably both.

It's not like the sex was even *good* the other night, and he rolled over and checked his email right after, so logically, I know I'm not missing anything.

But my damn heart still hurts.

“Misery loves company more than it cares what the company is,” I tell Wyatt.

He looks at me while he shoves the spoon back in the carton, then waves a hand in a circle, gesturing to me. “*This* is you being miserable?”

“I know, I make it look good.”

“I thought you looked like this all the time.”

“Asshole.”

He smirks, but it’s a dark smirk. Like he *wanted* me to call him an asshole, but it didn’t make him feel as good as he hoped it would. “What the hell do you have to be miserable about?”

“I broke a nail.”

He snags my hand and lifts it, turning it to inspect my perfectly trimmed, newly manicured nails, and tremors skittle out from the point where his thumb rests inside my palm.

It’s like he’s turning me on.

Patrick hasn’t turned me on in *months*. That’s what’s supposed to happen, right? You settle down with one person and get yourself into a rut and the sex becomes routine instead of exciting. It’s normal, right?

Or you were an idiot who should’ve dumped him a year ago, my subconscious helpfully offers.

I snatch my hand back, but I’m still ridiculously aware of Wyatt beside me.

The hitch in his breath.

The subtle scent of cinnamon and beer wafting off him.

The way his gaze is still trained on me. “So you got dumped too,” he muses.

“Shut. Up.”

That would’ve been more effective if I’d been able to say it without dribbling peppermint crunch ice cream down my chin and my voice wobbling.

He reaches out and wipes the drip off my chin, and I realize he's leaning into my space.

My heart's pounding. My breasts are getting full and heavy. My mouth is going dry, even with ice cream still lingering on my tongue, and I almost choke when I swallow.

"Merry fucking Christmas to us," he says. His nose is inches from mine, and his lids are lowering over darkened eyes.

"There's no *fucking* going on," I point out, my breath getting shallower as I glance down his just-barely-off-center nose to his stupidly perfect lips.

"There's not, is there?" he muses while his gaze darts to my lips too. "There's only getting fucked over."

Every time he says *fuck*, I get a shot of heat between my legs.

"You're in my bubble," I whisper.

"Maybe I'm trying to annoy you to make myself feel better."

"Maybe if you wanted to annoy me, you should take your clothes off."

Holy shit, I just said that.

He holds my gaze for half a second, and then his shirt goes flying. He settles back against the couch, still leaning into my space, but now with acres and acres of hard chest and sculpted stomach and cut hips and that perfect trail of hair arrowing down to disappear under his sweatpants.

"Now, what are you going to do to annoy me?" he asks.

I *should* dump this carton of ice cream on his head.

But I *want* to do something else.

Something wrong.

But right? Maybe?

Screw it.

Thinking's what got me in trouble with Patrick. I *thought* he was what I wanted. I *thought* I loved him because I *thought* I should. I *thought* he'd be a good partner. I *thought* we wanted the same things in life.

I *thought* Wyatt was annoying.

But my body isn't thinking.

My body just *wants*.

I slap the ice cream onto the wobbly end table that my brother broke years ago, and then I peel off my sweatshirt and the stained college T-shirt beneath it.

"Annoyed yet?" I purr.

Oh, crap, I'm *purring*.

His gaze dips to my chest, and his sweatpants tent.

Holy hell.

Wyatt Morgan is packing, and it's making my clit tingle.

That hasn't happened just by *looking* at a man in months.

"Yeah," he says, his voice thick and low. "Yeah, I'm fucking annoyed."

I rise and shimmy out of my leggings, because this is a bad idea, but every *good* idea I've ever had hasn't gotten me what I wanted in life, has it?

"Christ, Ellie," he rasps out.

"You only wish you looked this good," I tell him, but I can't keep my voice steady either.

I'd blame the ice cream for the heady tingling in my fingers and toes, but my blood's not spiked with anything more than sugar.

I let Wyatt take his time looking at me, because I *know* I look good. I hit the gym for weights four mornings a week. I run marathons. I still have curves. I don't run without a heavy-duty sports bra and my ass could squash a supermodel, but I won't apologize for being built like a woman.

I *am* a woman. A strong, powerful, unique woman who deserves exactly what I'm seeing in the raw desire in Wyatt's gray eyes.

If he's never noticed my body before, he's noticing now.

“You need to put your clothes back on,” he says, but his eyes aren’t in agreement with his words.

His eyes are offering to use my body to make my brain forget what my heart’s suffering.

“Or what?” I ask.

He visibly swallows, but he doesn’t answer.

He doesn’t look away either.

I slip one bra strap down my shoulder, letting it hang in the crook of my elbow, not off, but not on either.

“Ellie,” he warns, his hand going to his pants over his cock, like he can’t decide if he wants to press it down to stop it, or if he wants to jerk himself off while he watches me strip.

“You’re hurting,” I say, slipping my other bra strap halfway down my arm too. I’m still covered by my simple satin demicups, but I reach behind me like I’m going to unhook the band, and we both know he’ll be getting an eyeful of my breasts if I do it. “I’m hurting. I don’t want to hurt. Do you?”

“No,” he rasps out.

“Don’t you want to just say *forget them* and feel good for a few minutes?”

“Yes.”

I shut down all the warning signals alarming inside my head, because they’re not all *don’t screw your brother’s best friend*.

Some of them are *you know how long it took to forget him the last time you got a crush on him*.

And some *he’s unavailable, dumbass, and so are you. You know you can’t do this without feelings getting involved*.

Can’t I?

“You’re probably a terrible lay,” I say as I drop my bra.

He rises, and his pants hit the ground.

So do his boxers.

I take in the sight of his cock bobbing and straining, and I have to physically stop myself from reaching for it.

He's long. Thick. With a blunt head and dark curls framing his balls, so unlike Patrick's total blondness.

"You probably lay there like a cold limp noodle," he says.

"Try me."

He's suddenly crushing his mouth against mine, and he tastes like cinnamon and beer and summer, and his skin is hot against mine, his tongue unforgiving, his cock hard against my belly while his hands roam up my sides to tease the underside of my breasts.

I moan into his mouth. He groans in response. Our tongues clash, an inevitable extension of the war we've always waged since before we were old enough to understand it. I scrape his back with my nails. He squeezes my breasts. I push his shoulders until he's on his knees, following him all the way down to the ground.

This is insane.

I should stop.

"Condom," he sputters. "Wallet."

I grab it off the end table. "Hurry up before I change my mind."

He stills.

Like he's changing *his* mind.

So I grab his cock and pump it in my fist before he can tell me no.

I don't want to *think*.

I just want to *feel*.

And right now, my skin is on fire, my pussy is aching, and my breasts are heavy and desperate for attention.

"Fuck, Ellie," he groans, his head dropping back while he fumbles for the condom.

As soon as he's pulled it out of his wallet, I snag it and tear it open. "Touch my breasts," I order.

"Christ, so soft," he mutters while he tests the weight of my D-cups and teases my nipples.

Every brush of his thumb over one of my tips sends a shockwave of desire straight to my core. He alternates. One nipple. Then the other. Like my body is an instrument, and he's teasing new notes of arousal to the surface.

"So hard," I mutter back while I roll the condom down his steel shaft.

I cup his balls, and the next thing I know, he's rolled me onto my back, his mouth sealing over mine again. We fumble together to yank my panties off. I part my legs and arch into him, and he pushes into me.

It's new. And weird.

But not unwelcome.

He fills me, sliding easily into my soaking heat even as he stretches my inner walls, and I tilt my hips to take him as deep as I can.

"You drive me insane," he rasps as he pumps into me.

I don't answer, because *oh, yes*. "There. Right there." I buck my hips, the tension building high and tight right in that deepest part of me that he hits every time he thrusts in.

"Don't close your eyes," he orders.

Against my will, I open them.

He's watching my face while he hammers inside, faster and deeper, watching me gasp in pleasure while he fills me to the hilt and pulls back just long enough to make it that much better when he strokes deep inside me with the next thrust.

How long have I hated Wyatt Morgan?

And how long have I possibly just been *afraid*?

Told you so, my subconscious whispers, but he hits that sweet spot deep inside me again, and I come completely undone. My

orgasm roars out of me, squeezing and pulsing and spasming around his hard cock, a silent cry on my lips while he groans and strains, holding himself inside me while he grits his teeth, eyes still penetrating mine, anger simmering, pain simmering, *release* simmering.

The two of us are quite the pair.

And it's not nearly as terrifying a thought as it should be.

I'm panting, my breath loud in my own ears, when he suddenly freezes.

"Oh, shit," he whispers. He pushes up to his knees, pulling out so quickly and covering the goods so fast that my vagina almost gets whiplash. "Fuck. Ellie." He shakes his head, gaze darting in a panic around the room. "We shouldn't have done that."

The words take a minute to sink in.

And he takes advantage of my dumbfounded silence to hop back into his clothes. "Shit. Sorry. I—"

"Shut up." I lunge for my own clothes. Tears are flooding my sinuses, and they'll be leaking out my eyeballs in approximately two seconds if I don't get myself under control. "Just shut up."

I dive for my clothes too.

"Ellie—"

"*Shut. Up.*"

That sympathy. That regret. That *this was a mistake*. It's all in the two syllables of my name on his lips.

Crap. *Dammit*.

He moves toward me, but I shove him in the chest until he backs off.

He's right, of course.

It's Wyatt.

He's always right. If this was a mistake, if *I'm* a mistake, then yeah, clearly I'm a mistake.

A mistake who thought that screwing her brother's best friend was the solution to heartbreak.

I don't look at him while I dash for the door.

"*Ellie*," he calls in a hushed whisper, but I ignore him.

I've already been someone's *mistake* recently.

And as I barrel into the cold winter night and throw myself into the car, I vow to myself that I'll never be *anyone's* mistake *ever* again.

"Never again," I whisper as I start my car.

"Never again," I whisper as I gun it on the way down my parents' street.

"Never again," I'm whispering through tears five minutes later on the I-256 loop.

I see the movement flying up the entrance ramp next to me a second too late.

There's a flash, sparks, a crack, a jolt.

Spinning.

Crunching.

Glass shattering.

Metal buckling.

Pain.

Blinding hot pain.

Never again.

It's my last thought before everything goes black.

Chapter Two

Wyatt Morgan, aka a single dad military man unaware that an unresolved piece of his past is lurking in the bathtub

Six months later...

The house is too quiet.

Probably because Tucker quit talking as soon as he saw the socks and bra hanging on the chandelier in the foyer. I give myself a mental pat on the back.

Way to go, Dad. Introduce him to party central at a young age.

If Beck Ryder wasn't the closest thing I had to a brother, and if just being here didn't already bring back the same lingering guilt that's been with me the last six months, I'd be plotting to put Icy Hot in those briefs he models right about now.

Instead, I give the living room a cursory glance and stifle a sigh while I kick my sandals off on the entry mat and nudge Tucker to do the same. Books, magazines, robot toys, and empty mugs and glasses are scattered over every flat surface of the spacious living space, from the end tables to the wide-plank maple floor. The mess ruins the effect of the tall bay windows overlooking the spruce and oaks sloping down the side of the mountain to the little landlocked town of Shipwreck, Virginia in the valley below.

A subtle scent of wood smoke hangs in the air, and the massive stone fireplace separating the living room from the dining room needs the ashes cleaned out. The kitchen is just as much a disaster, with dirty plates, cups, mixing bowls, and pots and pans scattered all about.

Use my weekend house, Beck said. Somebody should.

Go clean my weekend house, he meant.

He needs to be more careful with who he lets in here when he's gone.

A family picture on the mantle catches my eye, and I do my best not to wince.

The guilt is still there. The guilt, and the lie.

I pissed her off.

That's all I told Beck about what happened before Ellie's accident.

Of course you did, Levi had said, because he'd also been lurking at the hospital when I showed up to check on her as soon as I got Beck's text the next day. I'd never been so glad to have a buffer, and felt less like I deserved one, and after what I grew up with before my mom finally moved us to Copper Valley, that's saying something. Levi hadn't cracked a grin when he'd added, *Pissing off Ellie is what you do.*

Fuck, man, you got your own problems, Beck had told me. *Don't put this on yourself too.*

And just like that, I was forgiven.

By them, anyway.

Not by *her* though.

And not by me.

It's gotten easier to get back in the groove of participating in the group texts with all the guys from the neighborhood, but being here, in Beck's second—third? fourth?—home, surrounded by reminders of his sister, makes me tenser than I've been in months.

Coming here was a bad idea.

But I'm not here for me.

Not entirely.

I squeeze Tucker's shoulder. His gaze has drifted from the chandelier to the life-size cardboard cutout of Beck in his skivvies standing in the corner.

The air-brushing on that thing would be hilarious if my son wasn't gaping at Beck's six-pack. I turn the thing around, then nod toward the hallway beyond the kitchen. "C'mon, little dude. Let's go find the bedrooms."

He nods back. Sort of. I guide him past the kitchen and down the hallway toward the two bedrooms on this level. His suitcase goes into the guest bedroom, and I'm about to fling my duffel inside the master, but the rumpled sheets on the king-size four-poster bed, the glass of water on the heavy nightstand, the open suitcase next to the stone fireplace stuffed with—*parrots?*—and the flowery scent tickling my nose give me pause.

But it's the soft light flickering in the bathroom doorway that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

I put a hand out to stop Tucker from coming closer. "Stay here," I murmur, my pulse suddenly hammering.

Since Christmas, it's been just me. Alone. Except the one weekend a month I've flown to Copper Valley to visit my son.

Checking out an intruder? Twenty-eight days a month, I can handle that.

But on the first day I get Tucker for the summer? When it's not just *my* neck on the line?

This is *not* how our week of vacation is supposed to go.

I slide my phone out of my pocket and creep softly to the bathroom door, one hand held back to remind Tucker to stay and be quiet.

He's seven.

This isn't going to end well.

But just as I decide getting the hell out of here and calling a sheriff is probably a better idea, I see what's lurking in the bathroom.

A woman.

Alone.

In the corner tub.

Her dark hair is piled in a short ponytail on top of her head. The faint sound of country music drifts out of her earbuds. Candles line the tub shelf and the platform it sits on, causing the flickering glow. The bath bubbles are so high I can't see her face.

My heart gives a squeeze and shoots out guilt, but I tell it to knock it off.

Beck lets anybody who asks use this house.

It's not Ellie.

Her hair's too short and too dark. Ellie always has blond streaks in her hair.

I step onto the cool tile floor, and I'm about to clear my throat to get her attention when Tucker exclaims, "A bubble bath!"

The woman shrieks, straightens, and spins, wide blue eyes connecting with mine for a split second before she disappears.

One second, she's gape-mouthed and goggling like she's just as shocked to see us as we are to see her, and the next, there's a splash that sets my heart spiraling into a panic, because *fuck me*, that's Ellie.

A flurry of foamy bubbles shoots into the air as she goes under the water. Her arm flaps up, then the other, waving wildly like she's trying to find purchase to pull herself up. I dash across the slick tile to grab for her in the deep tub. My hand connects with soft wet flesh, and suddenly I'm getting a fist to the chest as she breaks through the water. "Back up, asshole. I'll freaking cut you!"

That voice.

It's coming out of a face covered with bubbles from the top of her head to the foam sticking to her eyelashes all the way down to the droopy bubble beard, but I know that voice, and it has my pounding heart suddenly beating from somewhere around my voice box.

"Ellie. Are you—"

The bubble eyes blink. "*Wyatt?*"

The shriek is amplified by the hard surfaces in the bathroom, bouncing off the glass window over the tub, the mirror, the hard floor.

She gasps, looks down and flings her arms over her bubble-covered chest, and ducks back down, but then she shrieks and disappears under the water again, arms flailing again, and what the *hell* is she soaking in that's making the tub so slippery?

I bend at the waist to reach into the tub and grab onto her arm and pull, but no sooner does she surface than her eyes narrow. "Let. Go," she sputters around the bubbles cascading down her face.

"So you can drown?" Christ, she nearly died the last time I saw her. I'm not letting her drown.

No matter how much she irritates the snot out of me.

Or how—

Nope.

Not thinking about Ellie in any other way than the *annoying* and *alive* ways.

Still, we're so close, I can count the specks of midnight in her blue irises and the new list of reasons she has to hate me.

And I know she's naked under those bubbles.

Not good.

Think about my kid. Remember Beck. Think about Beck in his underwear...

Her eyelids snap up and down, more heat—*anger*, not interest—surging out of them. "I'm not going to—fu—"

Her words are cut off as she slips and flails again. She doesn't go under, because she grabs a handful of my shirt.

And pulls.

Hard.

The floor slips beneath me, and suddenly *I'm* falling face-first into the bubbles.

Wet heat crashes over my face and soaks into my T-shirt. I choke on a lungful of soapy water and come up sputtering.

I probably deserve that.

And more.

“What the fu—he—heck was that for?” I spit out around a cough while I shove away from the tub though, because while I can admit to myself that I deserved that, I’m not ready to admit it to her.

I’m still pissed at her for ignoring me so effectively for the past six months.

She huddles in a corner, firmly gripping the faucet. “Get out.”

“Dad, you got bubbles on your head,” Tucker laughs. “Can I have bubbles? Can I take your picture?”

The force of Ellie’s glare is so hot I’m surprised the bubbles don’t melt. “Get. Out,” she repeats.

I swipe water off my face and ignore the stinging in my eyes. “Gladly. You’re welcome for trying to help.”

She flips me the bird.

Not the first time.

Won’t be the last.

Ellie Ryder and me?

We mix as well as water and lava.

And I don’t want to talk about how damn good it feels to finally confirm for myself that she’s still in one piece.

That she’s still breathing.

And that she still hates me.

More so, if that was possible.

I hate that she hates me, but I also need her to hate me.

We’re so damn complicated.

“Can I take a bubble bath?” Tucker wants to know while I pull him back out of the bedroom, grabbing my duffel and then his

suitcase from the guest bedroom too. Water sloshes off my shirt and drips onto the runner while we head for the stairs.

Fucking Beck.

He knew.

He knew she'd be here.

Dude, seriously, get the stick out of your ass, screw your pride, and use my place out in Shipwreck. Tucker will love the pirate festival, and you're not gonna get a more comfortable bed. Or a better chance to teach him to play Pac-Man. Or a cheaper vacation. How much are you paying in alimony?

“That was funny, Dad. You were taking a bubble bath with a girl. Mom says I’m too old to take baths with anyone, but you’re way older than me, and you were doing it. Can we take a bubble bath together? I won’t tell Mom. Promise.”

My heart trips again, but this time, it’s an entirely different reason.

How much does he promise his mother he won’t tell me?

He’s already grown an inch and a half since I saw him for two short days last month.

What else am I missing?

Forget Ellie.

Beck’s not lying about how well she’s healing. She’ll be fine, and she can hate me all she wants.

Tucker’s the only thing I need to concentrate on for the next week while I’m on leave. And then every spare minute the rest of the summer until I have to bring him back to his mom.

“Yeah, bud. Let’s go see if there’s a big tub upstairs.”

Hopefully Ellie will clear out by morning.

But even if she doesn’t, we can avoid her. House is big, and we have tons to do in Shipwreck.

She might’ve invaded this house, but she won’t interfere with my vacation with my son.

Unless she needs me.

Not that she'd ever admit it.

And not that I want to admit it either.

I scrub a hand over my face as we step into the first bedroom on the second floor. The queen bed is decked out with a comforter featuring Beck making moon-eyes in his briefs, and the pillow shams are printed with matching pictures of him winking.

Crazy fucker.

“Dad? Why's your friend's picture all over everywhere? And why's he naked?” Tucker asks.

This is going to be one long week.

Chapter Three

Ellie

My doodle pad.

I left my doodle pad in the living room.

Where Wyatt Morgan is headed *with his son*.

I yank my dripping phone out of the water—*wonderful*—and hoist myself onto the edge of the tub, stifling a groan at the ache radiating from my left hip to my knee. The scars aren't red and angry anymore, but they're still ugly and twisted, and I still can't move as fast as I used to.

Especially not after slipping in the tub three times. So the answer would be *yes*, I still need that stupid anti-slip mat.

Dammit.

After I wipe the worst of the bubbles off my face, I do my best not to limp over the towels that I toss on the ground to prevent me from slipping on the slick tile floor. The air's cold now, but my bathrobe is warm, thanks to Beck's towel warmer.

Once I have my slippers on—simple granny slippers with, you guessed it, grippy foot pads on the bottom—and my phone in my robe pocket, I carefully creak open the bedroom door.

There are voices, but they sound like they're coming from upstairs.

It takes me longer than it should to get to the kitchen, dig out a box of Rice-a-Roni—no, my brother apparently *doesn't* keep plain rice here—and get my phone drying out as best I can.

And then I go in search of my doodle pad.

It's not on the glass end tables, in any of the magazine piles, or tucked into the crocheted ivory afghan on the brown leather couch. Nor is it between the couch cushions or hidden in the

recliners. Not in the papers and random old mail on the coffee table, or on the fireplace hearth.

I look at the stack of magazines again, my blood pressure starting to rise.

No one gets to see my doodle pad.

Especially anyone under eighteen.

Or possibly thirty.

Or with a penis.

Or who *creeps up on me in the bathtub*.

My brother is getting an earful as soon as my phone's dry.

I was doodling out here this afternoon after unloading my car, which I probably should've let Monica help me with, but it's her wedding week, and I'm her maid of honor, dammit, not her friend who needs babysitting. I sat in *that* recliner, swiveled it to face the scenery, and drew—

Never mind what I drew.

The point is, I distinctly remember setting my doodle pad *right there* on the end table.

And it's *gone*.

Nothing else is missing.

Just my doodle pad.

A shriek of laughter from above makes me eyeball the stairs. I could go ask Wyatt where he put it.

Or be polite and ask if he's *seen* it. The tones of his voice carry through the ceiling as well, low, deep, and carefully modulated, because that's Wyatt for you.

Always calm.

Always in control.

Always *right*.

Even about mistakes. *Oh, fuck, Ellie, we shouldn't have done that.*

I shake my head, because the two things I absolutely will *not* think about are Wyatt's hot, sweaty, naked body on mine, and the sound of metal crunching on metal and glass at sixty miles an hour in the dark.

Fuck.

Now I'm thinking about it.

About the dark. And the cold. And the pain.

The chill starts in my left femur and spreads a shiver through my bladder and up into that spot right beneath the bottom of my breastbone. The scent of blood floods my sinuses. My vision narrows, my skin goes clammy, and I get that itch between my shoulder blades while my lungs shrink to the size of a walnut.

I'm drowning.

I'm drowning in hot metal and sharp glass and snowflakes.

This is not real.

I'm safe.

This is not real.

I grip the edge of the leather recliner and focus on a single green leaf fluttering on an oak in the front yard.

Cool summer breeze. Warm summer sunshine.

I'm safe.

I'm safe.

I'm safe.

My fingers tingle, and my legs wobble, but I can see past the tree now. My lungs expand a little wider, and the rushing in my ears fades as quickly as it arrived.

I'm okay.

I'm okay.

My skin prickles as the last of my panic recedes—it's been two months since the last one, I should've been done with

these by now—and a reflected movement in the glass makes me tense up harder.

“Go. Away,” I grit out.

Wyatt’s at the bottom of the stairs. I didn’t hear him coming.

But I hear Wyatt from six months ago.

Fuck, Ellie...shouldn't have done that.

We made a mistake.

You're a mistake.

I squeeze my eyes shut, because he didn’t say that.

He didn’t say *any* of it beyond *we shouldn't have done that*.

But *why shouldn't we?*

Didn’t take much to fill in the blanks.

I was a mistake.

First Patrick—*staying together this long was a mistake. If I was supposed to love you, I wouldn't be in love with someone else*—and then Wyatt. *Fuck, Ellie, that was a mistake.*

“Are you okay?” he asks, and his voice prompts another round of cold chills.

But this isn’t the same panicked cold chills still making my thighs and knees quiver, and sending that ache deeper into my left femur.

Nope, that’s *regret* cold chills.

“Just a little naked,” I reply, because I *am* naked under my robe, and I’m apparently feeling like being an asshole.

I watch his subtle reflection in the window as his head jerks sideways, like he doesn’t want to look at me naked.

Who’s uncomfortable now?

“Beck didn’t mention you’d be here,” he tells the wall. “I didn’t mean to walk in on you. I thought—I thought one of his old flings had moved in.”

I'm fully aware Beck didn't mention me to Wyatt, because he didn't mention Wyatt to me either. I love my brother, but he's obtuse at best and mischievous at worst. "Sounds about right."

There. That was dignified and aloof without being a total asshole.

"Tucker's never been to the Pirate Festival," he adds.

I look past the trees to Shipwreck, nestled amongst more trees in the valley below.

We're 250 miles inland in the Blue Ridge Mountains in southern Virginia, an hour outside the booming metropolis of Copper Valley, overlooking a pirate town called Shipwreck, named thus because of the legend of Thorny Rock.

Thorny Rock, the pirate. Not Thorny Rock, the mountain named after him and which this house is built on. Which is a crucial distinction, since mountains can't smuggle pirate treasure in wagons, nor could they in the eighteenth century when Thorny Rock founded Shipwreck and supposedly buried all his gold here to hide it from the authorities who were on his trail.

"I'm sure you'll have a lovely time," I tell Wyatt while I tighten my robe ties.

I love the Pirate Festival.

Adore it, even.

But I'm not here for the pirates this week. Or to help dig up the town square—again—in search of Thorny Rock's treasure. Or even to hunt for the peg leg hidden somewhere around town.

Not for myself, I mean. I'm here to be maid of honor while my ex-boyfriend plays best man in my best friend's pirate wedding, since she's marrying his brother.

Apparently while Wyatt gets to dig for treasure and hunt for the peg leg and drink his heart out at The Grog.

Or maybe not the drinking part.

Not when he's here with his son.

That would be a mistake. And Wyatt Morgan doesn't make *mistakes*.

Not twice, anyway.

An uncomfortable silence settles between us. I want to squirm, but I won't give him the satisfaction of knowing he's getting to me.

"You looked like you needed help," he says. "In the bathtub."

I bite my tongue, because my pre-teen years were basically me telling Wyatt *I'll tell you when I need help, now back off*, followed by my early teen years where he grew a foot, discovered weights, got hot, and finally left me to my own devices while he did everything with Lydia.

Pretty, perfect, helpless-without-Wyatt *Lydia*.

Who is none of my business.

Although I'd rather think about Lydia than think about the last time I saw Wyatt.

"Thank you for trying," I say, politely, because it would make my mother proud, and my mother thinks Wyatt hung the damn moon. And I don't want to argue with him right now. I have to save my energy for tonight. And tomorrow. And the next day. All the way until Friday, when Monica and Jason are getting married in the biggest pirate wedding ever seen in Shipwreck.

"Are you...sticking around for a while?" he asks.

"All week." I study the furniture again, looking for the sparkly cover of my doodle pad, but no luck.

He clears his throat like he's eaten a bad banana pepper.

"But I won't be here much," I add "so..."

"Yeah. Us either."

Wyatt and Ellie, sitting in a tree. A-W-K-W-aaaarrrrr-ding!

"Great. I'm actually leaving in..." *Shit*.

My phone.

I don't have a phone.

I can drive. I've been driving again for two months. In a new hybrid car with more airbags than a bagpipe convention and sensors everywhere because other than refusing to drive a gas-guzzling tank, I didn't have it in me to argue when Beck decided it was his job to make sure I had every safety feature known to man, including the freaking *color* of car least likely to be in a car accident.

Except the one feature none of us thought I'd need—internal satellite phone support.

I'll always have my phone, which has a voice assistant, and that's plenty good enough, we all agreed.

I don't drive without a phone.

And I can't call Monica—or Grady, my date for the week—because *I don't have a phone.*

Dammit.

If I don't show up for dinner and the parade tonight, she'll send someone up here to find me, because that's exactly what I'd do if she was my maid of honor and she didn't show up for a planned event on my itinerary when I knew she was still a little jumpy driving and that she had to come down off a mountain to get there because she desperately needed space from a certain other member of the bridal party and therefore wasn't doing the *easy* thing and spending the week at the Inn.

I didn't tell her I was bringing Grady as my plus-one, just that I was bringing a date, so she won't know she can go to a local for help.

And the only person in the wedding party other than Monica who knows the backroads up the mountain is Patrick.

I flinch at the thought of his name, because while Wyatt was happy to tell me *we shouldn't have done that*, at least he didn't proclaim to love me with all his heart first.

And at least he didn't bring his smart, skinny, beautiful new girlfriend along for the week.

That would be even better.

Look, Ellie, everyone but you is worthy of love. You couldn't even get a fake date without asking four guys first.

I need to get off this mountain.

And get to that dinner.

I turn to head to the kitchen—Beck might have a spare phone in his junk drawer, not because he thinks of things like spare phones, but because he's unpredictable and just when you think he's completely irresponsible, he pulls out a spare cell phone—and for a moment, I forget that my hip doesn't like to move that fast.

My knee buckles, but I catch myself on the end table before I go all the way down.

Wyatt's crossing the room before I can think *boo*, but I hold a hand up. "Foot fell asleep," I lie.

Those gray eyes bore into me, and his full lips go flat. Between the military haircut, the square jaw, the broad shoulders, and that glare, I feel like I should offer to drop and give him twenty.

And no, I don't want to talk about what the combination is doing to my libido. My body doesn't get a vote in this.

It did last time, and that didn't end so well.

And I'm not talking about the accident.

I straighten myself and make my way more slowly to the kitchen.

If he notices the limp, he doesn't comment.

If he notices the *go away* message I'm trying to send him telepathically, he also doesn't comment.

Or go away.

"What do you need?" he asks, and I get another shiver, like he's not asking what I'm looking for in the drawer, but what my *soul* needs.

I jerk my head toward the island, where my phone is in a bag of rice.

“Ah. Did you take the SIM card out?”

“Yes, Wyatt, I know enough to know to take the SIM card out.”

“Right. Of course you do,” he mutters. “You need to call someone?”

I instantly feel like a jerk, because we’re not kids fighting over the right way to shoot a free throw or kick a soccer ball anymore, and we’re not whoever the hell we were six months ago when he was home for Christmas and Patrick had just dumped me and he’d just gotten a horrific divorce settlement and we were both miserable enough to think we could drown ourselves in meaningless sex between two people who hated each other.

A lot’s changed since then.

Mostly me.

“I’m meeting friends in town.” I move aside a hand squeezer, fingernail clippers, a set of cards with Beck’s picture on them, condoms, and taco sauce packets, among other things, but I’m not finding any spare phones.

Beck changes his number on occasion, and because he’s Beck, I’m pretty sure he forgets to cancel his old contracts, but if he has any spare active cell phones, they aren’t in this drawer.

I should keep a burner phone up here.

“You lost your keys?” Wyatt says.

“I need a phone.”

There’s a pause, then a heavy, “Oh.”

And now there’s also this gigantic guilt giraffe standing in the kitchen, leaning all up in my space.

“Not that it matters, because I don’t know anyone’s number,” I mutter as I realize my *other* problem.

“You want a lift?” he asks. “Tucker wants to see the parade.”

I open my mouth to tell him that’s not necessary, except...it kinda is.

I can either take his help, or I can scare my friend.

Monica was right on my parents' heels getting to the hospital. She's gone out of her way to have girls' nights—*without* Patrick's new girlfriend—because *just because I'm marrying the idiot's brother doesn't mean I'm giving up my best friend*. And she begged to ride out here to Shipwreck with me because *you are not driving that far alone right now, period*.

She doesn't sugarcoat it.

And I couldn't be more grateful.

And Grady is adorable and kind and well-loved in Shipwreck, and the perfect foil to Patrick and his wonderful new girlfriend, but he's not the kind to panic over me, because he's just a nice guy from town doing me a favor by pretending to be my boyfriend this week.

He's not *actually* interested.

Wyatt's watching me like he always has. Alert. Focused. Aware.

He probably watches everyone like that. I wonder how many other women have had their hearts broken just because of those eyes.

"If it's not too much trouble," I say.

"We're already heading that way."

"Right. Sure. Thanks."

"When do you need to leave?"

"We have reservations at six."

One corner of his mouth hitches. "Crusty Nut?"

I love Shipwreck. And I love that Monica loves it enough to get married here. "Not like The Grog takes reservations or has good seating for the parade."

"We'll be ready at five-thirty."

"Thank you."

It's just a ride. And I'm doing it for Monica.

And I refuse to feel uncomfortable just because he's seen me naked, played wild bucking stallion to my free-range cowgirl, and then decided to return me for a refund.

If he wants to remember that night, that's his problem.

I am officially moving on.

And I am officially not going to let him see that I care anymore.

Because then maybe I can also convince myself.

Chapter Four

Wyatt

While we wait for five-thirty, I introduce Tucker to the joy of Pac-Man in Beck's basement haven. Because modeling underwear as a second career after being in a boy band for years pays well, Beck has money to burn, and he uses it outfitting his houses with enough games to keep a man busy for three lifetimes. In addition to the old-school Pac-Man arcade game console, he has Ms. Pac-Man and Frogger, plus foosball, table tennis, pool, air hockey, and two closets full to bursting with board games. And more.

This whole house is a man cave, but the basement?

The basement is the cherry on top. Half bar with TV viewing area, half game room, it's where we always hang out when we're here on those rare days we're all in the area at the same time without other responsibilities to tackle, and some of my best adult memories have happened in this basement.

Like the Frogger weekend.

And I am *never* risking messing up that friendship again.

Not for the houses and the games.

But for the guys who are my only family left beyond my son.

"Run away from the ghosts, bud," I tell Tucker, who's sitting on a red leather bar stool so he's tall enough to man the controller. "You can eat them once you get the dot in the corner."

He shrieks with glee as he races the ghosts back and forth on the bottom row, until the blue ghost eats him.

As Pac-Man falls off the screen, Tucker bursts into tears. "I died!" he wails.

"Whoa, hey, it's okay."

“I *died*,” he wails harder.

I rub his back, because *fuck*, what else am I supposed to do? It seems like a silly thing to cry over, but then, he’s seven. He cried once on spring break because a worm dried out on the sidewalk.

Kid has big feelings and a big heart. There’s no way I’m breaking that heart.

The world needs more heart.

“You want to play again?” I ask.

He wipes his eyes, pushing his glasses crooked, and nods. “Uh-huh.”

“You want help?”

“Uh-huh.”

His hair smells like a fruit pie when I lean over him, and his little body is just so *little*. Even after growing since I saw him last. I kiss his crown and restart the game, covering his small hand with mine. “We’re going to run away from the ghosts, okay?”

“Okay.”

We die twice more before my phone alarm goes off with my two-minute warning to get upstairs and get shoes on.

Tucker heaves a grown-up sigh. “Really, Dad? The alarms *again*?”

“They keep us on time.”

“Sometimes you just have to live life.”

And that’s his mother coming through. I do my best to keep my expression neutral. “And sometimes, people are counting on us. And other times, we want to get to the pirate parade before we miss it.”

He pushes his hair out of his eyes and hops off the stool, dashing for the stairs and clutching his shorts, which are threatening to fall down his slender hips. “Pirate parade! Pirate parade!”

“Tucker, you forgot your...” I trail off, because he’s gone, running past the basement bar and up the stairs. So I grab the little scrap of a security blanket he still carries with him and trail after him, also grabbing three dirty glasses from beside a glittery notebook on the high bar counter as I pass, though those aren’t our mess. I get to the top of the stairs just a few steps behind Tucker, who’s staring again.

And when I look up, I realize why.

“Not. One. Word,” Ellie says.

“Daddy, a pirate girl came out of the bathtub,” Tucker whispers.

Ellie’s eyes go soft as her dimple pops out when she smiles at Tucker. She’s in a pirate wench dress, with a fluffy white blouse hanging off her shoulders and covered with one of those leather-looking thingies that ties up from her waist to her chest and gives her good cleavage—a corsage? A coriander? A makes-a-man-speechless?—and a flowing gauzy maroon skirt with black stiletto heels coming up to her knees.

I swallow hard and remind my dick that we’re here for my son to go to the Pirate Festival, not for me to lose my head. Again.

Or one of my best friends.

“You may call me Calamity Ellie, captain of the Golden Albatross,” she says to Tucker, ending on a fancy bow that has her wincing when she stands back up.

I start to ask if those boots are a good idea—she looked like she was hurting earlier, and I know she busted her leg and hip bad in the accident—but then I remember who I’m talking to, and I clamp my mouth shut and move past her to put the glasses in the kitchen.

Especially since she’s in full makeup with her hair curled special and hanging down to the tops of her bare shoulders.

She doesn’t look like she’s meeting friends.

She looks like she’s headed for a pirate battle that will be followed with a dance.

Not a care in the world.

Just time to party with the pirates.

“Girls can’t be captains,” Tucker announces as I step out of the kitchen.

I wince and angle back to put a hand on his shoulder. “Never, *ever* tell a woman she can’t be something. Especially Miss—*Captain Ellie.*”

“But boys are pirate captains.”

Ellie gives me a look that suggests this is *my* fault—of course she does—while she puts her fists to her hips. “Is that so, you scurvy dog? You keep talkin’, you’ll be swabbing the poop deck!”

Tucker giggles. “Ew, I don’t want to swap poop on the deck!”

“Then don’t be sayin’ there ain’t girl pirates, sonny boy.”

Ellie winks at him, then sashays past us.

With a limp that puts a rock in my gut.

I’ve never wanted to protect someone so badly while simultaneously being so irritated with her that I want to tie her to a chair and make her promise she’ll quit—quit—hell.

I don’t know what I want her to quit, but I know it’s none of my business.

Tucker falls in line behind her and also limps all the way out the door.

Hell.

Does it still hurt? Beck said they weren’t sure she’d walk again right after it happened.

But I can’t ask.

I don’t have the right.

Not with our history. *All* of our history.

“Set the alarm, please, powder monkey,” Ellie calls to me as though we’re kids again and she’s just trying to get my goat.

Like our relationship isn’t way more complicated than that.

Like we didn't screw on her parents' basement floor. Like she didn't tear off out of the house right afterward. Like she didn't ignore every last attempt I made to apologize.

"Are you going to the pirate parade with us?" Tucker asks her while I set the alarm and lock up.

"Nay, laddie, I be off to pillage and plunder whilst you all be watching the lesser pirates distract you."

"I'm going to dig for pirate treasure this week."

"Only the luckiest pirates who believe in girl pirate captains will find any gold."

"I know *all* the pirate stories, and none of them are about girl pirates."

"That's because men pirates write all the books."

"Where did you hear all the pirate stories?" I ask Tucker, and not just to distract him from sticking his foot further down his throat, which of course he doesn't realize he's doing, since he's seven. I talk to him most every night before bed, generally read a story on video chat, and I've never read him a pirate story.

"From Mr. Duffy next door. He lets me water his dog and he tells me about when he was fighting all the pirates before the war."

"Which war?"

"The Civil War."

I make a mental note to ask my ex-wife if she's aware of what Tucker's doing when he's playing outside. She'll probably tell me Mr. Duffy's a harmless old man, but Tucker can't always tell the difference between reality and a good story, and I don't want him getting made fun of at school for talking about his neighbor the vampire pirate hunter.

I *hate* not being close enough to go see his teachers and just be there for those minutes after school when he talks about his day.

One more year.

Just one more year.

“Keys?” Ellie says to me.

“I locked the door.”

She points to my SUV. “So I can drive.”

“No.”

“That wasn’t a question.”

“This is *my car*.”

“I have control issues.”

She’s got that stubborn look Beck gets when he’s determined that we’re going to play poker until he wins. And she’s not overtly setting any guilt trips, but she doesn’t have to.

She doesn’t fucking have to.

I approach and dangle my keys between us. “I’m backseat driving.”

She smirks. “Of course you are.”

But she still takes the keys.

I hold the ring steady until she makes eye contact again. “That’s my kid you’re driving,” I add softly.

She holds my gaze without flinching. “Noted. Now, if you don’t want me stealing this thing, you better get in.”

Tucker’s already in the backseat strapping into his booster seat, so I settle into the passenger seat.

Feels weird to be on this side of the car.

But I think I owe her.

She might not realize it yet, but she owes me too.

And since we’re here together, she’s going to pay up.

Chapter Five

Ellie

Shipwreck smells like fried oysters, cannon fire, and dirt. People in pirate costumes stroll along Blackbeard Avenue while locals leap out from behind barrels and out of the local shops to challenge tourists to swordfights.

It's glorious.

I tell Wyatt and Tucker to go on about their business, that I'll get a ride back with a friend, but because Wyatt is Wyatt, he insists on walking with me from the parking fields at the end of the main drag toward Crusty Nut, which has the best fried pickles and banana pudding in all of Virginia, and yes, I *have* sampled every banana pudding in Copper Valley, and a fair number up in the DC metro area too, so I *can* say with absolute certainty that Crusty Nut's banana pudding cannot be beat.

Also, if you don't like banana pudding, I'm happy to eat yours. You can have my Twizzlers.

"Tucker, have you ever seen the inside of a pirate ship?" I ask as we pass Scuttle Putt, the miniature golf course at the edge of the park. The entrance to the payment shack is shaped like the bow of a ship, complete with a mermaid figurehead above the door.

Tucker slows.

Wyatt scoops him up and puts him on his shoulders like he's light as a feather. "We'll check it out later."

"Why are you doing this?" I murmur. "I don't need a fu—freaking escort. I'm *fine*."

"Your brother would kick my *ahem* if I didn't get you back safe and sound to his house tonight, and we both know it."

"I know everyone in town, and I'll get a ride. Go away."

“Not until I see who’s driving you home.”

I pause outside Crow’s Nest, the local bakery, as I spot the owner just inside the open door, wiping down tables in a pirate costume, complete with eye patch.

Just as he’s supposed to be. “Hey, Grady. You ready?”

I smile, and he smiles back, and for the first time since Wyatt walked in on me in the bathtub, I know tonight’s going to be okay.

“You bet, hot stuff. Give me two seconds to toss this rag.”

Wyatt looks at me.

Then at Grady, who’s six solid feet of dependable, adorable muscle and dimples, topped with a thick mop of dark hair that even his hairnet can’t fully contain.

“What the f—fudge is going on here?” he growls.

“Just picking up my date. Who will also drive me home.”

“Your *date*.”

“Mm-hmm. Like I said, go about your business.”

Cooper, Grady’s brother, strolls out of the bakery and rubs my hair. Not because he’s older than me, but because he’s taller than me. “Still heartbroken you didn’t pick me, Calamity Ellie.”

“You’re unreliable,” I reply, earning a laugh.

“Dad. *Dad*,” Tucker whispers reverently while Wyatt continues to glare. “*Daaaad*.”

“I’m still handsomer,” Cooper points out.

I pretend to study him, then shake my head. “Nah.”

He puts a hand to his heart like he’s wounded. “Aah, Ellie. What’s a guy gotta do to get your affections?”

“You have to pick up your phone when she calls, idiot,” Grady tells his brother as he steps outside, sans the hairnet under his pirate hat. He offers me an arm. “Shall we, Calamity Ellie?”

“Who the hell are you?” Wyatt snarls.

“He’s—” I start, but I’m suddenly squished in a bride-scented hug with a fake parrot smashed into my face.

“Ellie! There you are. Why aren’t you answering your phone?” Monica demands. She’s dressed to the hilt as a pirate captain, with her honey blond hair tied back in a low ponytail under her pirate hat.

“It’s recovering from a swim,” I tell her.

“Daddy and Miss Ellie took a bubble bath together!” Tucker announces as I pull back.

Monica’s hazel eyes dart from me to Wyatt to Tucker up on Wyatt’s shoulders, going round as a pirate steering wheel by the time they’re back on me.

Grady drops his arm and takes a step back, brows raised, a slow smile spreading like he’s coming to a conclusion.

Shit.

Shit on a cannonball. This is *not* how today is supposed to go.

Behind Monica, Patrick, tall, blond, and usually affectedly bored, narrows his eyes like I’m still his business. “A bubble bath? Together?”

“They were all covered in bubbles,” Tucker says with a giggle.

I laugh too, way too high. “And isn’t it dinner time?” I interrupt, because I am *not* going to dinner solo with my ex-boyfriend and his perfect girlfriend and once again, Wyatt Morgan is screwing up my life. He’s going to ruin my carefully crafted date routine with Grady for the week. “We should get down to Crusty Nut before the parade starts.”

The crowd’s getting thicker, so I’m not wrong.

But Monica, Jason—her fiancé, who’s dressed like a first mate but usually looks like a surfer—Patrick, and his girlfriend, Sloane, don’t move.

“You’re dating again?” Patrick asks, again like it’s his business.

“Dude, I didn’t realize,” Grady says, backing away while Cooper shakes with silent laughter at his brother’s expense.

“Wyatt and I are *friends*,” I say lightly in a tone that leaves my answer open for interpretation.

Wyatt lifts a brow at me while holding onto Tucker’s legs, because whatever we are, we’ve never really been *friends*. More like people with opposing personalities who sometimes cross paths in social circles since my brother has always thought he could do no wrong.

But if he’s screwing up my fake date for the week, he’s going to be something other than my *friend*.

“Why doesn’t your *friend* join us for dinner?” Patrick says tightly, and *that’s right, you dumping asshole, I have men fighting over me*.

Sloane angles closer to him. “They’re not in costume,” she points out.

Like all of us, she too is dressed like a pirate. Her costume has red-and-black striped pants loose around her thighs but fitted to her calves, a white blouse, and a leather strap over her shoulder holding her scabbard and fake sword. A matching bandana covers her hair, and she’s sporting skull and crossbones earrings.

Patrick’s costume is nearly identical, except he’s missing the earrings.

And I can’t say a thing, because I would’ve dressed us in matching pirate costumes too.

“Grady was coming with me for dinner,” I say, “because Wyatt and Tucker have never seen the pirate parade, and Pop’s less likely to harass Grady if he’s with us. Wyatt, really, that’s an amazing spot to watch the parade. Tucker will love it. And wait until you see Pop. Pop Rock? Grady and Cooper’s grandpa? He dresses up like Blackbeard every year. It’s glorious.”

I point desperately to a minute space between a lamp post and a family of six right at the curb.

“Wyatt...Wyatt Morgan?” Monica asks.

And I'm done. Totally, completely screwed. My master plan for a fake boyfriend this week is unraveling before my eyes.

So I do the only thing I can to save my pride in the face of disaster.

I link my arm through Wyatt's. "It's new," I whisper, telling my best friend of ten years a bald-faced lie that will undoubtedly kick me in the lady nuts very, very soon. Like as soon as Wyatt opens his mouth and bucks away from me. "And I didn't want to take away from his time with Tucker this week."

There's a muscle working in Wyatt's jaw, but his gray eyes aren't glaring.

Nope, they're shifting into neutral. He disentangles himself from my arm, but then wraps his tightly about my shoulders, which is a little awkward with Tucker up on his shoulders, but he manages anyway. Because he's Wyatt.

Of *course* he can hold a kid *and* me.

"I don't share," he says with a pointed look at Grady.

Cooper has a coughing fit.

"*Dad*," Tucker howls, kicking Wyatt in the pec. "That's *Cooper Rock*."

"I'm free tonight, Ellie," Cooper says. He winks at Wyatt.

"And you're staying free," Wyatt replies pleasantly.

Too pleasantly.

Like he's bantering with Beck and the guys.

"Wyatt Morgan?" Monica repeats again.

"I know that name," Patrick says with a frown.

I shrug and put on what I hope is an embarrassed smile, rather than the mortified dread I'm feeling at the farce I'm going to have to pull off *all fucking week* if I don't want to be the fifth wheel for my best friend's wedding to my ex-boyfriend's brother. "You know what they say about that line between love and hate."

Monica's hazel eyes are so wide under her feathered pirate wench hat that she's in danger of losing an eyeball. "Well, yeah, I mean, I always suspected as much, but...*oh my god*, Ellie! I'm so fuc—freaking happy for you!"

She tackles me in a hug, babbling about needing all the details while I reel a little, because what the hell does *I always suspected as much* mean?

"Monica, seriously, this is *your* week. Wyatt and I are just... we're taking it slow. He doesn't *really* care if Grady comes to dinner with us."

Wyatt's grip—yep, he's still holding on, despite Monica trying to strangle me with a hug too—tightens so hard that if my shoulders were walnuts, they'd be walnut butter. "Yes, I do."

"DAD, THAT'S COOPER ROCK!" Tucker hollers.

Cooper, who no longer has any shot of anonymity, steps out from behind his brother to offer Tucker a fist bump. "Give it up, little buddy. You like the Fireballs?"

Tucker nods solemnly while he looks at his fist. "Dad says loyalty's important, even in the face of great loss."

Cooper pounds his heart twice with his fist. "Dang straight. Your dad's a smart guy."

"You'll get 'em this year," Tucker declares.

Cooper winces. Grady winces. Half the street winces.

Since Chicago won the World Series a few years ago, Copper Valley's pro baseball team has taken over as the sport's most lovable losers.

And they're embracing the title with gusto this year.

"They will, won't they, Tucker?" I say.

"They really will." He beams at me like we're going to be best friends, and I think he could be right.

Monica's frowning. "I don't know if Crusty Nut can fit two more people at our table."

“It’s okay,” I tell her quickly. “Tucker will love the parade *so* much more from right here. He can’t catch as much booty if he’s up on the balcony with us. Wyatt’s okay with this, aren’t you, honey?”

I lift my eyes to his, and that’s a mistake.

Because he’s promising me a lot of retribution in that colorful gray gaze. And if you think gray can’t be colorful, you’ve never pissed off a gray-eyed man.

“Looks like I have to be,” he replies.

“But you have to join us for lunch tomorrow,” Monica announces. She squeezes my hand. “Oh my god, Ellie, I always thought this might happen.” She throws herself around Wyatt too, and the parrot wobbling on her shoulder, stitched to her pirate captain costume, pecks Tucker’s bare calf. “You better be good to her, or I’ll slice your nuts off with my pirate sword and tie a cannonball to your ankles and shoot you over the mountains.”

Tucker gasps.

“She’s teasing,” Wyatt tells him quickly.

Monica smiles.

It’s an ugly smile.

I like it.

Wyatt smiles back.

It’s a tight smile.

My life is going to be hell as soon as I get back to Beck’s place tonight.

“Can you drive me home?” I ask Monica. “Tucker has an early bedtime.”

“Of course!” she squeals.

Patrick’s still glaring.

And since Patrick’s glaring, Sloane the wonder nurse is also glaring.

Only Jason, Monica's laid-back fiancé who's been watching all of this with an amused smile, is still blissfully unaware of all the weirdness.

It's remarkable that Patrick and Jason share genes, because that's the only thing they have in common.

"You'll drive safely," Wyatt informs Monica.

She rolls her eyes at him. "First one to the hospital. I got it."

He finally releases his grip on me.

"Go on, get that spot," I tell him. "Tucker, you're going to love the parade."

"Can we all have a bubble bath tonight?" he asks.

"No," Wyatt and I answer together.

The adults lining the parade route all chuckle with Grady, Cooper, Monica, and Jason. "You are adorable," Monica informs Tucker. "We're going to be good friends this week."

She's not going to see them at all this week if I have any say in it.

Far better to have a boyfriend who's an amazing single dad from afar than to have to put on a show for my friend and my ex-boyfriend anyway.

Maybe this will work out after all.

"Enjoy the parade," I tell Wyatt. "I'll see you back at the house."

His lips twitch, because Wyatt and I don't do *see you later*.

We never have.

As kids, we'd part on me shouting *shut up and let me do it my way* to his *fine, do it your way and lose, you crazy buttwipe*. As adults, there's less shouting, but generally more eye-rolling.

Until that last time.

Over Christmas.

He bends down and kisses my cheek. “I’ll miss you, schmoopsy-poo.” Quieter, he adds, “And we’re discussing this later.”

“I’ll miss you too,” I say breathlessly.

Monica loops her arm around mine and tugs gently, prodding me into falling into step beside her.

Well, limp.

These shoes were a terrible idea.

I give Grady a quick, “Sorry about that,” over my shoulder, but he just grins and waves me off.

“Good to see you happy, Ellie.”

I don’t look at Wyatt.

I can’t.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me he was hot?” Monica asks, because she came into my life after Wyatt was already gone in the military, and I realize with a start that she’s never actually met him.

“Most of my life, I didn’t look at him that way,” I answer honestly.

“I’m gonna need this bubble bath story.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing you’ve never done yourself,” I reply.

“Your leg hurts, doesn’t it?”

“What’s pain when I look like a million Spanish galleons?”

She rolls her eyes, then glances back.

I look back too, and spot Wyatt buying a foam sword for Tucker from a passing street vendor.

Except he’s not buying just one.

He’s buying two.

He swings Tucker down, squats and holds his sword in the ready position, and then staggers in mock pain as Tucker gets him in the gut.

“Right,” Monica murmurs, fanning herself. “Not hot at all.”

That’s right.

He’s not hot at all.

I just have to pretend he is.

It’s only four days. And barely a few little lies.

It’ll all be just fine.

Chapter Six

Wyatt

I don't like leaving Ellie in Shipwreck, but she's a grown-up, she's with friends, and one of the guys from the bakery—Cooper? Hell, I haven't kept up with the Fireballs this year—came out to chat for a while during the parade, and while I won't admit it to Ellie, he passed my gut test.

Seems like a decent guy.

So does his brother, Grady, who apologized again for the mix-up and told me I was a lucky guy.

So she has good people looking out for her in a safe small town, and she'll be okay.

But after I read six bedtime stories with Tucker, promise we'll go miniature golfing and try to dig up pirate treasure and look for the hidden peg leg that's supposed to come with a treasure of its own tomorrow, and hug him tight because it's *so* damn good to be able to hug him—video chat and phone calls aren't the same, and now that he's starting soccer and baseball, there's less time to talk—I head to the living room to wait for Ellie to get back.

It's possible she won't *come* back tonight.

Cooper wasn't shy with information, and while Tucker raked in candy, pirate rings, fake gemstones, and more from the floats passing by, I found out Ellie's in town for her best friend's wedding. Most of the wedding party is staying at the Shipwreck Inn. Her ex-boyfriend—I thought the Blond Caveman looked familiar—is the best man and brought the woman he dumped her for just before her accident. Ellie's been in town a lot the last six months—especially while she was recovering at first—and Cooper's glad Beck sent someone to keep an eye on her while she's feeling so lost.

That last part is what has me dialing my buddy, even though I think he's somewhere in Europe on a photo shoot and it's probably two in the morning at the earliest wherever he is.

Hell, I don't even know if his cell number works in Europe.

But, because he's Beck, he answers on the second ring.

"Wyatt, my man, what's up? How's the house?" Beck says in my ear.

I glance at the mess in the kitchen, and I shove up to tackle it, because it's annoying me. "Occupied."

Beck laughs. "If you're there, it must be."

"Ellie's here."

There's silence, and for half a second, I think he's going to pull the *Connection's breaking up* card, but then he simply says, "Huh."

Not like he's surprised.

Not like he's not either.

I stack up plates, cups, mugs—someone likes tea, it seems—silverware and dirty napkins from the dining room and carry them into the kitchen.

I don't have room to call Beck on any bullshit—it's my fault his sister was in a car accident that put her in the hospital for a month and still has her limping—but if he wants something from me, he damn well needs to come out and ask before I fuck this up.

Again.

"Ryder..."

"You remember that year we played Trivial Pursuit over Christmas break and you and Ellie ended up having a ranch dressing fight in the snow?"

"She called me a cheater."

"Bro, you did cheat."

"I did not."

“You memorized the cards.”

“There was nothing else to read.”

“Whatever. The point is, think of all the good memories. How about that time she went apeshit because you were using her art projects for target practice?”

“*You* brought them out and didn’t mention they were—”

“Good times, good times.” He sighs happily. “Man, I wish I could be there with you guys. Wonder if you’d wrestle me over Frogger again like that time—”

“What the hell are you smoking?”

“Fresh air, man. The best fresh night air Spain has to offer. You ever been to Spain? It’s gorgeous.”

Shithead’s avoiding my questions.

He *knew* Ellie would be here. And he knows we can’t stand each other. I stifle a growl of frustration while I plug the sink, squirt soap in, and flip on the faucet.

“I found her in the bathtub,” I grit out. I can tell him I found her in the bathroom, but I *will not* confess to my best friend that we’ve gone a lot farther than that.

Being friends with Beck Ryder saved my life, and it doesn’t matter if we go a few months without talking, that will never change.

Nor will I *ever* do anything to potentially screw it up again.

I keep waiting for Ellie to tell him, for him to turn on me, but apparently she either doesn’t remember or doesn’t want him to know.

So I’m not going to tell him either.

“You found her in the bathtub? Doing Jell-O shots or something?”

Beck might play the egotistical, idiot underwear model, but I’ve known him for too many years for me to fall for this bullshit. “Naked.”

“Ah. Yeah, that makes more sense. Were you naked too?”

“Christ on a butter knife, you jackass. Who asks that?”

“Wyatt. You’re my bro. You think we’d be friends if I didn’t think you were good enough for my sister? Nah, man. I’ve seen how you two look at each other. Far be it from me to interfere.”

I’m momentarily speechless, because I didn’t think that was how the bro code worked. And Beck and a few other guys we grew up with made a name for themselves as the band Bro Code for a lot of years.

So don’t tell me the bro code isn’t important to him.

It’s *everything*.

He’s gotta be messing with me, so I go with the easy response. “She looks at me like she’d like to slice out my kidneys and roast them over a campfire.”

“Young love, man. Young love is beautiful.”

“Ryder.”

“Dude. It ever occur to you that maybe it would mean a lot to me if one of my best buddies could finally just suck it up and get along with my sister? Is that too much to ask?”

I briefly consider Levi or Davis or one of the Rivers brothers asking Ellie on a date, and I decide it doesn’t matter that they, too, are like brothers to me, I’d smash all their faces in.

“What the hell’s actually going on?” I ask.

I wash six glasses while I wait for him to answer, and when he finally does, I wish I hadn’t asked.

“You know that accident Ellie was in?”

The pit of my stomach drops just like it did when I got his text the day after I screwed up. “We all know about Ellie’s accident, man.”

“She’s been...reserved since then.”

“She wasn’t fucking reserved when she punched me for trying to save her from drowning and then dunked me in the tub,” I say dryly.

“Really? That’s great!”

I swipe a hand over my face, because I’m getting annoyed. Beck’s always lived in his own world, but this is extreme, even for him. “She dropped her phone in the tub, so it might be a while before she calls to bitch you out.”

“Even better,” he says cheerfully.

“Push comes to shove, she tells me to leave, you know I’m gone.”

“Whoa, whoa, hold up.” Beck’s suddenly serious as banana pudding, which is pretty damn serious in these parts. “Okay, okay. Yes, I knew Ellie was going to be there. That’s why I kept talking up the pirate festival for Tucker. She...needs you.”

“Your sister. Eleanor *I can do it myself* Ryder. She needs me.”

“Wyatt. She doesn’t *know* it, but yeah, she needs you. She’s just—she hasn’t been herself since the accident. And that prick Patrick dumping her right at the holidays for his neighbor—she’s always had this life plan, you know? Finish school, take over for Mom and Dad, get married, have three kids, live happily ever after. But it’s all...I mean, work’s good. It’s about all she does anymore. I told you she qualified to run the New York City Marathon this year, didn’t I? Qualified back before the accident. Now she can’t do it. She’s just...it’s like she’s giving up. She puts on the show, but she doesn’t talk about her plans anymore like she used to.”

I grunt, because yeah, Ellie was *always* making plans. *When I’m in high school, I’m going to be on the soccer team. When I’m in college, I’m going to make the Dean’s list. When I go to work for Mom and Dad, I’m going to convince City Hall to hire us to make the building green. When I get married, I’m going to have two-point-four kids and a dog and a parakeet named Sue.*

“You know what I’m talking about,” Beck says. “And the thing is...you irritate the shit out of her. So maybe...I don’t know. Just give her something *normal*. Annoy her until she starts planning on annoying you back. And I know she’s there

at that wedding with her dickweed ex too. Drop-kick him for me a couple times, would you?"

I drop a clean plate into the drying rack before it registers that Ellie hasn't been cleaning her own dishes.

Ellie doesn't leave messes. She's too type A for that.

Something *is* wrong. "You know there's something really fucked up about asking me to irritate your sister."

"I wouldn't trust another soul for this job. Because I know you won't hurt her. Irritate the hell out of her, yeah. But hurt her? Not you, man."

Damn it.

I already did that, didn't I?

"Are you serious?"

"Everyone's treating her with kid gloves. She needs to know she can still do stuff."

"She's down in town in high heel pirate boots. I think she knows she can still do stuff."

"Yeah, and I'm just a dumbass egomaniac who models underwear."

Right. The Ryders know how to put on a face for the world. Doesn't mean that's the real story.

"I'm not going to try to pick fights with your sister to make her feel better." Especially not when she's just told the bride that *I'm her damn boyfriend*.

Which I'm still in denial about, because I'm not spending this week confusing my kid.

But I don't like how her ex was looking at her.

I don't want to let him think she's easy pickings right now either.

Beck laughs. "Like you have to try to irritate her. Just be you. It'll happen."

"Why don't *you* try to annoy her?"

“Can’t. She’s my baby sister, and she’s hurt. My instinct is to protect and save.”

“You just asked *me* to annoy her.”

“That’s different. Plus, it was Levi’s idea. I thought you two loved each other. I forgot all those times she threw dog poop at you when we were playing volleyball and you tried to help her serve better.”

I can’t believe I’m smiling over *that* memory, but here we are. “I was honestly surprised the day I heard she actually graduated college without getting arrested.”

“Mom says she never found where she fit in. Toss in teenage hormones and having us for role models, and she was basically doomed. But I think Levi’s right. She always hated you the most.”

“Appreciate that.”

“She can’t go too hard on you. Not with Tucker around. She loves kids.”

And I can’t go too hard on her.

Not with Tucker around.

Kid needs a good role model, not a fucked-up one. Especially since I know his mother’s dating again.

But the only thing I learned about being a good role model, I learned from my buddies’ fathers. Not my own.

“She’s gonna be okay, Beck,” I tell him. “She’s too stubborn not to be.”

“Thanks, man. I owe you one.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Quit being a pain in the ass. And don’t beat my high score on Frogger or I’ll ship you a box of dicks at work.”

“You coming home anytime this summer?”

“Sometime.”

“Swing by Georgia when you do. I need you to show Tucker that all these pillows and cardboard cutouts of you are

airbrushed so he doesn't get body image issues. And bring your baby book. The one with the picture of you swimming in cake with your baby belly hanging over your diaper."

He laughs. "You got it."

I hang up and finish the dishes, clean out the fireplace, and take out the trash before settling in to listen to an audiobook in the darkened living room.

Because if Ellie's coming home tonight, we're going to talk.

About everything.

Chapter Seven

Ellie

In addition to my brain reeling from trying to keep my story about Wyatt straight all night, my thigh and hip are full-on throbbing by the time Monica pulls to a stop beside Wyatt's SUV in Beck's driveway. A single lamp shines in the front window and the porch light glows bright in the dark, starless night. Once she has the car in park, she turns to look at me. "Sorry I didn't get you home in time to take advantage of Wyatt."

"Parenting is exhausting. We'll have plenty of time later. And Wyatt knows I'm here for *you* this week. Like I know he's here for Tucker to see the Pirate Festival. It's just a bonus that we get any time at all."

Gag me. But she'll freak more if she knows I'm faking this, and I do *not* want to distract her from the joy of her pirate wedding week.

She leans over to hug me tight. "Thank you so much for being here this week."

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't miss this for the world."

"Am I a horrible person if I say I could really like Sloane if she wasn't dating Patrick?" she whispers.

"Patrick's going to be your *brother-in-law*. So probably."

"I meant the being disloyal to you part."

"Oh, stop. I have Wyatt. Patrick has Sloane. The world has moved on. Besides, I think I could like her too. Did you hear her story about the patient who kept trying to trade her chocolate bars for tequila? That was really funny."

"But I'm still on Team Ellie."

"We're not on *teams*."

“But I’m totally on Team Wyatt. I swear, Ellie, if he turns into a douche too after all this build-up—”

“What build-up?”

“You don’t spend years claiming to hate a man, then screw his brains out, then nearly get yourself killed in an accident and refuse to even admit you screwed his brains out for *months* afterward, and not have secret feelings for him. You just don’t.”

I gape at her.

“This isn’t about the accident, is it?” she asks, her brow furrowing in the dim light. “Because if he’s doing this because he feels guilty, and not because he’s always been unable to handle knowing that you’re his soul mate, then I might have to slice his balls off. And I don’t want to do that. Not when I think of the trauma to his kid.”

“You are such a nut.”

“And you love me for it.”

I really do. She’s like a female version of Beck. Fun, intentionally obtuse, and sometimes annoying, but always with good intentions, and always there to have your back.

I could do without the inference that Wyatt and I are soul mates though, because while it’s fantastic for a cover story, it’s horrible for my indigestion. “I hope I can be as good a friend as you someday,” I tell her.

“Hush your mouth. Who’s limping around on pirate boots to appease the bride?”

“I’m not limping.”

“You will be when I kick you out of this car so I can go back to town and break into Jason’s room for crazy parrot sex.”

“*Crazy parrot sex?*”

“Huh. I was going for monkey sex with a pirate theme. That didn’t quite work, did it?”

I give her one last hug before I swing the door open. “I love you, you goober. Go seduce your fiancé until you can’t walk

tomorrow.”

“Well, if I must.” She winks. “Help you to the door?”

“No. I’ve got this. You go.”

“And you go have crazy parrot sex too. Understand me? And call me if you need a ride tomorrow. I mean, if Wyatt’s willing to let you out of his sight again.”

I lift the bag of two burner phones I grabbed to keep here, because *no* guest should ever be without access to a phone. “I should be fine, and my phone will be all dried out by tomorrow night. But thank you.”

After I assure her that yes, I also now have her phone number, Jason’s phone number, and Grady’s phone number written on a piece of paper to give to Wyatt and program into both of the burner phones I picked up at Peg Legs and Planks—yes, the hardware store here sells burner phones—I climb out of her car.

I make it to the front door without limping despite the pain shooting from my knee to my tailbone, but I refuse to let Monica see me hurting. It’s her wedding week, and she doesn’t need to worry over me.

I wave as I push open the door. She reverses in the darkness to head back down the mountain to town, and as soon as I’m inside, I crumple to a heap against the wall beside the door and let out a soft groan.

The bedroom is a long freaking way away. Past at least seven massive floor tiles in the foyer, then down a hallway the length of six football fields, through the door, and a walk from here to China to get to the bed.

Or so it feels.

Five minutes.

I just need five minutes to sit here, kneading my twisted thigh muscle and resting my achy hip joint, and then I’ll be fine.

“Need help?”

I shriek in surprise at the voice coming out of the semi-darkness, and I realize I'm not alone.

Wyatt's up.

Dammit.

"Just wondering the last time Beck's maids dusted the floorboards. Plus, you get a totally different angle on that artwork." I point to a row of prints on the wall outside the kitchen.

"The three-piece selfie of Beck's nostril?"

"Most people think it's a cave."

"Most people don't know Beck very well."

He's barefoot, in cargo shorts and a polo with a military-looking logo on his breast pocket, and when he tucks his thumbs in his belt loops and leans against the wall, my ovaries do a backflip, because yes, Wyatt Morgan *is* quite the handsome man.

And possibly I shouldn't have had that glass of wine three hours ago. Clearly it's still affecting my judgment.

"Overdid it?" he asks.

My eyes narrow and I start to scowl, and then the oddest thing happens.

Instead of narrowing his eyes right back at me, his lips twitch like he's holding in a smile, he lifts his eyes to the ceiling, mutters, "Dammit, Beck," and suddenly I'm more curious than I am irritated.

Until he squats down and picks me up, that is.

I yelp and try to twist, but I jolt my leg wrong and I end up gasping for breath and gripping him around the neck instead. "What are you doing?" I grit out.

"Annoying you," he says as he straightens and moves toward the hall.

He hasn't shaved. I could try to count his short whiskers if I wanted to. He's always clean-shaven. Maybe he's being a

pirate this week too.

“You are *not* welcome in my bedroom.”

“That’s seventy miles away or so, isn’t it? Which part of Copper Valley is your house in again?”

“Quit being a smart-ass.”

“There’s no shame in taking help when you need it.”

“I don’t need help.”

I am such a liar. Every step he takes closer to the bedroom is like a weight being lifted off my shoulders. *One less step I have to take...two less...three...*

“It’s your boyfriend’s duty to carry you to the bedroom.”

“Don’t even—” I start.

His lips twitch again.

Right there. Right in front of my face. His lips are twitching.

Like I *amuse* him.

I don’t amuse anyone. Annoy them, yes. It was one of the reasons Patrick broke up with me. *Ellie, you’re just...so perfectionist, it’s annoying.* I’m well aware that my project managers back home at work are relieved as hell that I’m on vacation, but I also know that having high standards is the only way I’m going to continue my parents’ legacy and grow their business when they retire in a few years.

Which is in a few years.

Not right here.

Tonight.

With Wyatt not even breaking a sweat or straining while he carries me into the master bedroom, despite the weight I’ve gained since the accident.

“Thank you,” I grumble when he sets me gently on the bed.

“You’re not really welcome.”

I gasp in surprise.

He purses his lips together and turns, but not before I see his gray eyes twinkling.

Twinkling.

Like he's *enjoying* being a shit.

"I should ask you to fetch my pajamas, but I sleep naked, so there's no point," I announce.

"You want a cowbell so you can call me to hang up your dress when you've flung it across the room?"

There's no heat in his words. It's like we're playing a game not to see who can be more insulting, but who can be more outrageous.

Because there's no way in hell *anyone* would give me a cowbell.

There's also no way in hell he's *flirting* with me, which is the other possibility reeling through my mind.

"I prefer a foghorn." I bend to tug my boot off, and another splinter of pain makes me suck in a breath.

I really, really overdid it tonight.

Without looking at my face, Wyatt bends over my feet and tugs my boots off, first my right foot, then ever-so-carefully my left foot.

I duck my head, because there's a sudden burn in my eyes that's drifting into my sinuses as well. "Please don't be nice to me," I whisper. "Not when we're alone. Though you owe me pretending to be my boyfriend this week, because that was a shitty thing to do to Grady."

"I just wanted to confirm your feet stink. And they do."

I shove him without thinking, because that's what we do. "They do not."

"I called you."

And now I want to hit him for real, because the shift in his tone means he did just say exactly what I thought he just said, about exactly what I've been afraid he'll want to talk about,

and we are *not* talking about this. “My phone got busted in the accident. It’s apparently a recurring problem.”

“Beck had you a new phone with your same number sitting by your bed the minute you were conscious.”

“So?”

“So, I tried calling you for *weeks*.”

I swallow hard, because he’s not taking my easy excuses. And the truth isn’t nice. “I didn’t want to talk to you.”

“You usually don’t. But—”

“No buts. Thank you. I can get my dress.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“All water under the bridge. You were right. It was a mistake. Didn’t happen. Moving on. Okay?”

He takes my chin in his fingers and lifts my face until I can’t help but look at him while he studies me with those intense gray eyes.

His lashes are stupidly thick. They’re not long, but they’re thick. And his nose is slightly off-center, but not in a weird way. Just in a rugged way.

And his lips—

I’m breathing too loud. And he’s watching me too closely.

Like he can see way down deep to the fourteen-year-old girl inside who turned around one day and realized that one of my older brother’s best friends was cute. And a little awkward, and still annoying with the way he *always* seemed to know *everything*, but also reliable and familiar but...new.

And dating Lydia Baker, who was smart and pretty and on the cheerleading squad. Not the head cheerleader, but still a cheerleader.

He was seventeen to my fourteen, which was basically illegal, and because I’ve always been *that* girl who knew *everything*, yes, I knew he was illegal, and I knew why I got all warm in

my belly when he looked at me, and I was also pissed that I couldn't control my body's reaction to him.

But I don't feel like I know anything tonight.

I don't know who I am.

I don't know why I'm here.

I don't know what I want.

Not past the next five minutes, anyway.

It's not the first time I've felt this way.

And the last time ended with me broken.

"Was it my fault?" he asks.

"You weren't driving the car, Wyatt."

"But it was my fault you were."

It wasn't. He didn't force me into the car. He didn't choose my route. He didn't *make* me do anything.

He even tried to stop me.

"It takes two. Quit being the martyr."

"Nobody trusted Beck to give us the truth about how you were doing. And you wouldn't answer your phone. I was scared shitless."

"I'm *fine*. Same old annoying Ellie."

And there he goes again, seeing right through me. "Yeah. Same old annoying Ellie."

Dammit. I whimper out a laugh, because it's so damn *normal* to have Wyatt calling me annoying that I'm in danger of crying. "Shut up."

"Annoying, know-it-all Ellie," he adds.

I reach out to shove his shoulder, but there's no speed or force behind my hand, and I end up resting it on his bicep instead.

"Mansplaining Wyatt," I whisper.

His eyes are boring into mine the same way they did that night while he plants his hands on either side of my legs. "Planner

Ellie.”

“Stick up your butt Wyatt.”

“Refuses to take help Ellie.”

“Refuses to admit anyone else can know how to do anything Wyatt.”

Our faces are drifting closer. This is a bad idea. We’ve been here before, and it ended in disaster. *Worse* than disaster. I need to shove him away for real.

Or...we need to practice so that on the rare occasions this week when we *have* to be seen together in public for whatever reason—Shipwreck isn’t *that* big—we can fake affection.

“Jumps to conclusions Ellie.” His breath tickles my nose.

“Obnoxious—” I start, but I stop when our lips touch.

A shudder races through me, but it’s not a bad shudder. It’s not a good shudder either. It’s my body craving human affection while my mind recoils in fear, because the last time I was here, with Wyatt, his perfect lips rubbing mine, his hot breath lighting up my veins, it literally changed the entire course of my life.

Maybe this is what I need to do.

Maybe kissing him will end this weird limbo I’ve been in. It’ll make the pain in my leg go away. I’ll find my balance at work again. The stars will realign, the man of my dreams will walk in the front door, I’ll start running again, and I’ll be living the life I always wanted to have.

I won’t *care* that Patrick’s life went on perfectly with his nurse girlfriend. I won’t *care* that my injuries might be more than skin and bone deep. I won’t care that I have to pick a new future for myself.

My free hand loops around his neck and drifts up to rub the prickles of his short hair. He suckles my lower lip and leans me back to the pillow, deepening the kiss as we go.

This isn’t the kiss we had at Christmas.

No, this is a *who are you?* kiss. It's an *I've been worried sick over you* kiss. A *let's do this right* kiss.

I've hated this man most of my life, from the day his grandmother knocked on our door and asked Beck if he could come out and play with the short, wide-eyed, floppy brown-haired boy with the stained T-shirt, through my pre-teen years when he grew into an obnoxious know-it-all, into my teen years when he didn't even acknowledge I existed anymore.

I shouldn't like kissing him.

Last time he kissed me, he told me it was a mistake.

And it was. It was the biggest mistake of my life.

But now I'm stroking my tongue against his and my breasts are aching for his touch and my clit is pulsing with a desperate need for attention.

I haven't had sex in six months.

Not since Wyatt.

Not since the accident.

I part my legs, and pain erupts in my left thigh. I break the kiss with a gasp, Wyatt and I make eye contact, and he leaps off the bed. A brief flash of terror skitters over his face before he rubs his hands into his eyes and takes one more step toward the door. "Do you have pain meds somewhere?"

"That bad, was it?" I deadpan while I rub my thigh.

He watches my hands and doesn't even spare me a dirty look. "For your leg."

"I'm *fine*."

He mutters a curse and stalks into the bathroom. I hear him riffling through my crap, and I don't bother telling him to stay out of my stuff since he won't listen anyway, and a pain pill sounds like heaven.

Not quite as much heaven as him kissing me, which is a paradox I don't want to deal with right now, but I take some comfort in knowing he'll see my vibrator if he looks hard enough, and let him think about *that* all night long.

He returns, slaps a prescription bottle on the nightstand, and marches out of the room.

My body sags, and I realize I must look crazy in my pirate wench costume. My mascara's probably running, and who knows what's happened to my lipstick.

I'm unscrewing the bottle when he appears in the doorway again with a glass of water. I ignore it and swallow my pill whole, almost choke, because I hate taking pills dry, and then reluctantly gulp the rest of it down with a glass of water.

"Give me your phone," I say crossly.

He hands it over wordlessly.

I hand it back because it's password-protected and glare at him.

He unlocks it, still without saying a word, and once again gives it to me.

Once I find Beck's number—what the *hell*? They freaking *talked* earlier. My brother is *dead*—I program it into one of the burner phones, then surrender Wyatt's phone to him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

We're the most obnoxiously polite people in the world right now.

He stares at me a beat too long.

I stare back.

You're not a bad kisser.

"You're on the hook for playing my boyfriend all week," I inform him. "My *smitten* boyfriend who *adores* me. And don't try to get out of it. You *asked* for this when you ruined my plans with Grady."

"Fine."

"*Fine*?" What the hell? He's not going to argue?

"Yes. *Fine*."

"I'm telling Beck."

“So he can blab to Monica that it’s fake?”

“So he doesn’t freak out when he sees you grabbing my ass in any of Monica’s photos.”

He smirks. “So that’s what you want from me.”

“Yes, Wyatt. I want you to be a total Neanderthal and take me on every horizontal surface in Shipwreck, and then I want you to fondle me in public until we both get arrested for indecent exposure, because you’re *so manly* and I *just can’t resist the allure of your testosterone*.”

He smirks again. “Goodnight, Ellie.”

I scowl, because he’s not taking the bait, and I’m out of other ideas to annoy him. “Goodnight, Wyatt.”

He snorts softly, which feels like him getting the last word, when he’s probably making a not-so-silent commentary on *me* getting the last word.

I don’t snort back. For the record.

Not until he closes the door anyway.

Chapter Eight

Wyatt

Tucker and I are at the island in the kitchen, chowing on eggs, Mrs. Ryder's biscuits—god bless that woman for teaching me to cook—and bacon, debating if we're going to play miniature golf at Scuttle Putt first or go check out Davy Jones's Locker—Shipwreck's water park—when the doorbell rings.

We both look at the tablet hung under the cabinet, because everything around this house is wired with security cameras, including the doorbell. Half a biscuit falls out of Tucker's mouth. "Dad..." he whispers while I take in the muscled guy on the front porch with a bicycle leaning against his hip and a white bakery bag in hand. "That's Cooper Rock. *Cooper Rock came to see us.*"

"Yeah, bud, looks like he did."

While I'm sitting there growling to myself, wondering why a pro baseball player is dropping by at this hour of the morning, Tucker takes off like a shot, dashing to the door and flinging it open. "*Cooper Rock!* You came to see us! Can I have your autograph? Can we play catch? Can you *please* win today? I know you can win. You won a game just last week. You can do it again."

I put in the alarm code while it beeps in warning, then pull Tucker off the guy, who's grinning in amusement once again. "Gonna do my best, little man. You like donuts?"

"*Yeah!*"

"Have to save two for Ellie, but here, you can have the rest."

"Eggs first," I tell Tucker, rescuing the bag before he can make off with it and eat all seven pounds of donuts inside.

"But, Dad—"

"Go on. You were almost done anyway."

He looks back at Cooper. “Can you sign my arm?”

“How about a pirate sword?”

“*Yeah!*”

Cooper points to a sword on Beck’s entryway table. “May I?”

I hand it to him. He pulls a Sharpie out of his back pocket and scribbles his name, then presents it to Tucker, who stares in awe.

“How’s Ellie?” Cooper asks.

I cross my arms and study him carefully, because I don’t care if he plays baseball or if he’s a fucking priest, and I don’t care how nice he was last night, I want to know if he has ulterior motives for asking. “Fine,” I say shortly.

“She’s still sleeping,” Tucker offers.

Cooper clearly tries to swallow a grin, though I don’t know which of us he’s more amused by.

“She should be, the way she was dancing last night.”

“She was *dancing?*”

“But don’t worry. We helped her get up on the table and made sure she didn’t fall down.”

“You—”

“Man, you should see your face.” He shakes his head. “She sat at the balcony table at Crusty Nut most of the night, then did the mini-golf course with her friends. But good to know she’s in good hands.” He slaps me on the shoulder and turns, straightening his bike as he flashes Tucker a grin. “Thanks for the support, little man. Stay strong, okay?”

My boy nods. “The Fireballs are gonna come back and win the World Series this time for sure! I’ve waited *seven years* for this.”

“Yeah, I’ve waited *twenty*. And I gotta run, or I’m gonna be late getting back to the city for practice.”

“Hit a home run!” Tucker yells, but I hear something else too.

Something that distinctly sounded like a woman yelling, “*Oh, fuck!*”

Somewhere beneath us.

I peek in the donut bag, which sends the heavenly aroma of fried dough and sugar wafting into the foyer, and I spy at least a half-dozen cake donuts smushed in there.

“Eggs,” I remind Tucker, and while he slumps off to the kitchen, I open the door to the basement and head down.

The game room’s open. Ellie’s on a stool, muttering enough *fucks* to make a pirate blush while she bangs on the controller on Beck’s Frogger arcade game.

The pink in her cheeks and that stubborn set to her jaw make my dick twitch.

Kissing her in December wasn’t a fluke.

Is she obnoxious? Yes. Short-tempered? Sometimes. Determined and smart and driven and unstoppable?

And now my pants are getting tight. Because there’s nothing hotter than a woman taking charge and going after what she wants, and that’s what Ellie Ryder has done every day of her life.

While thumbing her nose at me.

“Work work *work*, you son of a bitch,” she growls.

“Donut?” I ask.

She throws a wild-eyed look over her shoulder. “*Frogger is broken.*”

I almost drop the bag, which would be a catastrophe, and not only because they smell delicious, but also because I’d have to clean it up. “What? No, it’s not.”

“*DO NOT TRY TO MANSPLAIN ME.*”

I growl while I cross past the ping-pong table, pool table, and foosball table to the far wall. “I’m not—what the hell is—dammit, Ellie, this is called *denial*, because Beck’s gonna—oh, *fuck.*”

The screen on the arcade console is one big squiggly mess of greens and blues. Ellie hits the buttons, and nothing happens. “I can’t unplug it myself,” she grumbles. “I can’t freaking *bend* that way.”

I toss the donuts on the ping-pong table behind me and shift behind the machine.

“Wait!” she shrieks.

“What?”

“Beck’s high score. He’ll kill you if his high score is gone.”

I freeze.

She’s right.

He hit seven hundred thousand something points over a weekend about two years ago. It was one of those rare times we were all around—Beck, me, the Wilson brothers, the Rivers kids, Davis, Ellie—and the whole weekend turned into one big party of watching Frogger and drinking beer and eating pizza and shooting hoops under the stars and just having fun again.

No worries, no responsibilities. Only *fun*.

Like when we were kids.

The whole crew will have a fit if that score’s lost.

It would be like losing the weekend.

It’s all we *did* that weekend.

“Can’t you take out the screen and shake it and make it work?” she says desperately.

“It’s not a fucking Etch-a-Sketch.”

“But maybe it’s the video card. Maybe if we get the video card out, we don’t have to reset the whole system.”

“Dad? Can I have a donut now?”

We both whip our heads around to look at Tucker, who’s wearing a milk mustache and a yellow streak that I expect is egg down his Fireballs T-shirt, which isn’t what he was wearing five minutes ago.

Also, did he just hear me say *fuck*?

Shit. I need to remember he can hear me. Bachelor life on base isn't good for a kid-friendly vocabulary.

"Yeah, bud. Help yourself."

Ellie's watching me with wide eyes, like she has an idea.

Like she's thinking nobody would say a word if Tucker spilled milk on the video game.

He's just a kid.

And it could be our secret.

And—

She breaks eye contact, shaking her head with a high laugh. "We are terrible people," she whispers. Then she shrieks. "No! Don't hit the reset button! Maybe we can unplug it without losing the high score, but reset will *definitely* erase it."

We're an hour and a half by car into Copper Valley. The city's our best bet for getting the system looked at, but just because it has a million residents doesn't mean a single one of them will specialize in fixing a vintage 1980's arcade game.

Beck said he had to go all the way to Atlanta to get this one.

"Two options," I tell her. "We call a repair guy, or we reboot and hope for the best."

"What if we can't save it at all?"

"Whatcha doin'?" Tucker asks. He's standing at the ping-pong table, donut in one hand, rubbing the top of a sparkly notebook next to it with the other.

"Mr. Beck's game broke. We're trying to fix it. Hang tight, bud. We'll go golfing soon, okay?"

"Okay," he replies around a mouthful of glazed donut.

"Did you go out for donuts at Crow's Nest?" Ellie asks. There's pure lust in her eyes. And her voice. And my dick notices.

"Cooper Rock biked up to drop them off for you."

She blinks at me.

Then blinks again.

And then she busts up laughing.

At *me*.

“Feeling inferior?” she asks.

“You want me to pull this plug?”

“No, I don’t want you to pull the plug! I want you to fix it.”

This is new, Ellie asking me for something. Usually she’d tell me to go away, that she’d do it herself.

We’re like...a *team*. It’s weird. But not unpleasant.

I yank out my phone and start googling, because if we’re going to work together, I’m going to have The Google on my side before I do anything stupid.

“Look up if the high scores are erased if you unplug it,” Ellie tells me.

“Who’s mansplaining now?” I mutter, which earns me a light shove in the shoulder.

My skin tingles under my shirt, like I’m in danger of getting struck by lightning, and I concentrate on reminding myself that getting Ellie riled up is good for her, and has nothing to do with *me*.

Even if I did toss and turn half the night thinking about kissing her again.

“Alright, we shouldn’t lose the high score if we reset it by pulling the plug,” I tell her.

“But it’s *old*,” she points out. “Are you sure that’s accurate for old machines?”

“You’re right. We did just invent radio signals two years ago. I should check out this internet that’s been around since the twentieth century some more.”

“*Fine*, Mr. Expert. Pull the plug. But it’s on you if the high score’s lost.”

“I wasn’t the one who broke it,” I point out.

“I *wouldn’t* have broken it if—”

She cuts herself off sharply, pursing her lips and looking over at the Ms. Pac-Man game.

Was she about to say *if you hadn’t kissed me?*

I don’t remember who kissed who, but I’d take the blame.

It was worth it.

“Leg hurt too much to sleep?” I ask while I bend over behind the machine again and trace the right cord to the outlet.

“Yep.”

“Huh. My lips bothered me all night. Probably need Chapstick. It’s the elevation. Dries you out.”

She doesn’t answer, but she doesn’t have to.

I’m getting her goat.

I can *feel* it.

Plus, I’ve been practicing since I realized I annoyed her when I was about thirteen.

I know how to shoot a basketball, Wyatt. I don’t need you to show me how.

Damn if I didn’t have some fun telling her she was doing it wrong just to see her face light up in independent indignation for the rest of high school. It was almost as good as having my own little sister.

Until it wasn’t.

Because Ellie Ryder grew up, and she grew up stronger and faster and better at every sport she tried, and maybe it’s ego, but I swear she wouldn’t have been half as good if I hadn’t goaded her.

And I noticed. Believe me, I noticed. Even when I knew I shouldn’t, I did.

I yank the plug, and the fan inside the machine whirs to a stop. After counting to three, I plug it in again, then straighten to

watch the screen.

Ellie's rubbing her thigh, and I wonder if it's aching this morning.

Not that she'd tell me if it was. She doesn't admit weakness.

Not if she can help it.

The game flickers to life, the screen back in normal operating mode, and I breathe a sigh of relief while Ellie sags next to me.

Close enough that she's almost sagging *into* me, matter of fact.

"Oh, *shit*," she whispers.

Tucker giggles.

"Watch your mouth," I mutter, but I realize she's gone pale. "What?"

She points to the screen.

To the top. Where it's supposed to say *HI-SCORE 701,400*, but instead says *HI-SCORE 0*.

"No, no, *no*," she groans. "Do you know what this means?"

"Beck's gonna kill you," I offer. I've got sweat gathering at my collar, because Beck's gonna kill *us*.

Dating his sister might be okay—not that I have time in my life for that even if I'd let myself imagine it—but killing his Frogger score?

We're both dead.

But I can't say that to Ellie, because now I *have* to annoy her. It might be the only thing I do right for my buddy this week.

He spent hours. *Hours*. And we killed his high score. On his favorite game. *Fuck*, we all pitched in, egging him on, bringing him pizza. Levi even wiped his chin a few times so he didn't have to break from playing.

It's just a game.

This is stupid.

Except it's the memories. And the glory. And Beck's favorite game.

Tucker giggles again. "Daddy, what's a ball chain?"

"What's a what?"

"A ball—"

Before he can answer, Ellie's shrieking again. She leaps off the stool, almost goes down to her knees, but doesn't stop as she dives for the notebook in his hands. "Ohmygod, that's not for you!"

She snatches the notebook, but not before I see—a drawing of a short penis? And two boulders?

"I like Dick and his Nuts," Tucker says. "They're funny."

Her face is a cherry tomato with eyebrows and flashing blue eyes. "*Please* don't open random notebooks and sketchpads in this house. You don't know what you're going to find, and my brother has some *very* adult things that you shouldn't see."

Beck doesn't have notebooks and sketchpads.

Beck plays video games when he's here. Sometimes poker.

But he's never doodled or written stuff a day in his life.

Ellie, on the other hand...

"Not one word." She lifts her palm to me and hobbles out of the room, but not before grabbing the donut bag too. "Not a single word."

"Hey, you've got some Frogger to catch up on," I call after her. "Seven hundred thousand points worth."

She glances back at me, sees Tucker isn't watching, and lifts a middle finger.

I stifle a grin, because that attitude?

That's pure, classic Ellie Ryder.

And seeing her coming back in full force is more relief than I can ever admit to anyone.

Especially her brother.

Chapter Nine

Wyatt

Tucker and I are on the eighteenth hole, after having survived leaving the house with Ellie insisting she didn't need a ride anywhere and that she'll make sure none of Beck's notebooks get left out again.

I smirked at her, letting her know I didn't believe her, and she flipped me another bird when Tucker's back was turned.

On the miniature golf course, we've made it past the English cannon attack hole, the mermaid hole, the hurricane hole, and more, to finally reach the Kraken hole. It seems wrong that we've come this far just to lose our balls to one of the sea monster's mouths—or possibly his eye sockets—but I guess that's the life of a pirate.

“Dad! Dad, I got it in his *nose*! Did you see?”

“You gave him a golf ball booger. Good job.”

Tucker throws his arms around my waist. “I'm so glad you're my dad.”

My sinuses get heavy and I blink a couple times before I hoist him up for a hug. Most days, I feel like I get more wrong than I get right, and I don't have a clue what he'll think of me when he grows up—I'm supposed to be there for him *every day*, not just calling him at bedtime from Gellings Air Force Base five hundred miles away in Georgia—but he still seems to think I'm good at the dad job for now.

“I love you,” I tell him.

“I know,” he replies, and I set him down with a chuckle. “Your turn, Dad. I'll bet you can get it right in his forehead. That's the hardest shot, so they made the hole really big. I'll bet even Cooper Rock couldn't get it in his forehead.”

I oblige and sink my ball into the Kraken's forehead, which, indeed, is the biggest hole. But I don't tell him that makes it the easiest, because I like being his hero.

"Someday, I'm gonna be a putt-putt master just like you," Tucker informs me.

I take his hand while we head over to turn in our clubs. "Someday, you'll be even better than me."

"Yeah, because I'm gonna be Captain America one day," he says sagely.

"Captain America? Who wants to be Captain America when you can be Blackbeard?" the wizened old man behind the counter says with a wink while we hand him our clubs. He's sporting an eye patch, a pirate hat, and a parrot on his shoulder.

"Fucking Blackbeard," the parrot says.

"Hush, hush, Long Beak Silver." The old pirate—pretty sure they call him Pop around here, head of the Rock clan—looks sternly at Tucker. "Don't ever let your grandkids parrot sit. They teach terrible words. But I'll get 'em. I'll get 'em all. I'm fixin' to set every one of 'em up with the love of their lives, and that'll teach 'em."

"Empty threats," a pretty woman in jeans and a Shipwreck T-shirt says as she strolls in the door. "If you were going to set us up, you would've done it by now."

"Maybe I should practice on this young man."

Tucker giggles again. "I don't want to fall in love with a girl. I'm only seven."

"Hmmm... Then maybe I should practice on your dad."

"He's in love with his work."

Pop and his granddaughter both cough, identical blue eyes twinkling while I scrub my hand over my face to keep Tucker from seeing the irritation blossoming.

His mother shouldn't say things like that in front of him. I'm not *married to my work*.

I have split priorities between family and country. Whereas she—

Nope. Won't help. Not going there.

“Ah, a tough case,” Pop says. “Good. It'll just prove to my grandkids that it can be done.”

The woman rolls her eyes. “Have no fear,” she tells me. “You're safe.”

“You hungry?” I ask Tucker.

“I was hungry back before we jumped over the alligators, but they scared the hungry right out of me. I could be again though. Let me check.” He pats his stomach. “Hey, belly, you want some food?” He cocks his head, then nods. “It says yes, Dad. We want more donuts.”

We escape the matchmaking old man and head down the street to check out the wait at Anchovies, the pizza joint in the middle of Blackbeard Avenue. The hairs on my arms rise to attention a split second before I realize who's in front of us in line.

Ellie's best friend.

The bride.

She's in jeans today, but her T-shirt has a skull and crossbones on it, and she's wearing pirate boots and parrot earrings.

“Oh my gosh, it's Ellie's Wyatt,” she says.

Dammit.

Small town. Guess it was bound to happen.

The two men and the woman with her all glance back at Tucker and me, and I instinctively grip his hand tighter while I nod to her. “Morning.”

“We're not going to have to fight over who gets to sit with her, are we?” she asks.

The Blond Caveman goes stiff, earning a suspicious look from the redhead with him, but doesn't explain where Ellie is right now.

“I love Miss Ellie,” Tucker declares. “She shares her donuts.”

With some of us.

I didn’t get any.

The bride—Monica, I’m almost positive, who Beck’s mentioned a time or two, said she was Ellie’s best friend since college—squats down to Tucker’s level. “Do you want to sit with us so we don’t have to fight over her?”

“Yeah! And I’ll share my shaker cheese with her to thank her for the donuts.”

“Perfect. Jason, sweetie, make it a table for seven,” she tells the longer-haired blond holding her hand.

“We wouldn’t want—” I start.

“Don’t be silly. They have to push two tables together for a party of five anyway, so we’re being more economical. Plus, who wouldn’t want to eat with a kid this cute?”

Tucker grins up at me with his crooked, oversized front teeth, unruly brown hair, button nose, and dirty glasses, and I can’t help smiling back.

I should object more, but it’s likely me joining them for lunch will piss Ellie off.

And that *is* my secondary job for the week, right behind having fun with Tucker and right before losing sleep to try to recover Beck’s high score on Frogger.

Oh. And that whole *playing her boyfriend* thing.

Which I intend to enjoy every minute of.

Just to watch her ex squirm.

If *he* hadn’t pulled the dick of all dick moves—who dumps someone on *Christmas?*—she wouldn’t have been at her parents’ place looking for someone to share her misery with.

Easier to blame him the more I decide he’s a turdnugget.

“How was the parade?” Monica asks Tucker.

“Where’s Ellie?” Blond Caveman asks me while Tucker tells Monica he liked the parade.

I know his name, but I prefer to call him Asswipe. Since I can't do that in front of my kid, Blond Caveman it is.

"She's getting fitted for a peg leg," I tell him.

"Seriously, Patrick, I just told you," Monica says with a sigh. "She's parking her car and fighting with Grady about accepting a ride in a golf cart."

"You didn't drive her?" Blond Caveman says.

"She wanted to not share the rest of her donuts, since Cooper Rock delivered them," Tucker announces. "He signed my pirate sword. I wonder if he signed one for Miss Captain Ellie too?"

"Cooper's signed *tons* of things for Ellie," Monica tells him. "But she doesn't usually keep them. She donates them to auctions for pet shelters."

"Like for dogs and cats?"

"And sometimes goats and snakes and hedgehogs."

Tucker frowns, like he's pondering a shelter for goats and snakes and hedgehogs.

"I *told* you I could walk," says a familiar voice that sets Dr Pepper buzzing through my veins.

We all turn as Ellie gives an exasperated sigh, then leans over to hug the Rock guy who was supposed to be her date last night. He's driving the golf cart that she's climbing out of. "But thank you."

"It's worth it just to watch you have to take help," he tells her with a flirty grin, and I consider how much more attractive he'd be with a broken face.

I scowl at him.

He catches my gaze and winks. "Got a live one there, bro. Lucky man."

"What is *with* all the men in my life being ass—uming blockheads?" she finishes as her gaze lands on Tucker.

"Hi, Miss Ellie!" Tucker calls. "Did you bring more donuts?"

“Not unless we’re having pizza donuts for lunch,” she replies.

“Did you beat your dad in golf?”

“No.”

“There’s always next time. High five for trying.” Her gait is stiff, but she’s smiling at Tucker like she can feel no pain and she bends over to high-five him.

“Could you beat my dad in golf?” Tucker asks.

“Every time,” she tells him.

“Because I let her,” I add.

With a smile.

Like our relationship thrives on one-upmanship.

“And isn’t that the sweetest?” she says tightly with a smile of her own.

“Miss Captain Ellie, I want a llama someday,” Tucker declares.

Ellie gasps. “No way. Me too! Aren’t they so cute?”

“I’m going to name mine Llama Llama Ding Dong because my teacher plays that song all the time.”

“You—I—do you know you’re freaking adorable?”

“Yeah.”

He grins. She ruffles his hair, then moves in to greet Monica with a hug. When she’s done, just to piss her off—and to watch the Blond Caveman fume too—I wrap an arm around her shoulders and kiss her flowery-scented hair.

I have a role to play.

I’ll explain it to Tucker later. Shouldn’t be too hard. *We’re old friends.*

Not sure how I’m going to explain to my dick that we’re not doing this for real again, but it’ll live.

“Enjoy your ride?” I ask.

“Quit trying to help me walk. I can do it myself.”

“I can help you walk, Miss Ellie,” Tucker offers.

“Aww, that’s so sweet of you, but I have to eat with—”

“All of us,” I interrupt.

“We get to have lunch together!” Tucker says. “Captain Monica says so. Can you teach me to draw a—”

“Pirate?” Ellie exclaims desperately. “Yes. I can teach you to draw a pirate. Or a parrot.”

“The golf man’s parrot said a dirty word.”

“Aw, Pop Rock’s working at Scuttle Putt today? His parrot usually does say dirty words. He’s a very salty bird.”

Our table is called, and we head inside with Tucker proudly holding Ellie’s hand. “Be careful, there’s a chair,” he tells her, steering her around one of the thick wood tables in the treasure-themed dining room.

“Thank you so much, gallant sir,” she replies, then adds under her breath to me, “Why are you here?”

“Serendipitous timing. And fate, of course. I sensed you’d be here, and I missed you.”

She looks at me closer, and there’s a gleam in her eyes like she’s gearing up to top me in the lovey-dovey new relationship game.

Which shouldn’t be a big surprise. She’s always been bright.

“Here, Miss Ellie. You sit on the end so you can put your foot up if you need to.”

Tucker helps her gracefully into a chair—as gracefully as a seven-year-old who barely hits four feet tall can—and gives her a funny look when she replies, “Thank you, kind sir, you may kiss my hand.”

“It’s what gentlemen used to do for ladies,” I whisper to him.

He wrinkles his nose at me like I’m asking him to hug an eel. “Dad, I like her, but I don’t want to *kiss* her.”

“Here. No cooties. Like this.” I bend over, take Ellie’s hand, and press a loud, smacking kiss to it, but I also trail my fingers

down her palm.

Lightly.

Where no one can see.

Goosebumps visibly travel up her arm, and there's a tremor in her hand before I lower it, still holding on.

"See?" I say to Tucker. "Nothing to it."

I help Tucker into his chair on her other side and take the liberty of sweeping her short, dark curls back from her cheek before I pull out my own chair and sit.

Something squishes under my ass, and I register cold liquid on my left butt cheek the same moment a woman behind me shrieks.

I leap up as fast as I can, bumping into a passing server, who dumps a pizza all down the back of the woman who just got sprayed with—with *what?*

Whatever it is, it's red and sticky and why the *fuck* is there a bottle of ketchup in a pizza joint?

"Oh my god, you sat on the French dressing!" Blond Caveman's girlfriend says. Her eyes are round like she's both horrified and trying not to laugh.

"French—*what?*" Tucker asks.

"The French dressing," Ellie tells him, and I can hear her trying not to laugh as she scoots her chair, winces, and tries again to rise. "They put it on the pizza here, and—oh. Right. Bad time. Sorry."

"I'm so sorry. Oh my gosh, ma'am, I'm so, *so* sorry," the server is babbling. "Sir. I'm so sorry. I don't know how—why —"

I try to help her pick up the pizza. "My fault," I tell her. "Should've looked before I sat."

Ellie's sucking her cheeks in, face pointed at the ground. Tucker looks like he can't decide if he's supposed to laugh or cry.

“Daddy made a big boo-boo,” I tell him.

“This isn’t funny,” Monica whispers, like she’s talking to herself, while her face contorts with the effort of holding in laughter.

Her fiancé is on the ground helping me, lips twisted in a wry grin. “Could’ve happened to any of us, man. Ellie, sit. We got this.”

A manager rushes over, and Blond Caveman’s girlfriend leaps into action, checking the woman behind me for pizza burns. “I’m a nurse,” she says, like she just remembered. “May I?”

“Wyatt?” Ellie whispers in a strangled voice.

“Yeah?” I grunt while I swipe at melted cheese on the old wood floor.

“I’m sorry you’re having a shitty day.”

All of a sudden, the woman we’ve accidentally assaulted with French dressing and pizza bursts into laughter. “What are the odds?” she says.

“I’m really sorry, ma’am,” I say again.

“Honey, I was just sitting here mad because I have to go see my sister-in-law, who’s always talking about all the terrible calamities that happen to her, like getting a wart on her knee, which is a pretty lame calamity, but that’s my sister-in-law for you, and now I got a story that’ll top her for life.”

“Ma’am, we’re still going to have to comp your pizza and give you a coupon for more. And a free T-shirt,” the manager says.

“Can I get one of those glow-in-the-dark cups and a pirate mug too? I’ll pay for it, but I’m telling her I got it all for free.” She cackles as she rubs the French dressing on her shirt with a napkin. “She’s gonna be so jealous.”

“Her mug’s on me,” I tell the manager.

“I’ll buy her an Anchovies hoodie,” Jason pipes up.

“Put one of them squeezy treasure chests for her on my bill,” a grandma two tables over calls. “This is the best entertainment I had since Blackbeard stripped for me two nights ago.”

Half the people in the restaurant groan. “Didn’t need to know that, Sandy!” someone calls back.

“There are kids in this place, Nana,” the manager chastises.

“A stress chest? That’s it?” someone else says. “Cheapskate. I’m getting a whole *set* of mugs for her.”

“And I’m buying that table’s dinner,” another voice chimes in, pointing at us.

“Root beer all around!” someone hollers.

Despite sitting on French dressing for the next hour—the remains of which Ellie slathers all over her pizza and talks Tucker into trying too, after she’s taught him how to draw a pirate face—lunch is just as much fun as Scuttle Putt was, except with more sea shanties and souvenirs. Monica’s toned down the shrieking about Ellie and me *dating*, and instead is peppering me with questions about being a flight test engineer. Except for the occasional snide comment about my pay grade, the Blond Caveman keeps his attention focused mostly on his phone. Jason tells us all about the last time he went to Africa with the nonprofit he works for, and then brags on Monica’s recycled artwork.

And Tucker gets to color a pirate ship that Ellie draws him on the paper placemat, which keeps him happy long after he’s done eating. He’s loaded down with more loot than he picked up at the parade by the time we leave.

“This town is crazy,” I mutter to Ellie once we’re back out on the street, stuffed with the best thin crust pizza in the entire state.

“Customer service and reputation above all else,” she replies. “Welcome to the Shipwreck family.”

Two pirates on unicycles are juggling back and forth right in the center of Blackbeard Avenue, and the Sea Cow Creamery across the street is handing out free samples to anyone willing to shout *Ahoy, matey!* to distract them.

Everyone’s smiling despite the pirate insults flying.

Everyone except the Blond Caveman.

He's scowling at me.

And I'm ignoring him.

"You guys are coming with us to Cannon Bowl, right?"
Monica says.

"Wyatt promised Tucker a trip to Davy Jones's Locker," Ellie says with just enough regret in her voice that I almost hope Tucker announces he'd rather go bowling.

He doesn't, of course.

Kid loves a good water park.

But I make sure to kiss Ellie goodbye before the bridal party departs. A good kiss.

The kind of kiss that suggests there's more waiting where that came from.

And hell if I wouldn't kiss her longer if I could.

Blond Caveman glares at me.

And I decide I'll be perfectly content playing her *boyfriend* for the rest of the week.

"Dad, friends kiss, right?" Tucker asks as we head to the car for the swim bag and more sunscreen.

"Grown-up friends do sometimes, yes," I tell him.

"Does that mean you're getting married too?"

I never should've gotten married the first time, but I thought it was the right thing to do. No chance in hell I'll do it twice.

I squat down to his level. "You know you're number one in my life?"

"Behind your job."

I shake my head. "I do my job to keep you and your friends and your friends' families safe. Because I love you first, even when my job keeps me away. I miss you every day. And I might have special friends come and go, but *you* will always be most important. Okay?"

He frowns like he wants to ask more, but just says, "Okay."

And once again, I wonder how much I'm messing him up.

But this is my life in the Air Force. I move. I make new friends. They leave. I make more friends. Then I leave. It's the life a lot of military kids live too.

You have to say goodbye a lot, but you meet a hell of a lot of good people along the way.

I'll miss it when I'm done, which will be sooner than I ever wanted, but the odds of me having a long career in the Air Force close to Tucker are slim to none.

"We're pretty dang lucky," I tell him. "We got to share lunch with a bunch of people who think you're awesome."

He grins at me. "That's 'cause I am awesome, Dad."

He sure is.

Chapter Ten

Ellie

I spend the rest of the day feeling weirdly lonely despite being with Monica and Jason.

Yes, and Patrick and Sloane too, but it's weird to hang out with a man I've seen naked, knowing he gets naked for someone else now, so I'm concentrating on my best friend instead.

And not on Wyatt.

That kiss.

Tucker and his sweet insistence that no one else could ever draw pirates like I could.

"The parents get here tomorrow," Monica tells me with a nose-wrinkle as we reach my car in the parking lot. She insisted on walking with me, and since we haven't had much alone time the last few weeks aside from driving out here, it's good to have a few more minutes of *us* time. "My mom still doesn't understand the pirate wedding thing, but I think when she sees Jason sword fight the mutinous pirates who want to steal me after we say our vows, she'll get it."

I laugh. "I love you."

"Of course you do. Everyone else you know is B-O-R-I-N-G." She gives a mock eye roll, and we both crack up again, because there's nothing remotely boring about the people I've known longest in my life.

Beck and half the guys we grew up with have been world famous since before I graduated high school, and it hasn't always been easy to find the true friends from the people who just want to get close to Beck and his Bro Code bandmates. But Monica's all country, all the way, and she always has been. She couldn't pick a boy band out of a lineup, and she'd rather drool over Orlando Bloom in *Pirates of the Caribbean*

and Captain Hook from *Once Upon A Time* than check out my brother's Instagram page.

She also always asks me to turn the cardboard cutouts of him around whenever she stops by his house.

Or my parents' house after Beck's been there and left a few more.

He's such a goober.

"Seriously, though, I will completely understand if you beg off anything with Jason's parents. I sometimes wonder how he came out of the same gene pool as the rest of them."

"Every family has a black sheep." The Dixons' is Jason. He works for a nonprofit whose mission is to provide clean drinking water in third world countries, instead of going into the banking business with his father and brother.

Or even into the socialite business with his mother.

It's been long enough since Patrick and I broke up that I've finally been able to see clearly how my priorities have been messed up most of my life. I thought having a solid career, a stable husband in a complementary career, and adorable children to carry on the Ryder family environmental engineering firm was what it's all about.

But the idea of being one-half of a power couple doesn't appeal to me anymore.

And the more time I spend around Patrick, the more I question everything I ever wanted.

He spent half of lunch checking out his phone. He missed an entire two games of bowling for an important work call. And it wasn't until Sloane took his phone away at dinner that he finally engaged in a conversation that wasn't about his travel, clients, or work hours.

Or baiting someone. Like Wyatt at lunch.

The military? That doesn't pay very well, does it? Oh, that's right, you're divorced. I would never let my child go a week without seeing me.

When we were together, I thought he was charmingly cynical. Now, I can see he's truly an asshole in the way that makes Wyatt look like...not such an asshole.

And Patrick learned it from his parents.

"There's no way I'm making you face Jason's parents by yourself. I'll be there, and if they get snippy, I'll just mention how many of my other ex-boyfriends sent flowers after my accident."

Monica sighs. "They're just so oblivious sometimes."

I bite my tongue.

My brother is oblivious. The Dixons are just mean.

Except Jason.

Who's jogging into the parking lot now after stopping to help talk Pop Rock's cussing parrot off a roof. "Sorry, ladies," he says as he joins us. "Stubborn bird. How's the leg, Ellie?"

"Good." It's almost the truth, comparatively speaking. "You guys aren't going to The Grog without me tonight, are you?"

"Nope, we're saving that for tomorrow after our mothers drive us nuts," Monica replies happily.

Jason shakes his head, making his curls shake too. "They mean well," he tells her. He gives me a sheepish grin. "And I told mine to be nice to you."

"Don't worry about me. I've been through worse. You just enjoy your wedding week."

"Are you having fun?" Monica asks.

"Of course."

"Don't even try that with me. You're one degree of separation from needing to meet Willie Nelson for a joint. Do I need to talk to Wyatt about your need for backrubs and wine this week?"

"No, he's got that covered."

"So what's with the weird tension between you two at lunch? And don't tell me you were embarrassed about the dressing,

because your brother models underwear for a living. Nothing short of full frontal exposure in public is grounds for *you* to get embarrassed.”

Oh, no, she noticed? I drop my voice and try to come up with a reasonable explanation. “Tucker found my doodle pad this morning.”

When the idea of a seven-year-old looking at Dick and the Nuts doesn’t seem to faze her, I add, “While we were trying to fix Frogger.”

“Holy shit, you broke Beck’s Frogger?”

“Ssshhh! We’re going to get the high score back,” I say quickly. I have no idea *how*, but we will. “And did you miss the part about *my doodle pad*?”

“No, I’m trying really, really hard not to laugh at how Wyatt must’ve handled his son getting an eyeful of a penis cartoon. It’s easier to do when I’m concentrating on the threat of your brother banishing you from ever using his weekend house again. Remember the time we snuck up here for my birthday party?”

“Oh my gosh, and all your friends from work?”

“And the poor shaved poodle?”

“And the stripper?” we say in unison, and we both double over laughing, which sends a jolt of pain to my knee, but screw it, laughing feels too good.

“You had a stripper?” Jason asks mildly.

“A pirate stripper,” I explain.

“A really *bad* pirate stripper,” Monica adds.

“He tripped over his scabbard and accidentally mooned us trying to turn on his music.”

“He was so cute.”

“In a frat boy out of his element kind of way.”

“We ended up getting him drunk and tutoring him in calculus.”

“He still emails me his grade reports. I think he’s graduating next year.”

Monica’s eyes dance. “He is? We should go to his graduation! Engineering school, right?”

“No, he decided political science was more his speed. His parents are crushed, but he’s riding a 4.0 since he switched majors.”

“We are *so* going to his graduation.”

“It’s a date.”

“Hey, Ellie, you need a ride home?” Grady Rock calls from the edge of the makeshift parking lot.

“Got my car right here, but thank you,” I call back, patting my white Prius.

“Still happy to give you a ride. My TV’s out. Can’t watch the game.”

“Go crash Cooper’s house.”

“Pop’s there.”

“Go see your grandfather. It’s good for your soul.”

“Not when Nana’s with him. They’re disgusting. Heard she was telling stories at Anchovies about him stripping for her. Would you want to watch that?”

“We’re going with her to make out on the couch,” Monica tells him.

“Fucking hell,” he mutters loud enough to carry. “Next time, then.”

He waves good-naturedly and heads down the road.

“Aww, now I feel bad,” she says. “Where’s he going to watch the game?”

“His TV’s not broken,” I tell her. “He’s just spreading that rumor so the rest of his family doesn’t crash his place.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Spend enough weekends in Shipwreck, you’ll know what color underwear everyone wears too.”

“What color underwear are you wearing today?” Jason asks Monica.

She grins at him. “Want to see?”

“Ack, not here.” I shoo them both away. “Go on, go do your soon-to-be-newlyweds thing somewhere else. I’ll see you at breakfast.”

We pass around hugs, and I climb into my car for the drive up the mountain. The sky’s still a hazy gray-blue, but the sun’s dipped below the mountain ridge to the west and dusk is settling. I make it home without incident before darkness has fully engulfed the roads, and when I limp into the basement from the garage, I find Wyatt and Tucker snuggled on the basement couch watching the Fireballs game.

They’re oddly adorable, odd in the sense that I shouldn’t find anything about Wyatt adorable. He’s a military man through and through, his body a machine, his mind sharp, his expectations high, his hair short.

But sitting there with his legs propped up on the coffee table and his arm tucked around a sleeping, bony little boy in pajamas and messy hair, he doesn’t look like a military man.

He looks like a father.

Mortal.

Compassionate.

Vulnerable.

Holding his world.

A world I always wanted but might never have.

He glances up at me and shakes his head. “Hurting again?”

“No.” It’s habit to be a petulant ass around him, and I sigh, because now I’m frustrated with myself. “Yes.”

“Sit.”

I limp to the edge of the couch and sag into it, then dig into my purse for the over-the-counter painkillers I prefer to the prescription stuff.

He passes over a stainless steel water bottle, and I thank him politely.

Because I cannot use Wyatt as a punching bag.

I'm better than that.

Plus, my problems aren't his fault.

And I really do need to be able to pull off looking like one half of a happy couple in front of Patrick's parents tomorrow.

They're the worst, and they'll throw the sharpest darts.

I lift the footrest with the controller sitting in the couch's cupholder and look at the screen after passing Wyatt's water back. "Do I want to know who's winning?"

"Maybe if you're a Pittsburgh fan."

The inning comes to an end with the Fireballs striking out, and I wince as the score flashes on the screen. "Can't win them all."

"Still three innings to go."

Tucker snores, and a gentle smile softens the hard angles of Wyatt's face. I turn my attention to a commercial about jock itch. "Too much fun wore him out?" I ask without looking their way.

"He's an amateur."

A surprised laugh slips out of me, because *fun* and *Wyatt* aren't two things I usually put together.

Except they probably should be. *Anyone* who hangs out with my brother knows a thing or two about fun.

"I'm sorry about Patrick," I tell him.

He shifts, and I realize he's watching me, puzzled.

"For him being so rude at lunch," I clarify.

"Happens," he says with a shrug. "Not your fault."

“It was my fault I dated him,” I mutter.

“True enough.” The puzzlement fades into a frown. “Think I deserve to take some shit. I still haven’t said I’m sorry for what happened. Six months ago. For making you upset enough to leave. But I am. Sorry, I mean. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

I freeze for a half a second, because he’s not supposed to say he’s sorry. “Can’t live in the past,” I say quietly.

I should go check my phone to see if it’s working yet, but I want to sit for a little bit longer first. Not for the company, I tell myself, but for the rest.

The game comes back on, and he shifts. “Before I forget…”

He holds out my phone.

A shiver rolls through me, because was the man reading my mind?

“It works, and I didn’t prank call anyone.”

I stare at the device stupidly for longer than I should before taking it. Our fingers brush like they did over ice cream at Christmas. I remember the feel of his lips against mine, and a flush heats my entire body. “Thank you.”

He frowns. “You okay?”

And there’s more stupid staring going on as I blink blankly at him, because there’s something in his tone that’s not quite normal.

“You didn’t yell at me for not letting you do it yourself,” he clarifies.

“Twenty-something years of yelling at you hasn’t worked, so maybe it’s time I give it up.”

He shifts to lean over and touch the back of his hand to my forehead. Tucker grumbles in his sleep, but doesn’t wake up.

“Yep, definitely warm,” he says. “You should probably strip.”

“Excuse you?” I gasp.

He grins. “Ah, there she is. Just checking.”

“You’re *trying* to annoy me?”

He looks down at Tucker, glances at the game and winces as Pittsburgh gets a double off what should've been a single, then looks back at me. "You remember we used to play basketball at the Rivers house?"

"I remember you used to think I couldn't keep up."

"You couldn't, but that's not the point."

My breathing is coming easier as we slip back into the old habits. "You are *so* lucky that innocent child is sleeping on you right now, or you'd be dead."

"I used to wait until you'd sink the *perfect* shot, and then I'd tell you that you could've done it better, just to watch the steam roll out your ears. And it's still that easy."

I gape at him, because *he does it on purpose?*

And what does it say about me that I still take the bait?

"You-you're—you're an *ass*," I gasp.

Tucker stirs, and I slap a hand over my mouth.

Wyatt just shrugs, but not the shoulder that would disturb Tucker. "I have to have some flaws. Otherwise I'd be insufferable."

That is *not* the guy who's been Beck's best friend for over twenty years. I narrow my eyes at him, but I don't call him on it. Because I have the oddest feeling that's exactly what he wants me to do.

But I can't resist asking, "Why only to me?"

He holds my gaze longer than I expect. "Because I was so tired of being coddled, and you gave it right back, every time."

Just because I don't know what he's talking about doesn't mean he's not telling the truth. And there's a truth so clear in the ring of his words that I get a bone-deep shiver.

"Who coddled you?" I ask.

He shakes his head with a snort. "Better question is *who didn't?*"

"Why?"

He glances at the TV, and just when I think he's not going to answer, he does.

"Last guy my mom dated before she finally realized what she was doing to both of us and moved in with my grandma to reboot her life was a first-rate asshole," he says. "Let's leave it at that. But it meant my gran went around the neighborhood looking for any parents who had enough control over their kids to make them look after me."

"Beck didn't coddle you."

"At first he did. All of them did. I might've been small and damaged, but I wasn't blind."

My heart's starting to hurt, because *no* kid should *ever* feel damaged.

"Didn't mean I could take care of myself though. That I didn't need it. Wasn't big enough for that." He shakes his head. "Thought I could. But I couldn't. And Beck saved my ass when I got into it with his best friend. Could've left me behind. Instead, he dropped him. Hard. Broke his nose. Got a detention in sixth grade. And then he thanked me for showing him what a douche Andy Brentwood was. Dude all but saved my life and thanked *me* for it."

I swallow hard. I remember Andy, vaguely, but I never gave any thought to why Beck stopped talking about him. "That's not coddling you. That's doing the right thing."

"I started it. He got detention. I got chocolate chip cookies and milk. From your mom. From Mrs. Rivers. From my grandma. I shared so the Wilsons would teach me to lift weights and so Davis would teach me his Tae Kwon Do moves. I didn't want to be fucking helpless."

The groan of the crowd carries through the television, even at low volume, and I glance at the game, almost relieved by the distraction.

I had no idea I'd been being an asshole to a kid who'd had enough asshole in his life.

And that doesn't make me feel any better about my life choices.

Two-run homer. Fireballs are down by six now.

In the fifth inning.

It's going to be a blood bath.

Copper Valley's home team has never won a World Series, but they've never been quite as bad as they are this year either.

Even with Cooper Rock and his unbelievable gymnastics at second base.

"I always appreciated that you didn't cut me any slack, and I admired your determination," Wyatt says, speaking so softly I half think my ears are playing tricks on me. "If you could be that determined, then I could damn well be that determined too."

When I glance at him, he's still staring at the game.

But I know he said it.

And I know he knows I heard.

He settles deeper into the reclined seat at the other end of the couch. Tucker sighs and snuggles closer to him.

Little Tucker, safe, happy, and loved.

I overheard Wyatt telling Beck once, about eight years ago, that he didn't want to be a dad. He didn't know how. He was going to mess it all up, and it wouldn't just be himself, it would be him and a wife and kid.

But Tucker?

That kid is so very, very loved. With two parents who might live in different states, but still happy. Well-adjusted. And *loved*.

And I realize I need to go.

Not so I can check my email and any messages that came in while my phone was drying. Not so I can call Beck and give my brother grief for sending Wyatt here during Monica's wedding week.

No, I need to go before I start seeing Wyatt as the man I glimpsed the night we hooked up in my parents' basement six

months ago.

The angry father who just wants to be with his son.

Because *that* man is dangerous to my heart.

Chapter Eleven

Wyatt

There's exactly one sound that I will move heaven and earth to stop, and that's the sound of my son in pain.

Except as I sit here with Tucker sleeping peacefully on me, listening to Ellie limp up the stairs, I want to tear something in half to make *her* pain go away too.

I shouldn't. We're not exactly the enemies we were as kids, but we can't be much more than casual friends, or one of us will start wanting something the other can't give.

And she won't be the one unable to hold up her end of making something work.

No, that would be all me.

I hear every step as she makes her way slowly from the kitchen to the bedroom upstairs. Not because she's walking loudly. Not because there's a lack of insulation. But because I'm listening for it. When the distinct sound of running bathwater carries through the pipes behind the walls, I get hard as a brick.

She's taking a bath again.

And there's nothing I can say to my dick to convince it she's getting wet and naked for therapy and that there's nothing *sexy* about her soaking in a tub of hot water and bubbles.

I don't have enough fingers to count the number of times I've heard someone say Ellie's annoying, or god knows, the number of times I've thought it myself in my lifetime, but at Christmas, and again now, I'm getting pissed thinking about it.

She *is* smart. She *is* brave. She *is* strong. She *is* determined.

Why does that have to translate to *annoying*?

Why does she have to be disparaged for *wanting* something and going after it?

She's not power-hungry. She doesn't tear people down. She just wants her own bar set higher, and she doesn't apologize for it.

I force myself to sit through the rest of the game, which is painful more for knowing Ellie's upstairs naked than it is for watching the blowout. Tucker doesn't wake up when I carry him upstairs and tuck him into the queen-size bed that makes him seem even smaller, and my heart lurches even though I know he's getting the childhood every kid deserves, safe, happy, and loved, despite the hiccup with me not being able to leave Georgia to join him in Virginia yet.

He's not growing up hiding in shadows.

He has a capable mom who takes good care of him when I can't.

He's not me.

And I'm sure as hell not any of the sorry excuses for human beings my mom used to date.

I should go to bed too, but I'm restless, and I want a snack, so I creep softly downstairs. I expect Ellie's in bed, but I hear her voice drifting down the hall when I get to the kitchen. "Don't even try to play innocent. You did this on purpose."

I swallow a grin, because it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know who she's talking to, and I'm not surprised to hear the echoes of Beck's voice, even though I can't make out the words.

None of my business—he can tell her whatever story he wants, and she won't believe him, because she shouldn't—so I dig into the fridge instead.

The same carton is sitting there, right in front, calling my name, just like it has been since I spotted it yesterday.

A take-out carton of banana pudding from Crusty Nut.

Ellie would probably kill me if I ate it.

There's a line between annoying her and going too far, and I can't decide which side of the line eating her leftover banana pudding would fall on.

On the one hand, it's not a donut. On the other, it's still banana pudding.

"He has a *what?*"

The surprise and sudden hush in her voice makes me pause.

"You're lying," she says. "Because it doesn't make any sense. He freaking *carried* me to my room last night."

And now I'm interested.

I grab the banana pudding, pop the lid, and snag a spoon and meander down the hallway. Beck's voice gets clearer.

"—undiagnosed cardio-telepathy-rhymmeria. He's being a stubborn goat and refusing to admit something's wrong, so we need you to be extra nice to him. And watch out for his kid too."

"Rymmeria? What's a—Beckett Ryder, so help me, if you're lying to me—"

"Ellie, it's three in the morning here, I have a ten-hour plane ride tomorrow, and I'm talking about one of my best friends. Do you think I'm lying to you?"

"Yes." There's a hint of doubt in her voice.

Beck grunts in frustration. "You really want to take that chance? If he has a heart attack on your watch, you're going to feel like an asshole for the rest of your life. He might even get kicked out of the Air Force."

I knock and don't wait before pushing the door open. Ellie gapes at me wide-eyed from the bed, holding her phone out in front of her. "What the hell are you—do you have a heart condition—*is that my banana pudding?*"

She starts to leap, winces, looks down at her white tank top that leaves little about her nipples to the imagination, and pulls the covers up to her neck. "You are *dead*," she tells me.

I cross the room to lean into the screen on her phone, which puts me right in the sweet spot to have Ellie's dark hair tickle my face while whatever fruity bath crap she used tonight fills my senses.

Beck grins on the other end of the video call. "Wyatt, buddy, how you doin'?"

"A heart condition?" I say.

"Ellie was all we had on short notice to watch you, but you're gonna pull through." He winks, his blue eyes the same as Ellie's, though his face is sharper and his hair weirdly more styled. "Hang in there. More help's on the way."

"We beat your high score in Frogger," Ellie growls at the phone.

Beck's eyes go round. "The hell you did."

"We did," I agree. "Ellie ditched wedding stuff all day today to cook for me, and Tucker kept running to refill my Dr Pepper."

"Prove it, motherfuckers."

"Maybe tomorrow. I'm tired, and we didn't get any sleep last night," Ellie replies.

"You two couldn't get along well enough to tie a shoelace."

We make eye contact, and I don't have to know what she's thinking to know that I'm thinking the same thing.

What's the one thing worse than ruining his high score?

We move in sync like we've planned this, and suddenly I have my fingers threaded through the loose tendrils of her curly hair to cradle her scalp while she fists my shirt at the collar and pulls me to her mouth, still holding the phone out in front of us.

I don't know if I'm kissing her or if she's kissing me, but our tongues are clashing just like they did at Christmas, and her sweet taste is the perfect complement to the lingering banana pudding flavor in my mouth, and she's making whimpery moaning noises that might be real or might be for show but I don't care, because *fuck*, this feels good.

So damn *good*.

Just like it did six months ago.

“QUIT FUCKING MY SISTER’S MOUTH, YOU ASSHOLE!”

I don’t want to. But Ellie starts to pull away, so I let her go. She smiles sweetly at Beck, holding the phone close enough to her face that I’m not in the picture anymore. “We *totally* beat your Frogger score,” she informs him.

He’s glaring at her, jaw flapping like he wants to say something.

“Also, I think I’d know if Wyatt had an undiagnosed heart condition. Especially after what he did to me this morning.”

I start to talk, because isn’t *undiagnosed* kind of hard for *anyone* to know if *I* don’t even know it?, but she holds up a hand, and since I don’t actually want to give her a reason to notice another condition that kissing her makes me suffer from, I shut my mouth.

“You—” he starts.

“Goodnight, Beck,” she finishes sweetly. “I have to go do... something.”

She hangs up the phone and flings it on the bed, then grabs the banana pudding that somehow ended up on the nightstand. “Thank you for delivering dessert. You may go.”

I watch her for a minute, and when she looks at me, the craziest thing happens.

We both start to grin.

“Davis,” we say together, and it’s suddenly a race to see who can call him first.

There’s no telling if he’ll answer—there’s a lot I’ll never know about Davis Remington, despite living next door to him for half my childhood—but if he can’t do what we need, he’ll know who can.

My call goes to voicemail, and I start talking two seconds before Ellie does. “Dude, it’s Wyatt. Call me. It’s about

Frogger.”

“Davis, it’s Ellie. Beck’s on my shit list and you owe me one for you know what, so get your ass up here to Shipwreck yesterday.”

She hangs up and pulls the banana pudding out of my reach. “Don’t even think about it.”

“What does Davis owe you for?”

“Sexual favors.”

My blood pressure goes past red to black. “The hell he does.”

“Why did you kiss me?”

Of course she won’t shy away from asking. “So Beck knows there’s something worse than losing his high score in Frogger. Why did you kiss me?”

“Because you’re a good kisser.”

Of everything she could’ve said, that’s the last thing I expected.

But it shouldn’t be.

It’s Ellie. She charges in like a bull, fucks up, adjusts, and then hits it out of the park.

She’s unstoppable.

“That’s not all I’m good at,” I tell her, and I think that damn frog from the game is sitting on my vocal cords, because that came out way huskier than it was supposed to.

Like a promise instead of a threat.

“I’m aware,” she says, equally throaty, but also equally tentative.

If that was all she said, I could walk away. But she adds, “I don’t hate you, you know,” in a soft whisper, and I sink to the bed next to her, because I’m pretty sure that was an invitation.

“And if you *were* suffering from a real heart condition, I would help you,” she continues, softer still.

It's like Christmas all over again, hiding out in her parents' basement after finding out I lost the battle to keep Tucker in Georgia with me while I waited for orders to Copper Valley.

"You'd make a terrible nursemaid," I say hoarsely, because someone has to stop us from doing what I'm thinking of doing every time she lets her gaze drift to my lips like that.

"You'd make a terrible patient."

"I should leave."

"Why did you tell Beck you were going to make a terrible husband and father?"

How did she know that? "Listening in on people's private conversations, nosy-ass?"

"Don't get high and mighty with me. I know you too well."

"Ellie—"

"Was I that much of a mistake? At Christmas?"

"No. Yes. Fuck." I rub a hand over my eyes. "The guys—your family—they're all the family I have left. Them and Tucker. I don't want to mess that up."

"Do you honestly believe any of my family would put up with you if you weren't good enough for all of us?"

"Don't be nice to me."

"What if we *were* nice to each other?" she whispers.

"Ellie—"

"Shut up, Wyatt. I'm not asking for a relationship. I'm asking for a *friend*. I don't *want* to go to Monica's wedding by myself. I don't *want* to feel broken. I want to dream again. I want to know I can be *normal* again. I want to believe in the future. I can't—I haven't—I don't know if I can—"

She stops with a growl of frustration. "Never mind. Forget it. I ___"

I have my hands in her hair again before I can think, kissing her hard and ruthless and unapologetically.

The last thing she did before her accident was, well, *me*.

If she needs help getting back in the saddle, then I guess the least I can do is, well, *her*.

Whatever she wants. As far as she wants to go.

That's what you do for a friend, especially a friend you didn't realize you needed until it was almost too late.

Right?

Chapter Twelve

Ellie

Something this stupid should not feel this right, but *dammit*, when Beck told me Wyatt had heart problems—even when I didn't believe him—my own nearly stopped beating.

Until Christmas, Wyatt was the annoyance from my childhood. But he grew up.

I grew up.

And then I stumbled into my parents' basement with a carton of ice cream, and now I'm back with the last person who saw me before I wasn't *me* anymore.

And he knows it, or he wouldn't be here.

He wouldn't stay, pretending to be my boyfriend with history hovering at the edges of the tension between us.

He tastes like banana pudding and feels like forgiveness, and if I think about this too long, I'm going to chicken out, so instead, I toss the pudding on the other side of the bed and give in to the sensations of his mouth, his lips, his breath, his grip on my hair, the hard plane of his chest against the extra fluffiness mine's acquired this year.

"Tell me to stop," he murmurs when he pulls out of the kiss to lick a path along my jaw.

"I'll kill you if you stop."

"Sweet talker."

"My nipples are hard."

"Dammit, Ellie. I can't—I'm not—you deserve—"

"*Shut. Up.*" I'm drenched between my legs, and I can feel my pulse in my clit. "I know who you are."

He nips at the tendon between my neck and shoulder, and I grip his solid shoulders to hold him where it feels good. “More there,” I beg.

He nips again, then licks at my sensitive skin, and I shift on the bed to carefully part my legs while he gently swipes my hair to the side, his fingers brushing the back of my neck and making me whimper in pleasure.

“There too?” he asks, rubbing his thumb at my nape.

“Mm-hmm,” I manage.

“Relax, Ellie.”

“I don’t know how to relax. I was born this way. Take your shirt off.”

“You first.”

If he thinks I’m going to balk, he can think again. I whip my tank top over my head and let him see all of me. The fuller breasts. My tight nipples. The scars that are barely noticeable on the side of my left breast now.

He traces them anyway, because of course he notices, watching my chest with dark, hooded eyes. “Where else?” he asks hoarsely.

“Lose the shirt,” I rasp out.

His eyes lift to mine, and there’s raw hunger that I’ve never seen there before. Instead of ripping off the cotton shirt, he lifts it slowly, inch by inch, revealing the chiseled abs, the flat pecs, copper nipples pebbled hard, his arms flexing when he finally pulls it over his head.

“Show-off,” I whisper.

“Look who’s talking,” he replies, bending to suck one of my nipples into his mouth.

Pleasure rockets from my chest to my core, starting that long-forgotten spiral of need deep inside me.

I forgot how big his hands are until he cups my other breast, fully covering it despite the two cup sizes I’ve gained. While

he suckles harder on one nipple, he circles the other with his thumb. I arch into his touch. “Oh, god, yes,” I moan.

I’m so damn glad he doesn’t have a heart problem.

“Lie down,” he says gruffly, pushing me with his body until I’m on my back, head on the pillow, the covers low on my belly. He starts to pull them off, but I grip them tight.

“Not yet.”

He replies by moving to suck on my neck again while his hand slips under the covers and over my panties.

I part my legs more, and he dips his fingers between them over the thin cotton barrier. “Fuck, Ellie, you’re soaked,” he moans.

“Touch me, Wyatt.”

He covers my mouth with his again, his tongue gliding against mine, his hard body pinning me down, one hand stroking my hair while his fingers slip under my panties to trace my seam.

We both groan into the kiss, and I suck hard on his tongue when he slides one digit inside me.

He moves slowly, carefully, while I test arching my hips into his touch. “More,” I whimper.

“You are so damn hot.”

We dive back into the kiss while he adds another finger. I reach between us and fumble with the button on his shorts. When I finally reach inside and wrap my hand around his solid cock, he jerks his fingers hard inside me, reaching that desperate, aching, needy spot deep inside. “There,” I gasp, squeezing him harder.

“Christ, Ellie, that feels good.”

“Deeper, Wyatt, right—*oh, god, right there.*”

I pump him faster while he drives his fingers deeper. I lift my right knee to give him a better angle, jerking on his cock and tightening my grip until—

Until the tickle.

The tickle behind my left eyelid.

“Oh—ah—no—ahh—”

“Come for me, Ellie,” he pants. “I can’t—you need to—you can do it—”

“Wya—ah—ahh—”

“That’s it, baby. That’s—”

“*Ah-CHOO!*”

My orgasm explodes, and pain explodes in my nose as the sneeze rockets through me and my head collides with Wyatt’s. Something hot and wet squirts up my breast and into my armpit, and Wyatt grunts out a *fucking hell* before leaping back, covering his cock with one hand and his eye with another while he dashes to the bathroom, his shorts falling to his knees.

My eyes are stinging, my nose throbbing like someone’s hammering a nail into it, and my pussy is still having orgasm aftershocks like it’s no big deal that I just *sneezed all over Wyatt and head-butted him in the middle of a heavy petting session*.

I sneeze again, pain shoots through my entire face, and I stifle a whimper.

“I’m sorry,” I call weakly.

Wyatt reappears in the doorway with his shorts back on and a fuzzy gray dog in his hand. I think. My vision’s a little blurry with all the heat in my eyes, and I don’t know where a fuzzy gray dog would’ve come from.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“I’m sorry,” I babble again. “Did I hurt you? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—I didn’t realize—that’s only happened one time before—”

“Didn’t need to know that,” he mutters.

He rubs a towel—not a fuzzy gray dog—over my chest and side, and I realize he was in the middle of his own orgasm when I gave us both broken faces.

“Am I bleeding?” I whisper.

“No.”

“Is your eyeball okay?”

“Yep.”

“Um...thank you for the orgasm. It was very nice.” Oh, *shit*. I’m going to have a swollen nose for Monica’s wedding. I’m going to ruin her wedding pictures.

Then I remember this is Monica, and she’ll spend the rest of her entire life telling people I helped beat off the pirate vagabonds who tried to kidnap her from Jason at the wedding, and I even have the bruised nose to prove it, and I snort out a laugh.

And then I whimper in pain, because snorting and broken noses don’t mix.

“Holy hell, Ellie,” Wyatt mutters. “We have issues. Can you walk? How’s your leg? Get up. You can sleep in the guest room. I’ll clean this up tomorrow.”

He’s still holding his eye while he finishes wiping me off.

“Are you sure your eye’s okay?”

“Yes. Go on. You can’t keep going on no sleep.”

“I can clean this—”

He stands, plants his fists on his hips, spreading those shoulders even wider and holy banana pudding, the man could probably crack a walnut with those ab muscles.

He clears his throat. Oh, right.

He’s glaring at me. “I’m aware you’re perfectly capable. And I’m going to clean this, including the banana pudding, and you’re going to go to sleep anyway. Say *thank you, Wyatt*.”

I glance over and realize there is, in fact, banana pudding spilled all over the comforter.

“Thank you, Wyatt,” I mutter with a sigh as I silently mourn the lost dessert.

“Are we done arguing now?”

“Are we ever?”

His lips twitch again, and *dammit*, now I'm on the verge of smiling too, despite the pain still radiating out of my nose.

"Make you a trade," he says suddenly.

"Why do I not trust you?"

"I'll let you clean this up tomorrow if you show me that notebook you took away from Tucker this morning."

I scurry out of the bed as fast as my leg will let me go. "*Fine*. I'm going. But if this swells up and bruises, I'm telling people I tripped while saving Tucker from a rabid coyote."

"And I'll tell them you threw a log at me when I tried to help."

"Perfect."

Before I can limp out of the room, he snags one of my hands. I glance up at him, suddenly aware that I'm standing here in nothing but my bare breasts, soaked panties, and the mangled scar on my left leg.

But he doesn't look down.

Nope, not Wyatt.

He simply presses a kiss to my forehead. "Friends?"

"Can I still tell you not to tell me how to do things?"

"And definitely give me your wrong opinions when I'm doing something not your way."

I ignore the sarcasm. "Only if you agree to do the same."

He snorts softly, and I'm pretty sure it's a snort of laughter and not utter and complete frustration. "You're one of a kind."

"And thank god for that. Beck would never keep up if there were two of me."

I swear he's smiling when I leave the room.

Mostly because I'm not sure my ego could take the hit if he was vehemently agreeing with my awful attempt at a joke.

Chapter Thirteen

Wyatt

The sound of the house alarm buttons being pushed wakes me from a dead sleep at 4:30.

Someone's breaking in.

I fly out of the bed and land on soft feet, and I don't bother pulling on a shirt, because it's not going to be any protection against an intruder. I hit the bottom of the stairs when the lights flicker on, blinding me.

"Freeze, asshole!" Ellie barks. Something whizzes past me and thuds against the door.

The dark figure next to the alarm panel sighs. "A guy drives all night to answer a distress call, and what does he get? He gets a dildo launched at his face. Nice, Ellie. Real nice."

"*Davis?*" she shrieks.

The slender, man-bun-wearing, bearded *intruder* bends over and grabs the massive purple *thing* from the floor. It's longer than his tatted-up arm. "Does that even fit? Put your fists down, Wyatt, it's not about her honor. You see the size of this thing?"

Ellie snatches it back, but once she has it, she grabs it by the base with her other hand and wipes the first one on her shirt.

"Go put pants on," I hiss at her.

"It's like a swimsuit, Morgan," she snaps back. "And this isn't mine. It was in the drawer in the guest bedroom."

All three of us momentarily stare at the two-foot-long, six-inch-thick dildo dangling from her fingers. I try not to look at the mangled, leathery scar on her thigh, but my stomach still dips thinking about what she's been through.

"You should mount it," Davis says, nodding to the dildo.

Ellie goes stiff like she's going to beat him with it, and I'm about to slug him when his lips twist in a familiar smirk.

"On Beck's bedroom wall," he finishes.

His dark eyes flit between us. "And you two should be more careful when you're having sex. Looks like you had a threesome with a boxer."

Ellie's eyes bug out.

"We weren't—" I start, yanking my hand away from where it instinctively went to test the tender skin around my eye, but Davis pops a rare full grin and turns to the door to the basement.

"What'd you do to fuck up Frogger? And where's the coffee? If I'm gonna fix this, I need fuel."

"Screen went out, so we pulled the plug to reboot." I jerk my head back at Ellie. "*Please* go put pants on before Tucker comes down here and sees you walking around like that, because he'll tell his mother and I'll never hear the end of it."

I can deal with the guilt of seeing her scars.

But I really don't want Tucker thinking about women in underwear any younger than hormones finally make him.

"And don't forget my coffee, wench," Davis calls.

"Oh, go cut your hair," she replies good-naturedly with a smile.

She heads to the kitchen, swinging the dildo of indeterminate source, and I'm pretty sure she's going to at least wrap it in a garbage bag, if not take it all the way out to the trash herself.

I follow Davis into the basement. He was the youngest in our group growing up—of the guys, so excluding Ellie—the slowest to warm up to people, and he was the first to want to call it quits on the boy band thing. I don't know exactly what he does for a job now, but I know it involves computers, coding, and the nuclear reactor a couple hours south of here.

"Should've told us you were coming. We would've left the light on."

“Three calls in an hour, and you thought I wouldn’t come?”

“Three?”

He smirks again. “I don’t know what you told Beck, but he wanted photographic proof that his score’s still the highest.”

“I kissed Ellie. On video call with him.”

“About damn time, dude.”

“Shove it, Remington. Not going there.”

He flips on Frogger and whistles low. “You wiped it.”

“Can you write a new high score on it?”

He gives me a *don’t be a dumbass, of course I can* look. “Gonna take donuts and coffee. Wouldn’t mind pretty company.”

I spread my arms. “I’m free until my kid’s up.”

“How’d Ellie break it?”

“Maybe I did it.”

“Dude. If it was your kid, you would’ve just told Beck. If it was you, you would’ve just told Beck. If you’re calling me to fix it, it was Ellie. Man up and do something about it already.”

Easy for him to say.

He has a career—and a bank account—that mean he doesn’t move every one to four years unless he wants to. He doesn’t have an ex-wife and a son to take care of, and no idea what he’s going to do to support them if he has to leave the military next summer because of orders anywhere *but* Copper Valley. And he doesn’t have a clue how ill-prepared I feel to be a good partner to anyone, let alone my best friend’s sister.

Help her heal?

Yeah. I’m in.

Anything more than that?

I’m not the man for the job.

Chapter Fourteen

Ellie

“Oh my god, what happened?” A human-size tropical bird—I mean, Monica rushes to join me outside The Muted Parrot, Shipwreck’s bright, cheerful coffee shop, four hours after Davis made his unexpected appearance Wednesday morning.

“One of Beck’s friends showed up in the middle of the night,” I tell her. “I didn’t get much sleep.”

“Because he gave you two black eyes?”

“*Oh!* Oh. That. No, that was me walking into a cabinet door.”

“*You had sex with Wyatt!*” Monica whisper-shrieks like I didn’t just give her a perfectly reasonable explanation that had *nothing to do with having sex with Wyatt*. She claps her hands, and her fake red, yellow, and blue feathers all flap up and down with her as she bounces. “I *knew* it. I knew you weren’t fake-dating him just to make Patrick quit acting all superior.”

Oh, *shit*, I’m totally transparent.

“Of course I’m not,” I whisper back. “I sneezed right as I hit the big O and we knocked heads and I can never have sex with him again.”

She looks around.

I do the same.

Because I really, *really* shouldn’t have said that.

However...it will be a *great* reason to break up with Wyatt at the end of the week. No blame. Just the simple truth that it’s dangerous for us to be together.

There’s no sign of Patrick anywhere—yes, I continue to worry he’ll realize I’m a loser who’s still not dating—which probably means he’s on a work call. I wonder if Sloane’s bored out of her mind, or if she’s taken to mindlessly playing Treasure

Hunter on her phone like I used to when I was waiting on Patrick to end one of his important work calls so we could go somewhere.

Some days I get really pissed at myself for not seeing the signs sooner that he didn't check the box for *good husband material*, even if his resume did. I like to think he changed while we were dating, that he wasn't always a workaholic tool, but what does that say about my influence and our relationship?

You drive men to work too hard so they can avoid you.

Lovely.

Monica pulls me into the coffee shop. She lifts two fingers for the barista, who doesn't bat an eye at getting a sign language order from a parrot, and she points at the back table, then drags me around the seashell-themed room until we're in the sun room at the rear of the restaurant.

Cautiously, it should be noted, but she's still dragging me over.

We have to look crazy, even in Shipwreck. Me in a knee-length denim skirt and a different Jolly Roger T-shirt from yesterday, as requested, and her dressed like a five-and-a-half-foot-tall parrot. I'm pretty sure the costume is just to annoy Jason's parents, but not completely sure.

I'm also impressed that she went through with it. I thought she was kidding when she showed me the costume online.

"Do we all get parrot costumes?" I ask as she pulls out a seat and points a wing, gesturing me to sit.

"No, I got you a monkey costume. Explain to me exactly why you think you can't have sex with Wyatt."

"We'll both end up dead."

She makes a *go on* gesture, like being dead isn't reason enough to not have sex. It also makes her beak flop around her head, and her brightly-colored feathers all dance with the motion.

I lean in close and lower my voice. "The first time we had sex, I had my car accident. We...messed around a little two nights ago"—yes, yes, it was just a kiss, but I'm warming up to this

story—“and Beck’s Frogger game died mere hours later. We were in the middle of *you know* last night, and I sneezed and gave us both black eyes. *We are not supposed to have sex.* I can take a hint from the universe.”

“Wait. You said this happened mid-orgasm? Like, you got off, so the sex couldn’t have been *bad*.”

Bad? It was so far the opposite of bad that I don’t have a word for it.

And that was just his fingers.

I might burst into flames if we ever went farther.

“Ellie! You’re seeing someone? That’s fantastic.” Libby Rock, the middle-aged proprietress of The Muted Parrot, tucks her pirate wench skirts under her and pulls up a chair after setting a plate of scones on our table. “Who is it? Is it that handsome single dad from your lunch yesterday?”

“I heard Pop’s going to play matchmaker for all your kids,” I tell her in a desperate bid to distract her.

It doesn’t work. “Meh. He says that every couple months like clockwork. Tell me it’s the single dad. He’s a handsome one. And those muscles—mm-mmm. And so very polite and apologetic after the pizza mishap.”

“*The pizza mishap!*” I say triumphantly. “He kissed me on the sidewalk, and then the pizza mishap happened too. *This is not a coincidence.*”

“Ellie thinks she and Wyatt are cursed and should break up,” Monica tells Libby.

“Ah. Fear of commitment. Natural, after what happened with the last one she dated.”

“Monica’s marrying *that last one I dated*’s brother tomorrow,” I remind Libby.

“But she’s not marrying that barnacle you escaped from, thank goodness. They’re brothers, not clones. Now, you explain to me what’s bothering you about committing to this nice young man.”

“His name’s Wyatt,” Monica supplies. “The hot single dad. He’s in the military and flies experimental planes. Total badass with a big heart.”

“Not helping,” I tell her.

“You’re welcome,” she replies, lifting a scone. “Oh, white chocolate raspberry. Libby, you are a goddess.”

“Come, come, tell us the problem,” Libby says. “Physical, emotional, or vaporal?”

“Vaporal?”

“Pits, feet, or ass stinks?”

Monica chokes on her scone.

“He smells very nice,” I concede, because despite actually having a good excuse to fake break up with him—since we’re only fake dating—I *am* willing to be his friend.

For Beck’s sake.

One day, my brother’s going to crack the wrong joke and need the rest of us to fall in line to get him out of trouble, and Wyatt and I sniping at each other won’t help.

“Does he have performance issues?” Libby asks.

“No matter how I answer that question, it won’t be three hours before everyone in town thinks they know everything there is to know about my sex life.”

“Two lattes and an ice pack,” the barista says, setting coffees and a bag of ice with a dish towel on the table. “And this is why I recommend padded headboards.”

“Your face does kinda speak for itself,” Libby tells me with a grave nod of her short graying curls.

“I walked into an open cabinet door.”

“I threw out my hip trying a new position once. Took me four days to walk again, but the memories last a lifetime. Ah, to be young and nimble again.”

“Wyatt’s stationed in Georgia, and my job is in Copper Valley, okay?” I need something, or I’ll be hearing everyone’s

opinions on my love life before we make it the two blocks to the town square to try our hand at digging up old Thorny Rock's treasure. "Yes, we have attraction, but we have other things working against us."

"But only until his commitment with the military's up," Monica points out. "Less than two years, right?"

"And he's divorced." I feel like a heel tossing out *that* tidbit, but anything to get them to think he's not perfect. "You know the odds of divorce go up once you've done it the first time." Isn't that what they say?

Libby and Monica share a look. "Cold feet," Libby declares.

"And some history," Monica agrees. "Ellie. I don't hang out with your brother's crowd *ever*, and even I know Wyatt only got married because she was pregnant and he thought it was the right thing to do."

Libby frowns. "Boy didn't know to use a condom?"

"He hooked up with an old girlfriend after his mom's funeral," I whisper, because I feel like I'm cheating on Wyatt by telling other people his business, but I don't want them thinking he goes around having unprotected sex with any woman who'll have him. He used a condom with *me* at Christmas, and we didn't get far enough to need one last night. "I haven't asked, but you know those things break sometimes. Cut him some slack. And Tucker's an awesome kid."

Monica smiles at me over her latte. She's a smiling parrot bride, but she looks like a cat with a canary.

Libby smiles too. "Well then. *Clearly* you're right, and you two aren't meant for each other."

I'm being reverse psychologied. It won't work. "Exactly." I'm oddly deflated, like I *do* actually care that we could have a real chance. Or maybe I'm getting that good at subconsciously acting.

Monica and Libby share another smile, and Libby pushes back from the table. "You two enjoy your coffee. Monica, hon, you let me know if there's anything we can do to help with the wedding. Love your costume, by the way."

“Thanks, Libby.”

“You bet.”

“Where’s Jason?” I ask her when we’re alone again at the table.

“Picking out our shovels,” she answers cheerfully. “Eat up, Ellie. We’re about to dig up gold.”

Chapter Fifteen

Wyatt

Davis declines joining Tucker and me down in Shipwreck for the kick-off to the treasure dig, so it's just the two of us walking along Blackbeard Avenue, heading for the center square. We haven't yet figured out any of the clues to find the hidden peg leg around town, but neither of us cares. We're having fun with everything else.

"Dad, can I get a tattoo?" Tucker asks.

"What? No. You're seven."

"Motherfucker! Motherfucker!" a voice calls.

I clap my hands over Tucker's ears and look around at the various tourists joining us on the sidewalk, but they're all just as confused as I am.

Grady Rock pops his shaggy head out of the bakery. "Hush your craw, Long Beak Silver. There are kids around."

We all follow his gaze to the cannons sticking over the edge of the roof at Cannon Bowl next door, where old Pop's parrot is perched. "Eat shit," the parrot replies.

"Ah, go walk the plank," Grady says.

The parrot waddles to the end of the cannon, lifts a foot, sways, and plummets toward the ground.

Everyone gasps, but the bird flaps its wings at the last second and takes off across the street to perch on the movie theater's marquee.

"Asshole parrot," Grady mutters as he ducks back into his shop.

I let go of Tucker's ears, but he's stopped and is staring in the bakery window. "*Those* tattoos, Dad," he says.

Oh. Right.

The temporary tattoos that are in baskets all over town. “Oh. Yes.”

We grab a handful inside, and Tucker tells Grady he makes the best donuts in the universe, and I end up getting both of us a plain glazed donut for fuel for the dig, though I’m eyeballing the banana pudding donuts. “Banana flavoring?” I ask Grady.

He shudders. “Vanilla pudding with real bananas. They’re new. Want one?”

“Ellie will.”

That earns me a knowing grin. He glances down at Tucker then back to me, and mouths, *padded headboards*.

I give him a glare that usually makes lieutenants quake, but he just grins bigger.

“Tucker, say thank you for the tattoos,” I instruct.

“Aahnk oo,” he says around a mouthful of donut.

We make it to the crowded town square just in time to see Pop in full pirate regalia making a speech about the pirate Thorny Rock on the makeshift stage in the center of the square. Tucker tugs my hand, and I follow, thinking we’re heading for a better view, or to get closer to what looks to be the line.

But nope.

He’s pulling us over to gawk at a group in full costume.

The men are dressed as pirates, but the women are a dog, a monkey, and a parrot.

“Do you think that one uses bad words?” Tucker asks me while he points.

The parrot turns our way, and—oh, hell.

It’s Monica.

She waves and gestures us over while the crowd applauds Pop.

“I love your feathers,” Tucker tells her, reaching out to pet her stomach.

“Whoa, bud, we ask before we touch,” I tell him.

Monica offers an arm instead while I nod to Ellie, who's decked out in the monkey costume. The inside corners of both her eyes are swollen and purply-red, stretching halfway across her lids, and there's no mistaking that she took a hit to the face.

Just like there's no mistaking I took a hit to my right eye, though my bruise is smaller.

She's ridiculously adorable in the costume though.

"That thing hot?" I ask her.

"Not yet, but it will be soon." She casts a glance at the rising sun in the clear blue sky, and I swallow a smile.

"Don't even think about it," she says when I reach for my pocket, like I'm going for my phone to take her picture, but there's an easy smile that she usually doesn't have for me, and seeing the friendliness lifts a weight off my chest I didn't realize I was carrying.

So we *can* be friends.

"Mr. and Mrs. Dixon, have you met Ellie's boyfriend?" Monica asks, turning to an older couple I hadn't realized was with the group, since they're not also in costume. "This is Wyatt and his son, Tucker."

I stifle a wince, because Tucker heard that. Does a seven-year-old understand the difference between *girlfriend* and *girl friend*?

Doesn't matter, I decide. Ellie's my best friend's sister, so odds are, Tucker will see her again. It's okay for him to know grown-ups he can trust, even if he doesn't see them often.

Mr. Dixon—tall, white-haired, and stuffy—barely spares me a glance, but his wife—slender, in pearls and a pantsuit—looks me up and down. A haughty smirk makes her thin face even less attractive. "Dear god, what happened to your face?"

"He accidentally got hit with a log when he was saving a baby from a wolf," Ellie says.

The woman looks at her, and her lip curls as she leaps to the conclusion everyone else apparently has this morning. She

turns back to me. “And what do you do?”

“My dad’s a superhero,” Tucker announces.

“An actor, hm? I suppose that shouldn’t surprise me, given the circles Ellie’s close to.”

“I’m in the Air Force,” I correct.

“Oh. A *working* man.”

“He has a really cool job testing airplanes,” the Blond Caveman’s girlfriend says, surprising me.

Surprising the Blond Caveman too, by the looks of the *what the hell?* look he sends her way.

“How do you know what he does?” the caveman asks.

“Ellie told us about it at dinner the other night. Remember?” She smiles at me. “My brother’s a commercial pilot. So *thank you.*”

“I, ah, work on military jets,” I tell her.

“An airplane’s an airplane in my world, and I like knowing my brother’s safe when he’s in the air.”

“I like being safe in the air too,” Jason announces.

I start to explain that I’m more engineer than pilot, but Ellie jumps in before I can, tugging my arm like the good girlfriend she’s playing today. “Guys, don’t embarrass him. How much you want to bet Monica finds the most pirate gold?”

“I’m gonna find *all* the pirate gold!” Tucker announces.

“He has a *son*, Ellie?” Mrs. Dixon says with a nose lift.

“No, that’s a random kid he kidnapped with candy and donuts yesterday, but he’s cute, so we’re making him an official pirate with us.”

Monica coughs. Her fiancé clears his throat and swipes a hand over his grin. The Blond Caveman glowers. Ellie slips her hand lower until our fingers are intertwined, and fuck me, I could do this all day. “Come on. Are we digging for gold or what?”

“Mom, Dad, you go first,” Jason says.

“I can’t believe I’ve lived an hour from here my entire life and never knew I could come here to dig for pirate gold,” the Blond Caveman’s girlfriend says, falling into line.

“Dad, can we get two shovels?” Tucker asks.

“How about you help me?” Ellie says to him.

“Yeah! I’ll dig for you, Miss Captain Ellie. Does your leg hurt today?”

“Not too bad. Thank you for asking.”

“Me and Dad got donuts, but we ate them already.”

“The banana pudding kind?”

Tucker wrinkles his nose. “No, plain. But Dad said he’d get you one of those pudding ones later. Can I get another donut later too?”

“Absolutely,” Ellie says at the same time I say, “One’s enough for the day.”

Ellie bends down. “I’ll sneak you one when he’s not looking,” she whispers.

Tucker giggles.

And I shake my head at both of them.

“Is she bringing *him* to your wedding, Jason? He’s rather… plebian,” Mrs. Dixon murmurs loudly in front of us.

“So am I, Mom,” Jason replies.

“Honestly, I don’t know why you let Monica have a maid of honor who broke your brother’s heart. Not that he can’t do better, but it’s still rude.”

“So is talking about people behind their backs, Mrs. Dixon,” Ellie says cheerfully.

The Blond Caveman sends Ellie a murderous look.

She smiles back.

“I like you having other enemies besides me,” I tell her softly, and she snorts.

“Speaking of,” she replies, just as soft, “we can’t have sex anymore. It’s too dangerous.”

That’s a challenge if I ever heard one. “We’ll discuss this in bed tonight.”

“We will *not*,” she whispers.

“Bathtub works too.”

She gives me the old Ellie Ryder *you’re pissing me off* glare, and I don’t even try to tuck in a grin at how easy it still is to get her.

She huffs as she obviously realizes what I’m doing.

“Or maybe over strip ping-pong?” she murmurs.

Dammit.

There I go, popping a boner in public with my kid with me again.

She doesn’t look down, but she smiles triumphantly like she knows she won this round.

And honestly?

I’ll give it to her.

Because I like that smile.

She works hard. She’s dressed in a monkey costume in eighty-degree weather to make her best friend happy. And when I went snooping on her social media pages last night, I discovered post after post of shared *help find this pet a home* messages.

The last time she posted a personal picture was before Christmas.

Nothing about her accident.

Nothing about recovery.

The only pictures of her were posted by her parents or her friends.

So seeing her smile?

It’s like watching her come back to life.

Beck might've been pulling her leg about me having a problem, but he wasn't lying about Ellie's accident affecting her.

Monica's grinning widely as she hands me a shovel. "Get to work, Wyatt. This gold won't dig itself up. Show me those muscles."

The Blond Caveman yanks a shovel out of the pile and stalks off. "C'mon, Sloane, I'll show you how a real man digs for treasure," he says.

Monica and Ellie share a look. Tucker looks up at both of them, and says, "C'mon, Miss Captain Ellie. I'm gonna be a real man too," and even the Blond Caveman's girlfriend cracks up.

"Dad, I'm going to beat you," Tucker adds.

"Oh, you think so?"

"He's totally going to beat you," Ellie says.

He grins at me behind his glasses. How will I survive having to give him back to Lydia at the end of the summer?

I shove away the panic, because that's a problem for another day.

For now, I have pirate treasure to dig.

With my fake girlfriend.

Who just might be turning out to be more than I ever thought she could be.

Yep. Saving that problem for another day too.

Chapter Sixteen

Ellie

My brain is broken.

It's like the *How we feel about Wyatt* switch got flipped overnight, and now, instead of *annoying as a gnat*, he's at *hot as hell*.

Or possibly I'm overheating in this monkey costume.

But watching him shovel dirt in the town square is making me horny in ways I can't ever remember being horny.

He hasn't even taken his shirt off, and he's *still* smokin' hot.

"No, Miss Ellie, let me do that for you," Tucker says.

He's skin and bones, but he's putting his all into thrusting the short shovel into the soft earth, shrieking with glee every time he finds a plastic pirate coin.

I should really talk to Pop about getting some biodegradable pirate coins.

Yes.

That.

I should concentrate on how I can help make the Pirate Festival more earth-friendly.

Not on the way Wyatt just wiped his face with his T-shirt, exposing half of his six-pack and making ten women around us drop their shovels, including a pirate wench who just murmured, "I'd tap that."

"He's taken," Monica tells her.

"Lucky woman."

My cheeks burn, but I don't disagree. "I can dig a few shovels," I tell Tucker. "I'm not helpless."

"I'm being shrivelpuss," he informs me.

“Chivalrous,” Wyatt corrects with a grin.

“That means helping people because I’m a gentleman,” Tucker explains.

“And you’re doing a fantastic job,” Wyatt agrees. “But if Miss Ellie wants to dig some, you can let her have fun too.”

“But she’ll get her monkey fur all dirty.”

Such a sweet kid. “You’re the most chivalrous pirate I’ve ever met,” I tell him.

“Oh! Look! I found a pearl necklace!” Sloane exclaims.

All of the Dixons whip their heads around to look as she pulls a string of Mardi Gras beads from the ground.

“Those are *fake*,” Mrs. Dixon sniffs.

Sloane drapes them over her neck. She’s not sweating at all in her dog costume, nor does she seem at all the least bit offended that she had to play the dog. “They’re a fabulous addition to my collar, aren’t they, Patrick?”

He rolls his eyes. “Sure.”

“Are we nearly done?” Mrs. Dixon asks Jason.

“No way,” he replies. “We could dig for *days* and not find all the treasure they hid here.”

His mother goes pale. She takes a step and her heels twist in the dirt. “This is a safety hazard.”

“That’s why there are signs everywhere to wear boots,” Jason tells her.

“Big eyesore the rest of the year, isn’t it?” Mr. Dixon says.

“They’ll plant flowers in half of it and sod the rest when the week’s over,” Wyatt tells him.

I shoot him a look.

“I read the festival website,” he says. “You hot? Want a break?”

“Oh my god, Ellie, you’re so red you’re purple. Go sit down,” Monica orders.

“I’m fine,” I tell her.

It *is* really hot in this costume.

“Wyatt, do you know the most important thing about a wedding?” Monica asks.

“The bride’s always right?”

“Correct. Now go make sure Ellie sits down and has something to drink.”

Tucker looks wide-eyed between all the adults.

“You can stay with me, because you’re a good pirate treasure digger,” Monica tells him.

I squint my eyes at her, because is she *trying* to get me to strip for Wyatt?

She doesn’t bat a lash of acknowledgment.

“Can I, Dad? Please?”

“We’ll be right here,” Monica tells him. “And Jason knows CPR, and he always carries a first aid kit.”

That’s such baloney, and judging by the way Wyatt’s lips twist and his eyes narrow, he knows it.

“If she dies of heat stroke, it’s on you,” Monica tells him. “Are you a good boyfriend or not?”

“All right, all right. C’mon, Ellie. Let’s go get you out of this costume and into some air conditioning.”

“She loves the banana pudding at Crusty Nut,” Monica offers.

“I know,” he tells her.

Of course he does.

He fought me over which one of us got to put the bedspread covered in last night’s banana pudding into the washing machine this morning.

I let him win, but only because I had a call come in from an employee who needed to take an emergency sick day because her daughter was diagnosed with appendicitis.

And also because I know he didn't forget the deal he offered, whereby he'd get to see my doodle pad.

"I'm not that hot," I tell him when he stops beside me.

"Just dead sexy hot," he replies.

Heat funnels to my core, and I try to stutter out a response, but before I can, he bends and tosses me over his shoulder.

I gasp in surprise.

"That hurt?" he asks quietly.

"No," I answer honestly, half-surprised.

"Good. Tell me if it does. And don't be a stubborn ass." He turns, and adds, "Tucker, I'll be right over there if you need me, okay?"

"Okay, Dad."

He marches across the field, me hanging on with my monkey butt in the air, and while I get the occasional twinge in my leg, it doesn't hurt.

I can't see Tillie Jean's face when Wyatt marches us into the Crusty Nut, but I can hear her. "Table for two?"

"By the window if you can," he tells her.

"How about the balcony, sugar?"

"Is it out of the sun?"

"You bet."

"Sounds great."

"Sorry about my butt, Tillie Jean," I offer.

"Cutest pirate monkey butt we've had come in so far this morning," she replies. "C'mon. I got a table with an umbrella and a great view of the treasure hunt."

"You got clothes on under that?" Wyatt asks while he carries me up the stairs.

I'd argue about this, but I'm tired of arguing with him. "Enough that I can unzip," I confirm.

“Hot dog, it’s my lucky day.”

I shouldn’t be amused, but once again, Wyatt made a joke, and now I’m laughing.

He finally puts me down next to a wrought iron patio table and lets me take my own seat under the umbrella Tillie Jean cranks up for us. After standing at the railing a minute, he waves at Tucker across the street, and then takes his own seat.

“Did Monica just set us up on a date?” I ask him. “I mean, not that she doesn’t believe we’re dating, but...like on a *real* date. Alone. Is that what this is supposed to be?”

“That depends. Who’s paying?”

I toss a sugar packet at him. “Very funny.”

He smiles at me, and *hello*, gooey insides. Wyatt Morgan is *not* supposed to turn me all mushy and sappy.

But he’s doing an excellent job of it.

I wave a hand at my hot face, then belatedly realize I can unzip my monkey costume. I pull my arms out, and breathe a sigh of relief when the light summer breeze touches my bare skin.

Wyatt swallows a smile and glances at the menu Tillie Jean left.

“Has Beck called you today?” I ask him, because Beck’s a safe topic.

Kind of.

He shakes his head.

“Does that make you nervous?” I ask.

He frowns slightly, like he’s puzzled, then shakes his head again. “I think he’s trying to set us up.”

“Look, we can be friends, and it’s nice of you to humor me with claiming to be my boyfriend this week, but we seriously *cannot* be anything more.”

He leans back in his chair and watches me while our server delivers water glasses and asks if we need another minute.

“Yes,” he says at the same time I ask for a basket of gold nuggets—aka fried pickles—and a banana pudding.

“Hush,” I say to his raised eyebrows. “Patrick’s parents make me nervous, okay?”

“Make it two, please,” he tells the server, and she scuttles away with a smile.

Like she, too, thinks we’re on a date, and she, too, thinks we’re cute.

Not good.

Because even if Wyatt was relationship material, I’m not.

Chapter Seventeen

Wyatt

When our server leaves, Ellie leans into the table. “Why would Beck be trying to set us up?” she half-whispers. She doesn’t look annoyed.

More like anxious.

“He’s worried about you,” I tell her.

“Did you...tell him?” she asks.

She doesn’t say *what*, but she doesn’t have to. I shake my head. “You?”

“It was none of his fucking business.” She huffs. “That didn’t come out right.”

I start to smile, but she chews on her bottom lip, which simultaneously sends blood flowing straight to my cock and puts my pulse on high alert, because the Ellie I’ve always known would’ve rolled her eyes and said she was fine.

“Can I tell you something?” she asks.

“Why me?”

“Because if you tell anyone else, I can deny it because of our history.”

That’s the Ellie I know, and for the first time in my life, I’m finding her huffiness utterly adorable. “Then absolutely.”

“I don’t know what I want to do with my life.”

“I recommend *not* marrying your ex-boyfriend.”

She kicks me under the table, and I feel marginally better about myself for that smart-ass comment just popping off my tongue.

“When I graduated high school, I told myself I’d have a master’s degree in five years, a husband in eight, and kids in

ten,” she tells me, which isn’t a surprise in the least. “And that I’d work my ass off to earn every promotion I got with my parents, because I *know* they’ll leave me the company one day, but I don’t want it just because I’m their daughter. I want to *earn* it. I’ve been saving up to buy them out five years before they think they want to retire because Beck’s right, they’re workaholics and they don’t realize how old they’re getting.”

“You should probably not use the word *old* when you approach them.” Dammit, I’m terrible at this. “I mean—”

She cuts me off with a flutter of her hand. “I have two years to practice. I’ll get this.”

“Of course you will.”

“See? That’s the thing. I can tell you what I want *professionally*. But I don’t have a clue what I want in my personal life anymore.”

“You don’t want a family anymore?”

“I don’t know if I...if I *can*.” The words come out like they’re physically painful, and the sudden understanding hits me like a sock to the gut that pushes it into my chest to suffocate my heart.

I never wanted to have kids, and then Tucker happened, and I can’t imagine my life without him. We talk every night during the school year—I got him a phone over Lydia’s objections, and because he’s seven, he doesn’t know yet he can push limits—and it’s the best part of every day.

Ellie’s always wanted kids. *Always*.

Life’s not fair.

I swallow hard. “The accident?”

“I haven’t been...regular...since. And my doctor...doesn’t know yet. She says I need more time to heal, but the best way to find out is to...try. And I don’t have anyone to try with, and I’m *not* in any position to do it all by myself, or even ready at this point, and I never wanted to do it by myself anyway. But I just—” She looks away and cuts herself off with a shake of her head.

“Does your family know?”

“Of course not. They’ve barely gotten over the trauma of the phone call. I’m not putting this on them.”

“Ellie. They’re your *family*.”

“And they can’t fix it.”

I rub a hand over my face, wincing when I accidentally hit my sore eye, and stifle a sigh. “I don’t know what all’s going on inside your head right now, but I know your mother, and I know she’s always been the best listener, with the best advice, and she might not be able to solve anything, but she can sure as hell make anyone feel better.”

“I didn’t say I feel *bad* about anything.”

“But you don’t know what you want out of your personal life,” I point out. Helpfully.

“Never mind. Forget I said anything.”

“You know your worth as a person is more than just whether you can have kids and walk without a limp.”

The edges of her pursed lips go white as she glares over the railing at the park.

“If anyone can beat this,” I say, “you can.”

She doesn’t answer.

“Fuck, Ellie, Beck said the doctors weren’t sure you’d ever walk again, and look at you, being a dumbass and pushing your limits and giving them the double bird while you dance on tables.”

I get a reluctant grin.

“And scientists have made huge advancements in anatomically correct, realistic looking robots, so there’s even a chance you’ll be able to at least *look* like you’re married before you’re fifty,” I add.

She spins in her chair and lunges for the ketchup, and before I know what’s happening, I’m staring down a squeeze bottle.

“That wasn’t very nice,” she says primly.

Her eyes are dancing behind the bruises, and *dammit*, she's pretty when she smiles.

And when she threatens me with a ketchup bottle.

"You can try it," I tell her, "but I'm a quick draw with the mustard."

Her gaze darts to the yellow squirt bottle on the table, then back to me. "You think so?"

"I could definitely sword fight you with it."

"If you want to get stabbed in the heart with a ketchup spout."

"You'd go for my heart?"

"I'm ruthless, Morgan. *Ruthless.*"

"But have you studied the art of war?"

"I've studied the art of not getting trampled by my dear brother, which is the same thing."

"Is not."

"Oh, please. It is—hey!"

I snag the mustard bottle and point it at her while she's distracted with arguing.

"I should squirt you," she says, but she's smiling so big she can't get it out without a laugh.

"Wouldn't be the first time."

"Oh, like yesterday was *my* fault?"

I want to kiss her.

I want to lean across this table and kiss her until neither one of us can breathe, and then I want to kiss her more.

Because she's strong. *So* fucking strong. She's what I *want* to be. What I try to be.

Unstoppable. Undaunted by a challenge. Fearless.

"All your fault," I say. "You set me up."

She's leaning in like she feels it too. Like she would kiss me too.

She's still pointing the ketchup bottle at me, but it's Ellie, so naturally.

"You are so full of baloney."

She's a Siren, beckoning me with her wide smile and daring insults. She's bold and driven and *fun*.

I miss fun.

"You like baloney," I remind her.

She wrinkles her nose.

"You did. When we were kids."

The ketchup bottle wavers. "How do you even remember that?"

"It was horrifying."

"You used to eat canned meat. You can't talk."

We're so close, the nozzles on our condiment bottles are touching. "And how do you remember that?"

"My mother tells the story every time your name comes up. *That poor Wyatt Morgan, we had to introduce him to real lunch meat. Think what would've happened to the boy's diet if he'd never moved in down the street.*"

"Lies. All lies." So very close. I could kiss her. I shouldn't, but I could.

Her gaze dips to my lips, a smile growing, and I'm nearly there when she suddenly jerks back and squirts ketchup across my shirt.

She gapes for a minute at me, suspended in shock. "Oh, shit," she gasps. "I didn't mean—"

I squeeze my bottle and get her with mustard across her chin and neck.

She squirts again, and I dive out of my chair to miss the red stream. "*That was an accident, you jerk!*" she shrieks.

"Likely story," I retort, aiming the mustard just to her right.

A bird squawks indignantly. “Motherfucker, kiss my ass.” There’s a flap of wings, and Long Beak Silver shoots into the air with a streak of yellow that wasn’t on his feathers before.

We both stare at the bird.

“Oh my god, you shot Long Beak Silver,” Ellie whispers in horror.

“All your fault,” I repeat, hastily stealing her ketchup bottle and moving all the condiments two tables away.

She’s wiping the mustard off her face when Davis appears at the top of the stairs. His man bun is freshly straightened, his beard thick enough to be hiding a squeeze bottle, and he’s shaking his head. “Foreplay?”

“Shut up,” Ellie says.

I grab a napkin and wipe the mustard she missed under her jaw.

“How’s the patient?” I ask him.

“Sitting pretty with Ellie at 802,700, but I could change that to my name.”

“You are a god,” Ellie tells him. “I could even kiss that flea-infested beard. Sit. Lunch is on Wyatt.”

“So generous,” Davis replies. “Where’s your kid?”

I point to the treasure dig. “With the human parrot.”

“Ah. Anyway, bill’s in the mail. I’m heading home.”

“But you just got here,” Ellie says while I add, “Kick up your feet and stay a while.”

“No can do. I’ve got a reactor to hack.” He turns his gaze to Ellie. “We’re even now. Don’t break it again.”

“Swear on the penalty of having to watch Beck do a photo shoot, I will not touch Frogger again for the rest of my life.”

“Kiss her for me,” he adds to me. He gives us both a salute and disappears down the stairs again.

“You are *not* kissing me,” Ellie whispers.

“Now it’s a challenge,” I tell her.

“I’m so freaking serious, Wyatt. We can be friends, but we *cannot* touch, kiss, get naked, take baths, or do any other thing that people who date do. We will literally die. The universe does *not* want us together.”

And on top of that, she has a life in Copper Valley, and my situation is complicated.

“We have to touch at the very least,” I point out, because I’m apparently a masochistic idiot. “I’m your boyfriend this week. Your wedding date. Remember?”

“Fine. Touching. But only in public, and only when *absolutely* necessary. And we should probably both wear protective gear to bed—which we’re going to *separately*—and take shifts sleeping in case the house burns down around us.”

I don’t bother trying to hide my grin. “Sure. We’ll set up a schedule.”

“Don’t mock me. I’m serious.”

“As a heart attack?” I prompt.

She swats at my hand. “*Do not tempt fate*,” she hisses.

“All right, all right. No touching, no kissing, no nothing unless absolutely necessary to sell your story.”

“Thank you.”

She smiles.

I smile.

Boundaries should be a good thing. I don’t have room in my life for falling for Ellie Ryder. Not with the added complications it would bring.

But agreeing to her new terms feels more fake than pretending to be her boyfriend for the wedding.

And I don’t want to think about what *that* means.

Chapter Eighteen

Ellie

Because a wedding at the Pirate Festival is a big deal—especially since Shipwreck is competing with the Unicorn Festival in the small town of Sarcasm not ten miles away—Monica and Jason are guest judges for the pirate costume, ship model, and food contests, and the entire wedding party is invited along to help offer opinions. So Wednesday night, Wyatt, Tucker, and I join Monica, Jason, and their families at the Deep Blue Retreat Center, where dozens of pirate ship models are on display in the semi-circular conference room, which has windows overlooking the soft, hazy mountain ridges on either side of Shipwreck.

“These are amazing,” Monica says as we walk along the curved row of tables holding the ships submitted by the school-age kids in Shipwreck. Some are made of Legos, some out of popsicle sticks, some out of clay, but they’re all adorable and really cool in which details the kids picked to highlight.

Almost all of them have a fake bird, and at least half have signs added about no cussing on deck.

My personal favorite is the one made out of recycled food containers, and I know Monica’s totally going to vote for that one too, since her day job is making art out of recycled materials.

“Dad, can I make a pirate ship?” Tucker asks.

“Sure. I’ve got some Legos for you at home.”

“No, Dad, to enter in the contest!”

“Next year, bud. They’re closed this year.”

“I’ll judge your ship, Tucker,” Monica tells him. “And I’d bet it’ll be awesome.”

They're best friends since hanging out digging for treasure this morning.

"How's your leg today?" Monica's mom asks me as we make our way to the next room, which has tables and tables loaded down with pirate-themed food.

"Better than a peg leg," I tell her.

"Dad! Dad, can I have an octopus?" Tucker asks.

Wyatt catches him by the shoulders. "Slow down, there, Captain Hollow Leg. See Miss Monica's scoring chart? She needs to decide what's pretty before we taste it, and then she has to rate how good it is."

"No need to worry, we have extras for the wee ones." Pop Rock ambles over, dressed today like his ancestor, Thorny Rock. "Right this way, right this way."

My stomach gives a timely growl, and Monica laughs. "Go on, Ellie. All of you. We'll be done soon."

"I've never eaten a hot dog in my life," Mrs. Dixon murmurs to her husband. "This is the most undignified festival I've ever seen."

"I think it's fun," Sloane declares. "They say fun cures constipation."

Patrick shoots her a look. She smiles back tightly.

And Wyatt and I share a look.

So there's trouble in Patrick-Sloane land.

Pop opens the door to the center's industrial kitchen, and oh my word, the food.

So much food.

Plates and platters of entrées, appetizers, sides, and—"Cookies!" Tucker exclaims.

It's the same food out on display—deviled egg ships with pirate flags, island pizza, quicksand dip, pirate eyeballs, hot dogs cut into wedges with the bottom half sliced to give it octopus legs, meat cannonballs—except there are paper pirate

plates and napkins and a huge bowl of pirate punch that's obviously been dipped into.

"Eat up, me hearties," Pop says. "That there be kiddie punch, because me blasted crew drank up all the rum last night."

"Are these meatballs made with chicken?" Mrs. Dixon demands, pointing to the pirate eyeballs.

Monica's mom smiles. She's dressed like a hippie pirate, with a scabbard tied over her flowery muumuu and a pirate hat on her short graying hair. "Yes, Caroline, they're chicken. I called ahead and checked because I knew you'd prefer it."

Wyatt and I both turn around before Mrs. Dixon looks at either of us. He dives for a plate to help Tucker make a few healthy choices before getting to dessert, and I take a minute to wipe the smile off my face as I pretend to decide between the quicksand dip and shovels—aka hummus and vegetables—and the grilled parrot—aka chicken wings.

Ultimately, both win.

We all load up our plates and carry them into the center's dining room, where other judges are eating and discussing the festival. Monica's mom takes the seat beside me at the rectangular table, and Wyatt and Tucker pile in across from us.

Jason's family sits at the table behind me, and I breathe a sigh of relief that I can make any face I want without fear of getting an earful of loudly murmured insults.

"Ellie, honey, how's work?" Monica's mom asks.

I tell her about a few of the projects I've been overseeing. My parents' environmental firm has contracts to retrofit several aging buildings around Copper Valley to improve energy efficiency. We're also working on initiatives with the local government to promote more recycling options around the city, and we've been branching farther and farther into other parts of Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

She asks Wyatt about his job, and he downplays the whole *flies jets with untested systems* thing, because god forbid the man toot his own horn. Tucker's too busy chowing down on

everything on his plate to talk. He has a smear of ketchup across his face, which makes me smile, both because Tucker gets cuter every day, and also because it makes me remember holding Wyatt at ketchup-point this morning.

But then I'm frowning, because I'm not supposed to let myself find Wyatt attractive, since it's bad for our health.

And I probably shouldn't get attached to his son either.

Monica's mom asks how we met and started dating, and we trip over each other telling contradictory stories that all make Tucker giggle, but we're saved by Monica dropping into the seat on the other side of her mother.

"Don't listen to them," Monica says. "Their relationship thrives on one-upping each other. The *real* story is that they've been in love since they were teenagers but were both too stubborn and scared to do anything about it until recently."

I open my mouth to argue, but I realize she's boxed us into a corner.

She grins at me.

And Wyatt leaps up, uses his chair as a vault to fly across the cafeteria table.

"Wha—" I start, turning to watch him leap across the table behind us too. "Oh, shit."

"Oh my god," Monica gasps.

Jason drops his plate upside down and rushes to the table too, where Wyatt's lifting Caroline Dixon off her chair and giving her the Heimlich.

Her eyes are huge, her face mottling, lips parted and bluing at the edges as she struggles to breathe.

Wyatt thrusts his fist under her breastbone once, twice, and on the third thrust, a piece of meatball flies out of her mouth and lands square on Patrick's plate. I don't know where Sloane or Mr. Dixon are, but they're not at the table.

It's just Mrs. Dixon and Patrick, who's now rushing toward his mother too.

She gasps and sags and makes a very unladylike expression that's too garbled to fully be called an expletive, but I'm pretty sure she just said *fuck*.

Wyatt helps her to sitting. "Okay now?" he asks.

She gulps hard, panting, and nods without looking at him.

"Back up, give her space," Patrick snaps. He shoves Wyatt out of the way and squats. "Are you okay? Is anything broken? Did he crack a rib?"

"He saved her life, you jackass," Jason snaps, approaching quickly from the other side of the long table.

"Quit fighting," she rasps out. "And hand me a drink."

Adrenaline belatedly makes my veins fizz. My legs wobble while Wyatt quietly steps away from the Dixons and returns the long way to our table.

"My dad's a hero," Tucker whispers.

"You're damn right," Monica says softly, her voice thick too.

Her mother's fanning her face, eyes bright like she's fighting back tears. "Lordy goodness," she murmurs. "That was scary as all dickens."

Tucker's eyes are huge, borderline scared, and I reach across the table to squeeze his little hand. "Hey. It's okay."

"Did she die?"

"No, sweetie. She's okay."

He glances at his plate, full of hot dog octopi and big chunks of fruit and cookies. Then back at all the grown-ups fussing and panicking belatedly at the next table.

"Just chew it good," I tell him.

He nods and gives me a brave smile, and I suddenly don't know how I could do it.

How do you protect someone you love so much from ever getting hurt? Or let them hurt when they have to?

How do you survive it?

My respect for Wyatt is growing by the second.

Parenthood isn't for the weak.

Monica heads to help Jason, and her mom sinks back to her seat, but I watch Wyatt casually walk past two families at the end of the rows of tables, all gaping at him like he's the hero Tucker knows him to be, while he keeps his head down, hands in his pockets.

He doesn't look up until he's back in his seat next to Tucker, and then, his focus is all on his son. "Ah-ah, I saw that. Fruit swords before treasure cookies."

Tucker grins, his fear fading with Wyatt beside him again. "Good job, Dad."

I could probably explain what I do next, but I don't want to.

Let's just say it ends with me bending across the table, grabbing Wyatt by the cheeks, and planting a kiss worthy of a hero on his lips.

And there might've been some belated applause.

For him being a hero, I mean.

Not for me kissing him.

Because that would be ridiculous.

And dangerous.

But two hours later, I'm grateful to be safe and sound back in Beck's house. No deer or foxes or wolves darted in front of my car, and clearly they didn't get Wyatt either, since he pulls up right behind me.

Neither of us has said another word about Mrs. Dixon choking.

Or about me kissing the stuffing out of him.

And I'm not planning on mentioning it.

Especially the kissing part.

Until I walk through the basement door from the garage and realize there's a huge water stain over the bar. "What—" I start, and then I know.

“The dishwasher,” Wyatt and I say in unison.

“I started it before we left.” He scrubs a hand over his face.
“Davis probably didn’t notice.”

I just gape at him and continue to point at the ceiling.

“I know, I know,” he sighs. “I’ll go get towels.”

I should argue that I’ll clean it up. That this is my fault for kissing him. But I know he’ll insist on helping, and then we’ll be within *looking* distance of each other, and I’m really, really starting to be convinced that we probably shouldn’t ever even live in the same town. “I’m going to bed. And I’m locking the door,” I inform him.

He smirks. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Dad, can I watch baseball?” Tucker asks through a yawn.

I don’t wait to hear his answer, because I’m already starting to get attached to *both* of them.

The universe is being a real dick.

Or maybe I need to quit looking for what’s *easy*—like Wyatt just landing in my lap this week—and actually figure out what I want to do about getting my life back on track.

He was right this morning.

The doctors *didn’t* know if they’d be able to repair my hip and leg enough for me to ever walk again.

But here I am. Limping my stiff self up the stairs.

I *am* going to be physically fine again.

It’s time to figure out what the rest of me needs.

Chapter Nineteen

Wyatt

The things I do for my friends.

When Beck asked me to irritate Ellie, I had a vague idea what I was in for. A prickly porcupine sniping at me? Yep, because I knew just how to poke it. Glares hot enough to melt iron? Wouldn't have her any other way.

That uncomfortable feeling in my dick every time I thought of her naked?

Can't say I haven't been dealing with that anyway these past six months, when I wasn't letting the guilt seep in.

Getting my toes done with Tucker, Ellie, Monica, Jason, the Blond Caveman, Sloane, and the mothers of the happy couple? At the Yo Ho Ho Spa?

Didn't even cross my mind.

But here I am, in a fancy-ass massage chair with one foot soaking in a tub of flowery-scented water while a woman I've never met buffs, slathers, rubs, and does all kinds of weird shit to the other.

Tucker erupts in giggles every time his pedicurist tries to touch his feet, so she's given up and is letting him suck on a pirate lollipop and just soak his toes in the bubbly spa water.

"Smile, honey," Ellie says from her seat on the other side, holding up her phone to get a selfie of the three of us.

I glare at her.

She smiles bigger.

Tucker laughs.

"Beck gets this done all the time," she tells me.

“He also parades around in his skivvies. Are you texting this to him? I will...” I wiggle my brows at her, a clear threat to kiss her, or touch her, or cause some other disaster to befall us “...if you text that picture to *anyone*. Or post it on social media. Or do anything other than delete it.”

Her brows twitch like her face is battling between scowling at me and giving me the *I dare you* look.

“It takes a man very secure in his masculinity to get his toes done,” Monica calls to me from her seat in a massage chair on the opposite wall.

The Blond Caveman has his nose tucked inside a financial magazine and ignores her.

Jason grins at me. “She’s right, you know.”

“Oh, hush. Wyatt has no issues with his masculinity,” Ellie says. “You should’ve seen him mopping the floor of the kitchen last night.”

“*You* should’ve seen *us* mopping the floor,” I tell her.

“I was a big helper,” Tucker says proudly. “I mopped *buckets* full.”

Monica sends a quizzical glance at Ellie.

“Dishwasher flooded,” Ellie explains.

“Well, thank god it was Beck’s house,” Monica says.

I choke on a laugh, because that, at least, is the truth. I texted him a picture and told him Ellie and I got carried away doing the dishes.

He replied with a picture of his middle finger, and his assistant pinged me two minutes later to say that she’d scheduled a drywaller to come in and repair the water damage next week, and to enjoy washing dishes by hand in the meantime since the earliest she could get a new dishwasher was five to seven days.

This morning, I woke up to a message from him that he couldn’t ask for a better boyfriend for his sister, except maybe Levi, because his ass is nicer than mine.

I haven't told Ellie, because we'll sort that all out after the wedding's over, when she doesn't need me to play this role anymore.

I hope I don't lose a friend over this.

But if I do, I probably didn't deserve him as long as I had him anyway.

"Want me to paint pirate flags on your toes?" my foot lady asks.

Ellie dissolves in a fit of laughter.

"You don't have to get nail polish," Monica tells me with a grin.

"Yeah," I tell the lady. "Pirate flags."

Ellie laughs so hard she has a coughing fit that ends with her gasping and rubbing her leg, but she's still smiling, so there's that. Her foot lady has to stop. Jason gives me a thumbs up. The Blond Caveman rolls his eyes behind his magazine, which he's not using very effectively to block his face.

When we're done, I have pirate flags on my two big toes, and I look like an idiot, but I don't really care. Tucker thinks it's awesome and begs me to take a picture to send to his mom.

I oblige while I'm waiting to pay, and when I get to the front, the cashier smiles. "Mother of the groom took care of you, your son, and your girlfriend. Go show off those pretty toes, and come back and see us again!"

Outside, Mrs. Dixon is speed-walking toward the hotel at the end of the street. Jason and Monica and her mom are talking to Ellie and Sloane while the Blond Caveman makes a phone call.

I stop next to Jason. "Your mom didn't have to pay for us."

"It's the only way she'll say thank you." He claps me on the shoulder. "Don't mention it or she'll get bitchy again. We're heading to the food trucks on the square. You guys coming?"

"Wyatt promised Tucker another trip to the water park," Ellie answers for us. "They'll catch up with us later."

“You want to go with them?” Monica asks. “We’re just going to be walking and stuffing our faces and badgering Patrick into wearing a pirate hat and an eye patch. You’ll have more fun at the water park.”

“I didn’t bring my swimsuit.”

“I have six.”

“Monica.”

“Oh, hush. Don’t give me that *I’m here for the bride* stuff. When’s the last time you went down a water slide?”

“I can’t—”

“And the lazy river? You *love* the lazy river.”

“Babe, *you* love the lazy river,” Jason says. “Let’s all go.”

“Yeah!” Tucker cheers.

Ellie tries to send Monica another meaningful look, but it’s completely lost on the bride.

“Nobody cares about your scar,” I tell her quietly.

“*I* care,” she mutters.

I study her a minute.

She’s not meeting my gaze, and her cheeks are going pink.

She’s soaked in the tub at least three nights this week, so I know the water itself isn’t the issue.

It’s the swimsuit.

“Give me thirty minutes,” I tell her.

Her brows furrow. “For what?”

“A solution. C’mon, Tucker. We’ve got a job to do.”

“You’re not bailing on us, are you?” Monica asks.

“Nope. Meet you there. Make sure Ellie’s with you.”

I don’t know if my idea’s even possible, but it’s worth a try. And if there’s anywhere that can pull it off, it’s Shipwreck.

Chapter Twenty

Ellie

I am in severe like with Wyatt Morgan.

The man found me scuba shorts.

He activated Shipwreck's gossip network and found me scuba shorts that cover me down to the knee, completely hiding my scars.

We spend the entire afternoon at the water park, destroying our pedicures, Jason and Wyatt trying to out-cannonball each other, floating around on the lazy river, helping Tucker learn to swim, laughing as he climbs through the two-story pirate adventure sky fort with its water cannons and dodges the water that dumps out of the giant bucket on top, and soaking up the gorgeous afternoon sunshine.

I bypass the water slides, but Tucker and Wyatt go down them a million times.

Monica declares it naptime around five and gives me a gentle push toward Wyatt's car. "Go home. Jason and I are having a pizza-in-the-room night and leaving the families to fend for themselves. We'll see you for the rehearsal in the morning, okay?"

"Not The Grog?" We missed it last night with all the worry over Mrs. Dixon almost choking.

"Oh my god, Ellie, I am so tired," she says with a laugh. "Besides, I think Jason's feeling neglected."

"If you need anything—"

"My mom's here. And you know all I have to do is lift a finger and any of the Rock family will be right on it."

"C'mon, Ellie," Wyatt says. He waves at somebody on a bike, and the rider slows as he approaches, a double-handled plastic

bag dangling from the handlebars. “Train’s leaving in three minutes.”

“Mr. Morgan?” the kid on the bike says.

“Yep.” Wyatt hands him a couple twenties, and the kid hands over the bag.

“Is that fried chicken?” I ask, sniffing the air.

“And potato salad, french fries, banana pudding, and a funnel cake. Ordered it all from the food trucks.”

“Jason, I’m sorry, I’m marrying Wyatt tomorrow instead,” Monica announces.

“Shut your mouth, he’s mine,” I retort without thinking.

She grins at me, and I feel my cheeks heat up.

And not because of all the sun this afternoon.

“Girls are weird,” Tucker announces. “I’m never getting married. Except maybe to my sister if I ever have one. Can I have a sister?”

For once, Wyatt seems to be speechless.

“You should ask Santa for a sister,” I tell Tucker while I herd him into Wyatt’s SUV. “Sisters are the best. I know, because I am one.”

“Sisters are annoying,” Wyatt corrects.

“He’s just jealous because he never had one,” I whisper to Tucker, who giggles while he pulls his seat belt over his booster seat. “Sisters are totally awesome.”

Tucker loops his arms around my neck and hugs me tight, and surprised, I hug him back.

“You’re awesome, Miss Captain Ellie.”

“Not as awesome as you.”

We make it back to Beck’s house without incident and dive into the food like we haven’t eaten in a week. Tucker tries two bites of banana pudding and declares it gross.

“Then I guess it’s my paternal duty to eat yours,” Wyatt announces.

“Hello, we *share* it,” I argue.

“He’s not your kid.”

“Tucker, may I please have half of your banana pudding?”

He looks between us. “It’s nice to share, Dad,” he finally whispers.

“It really is, Dad,” I agree.

“Bath time for you,” Wyatt tells him without answering either of us.

But he leaves half a carton of banana pudding in the fridge when he takes Tucker upstairs.

I clean up the dinner mess, realizing with a start that it’s been days since I cleaned up in here, yet everything’s nearly spotless anyway. Except for our small dinner mess, of course.

Because Wyatt takes care of things.

I’ve sometimes wondered why Beck stayed close with him. Once the guys started their boy band adventure, an entire new world opened up. Beck, Levi, Tripp, Cash, and Davis could’ve gone anywhere, done anything. They each lost a few friends along the way—money changes things—but Wyatt was the one constant outside immediate family.

And I think I get it now.

Just like we called Davis to fix Frogger, any one of the guys from the neighborhood could call Wyatt, and he’d have their backs. He’d do anything they needed done.

Including keeping an eye on a sister they’re worried about.

Once the dishes are put away, I fix myself a cup of tea—a new habit since the accident—snag my doodle pad from the bedroom and carry it out to the living room. Tucker’s crying upstairs. Wyatt’s talking to him softly, steady, calm, his deep voice reassuring me too even though I don’t realize I need reassurance, nor do I have any idea what he’s saying.

It's just the calming cadence of his voice.

Nothing could be that calm and soothing if there was actually a problem. Poor kid's probably exhausted from too much fun.

I glance at email on my phone, decide there's nothing that can't wait until next week, and toss it aside to open my doodle pad instead.

I doodled all the time when I was a kid, but sports, clubs, and other extra-curriculars didn't leave me much time for it in high school or college. It wasn't until I was forced to take two months off work for recovery this winter that I picked it up again.

And it turns out, I realize as I flip through the pages, I had a lot of anger to work through this year.

Dick and the Nuts was supposed to be fun, about a schlong and a pair of peanuts—no, not testicles, actual peanuts, like the legumes—who set out to take over the world despite one of the nuts being on crutches.

Dick was supposed to be a funny, lighthearted evil genius.

He's actually everything I hated about Patrick by the time he broke up with me. Addicted to his job first, his phone second, his bloodline third, and everything else was just gravy. I met Patrick at a fundraiser for Jason's company—clean water and green energy pretty much go hand-in-hand, and my parents like to send corporate dollars from Ryder Consulting toward various nonprofits every year—and I thought we shared a lot of the same passions in life.

I don't know if I looked at him through rose-colored glasses that first year, or if he slowly changed away from the man I thought he was when we met, but by the time this past Christmas rolled around, I was more angry that he'd kept me from meeting my goal of being married and pregnant than that he hadn't proposed.

I should've realized that meant I wanted the wrong thing out of our relationship, but it took a car accident and, honestly, this week for me to fully connect the dots.

There's more to life than marking off checkboxes.

I'm smiling to myself over the Nuts—I named them Joe and Bob, because I'm creative like that—and their plan to put Dick in a trance so they can run the controls on the spaceship to blast the earth with a laser beam that'll give everyone the giggles so they can rob all the chocolate shops they want without anyone raising an alarm, when Wyatt steps down the stairs.

He disappears into the basement, and when he returns with an armful of sheets and the comforter for Beck's bed, I start to get up.

"Move one muscle, and I'm calling Beck and telling him we're getting married."

"That would show the Dixons," I reply. "And you know that's the fastest way to get Beck here. He loves weddings. And me. And sometimes you."

Wyatt grins.

I grin back.

He's not winning this round.

"I'll swap out your bubble bath for itch powder," he offers.

"You would not."

"Wanna bet?"

"You don't *have* itch powder."

"Last time I stayed here, your brother salted my sheets and put a life-size taxidermied bear in my bedroom to scare the shit out of me. I owe him. So yeah, I brought itch powder."

And I'm suddenly quite certain I don't want the man making the bed I'm going to sleep in tonight.

I start to move again. "*Sit,*" he orders.

Damn, that military order voice is hot.

Hot hot.

And that's why I sit.

Because if I follow Wyatt into the bedroom, the mattress won't be the only thing undressed.

“Thank you,” I say, conceding with a regal nod. “Also, if you itch powder my sheets, I’ll itch powder your underwear.”

He just grins again.

Which is also freaking hot.

I go back to flipping through my doodles. After a few minutes, Wyatt appears again. He stops in the kitchen before joining me with a water bottle in one hand and the rest of the banana pudding in the other. He claims the recliner angled to give him a view of both me and the scenery of the town below—or it would, if dusk wasn’t falling—and props up the footrest. “Trade you,” he says, lifting the banana pudding and pointing to my doodle pad.

I hesitate only a moment before I lean over, ignoring the twinge in my hip and thigh, to snatch the pudding and toss him the notebook.

“I was kidding, Ellie.” He holds out my book for me to take it back, but I shrug.

“I was going to show you anyway.”

“Why?”

“To scare you into your senses so you’ll quit trying to kiss me.”

He smirks and settles deeper into the recliner as he flips the cover open. “Do I want to know where you got the inspiration for Dick?”

“You don’t recognize him?”

Dick’s a short, squat, not very pretty penis. He looks nothing like Wyatt’s package.

“Can’t say I do,” he replies easily, completely bypassing the opportunity to ask if I’ve gotten an eyeful of my brother without the sock the photographers make him put in his briefs.

It’s an old joke. Possibly we’ve worn it out.

Also, possibly I don’t want to think about my brother in his underwear. It’s been nice having the cardboard cutout of him in the corner turned around.

Wyatt's perceptive gray eyes skim the page, and he snickers.

"Not a word on my talent," I warn him around a mouthful of heaven. I mean, banana pudding. My mom makes awesome banana pudding, but there's something about the meringue on Crusty Nut's banana pudding that puts it head and shoulders above.

"I was laughing at the Nuts," he tells me.

"Oh. Then maybe you do have good taste after all."

Sparring with him is so easy. We've done it a million times. It's habit. But it's also comfortable, which isn't something I ever noticed before.

Maybe it's never been comfortable before.

Or maybe we've both grown up.

Considering how long we've each been legal adults, it's probably past time.

"Why'd you date the Blond Caveman so long?" he asks as he flips another page.

"Ambition made me blind. Why didn't you quit the military?"

His smile fades into a resigned scowl. "Paperwork and networking failure."

"Networking?"

"Need a job to pay child support. Don't have enough experience yet in flight test to be valuable to anyone who'd hire me in Copper Valley. And my request for a waiver to get out of my service commitment got lost on some colonel's desk. Found it last week, got denied."

"Beck always said you'd be career military. That it suits you."

"Shit happens. Rather have Tucker than a long career though." He skims the next page and cackles.

Wyatt Morgan.

Cackling.

Because he thinks my doodles are funny.

My nipples go tight and a familiar heat pools between my legs.

“Broccolisauruses? Eating underwear models?”

“Beck might’ve pissed me off that day.”

“What’d he do, tell you that you couldn’t do something?”

“He asked me to be his date to some gala in Paris.”

He glances at me in surprise. “That pissed you off?”

“You want to know the last time Beck asked me to be his date to *anything*?”

“Ah.”

I think he’s done, that he gets it, but instead, he shuts the book and looks at me. “Ever consider he finally realized what he almost lost?”

I open my mouth, but I suddenly don’t know if he’s talking about Beck, and the possibility of losing a sister, or himself, and the possibility that he might’ve lost an opportunity.

With me.

Which is crazy, because I have *always* irritated the *shit* out of him.

I used to run marathons. I knew I was pretty—I’m Beck Ryder’s sister, for god’s sake, last year’s *People’s Sexiest Man Alive*, and we’re *clearly* related—and athletic and smart. I didn’t have insecurity issues, and so when Wyatt was willing to do the naked tango with me, I assumed it was because he wanted the same thing I did.

A little human companionship and confirmation that I was still attractive to *somebody*.

And possibly he was a little tipsy.

And angry. And hurt. And lonely.

Just like I was, except I wasn’t tipsy.

And maybe, just maybe, seeing him lonely and hurt and angry, made me realize what *I’d* been missing all those years between hating him, then crushing on him, then hating him.

That I wouldn't have given him a second thought if there wasn't something *there*.

"I considered a lot of things after the accident," I tell him. "But it's complicated. I don't want pity dates. But I don't want to take anything for granted either, so I understand other people not wanting to take people for granted. But I also wanted everything to go back the way it was before. Except it can't."

"Embrace what's better, Ellie. Change what you can change. Fix what you can fix. Accept the rest."

"You mean like accepting that the house will burn down if we sleep together again?" I whisper.

He gives an exasperated laugh. "Sure."

"Okay. Good. Glad we agree on that."

"You gonna eat that?" he asks with a nod to my banana pudding.

Our banana pudding.

I lean over and hand it to him.

"Did you spit in it?" he asks suspiciously.

And I laugh.

Because we're a little messed up, but for the first time in my life, I'm really glad to have Wyatt as a friend.

Chapter Twenty-One

Wyatt

After a long and restless night, Tucker and I agree he needs to learn to play air hockey more than he needs to go dig for more pirate treasure or hunt for the peg leg that apparently still hasn't been found in town. Ellie was up early to take the box of parrots into town and get ready for the wedding, but she hung around long enough to have breakfast with us and draw Tucker a parrot for him to color later.

We're scrambling away for the puck mid-morning when I hear the door open and someone hit the security keypad.

"Stay here, bud," I tell Tucker.

I creep softly up the stairs, half expecting to see Beck, and instead, I get a glimpse of an older couple.

My eyes sting and my chest swells, because these two people are the closest thing I have to parents in the entire world.

"Morning," I say.

Mrs. Ryder turns, her bright blue eyes land on me, and her face lights up in a familiar smile that her children share. "Wyatt! We thought you'd be down in Shipwreck with Ellie."

She smothers me in a hug, which is impressive, considering I have over half a foot and at least thirty pounds on her. Mr. Ryder squeezes my shoulder. "Hanging in there?" he asks.

"Always. You, sir?"

"Can't complain."

"Where's that little boy of yours?" Mrs. Ryder demands. "I have presents."

"You didn't have to—"

"Hush. This is what grandmas do."

I know a thing or two about arguing with the Ryders—all of them—and I know it's usually pointless.

Sometimes fun, but always pointless. “Yes, ma'am.”

I help Mr. Ryder with the luggage while Mrs. Ryder heads downstairs to hug Tucker. After they're settled, Tucker talks them into heading to town with us for pizza.

Doesn't take much. Just him looking at Mrs. Ryder and asking if she's hungry for pizza too.

Tucker chews her ear off about the pirate festival on the drive down the mountain. I smile as I listen to them chattering back and forth, but worry's creeping in.

Tomorrow, we leave to drive home to Georgia. Monday, I go back to work. He starts at a summer camp that my boss swears his wife loves for their kids.

And we won't have Ellie with us.

For the majority of my life, that was just fine with me. She was irritating, obnoxious, and a general pain in the ass.

Now?

Either I need to see my doctor for an issue with sudden flaming indigestion, or I'm going to miss her.

Because maybe the problem was never that she was irritating, obnoxious, and a general pain in the ass.

Maybe the problem was that she was everything I wanted to be, and then everything I wanted, and nothing I thought I could have, or deserved to have.

Working hard to make something of myself in a career and being the best father I know how to be isn't always enough to erase the seeds planted in my subconscious in my early childhood that I was nothing but a pest.

“Work going well?” Mr. Ryder asks.

I tell him about my current project, an upgrade to radar sensors on the newest fighter platform, and he tells me about a windmill farm project their company's been doing for a cloud-

based server complex south of the city, closer to where Davis lives.

“Still looking to get out in a year?” he asks me.

“I’m ready.” I’d stay in until retirement if I could—I like knowing my job supports my country and ultimately helps protect my friends and neighbors, and the work is challenging and rewarding—but the odds of being able to get stationed and stay stationed at the base just north of Copper Valley, and therefore close to Tucker, are slim. “Just waiting for the clock to tick down or a waiver to come through.”

“You want a job, you know where to find us.”

“Appreciate that, sir.”

Not that I plan on taking him up on any offer without knowing I’ve earned it. It was hard enough letting them pay for me to take my SATs so I could apply to college.

Which is exactly the sort of thing that family does, and one more reason I need to not fuck around with Ellie.

Her family means too much to me.

Hell, they’re why I applied for an ROTC scholarship the minute I hit campus.

So they wouldn’t feel like they needed to help me through.

That was before Beck and the guys hit it big with Bro Code, and before Ellie landed herself a full ride.

And if I mess things up with her, I’ll never again hear the chatter in the back of the car with the way they’ve adopted Tucker as a surrogate grandkid. I won’t feel like I still deserve to be treated like one of their own.

If Ellie and I were both in this for the long haul, that would be one thing.

But she doesn’t even want to touch me for fear the world will crumple around her.

So I’ll keep my feelings to myself, and Tucker will keep his second set of grandparents, and life will go on, just as it always has.

Except different.

We park once again in the field at the far end of Shipwreck and head down Blackbeard Avenue into town. Mr. Ryder scans the street. “Where do you suppose Ellie is?”

Spotting the bridal party isn’t easy this morning—no bright parrot costumes for the wedding day, apparently—but then I notice the English colonists.

And the woman who looks like Kiera Knightly in that pirate movie.

“Ah, there, I’d guess,” I tell Mr. Ryder. I don’t see Ellie, but Monica, Jason, Sloane, and the parents are in full colonial regalia. It appears Pop Rock is spending the day playing the role of a governor with the powdered white wig.

This town.

I wave to Monica down the block when she glances our way, and her face lights up as she waves back.

“Oh my heavens,” Mrs. Ryder murmurs with a smile. “I can only imagine what her bridal gown will look like.”

We meet up with them two shops down from Anchovies. Ellie’s still not with them.

Neither is the Blond Caveman.

A slither of unease works its way down my spine. Not because I’m worried Ellie still has feelings for him, but because I don’t trust him.

Especially when Mrs. Dixon’s face lights up at the sight of the Ryders. “Michelle! Christopher! How lovely to see you both again.”

She leans in for cheek kisses with Mrs. Ryder and to embrace Mr. Ryder.

Behind her back, Monica rolls her eyes so hard her tongue sticks out, and I realize maybe I’m not so bad.

All I want is a little love and acceptance.

These people, though—they’re in it for the social status.

“How *is* the environmental business?” Mr. Dixon asks, engaged for the first time all week.

Mr. Ryder shakes his hand. “Good, good.”

“You know our bank will be *more* than happy to help you out anytime you want to get out of that old neighborhood you’re still living in. Upstanding family like yours should be in a house fitting your station.”

Jason sighs.

Even Sloane seems surprised.

“We could never leave our home, but thank you,” Mrs. Ryder informs them. She easily executes a side-step to hug Monica. “You look beautiful, sweetie. We’re so happy for you two.”

“I’m so glad you came,” she replies.

When Mrs. Ryder turns to Monica’s mom, I lean closer to the bride. “Where’s Ellie?”

She points to a bench at the edge of the park, then frowns. “I think we pushed her too hard this week. She’s limping. I told her to stay there, but—”

“Is she okay?” I ask at the same time Mr. Ryder asks, “But where is she *now*?”

“Miss Ellie kissed my daddy,” Tucker announces.

Festival-goers keep passing by, a band of pirates leaps out into the middle of the street for an impromptu swordfight, and complete silence descends inside our group while the Ryders turn to look at me.

It’s not that I didn’t know this was coming.

Ever since the moment Ellie informed me that I owed her for ruining her wedding date, I’ve known I’d have to face her parents.

Her brother.

Our friends.

Explain it to Tucker.

“Oh, Wyatt!” Suddenly, Mrs. Ryder is squeezing me tight.
“Oh, this is wonderful.”

Mr. Ryder’s grinning at me, and I’ve never felt so loved while hating myself quite so much at the same time, because soon enough we’ll have to stage a break-up, and I don’t know the next time I’ll be able to look any of them in the eye.

“We should go find her,” I say gruffly.

“Absolutely,” Mr. Ryder agrees. He pulls his phone out and dials, and we all listen while the ringing rolls to voicemail.

Ellie’s safe here. She can take care of herself, and the locals know her well enough that if she gets into trouble, or gets hurt, they’ll be right at her side. She probably had to find a bathroom.

Or she went for banana pudding.

But the Blond Caveman is missing too.

I scan the square with its upturned dirt and more festival-goers digging for gold, the benches around it, up and down the sidewalk, but I don’t spot her.

“Tucker, you want to hang with me?” Monica asks him, like she knows I’m about to head off to find her.

“Is that your real hair?” Tucker asks.

She nods and squats in her huge colonial princess dress, tilting her ringlets at him. “It sure is. Want to touch it?”

I don’t want to leave him here. I have no idea what the Ryders will think of me when this week’s over, and so I’m clinging to the one thing I know I’ll still have.

But he drops my hand to inspect Monica’s hair, and somebody needs to find Ellie.

Mr. Ryder inclines his head back toward the Crusty Nut. I nod and take off into the dug-up square and toward the bench Ellie was last seen sitting on.

I’ve barely passed the back edge of the building to my left when I hear voices.

Familiar voices.

“Why are you doing this to me?” the Blond Caveman demands.

“It’s not *about* you, Patrick. This week is about Jason. And Monica.”

“I meant shoving that asshole in my face.”

There’s a beat of silence before Ellie asks, “What are you talking about?”

“You, all over that jerkoff friend of your brother’s.”

I turn the corner and spot them. He’s blocking her against a dumpster, and I’m about to say something when Ellie speaks.

“Your insecurities and delusions are not my problem. You don’t get an opinion here. Now *move*.”

“You’re not listening to me—”

“And I don’t have to. *We’re done*. We’ve been done. Your opinion has no bearing on my life. Shut up and *let me go*.”

“I’d do what she’s asking,” I interrupt. “She has a mean right hook.”

I don’t add *so do I*, because I don’t actually make a habit of punching people, so all I have are gut instincts and the overwhelming desire to protect and defend what’s mine.

And by *mine*, I mean my *family*.

And no, I don’t want to talk about the way my heart is pounding or my muscles tensing to leap, because I will move heaven and earth and travel to the depths of hell to make sure Ellie’s safe—physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, all of it.

Safe. Sound. In one piece.

Fuck.

Fuck.

I’m in love with Ellie Ryder.

The Blond Caveman has four inches on me, but I will flatten him if I have to. And based on the curled-lip scowl under his powdered wig and the way he's flexing his arms under his vintage navy uniform, he's thinking he'd be happy to take me out too.

His lips part. "Shut your—"

"Your parents are here," I tell Ellie.

She smiles, and *dammit*, she's pretty.

It's not the colonial dress or the funny wig with long black curls either. It's the way she doesn't hold back on letting the smile spread cheek-to-cheek. The warmth in her eyes. The stubborn set of her shoulders.

Pretty?

No.

She's *everything*. The whole package.

"They must be disappointed," the Blond Caveman sneers.

"That I'm happier without you? Not really." She leans toward me, and I wrap an arm around her shoulders while she slips away from him. Her pulse is fluttering fast in her neck, and I want to lay him out just on principle.

And then I want to carry her to the nearest dark corner and inspect every inch of her to make sure she's okay.

And then I want to kiss her. *Fuck*, I want to kiss her.

"Let's go," she says to me.

"Your girlfriend know what you're doing?" I ask the Blond Caveman while I twist so I'm between him and Ellie.

"She knows I defend helpless women, and she thinks it's hot."

Ellie chokes on air. I'm suddenly unable to stop a snicker.

"What the hell are you laughing at?" he snarls.

"We better go quick," I mutter to Ellie. "You okay?"

She leans on me while we hasten back into view of the street, and it's going to hurt like hell when I can't touch her anymore.

“I was such an idiot,” she sighs.

She’s limping more than usual. Not good.

“How heavy is your wig?” I ask her. “Is that what I smell?”

“You’re probably smelling your own armpits,” she says, but she looks up at me and smiles with none of the old *you irritate the shit out of me* that’s always been there.

No, this is *I love flirting with you*.

It’s messed-up flirting, but that’s what it is, isn’t it?

Flirting.

That’s what it’s always been.

We were just too stubborn to see it.

Or to admit it.

And no small part of me wishes we could go back to that.

Because leaving Ellie Ryder?

This is going to suck.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ellie

By the time we're doing our last-minute hair and makeup fixes in a small tent just down the hill from the gazebo at the far end of Blackbeard Avenue where Monica and Jason will take their vows, I can't decide whose mother is happier—Monica's, or mine.

Definitely *not* Mrs. Dixon. She's getting an artsy-fartsy daughter-in-law from her black sheep son while her favorite son's girlfriend has been giving him the cold shoulder all afternoon.

But mine?

She's in utter heaven over me and Wyatt dating.

Next week just might kill her.

This isn't good.

"Jeez, Mom, maybe you should've adopted Wyatt and kicked me and Beck to the curb," I tell her while she fusses over my short curls. Any minute now, Pop's going to call us up for the wedding.

She swats my arm. "You hush. You know I love all my children equally. Wyatt just needed me more than you, Beck, and the rest of the boys and girls."

I'd be offended, but we were raised by a village. I was just as likely to get grounded by Mrs. Rivers as I was by my own mom. "He's lucky he had you," I tell her, and crap.

Now she's crying, and it's going to make me cry too, but not out of happiness and joy.

No, my tears will be all guilt.

And possibly grief, because Wyatt isn't an asshole, and he isn't a thorn in my side, and I don't know what to call him, but

the *fake* part of *fake boyfriend* feels more wrong than the *boyfriend* part.

Which is impossible, because we really would die, and Tucker deserves to grow up with a good father.

“Stop, stop,” Monica says, bustling over to hug her. She’s changed from her colonial gown to a pirate wedding gown, an eclectic mix of formal and buccaneer, with pirate boots under her lacy hoop skirt and a leather corset embroidered with skulls and crossbones for her bodice. She has a bandana over her ringlets and giant hoop earrings dangle to her shoulders. “No crying until you hear the vows. They’re beautiful. Ellie, how’s your leg? Do you want me to send one of the Rock boys for a chair?”

“I’m *fine*,” I tell her.

Okay, maybe I’m not *quite* as fine as that, but I can make it through the wedding before I need to lay myself up for a week to recover.

Alone.

Probably here in Shipwreck, because even without a dishwasher, Beck’s house is still super comfortable, and it has internet, and I can borrow the laptop Mom brought to telework for a week.

The house will be weirdly empty, but it’ll be nice to be alone again.

All alone.

With no one to talk to.

No one to poke. No one to share banana pudding with.

No little voices shrieking with laughter over bubbles or drawings of pirates or parrots, or asking to share a donut.

No one to kiss and cause the house to collapse around us with.

Dammit, I can’t stop this weepy-eyed stuff.

“Monica, honey, it’s time,” her mom whispers.

Monica squeals, and her eyes go shiny too. “Oh my god, I’m marrying Jason,” she whispers.

I squeeze her in a hug. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Go on, go walk the plank—I mean, walk the aisle so I can get hitched.”

My mom scurries to join Dad, Wyatt, and Tucker in a row of seats near the gazebo. The list of invited guests is small—a few friends and coworkers from Copper Valley, and a few aunts, uncles, and cousins on both sides—but the people of Shipwreck have turned out in force to watch.

And participate, though most of the guests and tourists who are also gathered beyond the reserved seating don’t know that yet.

Mr. Dixon escorts Mrs. Dixon down the plank—I mean, aisle. Then Grady Rock escorts Monica’s mom. And then it’s time for Patrick, fully costumed as a member of the English Royal Guard, to walk me down the aisle.

I tuck my hand into his elbow, but while his powdered wig amuses me, I keep as much distance as physically possible while smiling at Jason, who’s standing with Pop on the gazebo steps.

“We don’t have to be like this,” Patrick mutters.

I keep smiling. “There’s no *we*, and if you don’t shut up, I’m telling your girlfriend *you* dumped *me*, since I know she thinks it was the other way around.”

He blanches.

We reach the gazebo and I gladly drop his arm. Wyatt’s scowling. My dad doesn’t look very pleased either.

But then the pirate band—yes, the pirate band—strikes up “Here Comes the Bride,” and everyone rises as Monica emerges from the tent.

“Oh, god, she’s gorgeous,” Jason says hoarsely.

He’s utterly adorable in his first mate getup. *We all know who’s going to captain the ship of our life*, he told Monica when they

were discussing formal wedding wear. *I'm wearing the first mate outfit.*

Monica's mom is already crying. Mine's dabbing her eyes in the next row back.

I wonder what Wyatt's thinking about while he watches my best friend walk down the aisle.

His own wedding?

Or maybe Tripp's, which was utterly gorgeous and completely opposite of this small-town pirate affair, because when a former boy bander marries a Hollywood A-lister, you're damn right it's spectacular.

But he glances back at me, and I'm suddenly quite certain he's not thinking about weddings at all.

There's something raw and unguarded and beautiful in his gray eyes. Regret mixed with hope.

My belly dips to my toes, adding an extra shiver to my bones along the way.

I like Wyatt Morgan.

I like Wyatt Morgan.

He's loyal. He's protective. He's smart. He's brave.

He adores that perfect, sweet, happy little boy fidgeting next to him.

He's a survivor.

Wounded in his soul, but still *here*. A good friend to my brother. The son my mother would've added to her household in a heartbeat.

The man who pushed me to be better since he got his own footing in the neighborhood.

Jason kisses Monica's cheek as she joins him on the gazebo steps. "Now, now, save that for marriage, boy," Pop says, and everyone laughs.

I take her bouquet—a red rose, a black rose, and a purple rose, tied together with a Jolly Roger ribbon and stuck in a rum

bottle—and step back to let the wedding begin.

I might get a little teary-eyed too. The way Jason's just watching Monica, like he's the luckiest first mate to ever board a ship, like the only thing he needs in his life is her... Just *swoon*.

Thank you for finding me my missing puzzle piece, Monica told me once not long after I introduced them. But these two, I'm certain, would've found each other one way or another.

They were meant to be.

Wyatt's watching me. I can feel his gaze.

And it's not annoying, or haughty, or critical.

It's *hot*.

And not just *he wants to see me naked hot*. But *he feels it too hot*.

Monica and Jason say their vows. Monica's mom cries. My mom cries. I cry.

Tucker cries, because, "Dad, I don't like it when people cry."

Everyone laughs, and I wish I could hug Tucker the way Wyatt is now, just scooping him up and patting his back. "It's happy tears," I hear him murmur.

"I don't like it when you cry either," Jason tells Monica.

She wipes her eyes as she laughs. "It's joy leaking out my soul."

Joy.

They have joy.

I've always had plans. Calendars. Deadlines. Tasks. Life events to check off.

Maybe what I really need is *joy*.

Laughing with someone when the dishwasher leaks. When he accidentally sits on a squirt bottle of French dressing. When we knock heads in the middle of an orgasm.

I glance at Wyatt again.

Joy.

Oh my god.

He's my joy.

My laughter.

My strength.

My challenge.

My motivation.

My rock.

My joy.

His eyes are misty too, but he doesn't look away.

I suddenly don't care if I can never get pregnant or give birth.

I don't care if I never have a big wedding.

I don't care if nothing on the outside looks perfect.

I just don't want Wyatt to leave tomorrow.

"The rings!" Pop calls.

My mom gasps. Tucker leaps to his feet and points past the gazebo. Wyatt's eyes leave mine, and they go comically wide. He starts to his feet too.

My dad's jaw is flapping.

I turn to look, already smiling, because I know what's coming, except—

"*Goats?*"

Monica shoots me a look and laughs like I'm crazy, but then her eyes, too, go round as a ship's wheel.

Because there's an army of goats cresting the hill and charging the gazebo.

The wedding guests are laughing.

So are the tourists.

But the locals who are in on all the wedding plans?

They're not.

Grady looks at me and mouths, *Goats?*

I shrug, because I don't know where they came from.

"The rings!" Monica says to Pop, who's also staring in surprise at the herd.

"The rings," he agrees.

Only Jason seems amused.

Confused, but also amused.

Pretty sure real pirates could invade his home and he'd just stand there watching. Unless they tried to take Monica as part of their booty.

Then I think things would get ugly.

Patrick hands Pop the rings.

A goat barrels into the gazebo from behind, darts across, and head-butts Pop's knee.

"Oh, no, you didn't, you little sucker!" Grady yells. "*Charge!* That powder monkey's making away with our pirate captain!"

"Little fucker. Little fucker," Long Beak Silver improvises from atop the gazebo.

"Dad—" Tucker says.

"I know. Don't repeat it," Wyatt tells him.

"The pirates—" Tucker says, pointing.

Sit, I mouth.

He narrows his eyes at me while two dozen locals dressed like pirates charge up the aisle and around the chairs toward the bride and groom, yelling and waving swords.

I grin back at him.

And then a goat rams my left leg, and I gasp and buckle.

"With this ring, I thee wed!" Monica yells.

"With this ring, I thee wed!" Jason yells back.

I know he's supposed to unsheathe his sword and battle the pirates, but stars are dancing in my vision as a goat jumps on

my knee and tries to lick my ears.

“I now pronounce you pirate and wife!” Pop yells.

“Back, you little fucker.” Wyatt sweeps the goat back, and then I’m up in his arms. My dad’s right behind us.

“Ellie. Hospital. Now,” my dad orders.

“It’s *fine*,” I say.

I want to watch the show.

And grip Wyatt a little tighter.

And, yes, probably pop a painkiller—the over-the-counter kind, because I’m sure the pain will recede soon—or maybe two.

“Dad, the goat’s licking me and the pirates are fighting,” Tucker laughs.

“The swords!” I gasp. “Wyatt, the guests need their swords!”

“I got ’em, Ellie,” Sloane calls.

And she does.

She’s handing out foam swords to all of Jason and Monica’s friends, who are leaping into the fray and battling the pirates who are trying to weave around the herd of goats to get to Monica.

“Back, you scurvy dogs!” Jason yells. “You’ll never take my bride! Piracy can’t stop true love! Only *death* can do that!”

“My hero,” Monica cries happily.

He scoops her over his shoulder as Sloane throws me a sword.

“Behind you!”

She hasn’t given one to Patrick.

And he has four locals surrounding him.

“Babe, some help?” he says.

“Eat shit and die, you cheating asshole,” she replies.

Mr. and Mrs. Dixon gasp in horror.

And that's before Grady's younger cousins attack them with foam swords. "Plunder the booty!" one of them yells.

I bash foam swords with Tillie Jean, defending Wyatt while he tries to get us out of the mess of goats and pirates.

"Tucker! Careful!"

"I've got him, Wyatt," Mom calls. "He's a good pirate fighter. You get Ellie to safety!"

She bops Grady on the head with the butt of her foam sword, and he staggers dramatically, trips over a wooden folding chair, and faceplants in the ground.

"Oh my god!" I gasp.

"He'll be fine," Tillie Jean says while I continue to fight her behind Wyatt's back. "The only person I know with a thicker skull than Grady is Cooper."

My dad stabs Tillie Jean in the back with his foam sword, and she makes a dramatic pirate death too, yelling, "My brothers in pirate arms are coming for you, Captain Monica!" as she croaks out her fake last breaths.

"Good one, Dad!" I call.

"*Safety*," he replies pointedly as he turns to help Mom defend Tucker against two more local pirates and the random goats.

Everyone's laughing.

Wyatt's dodging goats and tourists, not breaking a sweat, not even breathing hard as he carries me down behind Jason, who's running with Monica tossed over his shoulder. They're both laughing in glee, and I wonder if they'll still go straight to The Grog for the reception, or if they'll be fashionably late to their own party.

Probably late.

I take advantage of the fact that Wyatt's supposed to be my boyfriend to bury my face in his neck.

It's pretend, universe. Don't strike us with lightning, I plead.

Dammit, he smells good.

“Thank you for being my hero,” I whisper against his hot skin.

“Thank you for letting me.” His voice is thick, and he knows.

He feels it too.

The inevitable.

Destiny.

The reason he moved in on our street when we were little.

The reason we’ve always irritated each other.

The reason he was just out of reach when I finally noticed him.

Because it’s been building up to this moment.

This exact moment here.

When he can be my hero.

And I can finally let him.

“Ellie?” he says thickly.

“Mm?”

“I don’t want to let you go.”

My heart swells three sizes and glows, radiating every ounce of affection I’ve ever denied having for this stubborn, strong, dependable man. “Your arms will eventually fall off,” I whisper. “But you’ll still be my hero even if they do.”

“I’m going to miss you.”

While Jason hustles Monica toward the Shipwreck Inn, Wyatt turns us down a side street and into a small public garden. He yanks on the wrought iron gate, and it shuts us inside with a *clink*.

“Are you kidnapping me?” I ask breathlessly.

“I’m seizing the moment.”

The Shipwreck Gardens are small—it’s more like *garden*, singular, surrounded with an ivy-covered wall, a fountain featuring a statue of Thorny Rock and his pirate treasure chest standing proudly in the center.

Wyatt sets me gently on a bench with my back to the shops on Blackbeard Avenue, so I can see the roofs of the town's cozy houses beyond, and the gently sloped, blue haze-covered mountain peaks around us, and he squats on one knee in front of me.

My eyes bulge.

At least, until he ducks his head and laughs. "God, Ellie, it's so easy."

"You—you—" I sputter, but then I'm laughing with him.

Laughing and cradling his head as he laughs right there in my lap, over the crazy colonist dress I wore for Monica because I would've gone to her wedding dressed as a half-naked mermaid if she'd asked me to.

"How's your leg?" Wyatt asks as we both regain control.

"Oh, it aches like a mother," I reply cheerfully.

"Overdid it?"

"Times ten."

He rubs his hand softly over my thigh through the fabric.

"What do you need?"

"Warm bath, Motrin, and rum." My fingers rest on his shoulders, just enough contact to make me feel grounded.

"And maybe more of that."

"This?" He tests the pressure on my muscle, and I sigh and nod.

"Is it supposed to still ache?"

"Muscle and nerve damage on top of newly healed bone. Eventually it'll probably only be bad with weather changes, but apparently broken hips and femurs like to take their sweet time to heal."

"No crutches?"

"I graduated crutches early, thank you."

His lips twitch while he watches me with those intense gray eyes. "You're a fighter."

“I’m tired of fighting,” I whisper.

His gaze searches mine like he’s asking if I’m tired of fighting the pain, or tired of fighting him. “That’s just because you know you’ll never have a cooler wedding,” he whispers back.

My jaw drops a split second before the laughter overtakes me. “You are such a—such a—” I gasp out, searching for the right name to call him.

“Stud,” he supplies with an eyebrow wiggle, and it’s so *un-Wyatt-like* that I double over in laughter.

Except doubling over puts my face right next to his, and he’s smiling, his eyes alive and happy and twinkling with utter mischief, and *this* is everything.

He’s everything.

Everything I never knew I wanted, wrapped up in one Wyatt-shaped package.

I don’t know who starts the kiss, but once his lips are on mine, I know I won’t be the one to break it. He’s still massaging my leg while he loops his free hand behind my neck. I cling to his polo shirt, and almost laugh into the kiss thinking how crazy the two of us must look.

Him dressed like he’s a tourist from this century, me decked out like some kind of island colonist from the 1700s, a baby goat bleating beside us...

It’s the goat that breaks us apart.

Mostly because I can’t laugh and kiss him at the same time.

I need more practice.

More time.

“Ellie?” he says softly through a chuckle.

“Hmm?”

“I’m going to make love to you, and the world’s not going to end.”

“That’s a terrible idea,” I choke out.

“Challenge accepted.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Wyatt

The list of reasons I shouldn't be playing with the hem of Ellie's skirt is longer than my arm. Tucker could catch us here. Ellie's parents. The baby goat that got through the gate could try to help. Someone else could walk into the gardens.

I could get in serious trouble and lose my job for indecent exposure.

But when Ellie's only objection to me snaking my hands up under her skirt is that *we're tempting fate*, I run my hands over her knees and up her thighs.

She shudders and widens her legs as her lids get heavy. "We're not supposed to do this," she whispers.

"I like you," I whisper back, "and I want to make you feel good."

"I take no responsibility for your son becoming an orphan," she informs me.

I have zero fear that her belief that we're physically dangerous is accurate. It's superstitious nonsense, and it's not like Ellie to believe in it. "What are you really afraid of?"

I don't expect her to answer me, so I dip my thumbs low on her inner thighs. She's not flinching away from letting me touch her scars, and I wish I could kiss her where she hurts and make it go away.

Her eyes squeeze closed as her legs fall open wider. "I'm afraid I'm not lovable."

My heart cracks in two.

I didn't know I had it in me for my heart to crack for another person, but it did. Split. Right in half like someone attacked it with a rusty butter knife.

“Why?”

“I’m stubborn.”

“Determined,” I correct.

“Annoying.”

“Says who?”

“*You.*”

“Only to get your goat.”

The baby goat bleats again, and her lips wobble upward. But her eyes—*Christ.*

Her eyes are breaking my heart. “I’m too career-minded.”

“You have a calling.”

“I didn’t pick it.”

“Didn’t have to.”

Her skin is so soft, and I can smell her arousal through the layers of her dress.

“I don’t know what’s important,” she insists. “I can’t prioritize people over *things*. I don’t know how to let go and trust someone else. I can’t—”

“You’re Ellie Fucking Ryder. Yes, you can.”

“Why do you believe in me?”

“Mostly to piss you off.” I wink at her and stroke the edge of her panties, and she huffs out a smile and a groan.

“*Wyatt.*”

“Come see me in Georgia.”

“What?”

“Come see me. Me and Tucker. Spend the weekend with us. In two weeks. Three weeks. Whenever you have a free weekend. Come see us.”

She blinks quickly, but not fast enough to erase the sheen in her eyes. “Why?”

“Because I’m going to miss you.” Honesty makes my voice raw. I never thought I’d get married. Never trusted that I could fall in love and know how to do it right.

But Ellie?

She won’t let me do it wrong.

Because she’s Ellie. She’ll push me. She’ll teach me. And if she’ll love me, she’ll *love* me.

“Wyatt,” she whispers, and then her hands clasp around my ears and she’s kissing me.

Softly.

So softly.

Like she’s learning me. Memorizing me.

Savoring me.

I stroke the center of her panties, and her groan vibrates against my lips. I stroke her again, and she arches into my touch while she nips my lower lip. “More,” she says into our kiss.

So I give her more, stroking and teasing and touching her while we kiss, slow and easy, then slow and deep, then hard and desperate while she jerks against my fingers. I slip two under her panties, find her entrance, and thrust into her slick heat.

But it’s not enough.

I don’t want to just feel her.

I want to taste her.

“Wyatt,” she gasps when I duck under her skirts. “We’re—someone could—*ohmygod do it again.*”

I push her panties aside, put my mouth to her pussy, and I devour her sweet center. Her hips buck into my mouth, and *fuck*, I could stay here all day.

I don’t care that I can’t see a thing. I don’t care that it’s hot as hell.

I don’t even care that we could get caught at any minute.

I just know I'm finally right where I'm supposed to be.

Loving Ellie.

Pleasuring her.

Her gasps are muffled, but she's holding my head steady through her skirt, urging me higher, left, *right there oh my god more right there suck me harder Wyatt yes harder YES.*

I slide two fingers deep inside her hot, wet channel, and when my lips find her sweet little nub, I nip gently, then suck it, and she's suddenly clamping around my fingers, her thighs squeezing my head while she comes for me.

"Yes," she gasps. "Wy-aa-aah—"

I tense, and sure enough—

"*Ah-choo!*"

Her walls clench tight around my fingers again, spasming harder and coating me, and fuck if her coming doesn't make me about to blow my own load in my pants.

"Dammit," she mutters, but it comes out on a half-groan while her pussy's still coming for me.

She sneezes once more, and I pull my fingers out, gently replace her panties, and peek out from under her dress.

"*Baaah!*" the baby goat bleats.

Ellie's wiping her nose with her arm. Her cheeks are rosy, her body slumping on the bench.

"It was messy," she grumbles, pointing to her nose. "And we're probably going to get eaten by baby goats in our sleep. But thank you. That was the best orgasm I've had in years."

I frown. "So I have work to do to be the best ever."

She snuffles. "You really want to do this again?" she asks, gesturing to her snotty face with the healing black eye.

God, she's gorgeous. And so very *Ellie*.

"Yes," I tell her. "Preferably soon. And often."

The hesitation in her bright blue eyes wavers, and then she's laughing again, leaning in to kiss me. "You know something worse than goats will happen now, right?"

I grip her chin. "Nothing. Bad. Is. Going. To. Happen."

One eye wrinkles.

"I like you, Ellie Ryder." *I love you, but I don't want to scare you.*

"I like you too, Wyatt Morgan."

"Then don't be afraid." I lean in to kiss her again when we hear the gate rattle.

She jerks back, and I straighten too when I recognize that voice.

"But I want to show you the fountain!" Tucker says.

"Leg better?" I ask her.

She smiles softly. "Nature's miracle cure worked."

"See? That's not bad."

"Hmm."

I can still taste her on my lips, and I'm more than a little sore and eager in other parts of my very unsatisfied anatomy, but I take a seat next to her, cross my ankle over my knee, and fling an arm around her shoulder while the gate creaks open.

She glances at my crotch, then back up to my face. "Not going to complain?"

"About getting to eat you? No. Are you going to complain about it?"

"No," she replies with a smile.

"Good. But I'm sneaking into your bed tonight after your parents are asleep."

"Are you?" she murmurs as Tucker races into the garden and spots us.

"Yep. And I can't wait."

She lays her head on my shoulder as her parents follow Tucker, who's talking a mile a minute about the goats and the pirates and the wedding and acting out a sword fight.

"This isn't fake anymore, is it?" she whispers.

"No, ma'am," I whisper back into her wig.

And I'm not sure it ever was.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ellie

Monica and Jason's party at The Grog is more fun than I've had in months. Possibly years. There are pirate jokes and impromptu sword fights and a limerick contest with a bunch of implied words to protect the innocent ears in the room. Tucker makes friends with Monica's cousin's daughter, who's a year younger than he is, and the two of them spend the evening playing pirate and talking about Pokémon cards and video games.

Nobody talks about work or where we'll be next week, except Monica and Jason, who will be on a cruise in the Bahamas.

My parents want to know about when Wyatt and I hooked up though.

"A psychic set us up," he says, which makes my mom spit her ale.

"I watched him lift a burning car off a baby and decided he was okay," I say, which is lame after his answer, but Mom stops the third degree, and I find I can breathe again.

I don't mean to rub my leg, but it's aching after coming down off my post-orgasm high, and suddenly Monica's next to us. "If you don't take her home and get her a hot bubble bath and a glass of wine *right now*, I'm going to ask the Rocks to blacklist you from Crow's Nest *and* Anchovies," she informs Wyatt.

"It's your wed—" I start, but she clamps her arm around my head and her hand across my mouth and gives Wyatt the *I'm watching you* hand gesture, then points to the door.

"We both have cars here," I say, but it comes out as "ee owe aah rrr rr" with Monica's hand still over my mouth.

If it weren't her wedding day, I'd lick her hand, but honestly, I don't know where it's been, and I like Jason, but I don't want

to accidentally lick his penis sweat.

“We’ll drive your car back, sweetie,” Mom says.

“It’s like she doesn’t know you at all,” Wyatt whispers.
“Sweetie?”

Monica snorts with laughter.

So does my father.

“I’ll go get Tucker,” Wyatt says to Monica.

“Oh, we’ll bring him home,” my mom says quickly. “He’s having so much fun.”

He’s drinking root beer and completely missing all of his dart throws, which is about the cutest thing I’ve seen all day.

“Out! *Out!*” somebody suddenly crows. One of the wandering goats has wandered into the bar.

“Goats a normal part of the festival?” Wyatt asks.

Grady Rock pauses on his way to the animal and shakes his head. “Never. Don’t know where the damn—darn things came from.”

“They’re homeless goats?” Dad asks.

Grady leans down and gets it by its horns. “Or somebody over in Sarcasm sent them,” he mutters.

“Wouldn’t they have unicorn horns if Sarcasm sent them?” I ask.

He glares at me. “You’re lucky you’re cute, or you’d be really annoying.”

“They could be wild goats,” Wyatt points out. “Nomadic mountain goats. Psychic nomadic mountain goats come down to make sure you don’t call very nice women *annoying*.”

Mom coughs to cover a laugh when Grady pins him with a look. “So let’s move the goats to your bedroom and see how you feel.”

“Aren’t they the cutest, Chris? We should take one home,” Mom says to Dad.

“Nomadic mountain goats wouldn’t take well to domestication,” he replies.

“Dad! Dad! Can we keep a goat?” Tucker barrels over, wedding cake frosting on his cheek. I wipe it off while Wyatt shakes his head.

“Your mother would kill me. You ready to go, or do you want to stay a while? I have to take Miss Ellie home.”

Tucker frowns at me. “Does your leg hurt, Miss Captain Ellie?”

“Just a little,” I tell him.

“I got a cut on my finger.” He shoves the digit an inch from my nose, and I draw back to peer at the pinprick-size dot of red on his middle finger.

“Did you get in a sword fight with toothpicks?” I ask.

His eyes go wide. “How did you know?”

“That’s how I get all my best cuts.”

“Tucker?” Wyatt asks.

“I wanna stay. Me and Sophia’s gonna play darts some more and pet the goats.”

Grady groans as he wrestles one goat out, but two more come in.

“You be good for Mr. and Mrs. Ryder, understand?”

“Yeah, Dad!”

He catches the little boy by the hips before he can dart away.

“And when they say it’s time to go, it’s time to go. Yes, sir?”

“Yes, sir. Can I go play darts now?”

“Hug first.”

Tucker launches himself at Wyatt and squeezes. “Love you, Dad.”

“Love you too, bud.”

He scampers off, and Wyatt shoots a look at my parents. “He’s a little sugared up.”

“Psh. I raised Beck. I can handle Tucker on a little sugar.” She and Wyatt trade keys so we don’t have to swap Tucker’s booster seat.

“I’m becoming displeased,” Monica says.

“Want me to toss them, babe?” Jason asks.

“Yes.”

“We’re going,” Wyatt tells them, pulling me to my feet. He frowns, and shakes his head as he looks at me. “Nope. Not that way.”

“What—” I start, but before I can finish, he’s hefted me over his shoulder again like a sack of potatoes.

“Leg okay?” he asks.

“This is really annoying.”

“I’m so tempted to slap your ass, but that would be a bad example for my kid.”

“And my parents are watching.”

“I know. Your dad’s glaring at me.”

I manage to shuffle around until I can see my dad’s upside-down face.

And Dad’s not glaring.

Nope.

If anything, he’s watching me like he’s realized his baby girl is all grown up. “Drive careful,” he says gruffly to Wyatt.

“Always,” Wyatt replies.

And despite that lingering fear that something terrible is waiting around the corner, because *holy hell*, that was quite the orgasm Wyatt gave me before the reception, I’m not the least bit concerned about making it back up to the house safe and sound.

It’s Wyatt.

Dependable, reliable, smokin’ hot, *likes me* Wyatt.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call you back,” I tell him as we leave The Grog.

He doesn’t ask *when*.

Nope.

“You needed your energy to kick recovery’s ass,” he replies.

I could argue that I owed him an hour of my time. That it wasn’t nice of me to let him worry. Or any other argument in the world.

Instead, I murmur, “Speaking of asses....” and take advantage of being carried over his shoulder, which puts me in a great spot to not only ogle his, but also squeeze it.

His pace speeds up, and there I go again, laughing.

I haven’t laughed this much in ages.

And all it took was learning not to hate Wyatt.

Who knew?

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ellie

We ride in companionable silence up to the house.

Holding hands.

While my heart pounds in my throat.

Everything's different, but it's also *right*.

Wyatt knows my cranky sides. My stubborn sides. My ugly sides. He knows what he's in for.

And he wants it anyway.

Despite who I am at my worst.

And he's not pretending to be anyone he's not either. I know *this* side of Wyatt. I've seen him with my brother. With the other guys we grew up with. With their sisters.

With Tucker.

Even with Lydia.

The difference is, he doesn't hold back with me.

He lets me see his ugly sides too.

He's barely turned the car off in the garage before I lean across and grab him by the shirt and pull him in for a kiss.

I've always hated that Wyatt always seems to know exactly how to do everything.

That hatred does *not* extend to how well he kisses.

No, I'm seriously enjoying that right now. From my roots to my toes. Every bit of me is lit up, turned on, and ready.

"Ellie," he gasps, pulling back. "Inside."

"Race you."

"Okay, gimpy."

“Oooh, you—”

I cut myself off, because he’s flinging open the car door, and there is no way I’m not even putting up a fight.

Or maybe I’ll fight dirty.

“Wyatt? I don’t think I can walk by myself.”

I bat my eyelashes.

He snorts with laughter.

I grin.

And he circles the car to pull me out. We stand toe-to-toe, belly-to—huh.

“That’s not your belly,” I whisper.

He looks down between us. “No, it’s not.”

“So it’s not some kind of intestinal protrusion either?”

“You are a pain in the ass,” he says with a laugh, and then I’m up in his arms—*not* over his shoulder, but cradled close to his chest while I loop my fingers together behind his neck.

I press a kiss to the pulsing vein under his rugged jawline.

“You don’t suck at that,” he says huskily, so I kiss him again. Except this time I graze my teeth over the throbbing vein and follow it with a quick swipe of my tongue.

He stumbles through the door and puts me on the ground. “Do you know what I need?” he growls.

I arch my belly into his hard length. “I have an idea.”

He nods. “That’s right. Strip darts.”

My eyes jerk wide, and he grins. “C’mon, Ellie. You’ve gotta *earn* this body.”

“Oh, those are fighting words,” I say, my own smile growing in direct proportion to the arousal pinging through my veins.

Strip darts.

This is going to be fun.

I take the lead, ignoring the twinge and fatigue in my leg to pull him down the hall and around the corner into the game room. I hit the lights, and he instantly turns the knob to dim them.

“Ah, a real challenge,” I say softly, drawing my fingertips down the corded muscles on his forearms. “Throwing pointy objects in the dark.”

“Guess you’ll have to trust me not to miss.”

I let him grab the darts out of the board while I lean against the pool table, and when he returns, he hands me the set. “Ladies first.”

“Oh, no, I’m much more motivated at seeing what I’m working toward. Gentlemen first.”

The challenge in his smile is pure Wyatt, but it’s also...*more*.

“Rules?” I ask.

“One of us gets a bullseye, the other takes something off.”

“And one of us misses, we take something off.”

“In a hurry?”

“With the way you play darts, I’d never get my shoes off if I had to wait for you to hit a bullseye.”

“Prepare to lose your socks, Ellie Ryder.”

He throws his first dart, and it impales the wall six inches to the left of the board. “Bullseye,” he declares.

I shriek with surprised laughter. He grins, and pulls off one shoe. “So close,” he declares, and now I’m almost bent double.

His second dart gets closer to the board. “You’re gonna be handing me those pantaloons next,” he says while he kicks off his second shoe.

“*Pantaloons?*”

He gasps a mock gasp. “You’re not wearing pantaloons? Ellie, did you go to your friend’s wedding *commando*?”

“You know I didn’t.” But the idea of being commando, of being able to push him to the ground, straddle him, and take him inside me in an instant, is doing exactly what he wants it to do, and my panties are getting soaked again.

He grins like he knows it, and takes aim again.

This time, his dart doesn’t even stick. It bounces off the Dogs Playing Poker poster two feet to the left of the board.

“Damn,” he says, but he doesn’t sound the least bit unhappy.

Nor does he look the least bit unhappy when he shucks his khaki shorts and stands there tenting his St. Patrick’s Day boxers.

I’d laugh at the boxers, but there’s nothing funny about how hard he is.

No, that’s just plain intriguing. And arousing.

“You’re up,” he tells me, handing me my three darts.

“I’d say *you’re* up.”

“Recurring problem around you.”

“My nipples are commiserating.”

His eyes go dark. I turn to take my first throw, and he brushes my hair off my neck and presses a kiss to my nape.

Oversensitive aftershocks from his touch ripple across my skin. The dart doesn’t even reach the wall.

“Do that again,” I whisper.

“Ah-ah. You need to take something off first.” His breath is hot on my ear, and he follows the chastising with a nip to my earlobe that has me whimpering in pleasure.

“Shoe,” I say, holding out my foot for him.

He bends and obliges, pulling off my boot. “Cheater,” I whisper when my sock comes off too.

“Just saving us some time when you miss again.”

I line up for my shot, and he lines his erection up with the top of my ass, then dips his head to nibble at the crook of my neck

while I fire the dart.

“Bullseye,” I gasp.

“*Bullshit*,” he says with a chuckle.

“But I hit the board.”

“Barely. Gotta lose something, Ellie. It’s the rules.”

“Fine. You may remove my other shoe.”

God, this is fun.

He obliges again, and this time, he doesn’t let my foot go until he’s kissed a path from my ankle bone to my knee.

“Cheating,” I gasp.

“Well, yeah,” he replies with another smokin’ hot grin.

This is the side of Wyatt I’ve overlooked for years. The fun, playful side. He’s always been obnoxious and buttoned up and stiff, *perfect* for a military career, but that’s not all there is to him.

I could throw my last dart before he tries to distract me, but what’s the fun in that?

And sure enough, as soon as he’s straightened and behind me, his hands are on me again, this time high on my waist. “Need pointers?” he asks.

“I think you’re already giving me pointers.” I arch into the bulge against my lower back, and his breath hitches.

“I’ve been giving you pointers all day, but you haven’t noticed.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“You gonna throw that last dart?”

“Debating if I want to hit a bullseye and make you lose the shirt.” It’s *so* freaking *right* here in his arms.

“Not the boxers?”

“I’m a big fan of anticipation.”

“You’re a big fan of torture.”

“That too.”

He nuzzles my neck again. I toss my last dart, and I don't even care where it landed, because now I can turn in Wyatt's arms and kiss him.

I know this might be a mistake, but if I don't have Wyatt, I'm going to die.

So I'll either die because the universe is a dick and doesn't like us together, or I'll die because I can't have him.

I'd rather go out happy, thank you very much.

“Want—you,” I whimper into Wyatt's kiss.

“Never knew—needed you—so bad,” he gasps between kisses as he tugs at the zipper on the back of my dress.

And I get a sudden chill, because this is where it started.

In a basement.

Without thought.

“Ellie?” Wyatt murmurs, his hand stilling.

“Can we really do this?”

“Yes.”

“But *should* we?”

He threads his fingers through my hair and presses that thick bulge into my belly. “What are you afraid of?”

He asks it like whatever it is, he's going to leap onto his magical unicorn and ride it into battle and slay my fears. “That we'll break,” I whisper.

“Or maybe we'll finally get it right.”

“What if the house burns down?”

I feel his smile against my lips. “The house is *not* going to burn down.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Neither one of us were in the right headspace for this six months ago. But now? Today? You didn't look at your ex *once*

during the reception. I wasn't there for *him*. I was there for *you*. Deny it."

I open my lips to do just that, but I realize he's right.

I forgot Patrick was even there.

"I just didn't want you to feel self-conscious."

He chuckle-snorts, and I giggle, because we both know I wouldn't stroke his ego.

However, my fingers are trailing down his pecs and abs looking for something else to stroke.

"Do I need to get a bullseye to get this dress off you?" he asks.

"No, you need to pull the damn zipper down."

"Now?"

"Yes, please."

"Look at you, using your manners and everything." He tugs on the zipper once again, and cool air hits my back.

I push his shirt up, revealing that chest that I could spend days exploring, and my nipples pull so tight I feel it in my clit when he reaches behind himself with one hand to pull the shirt over his head and the rest of the way off.

He brushes my dress off my shoulders, and then I'm standing there, in just my panties, while he whispers my name in sheer reverence.

I step out of the puddle of fabric, and he snags it, tosses it on the pool table, then scoops me into his arms and lays me on it.

I tip my head back and laugh, because my brother would kill me if he knew what we were doing.

Wyatt hooks his thumbs in his boxers and pulls them off in one smooth motion, and all thoughts of anything except him flee my mind. He disappears, ducking beside the table, and I whimper.

"Condom," he says, returning to crawl onto the pool table with a foil packet in his hand.

“This thing won’t break, will it? That would be awesome. Death by sex on a pool table.”

“I got a private Bro Code show with this as their stage once,” he replies. “It’s solid.”

“Ew. Maybe we should move to the foosball table. It’s clean, right? Bumpy, but clean?”

“Have you met your brother? He licks his players for luck.”

We both crack up.

But only until he dips his head to tease my nipple with his tongue.

Then nothing’s funny.

But everything’s perfect.

Right.

Glorious.

“My turn,” I gasp when he pinches my other nipple. “Roll over.”

“No.”

“Wyatt—”

“I love that irritated note in your voice. It makes me so fucking hard.”

I look down as he pushes up onto all fours, and *whoa*.

He’s definitely hard.

“C’mon, Calamity Ellie. Tease me.”

I push him onto his back and twist, and my stupid leg twinges. But before I can moan, Wyatt kisses me and gently caresses my leg and hip. “What’s more comfortable for you? A bed?”

I shake my head, because dammit, I still want to be the kind of crazy that has sex on pool tables. And it’s not the table. “I don’t know. Just—I don’t know how I bend best.”

He grins like that’s a challenge. “Then let’s start with what we know works.” He leans me back again and kisses me, and his long fingers trace a path over my hip to my panties.

I gasp as his knuckles graze the cotton over my clit.

“But you—haven’t—not—”

“I have a few years of taunting you to make up for,” he says as he moves to kiss a path down my jaw to that sweet, sensitive spot at the base of my throat.

“I was—you were—*oh, god, Wyatt.*”

“I’m going to take your panties off.”

My *yes* comes out garbled as he peels the waistband down over my hips, taking special care around my scars, kissing my breasts, my belly, all the way down until he’s nipping at my inner thigh.

My pussy’s aching. “Touch me,” I gasp, widening my right leg.

“Soon,” he says, still pressing soft kisses on my sensitive skin.

“*Now.*”

He kisses lower on my leg, heading for my knee. “If you’re in that much of a hurry, maybe you should touch yourself.”

He lifts hooded eyes to mine. *Touch yourself, Ellie. Turn me on by touching yourself.*

I hold his gaze while my fingers drift between my legs to stroke my slick folds. “Like this?” Oh, *god*, that feels good, but it’s not enough.

“More,” he rasps out.

I flick at my clit, and my legs open wider, because it’s not enough. “I want *you*,” I tell him.

“Say it again.”

“I want you.”

“Say my name.”

“Wyatt, *I want you.*”

Finally, *finally*, he crawls back up my body until his sheathed length is pressing at my entrance. “Here?”

“*Yes.*”

“What about tomorrow?” he’s teasing me, gliding his thick head along my seam. “Will you want me tomorrow?”

I grasp his cock and stroke him, and *oh*, so hard, like iron, and I can feel his pulse in the thick veins circling him. “Tomorrow—argue with you—at breakfast—over toast,” I gasp. “Next week—fighting—who pays for dinner.”

“And next month?” he asks, finally, *finally* inching inside me toward that needy emptiness that might be in my pussy or that might be in my soul, spreading me and teasing at how well he’ll fill me when he gives me everything.

“Next month—surprise you—on a Tuesday—on my knees.”

“Fuck, Ellie.” He shoves deep inside me, and I cry out in relief at being connected to him. “I don’t want to let you go.”

“Then don’t.”

“You feel so damn perfect.”

He slowly pulls almost all the way out, then pushes back in again, hitting that *oh so perfect* sensitive spot deep inside me.

“Again,” I gasp.

“Want you every day,” he says as he thrusts into me again.

Every day. No one wants me every day. “You’re craz—aaaah, oh god, Wyatt, *more.*”

He thrusts again, not too gentle, not too hard, and the anticipation is building, the tension tightening, my pussy swelling and going hypersensitive with every stroke inside me.

“In my bed,” he says.

“On the kitchen table.”

“In the shower.”

“In the backseat of your car.”

“Under the stars.”

“On top of the Eiffel Tower.”

“In your parents’ linen closet.”

I laugh as he thrusts in again, and everything swirls out of focus while my climax hits hard. “*Ellie*,” he cries, his dick pulsing inside me in time with my pussy squeezing and spasming around him.

“*Wyatt*,” I gasp when he pumps once, twice more, pushing me higher and farther and deeper until— “*Wy—ahh-ahh—*”

He pushes up, his dick still straining deep inside me, and when I sneeze, he gasps. “Christ, *Ellie*, that feels amazing.”

I’m still twitching and spasming around him, and here I am, laughing. “My *sneeze*?”

“Fuck, yeah.” He drops his head into my shoulder, panting. “Was that it? I could take another sneeze. *Christ*.”

I laugh, and another tingle of pleasure lights up my clit. “You’re crazy.”

“Crazy for you.” He kisses my shoulder, my neck, up to my lips, where he lingers, lazily kissing me and letting me trace his jaw and stroke his short, soft hair. “I think I’ve wanted you my entire life. I was just too blind to realize it.”

“Too scared,” I whisper.

“That too.”

“Are you still scared?”

He lifts his head, and serious Wyatt is back. “Depends. Were you serious about surprising me in Georgia with a blow job?”

I gape at him for half a second.

He cracks a grin.

“*You—*” I start, but he swallows my tirade with another kiss, and truly, kissing Wyatt is better than strawberry daiquiris on a beach.

I don’t know what tomorrow will bring.

But I know one thing.

It will be the first day of the rest of my life with Wyatt.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Wyatt

Ellie and I are fooling around in the master bathtub when the text comes in that the Ryders are on their way back with Tucker. She goes pink in the cheeks. “My parents know what we’re doing,” she whispers.

I kiss her forehead before I reach for a towel. “And they approve, because I’m awesome.”

Her lips twitch. “Or maybe because they know I can keep you in line.”

“Nah.”

I’m smiling as I disentangle my legs from hers and climb out of the tub, and not just because her eyes go dark and smoky again as her gaze wanders down my dripping wet body.

No, it’s because of the peace.

The utter contentment.

I never wanted to get married because I didn’t think it was in my genes, in my bloodline, to be capable of being a good husband and father. Fate proved me wrong on fatherhood.

And this sensation that I’ve found a missing piece of myself, and that she’s sitting right there in the bubble bath, turning down the music and tucking her hair behind her ear. “Did you grab my dress from downstairs?”

“It’s on the bed.”

“I didn’t mean you had to. I could’ve gotten it. I just—”

I silence her with a kiss, which might be my new favorite hobby.

Kissing Ellie Ryder.

Who knew?

“I left your shoes for you to get yourself,” I tell her. “But I’ll probably go get them anyway because you’ll get mad and insist you’re perfectly capable, and then we’ll have some silly little fight that’ll end with me needing to stroke your pussy, so —”

“Yep. Same old obnoxious Wyatt,” she says with a grin.

“Same old stubborn Ellie.”

She rests her hands on the edge of the tub and leans her chin on them, watching me dry off. “Provided we don’t die, we’re never going to be bored, are we?”

“I might be.”

She gets me with a surprise slap to the ass, then shrieks as she slips under the water.

I give her to the count of one-half before I’m grabbing her arm and pulling her up.

“Okay?” I ask.

She blows and spits at the bubbles around her mouth. I grab my phone and angle it toward her like I’m going to snap a picture, and she rolls her eyes with a laugh. “Go ahead.”

“Nah, I don’t—”

“Oh, no. I want you to remember this for the rest of your life. Get in here. Selfie with me.”

When I get down on my knee, she scoops bubbles onto my head and dribbles them on my nose.

And we’re both smiling in the picture.

“Crazy woman.” I wipe her face with the towel and set out another on the floor for her when she gets out. “You hungry?”

“You know what sounds good?”

“Banana pudding?”

“Tea. I have chamomile sometimes to help me fall asleep when I’m achy.”

“With banana pudding?”

“We’re out.”

I put a hand to my heart and stagger. “You’re right. We can’t be together. We’ll run out of banana pudding and die.”

She throws the towel at me with a laugh. “Shush and go heat me some water, powder monkey.”

“Yes, ma’am, Calamity Ellie.”

While she takes her time getting out, I toss on sweatpants and a T-shirt, fill a tea kettle and turn on the burner, then head downstairs to get her shoes. Tucker’s left his security blanket down here again, so I take it upstairs too, all the way to his bedroom, and pull out pajamas for him since he’ll probably be dead on his feet at this hour.

Hope he had fun.

I’m on my way back downstairs when I smell it.

Smoke.

“Wyatt?” Ellie calls, and there’s no mistaking the panic in her voice.

Nor the blare of the smoke alarms that suddenly explode in the house.

I tear down the stairs and land in a cloud of smoke just outside the kitchen. Ellie’s in here, coughing, and flames are erupting from the stove. “The towel!” she shrieks, then coughs again.

Fuck.

I snag the flaming fabric and fling it in the sink, then turn the faucet on. “Get out,” I tell her. The smoke’s not too thick—I don’t think anything else is burning—but the smoke alarms are still going off and the towel’s still flaming in the sink.

I turned on the wrong fucking burner.

I turned on the wrong fucking burner.

And there was a damn *towel* on it.

And I nearly burned Beck’s house down.

After promising her *that would never happen.*

“Hi, yes, there’s a fire,” I hear her say. “It’s at... Oh my god, I don’t know the address. Beck’s house. Beck–Beck—*what’s my last name?* Yes! Beck Ryder’s house. On the mount—*yes!*”

The alarms are screeching. She grabs my arm. “Wyatt. *Out.* Both of us. 9-1-1 says we have to get out. Now.”

I spray the last of the embers and check the stove, which is off. “It’s out, Ellie.”

“*You are not going to die in a house fire on my watch, goddammit, get the fuck out!*” she shrieks.

She doubles over, coughing, then says, “Yes, we’re still here,” and that’s when I hear it.

The high-pitched panic.

“Ellie—”

“*Out!*”

She’s in a bathrobe, and she’s limping hard. The haze isn’t thick enough to mask it. “*Please get out,*” she adds, and now there’s a choked sob in her voice, and *shit.*

I sweep her up and head for the door. “Okay. We’re getting out. It’s okay.”

As soon as we’re outside, she twists. “Let go.”

Tears are streaming down her face.

“Ellie—”

“No. *No.* Don’t. Back up.” She retreats down the sidewalk to the driveway. The yard is too sloped for her to head there, and the limp is breaking me. “Yes, we’re outside. We’ll stay out.”

She’s crying.

Ellie’s crying.

Ellie *never* cries. She tells those tears to back the fuck up and get out of her way.

But she’s crying. On the phone with a 9-1-1 operator.

“It’s my fault,” she sobs. “I ignored the signs.”

“Ellie. Stop.”

Headlights flash up the driveway. The Ryders are back. They stop mid-way to the house, and Mrs. Ryder flies out of the passenger seat. “What happened? What’s wrong?”

“We burned the house down,” Ellie sobs, letting her mom gather her up while the alarm blares inside.

“We didn’t—” I start, but my objection is cut off by the wail of a fire engine’s siren in the distance.

“A fire?” Mr. Ryder asks.

“I set a towel on fire. It’s out. It’s fine. It was an accident.”

“It’s because we—we—”

“Ellie, it’s not—”

Sometimes I wish my hair was long enough to pull it out, because that might help distract from the ice-cold fear settling into my chest.

Both the Ryders look at me, but Tucker leaps out of the car, fear written all over his little face, looking so fucking much like the kid I remember being at his age, and my throat closes up and my eyes sting and I grab him tight. “It’s okay,” I say as he starts to cry too.

“Miss Captain Ellie’s crying,” he sobs. “Is the house gonna burn down?”

“Hey, no, no, everything’s fine.” Everything’s not fine.

“Take me home,” Ellie whimpers. “Mom? Take me home. I want to go home.”

“Honey, it’s late,” Mr. Ryder says.

Headlights flash again, but instead of a firetruck, it’s a fire engine red sports car.

Hell.

“Ellie—” I start again while I hug my son and my best friend steps out of his car and the closest people I have left to parents gape at me in utter confusion.

“We *can’t*, Wyatt,” she says, her words muffled against her mom’s shoulder but still clear as day to me. “We. Will. Die.”

“We—”

“When’s the last time you ever accidentally set a towel on fire? Never. Ever. Because it’s you. You don’t make mistakes. We are not supposed to be together.”

“Ellie, sweetie, what’s all this?” her mom says gently. “Honey, everyone makes mistakes. The house is fine.”

Beck looks up. “My house is on fire?” he asks.

Curiously. Not mad. Just confused.

Despite the alarms still blaring inside.

“No,” I tell him.

“Burned to the ground,” Ellie sobs.

“It’s not—” I start.

“IT WILL BE. Mom. I want to go home.”

Beck looks at me, shrugs in bewilderment, and then saunters to his sister. “C’mon, Ellie. I got you.”

“She’s in a bathrobe,” I say.

“I’m commando,” he offers.

Tucker’s still crying. The sirens are getting louder. And when Beck helps Ellie shuffle past us, she doesn’t look up when she whispers, “I’m sorry, Wyatt.”

Having my arm gnawed off by a bear with dull teeth would be less painful than the searing ache shredding my heart. “Ellie —”

Beck shuts her in the car, and he, too, doesn’t look at me as he walks around to the driver’s seat. The engine roars back to life, and he pulls out of the driveway thirty seconds before the fire truck screeches to a halt at the house.

“The fire’s out,” I tell the firefighters, but the words are hollow. “Kitchen accident.”

They still file inside.

Mrs. Ryder wraps her arms around both me and Tucker, and I wish I was seven again so I could cry too.

Because it's Ellie.

She's strong. She's smart.

And when she's fucking determined, there's nothing in the world that will stop her.

And she's determined that I'm not good for her.

I grip Tucker tighter.

One day, he'll grow up and leave me too. And we still have the teenage years to get through, when he'll probably hate me.

"I love her," I whisper to Mrs. Ryder.

"I know, honey," she says softly. "I've always known. She'll come around."

I shake my head, but I don't answer.

Because she won't.

She's made up her mind.

And thirty minutes after I thought I was finally in, finally right, it turns out I'm out.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Wyatt

It takes less than an hour for us to get the all-clear to head back inside, but it feels like weeks. Especially with a sleeping Tucker in my arms. He's dead weight once he drifts off.

"Watch those towels," one of the firemen tells me as they depart.

"Yeah. Got it."

I get Tucker put to bed, and I'm about to collapse into my own bed in the next room when I realize I left my phone in the master bedroom downstairs before the fire. On the off-chance Ellie's willing to talk to me, I don't want to miss her. I hit the bottom of the stairs and realize Beck's back.

He's lounging in the living room. Alone.

"Where's Ellie?" I can't help it. The question rolls out.

"Cooper's place."

"In her bathrobe?"

"Doesn't really need clothes for sleeping, does she?" He grins at me, like nothing in the fucking world is fucking wrong, and I consider decking him. He might have two inches on me, but I have more muscle.

Plus, hitting something would feel damn good right now.

Maybe.

Probably not.

But it's worth a try.

"Want a beer?" he asks me.

"No." I scrub a hand over my face. "Yes."

"Awesome. What've we got? Smells like toast. You hungry?"

“That’s *burnt dish towel*.”

“Eh. Never liked that one anyway.” He leads the way into the kitchen, digs into the fridge and emerges with two bottles of Sam Adams. “Ping-pong?”

“You know I’ve been sleeping with your sister, right?”

“Yep.”

“There a reason I’m still standing?”

His blue eyes flicker over me, and for half a second, I think he’s going to deck me. “Looks like she already got you.”

“She sneezed.”

“Son of a *bitch*.” He gets me with a jab to the shoulder. “Keep that shit to yourself.”

I recoil. “Hell, you do that—never mind. Don’t want to know.”

“Exactly, motherfucker.”

He shoves the second beer at me. “Ping-pong. Now.”

We troop down to the basement, and he flips on the lights. If I wasn’t watching, I wouldn’t have noticed him casting a glance at the water stain in the ceiling.

“Didn’t mean to break your house,” I mutter.

“It’s just a house. I’ve got more.”

In the game room, he claims the far end of the ping-pong table and tosses me a paddle. “Talk.”

I set my beer aside and serve a ball.

And while we battle it out for superiority in ping-pong—he’s winning, because I have no heart left to put in it—I tell him everything.

Everything.

Starting with Christmas.

He doesn’t say anything for three games after I’m done. It’s past two in the morning. We’re just standing here, hitting a ping-pong ball back and forth, beers gone, the ball hitting the table and our paddles the only sound.

Finally, he tosses his paddle to the table. “You love her?”

My chest threatens to cave in. “Yes.”

“Huh.”

A Beck Ryder *huh* can mean anything from *you’re in my seat to clogged the toilet again* to *oh, good, meatloaf leftovers*. “*Huh* what?”

He shrugs. “All she’d say was *Tucker needs him alive more than I need to bang him again*. I think you’re fucked.”

“Thanks. Helpful. Real helpful.”

“And Mom’s making pancakes in the morning. Told me to tell you to sleep as late as you want, she’ll make you more.”

I dig the heel of my palms into my eye sockets, because I don’t want *pancakes*.

I want Ellie to have some faith that *we can do this*.

But I’m supposed to leave to drive back to Georgia in a few hours, because I go back to work Monday.

“You believe we’re cursed?” I ask Beck.

“Nah. Met too many witch doctors over the years. Your case is too boring.”

He was always unpredictable even before the boy band days. Now, he’s unpredictable with a worldly bent, which is mildly terrifying at times.

“Can you convince Ellie?” I ask.

“You want *me* to convince *my sister* that I know more than she does about something? Dude. It’s one thing to say you love her. It’s another to act like you don’t know her at all.”

“The Ellie I know would say screw the universe.”

His smile drops. “Yeah. Fucking Blond Caveman.”

I start. “You—”

“Her ex. The douche-nugget.”

“Didn’t know you called him that too.” A thought strikes me, and I squint at him. “Was this your plan when you asked me to

annoy her?”

“That you break my dishwasher and burn my house down?”

“To hook me and Ellie up.”

“Nah. That was Levi.”

I owe another buddy a text. “Levi,” I repeat doubtfully.

“After you showed up at the hospital, he said the only other time he’s seen that look on a man’s face was Tripp, when Jessie had all those complications with delivery.”

“You miss the part where it was my fault she was on the road?”

“Oh, go shove your responsibility complex up your ass. You weren’t the drunk shitbag who hit her, and you weren’t the fuckweasel who dumped her on Christmas Eve. She made up her mind she wasn’t staying at Mom and Dad’s that night the minute she saw you, and we both know it. She just wanted to pick a fight, just like you wanted to pick a fight. It was shitty timing, but it wasn’t your fault. Got it?”

“Yeah,” I mutter.

I don’t know if I believe him yet, but I hear him.

Maybe Ellie’s right.

Maybe we are safer apart.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ellie

My leg is pounding like a mother, there's an annoying light shining directly at my eyelids, something smells faintly like moldy gym socks, and there's a godawful racket coming from outside the doorway.

Sounds like—

Oh, *dammit*.

Sounds like my brother trying to hit those falsetto notes Levi can reach but Beck most definitely *cannot*. He's not *bad*, but they didn't add him to the band for his musical talent.

Nope, they added him for the eye candy.

Blech.

He bursts into the room, and I remember I'm not at his house.

I'm at Cooper Rock's house half a mile up the road. Because Wyatt and I tried to burn down Beck's house last night.

"Is your house still standing?" I ask, realizing I'm croaking like a frog, and also that I don't give two fucks.

The universe spoke.

I listened.

And it hurts like hell.

"Damn straight," he says. "C'mon. Get up. They haven't found the peg leg yet. I want to go look, but I can't go without a disguise."

"Go buy yourself a peg leg." I shove my head under the pillow, which smells like mothballs, and I really don't care.

Yum, mothballs.

Like death, but mothier.

Where'd you put her? Are you from Zygorb? Are you an alien wearing my sister's skin?"

"You are annoying as hell."

"I'm annoying? You're the one who's pulling this shitty woe is me, the universe hates me, and for once in my life I'm gonna just lay down and take it because I'm afraid to love somebody who might actually break my heart shit."

I freeze.

Because that might be hitting too close to home.

"Go. Away."

"Wyatt's a good dude, Ellie. And he likes you despite you."

"And he flies in airplanes for his day job and we can't even kiss without dishwashers leaking and towels catching on fire and Tucker deserves to grow up with a good dad."

Beck heaves a loud, annoyed sigh and climbs off me. "Fine. Have your pity party. But if you don't get up, I'm calling Monica, and you know she'll skip her honeymoon to be here."

"Dick move. And you'd put her on a private jet and upgrade her to the fanciest cruise in the world to make it up to her."

"Yeah, but she won't know that when she comes running."

Which is why she's my best friend.

My best *girl* friend.

My best *friend* friend might be—*dammit*.

"And I'll send Mom," he adds. "Oh, and by the way, Wyatt was *pissed* when he found out Cooper lives so close. Dude thought he was bicycling up the mountain to deliver you donuts because he's angling to get into your pants. Isn't that a hoot? Ten minutes, Ell. And then I'm singing again too."

He heads out the door whistling like he has freaking sunshine in his sparkly bright soul, and I realize I'm naked.

I'm naked, with a healing black eye, a sore hip and thigh, and a big ol' pile of ash in my chest.

But that's how it has to be.

Because I've hurt enough people in my life.

I won't put Wyatt in danger. He deserves better.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ellie

I'd planned to stay in Shipwreck through the weekend for recovery time, but with Beck back, the odds of having a minute of peace are nil. Not because he's always as annoying as he was this morning, but because he'll be calling anyone he can to hang out while he's in town, which will undoubtedly be three days or less.

And I don't want to be in the house when he sees the new high score on Frogger.

Too many memories.

So I convince my dad to ride with me back to Copper Valley before lunch.

When we hit the 256 loop around the city, my eyes sting, because we're officially now out of the country and out of the mountains. It's back to the hustle and bustle. Traffic. Billboards. Skyscrapers.

Dad's quiet the entire ninety-minute drive. When I pull into the driveway of the red brick colonial in the middle-class neighborhood where I grew up, with the old basketball hoop still over the garage door, my eyes burn again.

Dad squeezes my knee. "Been through a lot this year."

He doesn't tell me I'm overreacting. Or that it's okay to be scared, but not okay to let fear rule my life, or any of the other things I logically know.

That's not how Dad works.

Probably because all the rest of us finally talked him into silence over the years.

But he does offer me a scoop of homemade peach cobbler if I want to stay a few hours.

So that's how I find myself curled up on my parents' couch, watching the Fireballs get creamed in high definition, while my dad cuts and sugars early season peaches for our late lunch of peach cobbler.

I don't realize I've drifted off to sleep until the doorbell rings, and when I wake up, I'm disoriented and confused, and it takes me a minute to remember why my heart hurts.

Wyatt.

He probably hates me.

I hope he does. That'll make it easier for him to move on.

I curl tighter into a ball. The game's over, and now an old Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks movie is on.

"Ellie, I'm going for a walk," Dad calls from the front door.

"Kay," I answer, frog voice and all.

I haven't had any peach cobbler yet, but I should go home. I don't have any food. I need to do laundry. And catch up on work email.

Plus, I could stop at a pet shelter on the way and ask to play with the dogs for a few hours. Guaranteed pick-me-up.

Since Beck sometimes shares my social media posts about dogs that haven't found their forever homes—always with a caption like *Sharing for my sister, who wishes she'd been born a dog so it would be socially acceptable for her to lick my face*—I'm undeservedly welcome at all the shelters in the metro area.

I'm staring blindly at Meg Ryan's profile on the television when the hairs on the back of my neck prickle, and the pile of ashes in my chest gives a big ol' *whomp*.

There's a shadow in the doorway.

A Wyatt-size shadow. Or possibly more than a shadow.

That *whomp* turns into a staccato beat of *whomp* after *whomp* after *whomp*.

“Please,” I whisper, and I don’t know if I’m asking him to stay or leave. I just know it hurts.

It hurts to think about hurting him.

It hurts to think about losing him.

And it hurts to be terrified that disaster is waiting around every corner if I reject both of my first two options.

He steps slowly into the room, eyes trained on me, searching, asking.

I don’t even have to look him in the eye to know.

He’s not afraid.

He’s not afraid of anything.

“You okay?” he asks, and that voice.

God, I love his voice. Rich and smooth and warm, like hot chocolate after a day playing in the snow.

“Fine,” I say hoarsely, and we both know I’m lying.

I can’t tell if he’s tired, frustrated, or all of the above, but I do know the yellowing bruise on his eye is all the reminder I need of the danger of the two of us getting together.

“Where’s Tucker?” I ask, and *dammit*, there’s another flame attacking the ashes in my chest.

“With your dad. He’s not too happy about the drive coming up.”

The drive.

He should’ve already left.

Instead, he’s still here, lowering himself to the couch on the opposite end of where I’m curled up, and it’s all I can do not to crawl across the cushions and into his lap to hold him and tell him how sorry I am.

For everything.

For being a shithead when we were kids. For seducing him at Christmas when we were both hurting.

For not answering his phone calls after the accident.

For pushing him away.

“I love you,” he says quietly, his voice husky but strong. No hitch. No hesitation. “I’ve spent my whole life afraid of what it would be like to love you, but I do, Ellie. I love you.”

“You shouldn’t.” He’s going to break me.

“I never thought I was built for marriage. I never believed in forever. But I look at you, and I can feel it. I can *see* it. You? You’re everything I never knew I wanted. Never knew I *needed*. I didn’t believe in forever until I believed in you.”

Break me? No. *Destroy* me. “We’re—we’re *dangerous*, Wyatt.”

“If there’s anyone in the world who can give the universe a middle finger and tell it to kiss your ass if it thinks it’s going to stand in your way, it’s you.” He sets a piece of paper on the cushion between us. “I don’t care if it takes you two hours or forty years. I’ll wait. You will *always* be the only woman I’ll ever love.”

My breath hitches when he takes my hand and kisses my cheek, because *yes*, he’s everything I want.

Everything.

But I’m terrified.

My entire life, all I wanted was to meet the goal.

Of course I dated Patrick. He checked all the boxes. Handsome. Successful. Smart.

We could’ve had a lovely marriage where neither of us actually had to love each other, where there was no danger of a broken heart, because all we wanted was someone to be married to.

But I could have so much more.

Laughter. Joy. Tears. Heartbreak.

With a man who *knows* me. Who *gets* me. Who *accepts* me.

All of me. The good and the bad. The pretty and the ugly. The broken and the whole.

If I'm willing to go for it.

Wyatt doesn't pause on his way out the door.

He doesn't have to.

Because he's tossed the ball back in my court. And left his address, his home phone number, and his work phone number on the couch between us.

It's my turn to decide what to do.

If I'm going to do anything at all.

Chapter Thirty

Wyatt

I fucked up.

I fucked up hardcore. And I hate fucking up.

I also hate hundred-degree weather with humidity so high you can't get your balls dry when you get out of the shower in the morning, but that's life in Georgia.

I hate hearing from my colonel that there's nothing we can do right now to reapply for early release from my service commitment.

I hate that I'd be arrested for being AWOL if I left Georgia forever anyway in August when I have to take Tucker back to Copper Valley.

And I hate that I feel like a shitty parent because I *hurt*, and I don't know if I'm making this the best or the worst summer of my son's life.

"Wow, Dad, you missed that by a mile," he calls with a laugh as I jog after a baseball in my backyard. The live oaks provide enough shade to block the sun from helping the grass grow. Or maybe the grass has also lost the will to live in the damn heat.

My hand's sweating so bad my glove can barely stay on.

But Tucker's grinning and squealing and laughing while we play catch, which is really more him flinging the ball wildly about the backyard while I try to aim to gently toss a baseball into his mitt.

I love Saturdays.

And I hate Saturdays.

"Does Miss Captain Ellie know how to play catch?" Tucker asks when I toss him the ball.

"Yep."

“Is she as good as you?”

“Don’t know, bud.”

“Can I see her when I go back with Mom?”

“That’s up to your mom.”

“Ha! Dad, you missed *again*.”

I sure did.

I bend to grab the ball as my phone rings, and when I see who’s calling, I almost drop it.

Both the ball and the phone, actually.

“Hey, bud, I gotta take this,” I say. “Throw it at that back tree for a bit, okay? Be right back.”

“Okay, Dad!”

I angle around to the side of the two-bedroom brick house I’m renting a couple miles from the base and put the phone to my ear, my heart in my throat. “Ellie?”

“I thought of you while I masturbated last week and then I ran over a squirrel.”

My lungs freeze and I grunt out an unintelligible answer.

She barks out a high-pitched laugh. “Kidding. I mean, not about thinking about you while I masturbate. I mean about the squirrel. Nothing bad happened.”

“Fuck, Ellie,” I manage, because now I’m hard as a pipe and so damn glad to hear her voice and terrified what she might say next.

“And I’ve kissed your picture every night this week before I went to bed, and all that happened was I ran out of milk.”

Her voice is wobbling, which is understandable, because my knees are wobbling too. “And?” I ask.

“I miss you,” she whispers.

“I miss you too.”

“Did you know the odds of getting in an accident *and* having your house burn down in the same lifetime are less than your

odds of getting struck by lightning?”

I have no idea the real statistics. “Of course. I remember all the Trivial Pursuit answers I read.”

She laughs, and it sounds watery, and I wish like hell I could hold her right now. Or just look at her. “Shut up,” she says, but there’s none of the old venom or irritation.

This is all playful Ellie.

Hesitantly playful, but playful.

“When I’m right, it’s my duty to tell you so.” My cheeks crack with the effort of smiling, and my heart’s buzzing like it’s hooked up to a car battery. But this is what we do.

We give each other shit.

“Fine, Mister Smartypants. What are the odds I’m in your driveway?” she asks.

I freeze.

But only a split second before I’m striding to the front of the house.

The back bumper of a white Prius comes into view.

My pulse amps higher.

She’s here.

Ellie’s here.

I drop my hands to my side, just staring while she pulls herself out of the driver’s seat. She cut her hair shorter, so it’s framing her ears with crazy, beautiful curls. Her blue eyes match the deep summer sky, but the hesitancy in them almost makes my knees buckle.

“You drove,” I say dumbly.

Her lips hitch toward the sky. “The whole way. After I told the universe I was coming to talk you out of your pants. And no vultures attacked my car. Bears didn’t dash in front of me. Random ice storms didn’t pop up out of nowhere. My hotel didn’t burn down. And so I don’t have to interrupt the space-time continuum and bring about another ice age.”

I'm supposed to smile, but I still can't believe she's standing here. "What—why—"

She limps as she starts around the car, but holds a hand up when I move toward her. "Do you know what irritates the fuck out of me about you?"

My eyes shift toward the side of the house, but I can hear Tucker still laughing in back, so he missed that little F-bomb. "How perfect I am?" I guess, even though I'm so far from it.

"Exactly. You even knew I was going to say that."

Her gait is smoothing out as she rounds the car.

My fingers itch, and my arms are aching to hold her, but I wait, because I know she'll read me the riot act if I try to make this any easier on her.

"I'm not perfect, Ellie."

"Do you remember what you said? That if anyone would flip off the universe and do what I wanted anyway, it was me?"

She stops inches from me, the waver still in her voice.

I nod.

"You forgot a part."

"What part?"

"The part where I won't have to do it alone."

"I thought that's what you were afraid of."

"I don't want to be afraid to live."

"That's my girl."

"I love you, Wyatt." She finally closes the distance between us and lines her body up with mine, her hands sliding up my chest. "Do you still want me?" she whispers.

"Always."

"Even if *always* is only like thirty more seconds?"

I laugh, because she's teasing. And she's *here*. "Ellie Ryder, I will love you long after my heart stops beating. And *that*, you can count on."

She pushes up on her toes while I angle my head down to meet her, and there's no head-crashing, no black eyes, no sneezes, just her lips teasing mine, *here*, real, *here*, in the hot Georgia sauna, her hands exploring while I crush her to me because I am *never* letting her go.

Ever.

“Dad! Are you—*Miss Captain Ellie!*”

The joy in Tucker's voice puts a lump in my throat, and I'm blinking hard as Ellie pulls back and leans down to hug my son. “Hey, kiddo. You teaching your dad to play ball?”

“Yeah, he's kinda bad. He keeps missing the ball. Are you better?”

“Probably not.”

“That's okay. We have ice cream when you're bad.”

I choke on a laugh. “We *what?*”

He grins hopefully at me. “Right, Dad? Ice cream. Miss Captain Ellie, can you stay for ice cream? My dad's grilling burgers later too. You can have his. He'll go to the store for more.”

I gape at him, because he's moving in and pulling smoother moves than I have.

But Ellie hugs him again. “You are adorable.”

“I don't think he needs encouragement,” I tell her.

She rises and smiles at me, but as she does, something white lands in her hair.

My jaw slips.

Her brows furrow, and she starts to reach for her head, but I snag her hand. “Don't. Just... Hey, Tucker? Go get the gloves and bring them inside, okay? We'll get ice cream. We'll get ice cream right now.”

He giggles. “Miss Captain Ellie, a bird just pooped in your hair!”

“Go on,” I say, giving him a gentle shove in the right direction.

“Are you *kidding* me?” Ellie mutters.

I can’t decide if I want to laugh or if I need to go into full-on overprotective mode, but as soon as Tucker turns his back, she lifts a middle finger to the sky. “Bring it, asshole,” she mutters.

“If you really meant it,” I tell her, “you’d use both middle fingers.”

Something squawks, and a bird bounces off the neighbor’s side window. It falls on the ground, leaps to its feet, bounces around like it’s dizzy for a minute, and then takes off again in the opposite direction.

Ellie dusts her hands. “That’s right. Who’s in charge now?”

I don’t bother stifling a smile.

Because that’s my girl.

Epilogue

Ellie, aka a kickass hottie who's not taking any grief from the universe (and yes, Wyatt insisted that's how she be described for the rest of her life)

A year after Wyatt invaded Beck's house to dunk me in the tub—yes, that's my story, and I'm sticking to it—we're back in Shipwreck for the Pirate Festival with Tucker, and this year, we have a strategy to find the peg leg.

"It's in the fountain!" Tucker shrieks while we stroll down Blackbeard Avenue with all the clues printed out.

"Ssh," Wyatt murmurs. "Don't tell the whole town. They'll beat us to it."

Tucker grins.

He's grown at least six inches since last summer, I swear he has.

"Race you there, Miss Captain Ellie," he says.

I pretend to swoon, mostly to take advantage of the opportunity to lean into Wyatt's solid body. "I can't possibly race if I don't fuel up first."

"Dad! Dad, I need four dollars to buy Miss Captain Ellie a donut," Tucker says.

"A plain donut?" Wyatt's nose wrinkles.

"A *banana pudding* donut," Tucker says in exasperation.

"But she'll be *useless* after that," Wyatt replies dramatically. "All *I'm so full. Tucker, you have to carry on without me.*"

Tucker giggles.

"I will not," I declare. "You're just trying to sneak your way into eating half my donut."

As if I won't share with him.

He flashes my favorite smile as he hands Tucker a ten. "Also possibly true."

Tucker scampers into the bakery while we watch, Wyatt's arm casually slung around me. He kisses my crown. "He's getting too tall," he grumbles.

"I hear it happens." I squeeze him around the waist. Because of a couple scheduling snafus, it's been six weeks since Wyatt saw Tucker.

But he starts a new job at the base just north of Copper Valley in three weeks, and the three of us are hanging out every last minute of those three weeks until he reports for duty. And once summer's over, we'll get Tucker every other week.

Every week of the year.

Grady waves at us from the counter after giving Tucker his change and a donut bag, and the not-so-little boy scampers back to us. "He has *unicorn* donuts, Dad!"

"Oh, that's trouble," I murmur. "Sarcasm won't like that. But it's not like they get the monopoly on unicorns just because they have a unicorn festival."

Wyatt watches with his jaw moving up and down while Tucker pulls a pastel rainbow painted donut with a cotton candy horn out of the bag and bites into it.

I follow suit and pull out the banana pudding donut, which is oozing on the edge, and take a giant bite that makes pudding and banana slide down my chin.

"You two," Wyatt murmurs with a grin, wiping my chin for me and licking his thumb.

"C'mon, guys!" Tucker says. "It's at the fountain, I know it is!"

We trail after him, sharing the banana pudding donut, with Wyatt staying pristine and clean, and me getting pudding all over my pirate festival T-shirt.

It's my compromise with the universe.

I sometimes get dirtier than I should be, and it lets me have all the sex I want with Wyatt without making me crash, burn down houses, or accidentally kill small rodents.

Okay, okay.

The universe and I don't actually have an agreement.

I just finally decided to stop being scared, and chose to be happy, and cut back some on my hours at work, and I'm finally running again.

Not marathons yet, but I'm running.

A year makes a huge difference.

Especially with a helper for my physical therapy exercises.

Or a drill sergeant.

Depends on if Tucker or Wyatt has the job.

But if it's Wyatt, I usually pencil him into a new cartoon of Dick and the Nuts, and always in a compromising position.

Since we're the only two who ever see my doodle pad anymore, it's worked well to keep the spark alive between us.

Or possibly the fun.

Not that we need much help.

"It's like we never left," Wyatt says as we cross the street toward the garden. The wild goats are still here, and the townspeople of Shipwreck have adopted them all.

Beck's house is still standing.

Although the Frogger score has me slightly suspicious.

"Here! I know it!" Tucker calls. "*Right here!*"

Wyatt tucks in a smile.

I know that smile

It's a *something's up* smile.

"What?" I ask.

He lifts his brows like he has no idea what I'm talking about.

“Hmm.” I squint at him.

His lips spread in a full smile, and he pats my ass. “Doesn’t take much to make you suspicious, does it?”

“With you? Never.”

Tucker’s leaping around the fountain. “It’s here! It’s here!”

“Where?” I ask, following him around the statue of Thorny Rock.

“There!” he cries, pointing to Thorny Rock’s leg.

“Tucker,” I say, laughing, “he’s always had a peg leg. We’re looking for a wooden peg leg not attached to a pirate.”

“It’s there, Miss Captain Ellie,” he says, grinning big with his crooked front teeth. “Look closer!”

I lean into the statue, half-expecting Wyatt to shove me into the fountain. “Tucker, bud, I really don’t—”

I turn, and I stop, because the two most important men in my life are both down on one knee behind me.

Tucker giggles. “Or I might be wrong,” he says, his bright brown eyes dancing.

Wyatt’s smiling too, but it’s a solemn smile.

“Calamity Ellie,” he says, taking my hand, “will you do us the honor of being my pirate captain?”

“And my powder monkey!” Tucker pipes up. He fishes something out of his pocket, and suddenly I’m being presented with a plastic pirate ring.

Which is almost as beautiful as the diamond Wyatt’s now holding out.

I think.

I can’t tell exactly through the blur clouding my eyes. “Yes,” I tell them both.

One of the town goats bleats in approval from its spot on the bench where Wyatt did heavenly things to me last year, and I’m laughing through tears as each of them slide a ring onto my fingers.

“Fucking weddings,” Long Beak Silver says from the wall above us.

“Go walk the plank, you bad bird,” Tucker chides.

And the bird does.

And when he catches himself before he hits the ground, he recovers by swooping straight at my head.

I duck, my foot slips, and I go ass over teakettle into the fountain.

“Miss Captain Ellie!” Tucker shrieks.

My legs are all akimbo, my butt soaked, my T-shirt dripping, and I’m touching slimy quarters and pennies in the bottom of the fountain, but as I look at Wyatt, all I can do is laugh.

And not just because he’s doubled over as he holds out a hand to help me up.

“Maybe it’s Shipwreck,” I say while he hoists me out of the fountain. “Because this doesn’t happen anywhere else.”

“I think it’s life, Ellie,” he says. “Now you get over here and kiss me before I take my ring back.”

You can’t say I won’t be a dutiful wife, because I *do* get over there and kiss him.

I rub my wet, soggy, slimy body all over him, laughing while I kiss him, but I kiss him.

Because he’s my best friend.

My everything.

And my one true love.

Bonus Epilogue

Wyatt

There's nothing quite as beautiful as watching Ellie pause in her yoga routine next to the bar in Beck's basement to smile at her ring. Tucker's passed out cold upstairs after more fun at the pirate festival than even I thought possible, and though he'll be up with the sun, I have plans for this pretty lady that involve getting her naked ASAP and neither of us sleeping for hours.

"That as far as you can stretch?" I ask. "C'mon, Ryder. You're barely touching your knees."

She rolls her eyes, but she's still smiling. "With my nose, you big jerk. Like to see you try."

I settle on the ground next to her, on my hands and knees, and I bend over and kiss her knee. "See? Nothing to it."

"You goober," she says with a laugh, rubbing my short hair and catching me by the back of the neck so she can kiss me.

And so I can kiss her back.

If I live to be two hundred, I'll never get tired of kissing Ellie. I sometimes can't believe I spent so many years thinking she was just an annoying twit, because *this* Ellie is all heart.

And too many people overlook it because she's also determination and grit and honesty. But it's all driven by that heart that she puts into everything.

She pushes me onto my back and straddles me. "Have I told you how much I love my rings?" she whispers, because yep, she got more than one.

"Nope. I'm pretty sure you hate them and you're just humoring us."

She laughs. "You're absolutely correct. But since they come with Tucker, I guess I'll keep them." Her hair tickles my

cheeks as she bends to kiss me, and I thread my fingers through the soft, curly locks while I tease her tongue with mine.

Her phone buzzes on the floor next to us, but we both ignore it. Her fingers are trailing over the vacation stubble on my jaw, and there's nothing I love more than her touch on my face.

Except maybe the way she's rocking her pussy over my rapidly hardening cock.

That's pretty fucking amazing too.

Especially knowing how hard she's worked to get so much strength and range of motion back in her leg.

Anytime Beck gives me shit for sleeping with his sister, I point out how much I've improved her flexibility.

Her phone buzzes again. "Sorry," she murmurs. "Couldn't help myself. I posted a picture of my rings on Twitter."

"So you *do* like them."

"Maybe a little." Her eyes sparkle while she dips her head to press a kiss to my neck. I slide my hands under her shirt, and —"*Dammit*, Ellie, I hate your sports bras."

She laughs while she straightens and pulls off both her shirt *and* the stupidly tight rubber band with straps that require flexibility and acrobatics to pull off.

I don't mind the show, but it looks like wearing it would hurt.

Though I do like the way her breasts just somehow fall right into my waiting palms while she's still wrangling the thing over her head.

So soft. And those gorgeous pink tips that harden immediately under my thumbs are making my cock ache. I lean up to take one in my mouth, and she gasps and grips my shoulders. "*Wyatt*."

"Mmm," I hum against her nipple, and her breath catches again while she arches into me.

Her phone erupts in a series of buzzes, and she laughs breathlessly. "I should shut that off."

“Ignore it,” I reply, shifting my focus to her other breast while I roll her wet nipple between my thumb and finger.

“Oh, god, Wyatt, what if Tucker gets up again?” she whispers.

“I’ll hear him.”

“Like last time?”

“Ellie. He’s passed out cold.” I blow on her nipple, and it works.

She moans and grabs my face and kisses me hard, then orders me to lose my shirt too.

I’m happily obliging when her phone blows up.

Not like kitchen-fire-level blowing up, but a steady stream of buzzes that just don’t stop.

At all.

She huffs and leans over to grab it. “Stupid pho—oh.”

Her eyes go wide.

Then wider.

Her mouth follows suit.

“Wyatt,” she whispers.

That raging hard ache in my cock disappears, because something’s wrong.

Something’s *seriously* wrong.

“What? What is it?”

“Beck—” she starts.

My veins freeze over. For all the shit I’ve given him, if something happened to Beck—

“No, no,” she says quickly. “He’s okay. He’s okay. But—the jokes. The pranks. His mouth. He—”

She cuts herself off and holds her phone in front of my face.

I read the first text from Monica.

Another from her mom.

One's come in from Levi, and I realize if I had my phone on me, it would probably be blowing up too, but my phone's upstairs.

And then there's the picture.

The picture of a tweet.

Sent by Beck.

Looks like something he'd say to Ellie, but he most definitely did *not* send that Tweet to his sister.

"He's so dead," I say, my own eyeballs like saucers.

"His career is," she whispers back.

We make eye contact.

"Surprise engagement party tomorrow night at home," I croak out. "He's coming."

She's off me in a heartbeat, putting her phone to her ear, undoubtedly calling the dumbass. "He's home?" she asks me while I hear his voicemail pick up.

"Flying in overnight."

I'm on my feet now too.

I don't care how much shit he gives me for dating his sister—or how many other pranks he's pulled on me this past year alone—he's my brother.

And he just made the mistake of his life.

"I'll start packing," I say while I throw on my shirt.

She leaves her sports bra on the ground and struggles into her tank top. "I'm calling Mom and Dad."

"Tucker can sleep in the car."

She winces. "But the festival—"

"Ellie."

She studies me a minute, then nods.

Would I rather spend the night making her moan my name?

Fuck, yes.

But family comes first. And if the way Ellie's phone is blowing up all over again is any indication, family needs her right now.

And me.

And every last one of the guys from the neighborhood.

For what Beck just did, he's going to need all the support he can get.

"Ellie?" I say softly while I trail her up the stairs.

"What?"

"You know this isn't because we got engaged, right? We don't actually cause disasters."

She pauses to look at me, and then we both laugh. Except neither one of us actually thinks it's funny.

We're loading up the car before she says any more about it. Tucker's objecting to being strapped into his booster seat in the middle of the night, and Ellie's about to climb in to sit next to him and snuggle him as best she can in the car when she turns to look at me.

"We really are cursed," she says slowly, but then a smile pops out. "But there's no one in the world I'd rather be cursed with."

* * *

Hey, awesome reader! Ellie Ryder here with the best news ever —my brother, Beck, has his own book! It's called [America's Geekheart](#), and ooooooh, is it fun to watch him get tortured in the name of love. You'll ADORE it! Plus, you're totally gonna find out exactly what stupid thing he just did. Click [HERE](#) to go right to [America's Geekheart](#) on Amazon.

P.S. If you want to see a couple bonus short scenes from my and Wyatt's happily ever after, click [HERE](#) to go right to where

you can download them. You'll also get the option of signing up for THE PIPSTER REPORT, a weekly newsletter that's hilariously awesome and occasionally features cameos from yours truly.

About the Author

Pippa Grant is a stay-at-home mom and housewife who loves to escape into sexy, funny stories way more than she likes perpetually cleaning toothpaste out of sinks and off toilet handles. When she's not reading, writing, sleeping, or trying to prepare her adorable demon spawn to be productive members of society, she's fantasizing about chocolate chip cookies.

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Want more from Pippa? Read on for:

1. Sneak peek of *The Bro Code* series, book #2: *America's Geekheart*.
2. Pippa's Booklist

America's Geekheart Sneak Peek

If you love hot, sexy Hollywood men, Tweets gone terribly wrong, and charmingly adorable heroines looking for where they fit in the world, read on for an uncorrected early excerpt of Beck Ryder's story, [America's Geekheart!](#)

Beckett Ryder, aka a man completely oblivious that he's just mistweeted his way to being public enemy number one

Life is pretty fucking perfect.

Weather's a glorious seventy-five degrees and sunny on this brilliant June morning. My new jogging shoes fit like I'm running on a cloud. The green leafy canopy over Reynolds Park is hitting that perfect level of shade, and I've got my tunes dialed up and nowhere to be until my sister's engagement party tonight.

Ten solid hours of doing whatever the hell I want.

I'm grinning to myself as I run the familiar pathway through the city park, so glad to be back in Copper Valley. Love my job, but there is no place in the world like home.

I nod to a woman pushing a jogging stroller going the other way, and she scowls and flips me off.

Odd.

Crazies are normal when I'm in LA, or sometimes in Europe, but here?

My hometown *loves* me.

I dial down the volume on my tunes and double-check my shirt.

Nope, nothing offensive about a Fireballs T-shirt. They might be the biggest losers in baseball, but they're lovable losers.

I glance lower, and—yep, remembered to put pants on today. Shorts, really. My brand, naturally, but not because they're *my* brand. More because I picked them to be in my RYDE fashion line because they're really comfortable.

I might've been singing along to Levi's latest hit, but I'm not *that* bad. Sure, I was the eye candy in the boy band Bro Code back in the day, but I can still carry a tune.

She must've mistaken me for someone else. Or her fingers are stuck that way. Resting bitch face knows no boundaries and can happen to even the most innocent victims. Probably not her fault.

I keep on truckin', and an elderly woman on a bench shakes her cane at me and says something I don't catch while her dog yaps along. I pop out one earbud.

"You're a disgrace to good men everywhere," she crows.

I slow and face her, jogging in place. "Ma'am?"

"Your poor momma must be ashamed."

Ah. The underwear police. Not so unusual. While Levi went on to be a pop sensation when we called it quits as Bro Code, Cash took off for Hollywood, Tripp hung up his fame and settled down, and Davis went into hiding, I took my own route.

My post-boy-band career choices have been known to raise a few eyebrows.

"Yes, ma'am. She's horrified. Y'all have a nice day now." I salute her and head back down the path toward the fountain at the center of the park.

In the years since I modeled my first pair of briefs for Giovanni & Valentino, before I branched out into creating a fashion empire of my own, I've had my share of haters. Goes with the business.

But my *momma* isn't ashamed of me.

No more than she was during my boy band days.

If anything, she's amused. Resigned sometimes, but amused.

Ellie—my sister—gives me trouble. So do all the guys we grew up with.

That's why I love them.

They keep me grounded.

Hell, half of them needed the grounding themselves.

The path curves, and there she is.

My fountain.

Okay, fine, she's not *mine*. But she's on the city's crest, and she says *home* to me.

I love home, but running the Beck Ryder fashion empire—yeah, go ahead and snort, it's funny—keeps me away a lot.

I burst out into the sunshine and make the loop around the curved sidewalk, feet pounding the concrete, mist brushing my face, the five stone dolphins around the fountain joyfully spitting water into the stone mermaids' buckets on the second tier while a circle of seahorses blows water horns.

The early summer breeze rustles the birch and sugar maple leaves shimmering in the sunlight. The air's clear. The sky's my favorite blue. Flowers explode in reds and yellows and purples in the carefully cultivated landscaping that masks the downtown skyscrapers and mutes the noise of the city.

It's my own private welcome home party from nature.

Can't wait to be here more often.

Soon. *So* soon.

I circle the fountain and head back toward the path that leads to Schuler Tower and my penthouse at the edge of the park. Tomorrow, I have to get back to work—there's always work when you're running an empire and launching a new foundation—but today, my staff has the day off, my phone's still on airplane mode, and the whole Copper Valley metro area is my oyster.

No phone, no work, no responsibilities.

Maybe I'll leave the city behind and head up into the Blue Ridge mountains for a hike. Nap up there in the fresh air. Eat. Eat some more. Get back in time for Ellie and Wyatt's surprise engagement party.

Rumor has it they're serving barbecue.

I haven't had good barbecue in months.

I'm so busy drooling over the thought of real Southern pulled pork that I almost miss the yoga class.

By itself, a yoga class on the lawn by the fountain isn't unusual. But this yoga class seems less into the Namaste and more into hurtling their yoga bricks.

Specifically, at me.

They charge me as a group, a yoga-pants-clad mob racing over the hilly green grass, shouting obscenities and shaking fists. One lady has her mat rolled into a cylinder and is leading the pack *Braveheart* style.

"*Creep!*"

"*Jerk!*"

"*You go home and get your own damn apron!*"

My pulse amps into sprint territory.

"Hey, hey." I hold my hands up in surrender while I jog backwards, because seriously, *what the hell?* "Y'all know I love you. What's—"

A shoe hurtles at my face. Another yoga brick clips my shoulder.

"Get him, ladies," the *Braveheart* lady yelled.

Oh, *shit*.

They want blood.

I don't have a clue what I did, but these ladies want blood. *My* blood.

My run morphs into a sprint, but for once, my brain's spinning faster than my legs.

The mother and her stroller and her middle finger. The grandmother and her cane. And now a yoga class.

I'm outnumbered.

Probably outsmarted and outmaneuvered too.

Another yoga brick.

And I'm still too far from safety.

"*Shut up and let your underwear do the talking!*" A clump of —oh, man, that's disgusting. Flying horse poop. Awesome.

I pump my legs harder. Knees higher. Like I'm gonna beat Usain Bolt. Running. *Sprinting*. Away from a mob of angry women.

This is new.

As is having a mob of angry women gaining on me.

The ladies usually love me. Or if not, at least they tolerate me with patient smiles.

Maybe a run wasn't the best cure for jetlag.

But how was I supposed to know today's *International Beck Ryder Is The Enemy Day*?

"I'll show you where *you* belong," one of the women screeches.

I don't have a clue where she thinks I belong, or why she thinks I belong there, but I know one thing.

I am totally screwed.

~END SNEAK PEEK~

[Click here to get AMERICA'S GEEKHEART today!](#)

Other books by Pippa Grant

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Arrogant Devil

R.S. Grey

A full-length STANDALONE romantic comedy from USA TODAY bestselling author R.S. Grey.

Everyone in Cedar Creek, Texas, knows Jack McNight is an arrogant devil. Physically, I get it: he's tan and fit, with coal-black hair that's clearly been scorched by hellfire. Oh, and his personality? It burns just as hot.

When I show up on the doorstep of Blue Stone Ranch, I'm run-down and rockin' my last pair of underwear. I'm hoping for a savior, but instead, I find him.

My opinion of Jack is marred by a dismal first impression, but his opinion of me is tainted even before I arrive. He's heard I'm a spoiled princess there to take advantage of his goodwill. To him, I'm more trouble than I'm worth.

Our button-pushing banter should get under my skin. His arrogance should be a major turn-off. Problem is, devils are known to offer their own form of temptation.

Every one of his steely glares sends a shiver down my spine.

Every steamy encounter leaves me reeling.

Sure, it could be the Texas heat messing with my head, but there's no way I'll survive the summer without silencing him with a kiss and wrestling him out of those Wranglers.

Who knows...going to bed with the devil might just be the salvation I've been looking for all along.

Meredith

I left my husband last night. There's something so nice about the past tense—*left*. He's still in California. Meanwhile, I'm standing in a gas station in Middle-of-Nowhere, Texas. I have no money, no car. I pawned a gaudy diamond tennis bracelet to purchase a plane ticket to San Antonio, and to its credit, the bracelet also paid for the taxi currently fueling up at the pump outside. However, my cash has run out and my stomach is growling.

I eyeball the shelves lined with an array of sugary junk food. It's the good stuff: half-dozen packs of white powdered donuts that are messier than glitter bombs and stacks of sad, deflated honey buns. It all seems like what aliens would come up with if tasked with recreating human food. In spite of this, my mouth waters just looking at it all. I want to tear open a bag of Doritos and waterfall the chips straight into my mouth. I want to double-fist the ancient, desiccated hot dogs destined to forever spin on greasy rollers—that's how hungry I am.

I didn't plan my departure very well. I didn't plan it at all, in fact. Last night, I was lying on my side of the bed, wide awake. Andrew was snoring loudly beside me, just as confident as ever that the sun would rise in the morning like it always does. An hour earlier, he'd come in late from a work dinner with lipstick smeared on his cheek. His white collar, meanwhile, was pristine.

I had a million reasons for leaving him—enough to fill this entire gas station snack aisle, enough to make any marriage counselor put a big down payment on a vacation home—but last night, I only needed one. I left, and that's all that matters. There's half a country between him and me, and the only thing I have to worry about now is putting my next foot forward... well, that and the fact that I have nowhere to go, no money, no job, and no food. I'm also rapidly running out of sellable accessories, but let's not get bogged down by the details.

I stare at a can of peanuts sitting on the shelf. Yesterday, I could have slapped my black AMEX down on the checkout counter and dragged my arm across the shelf, knocking food into my basket like a contestant on *Supermarket Sweep*. Now, I can't afford peanuts; Andrew canceled my cards as soon as he realized I left.

I smile, imagining how pissed he must have been when the truth dawned on him. He never thought I'd do it. It was part of his spiel: *Who pays the bills? Who buys your clothes? You're nothing without me, Meredith—worthless.*

In a purely financial sense, he was right about the whole “worthless” thing. My net worth currently consists of a couple dollars and some loose change. He was wrong about the other part though. I left him, and I did it in the middle of the night with nothing but the clothes on my back. It's the outfit I had laid out for a charity luncheon—an event that must be taking place at this very moment without me. The ensemble is a frilly white blouse, Hermes belt, and designer jeans.

My great escape was a victim of my fleeting courage. I knew if I sat down and planned it all out, I'd lose my nerve. I needed to have no time to back out, no second-guessing. Now, I realize I should have been a *bit* more practical. I should have packed myself some getaway snacks, water, maybe some sneakers.

Honestly, though, I never thought I would be here. Of all the places I could have run to, Texas seemed to make the most sense because of my sister—well, technically she's my *half*-sister. I recall the phone conversation I had with her last night while I was at the airport trying to catch a red-eye. I had to dial her number about a dozen times before she finally answered.

“Meredith?” she asked, obviously shocked to see my name appear on her phone screen. We aren't exactly close. She probably has me in her phone as *That Half-Sister I Hardly Know, Meredith*. To be fair, I have her in my phone as *Half-Helen*.

“Helen! Hey!”

She didn't answer back right away. There was so much static on her end of the line.

"Are you there? Can you hear me?" I plugged my free ear with a finger and hoped the call would suddenly come through clearer.

"Barely!" she shouted. "What's going on? I have like fifty missed calls from you."

I blanched. "Yeah, well, it's actually kind of a long story, but I'm on my way to Texas."

"*Texas?*"

She sounded shocked, and that's fair. She's lived in the Lone Star State for six years and I've never visited.

I cut right to the chase since time was another luxury I'd abandoned.

"Yes, and I have a favor to ask... a rather big one actually."

"Speak up, Meredith, I can hardly hear you. You need a favor?"

"Yes, well, that is"—I raised my voice—"I was wondering if I could stay with you for a while?!"

"What?"

"I'm actually already headed your way."

A lighthearted, singsong chuckle on my end did not ease her shock.

"Are you kidding? Brent, hold on, it's Meredith."

I heard a door close and then she dropped a bomb.

"Well, I hope you haven't left yet. I'm in Paris."

"You're in Paris?! *Paris* Paris?"

For the record, my sister is not a jetsetter. I hoped she meant Paris, Texas, not the croissant-filled country half a world away.

"Yes, *Paris* Paris. Brent and I are traveling for the next three months while our house gets renovated."

"You've got to be kidding."

I really almost broke down then. My throat was tightening. Tears were locked and loaded. People were starting to look at me and wonder if TSA had made a mistake letting me through security.

My flight was already boarding as my sister continued, “We’ve been wanting to redo the kitchen and bathrooms for a while...”

What the hell does that have to do with Paris?

“...so we thought, why not make a big trip out of it while our house is unlivable?”

Unlivable. I guess there’s more than one way to demolish a home, a life.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Let’s see, I told the bank, the contractors, the permit office—oh darnit! Now that you mention it, I *did* forget to tell the half-sister I haven’t spoken to since when...*Christmas?*”

Her tone implied that was my fault, and it was—partly.

“Sorry, I’ve been MIA.”

“It’s fine. Listen, why don’t we try to schedule something for the holidays like we always say we will? This time we’ll do it. I’ll fix up the guest room for you and Andrew—”

I rubbed my eyes, hoping I could push the tears back to where they belonged. There was so much to catch her up on.

“No, Helen. It’s a long story, but I need to come *now*. Can I stay in the house while you guys are gone?”

“It’s a disaster zone. There are exterior walls missing. That’s why we left.”

“Right.” Of course. She’d just told me that. “What about jobs? Do you know of anyone hiring? I could update my resume...I think I have it saved on my old university email somewhere.”

At that point Helen began to crack up, then she repeated my request to Brent, and together, their chorus of laughter pounded on my heart like it was a punching bag.

Oh ha-ha-ha, your life is falling apart before your very eyes. Stop, stop—you're killing me!

“Is this a prank? If so, it’s a very expensive, overseas-phone-call prank. Did Andrew put you up to this?”

“Last call for passengers for flight 365, service to San Antonio. Final boarding at gate 12.”

She must have heard the announcement, because her next words were delivered in a much more serious tone. “Oh my god, you’re really at the airport, aren’t you?”

I was flying down the terminal, knocking down any and all children and elderly people in my path, trying to get to my gate before they closed the doors without me. They even said my name over the loudspeaker. I always wondered what kind of dummy has to have their name announced like that. Me. I’m the dummy.

“Yes. Helen, I’m coming to Texas and I need your help.” I was out of breath from running as I pleaded with her. “*Please*. I can’t explain, but I just need to cash in whatever love you might have for me.”

She sighed, exasperated. She was always exasperated with me about one thing or another, which was one of the reasons I hadn’t bothered visiting in the past.

“Fine. Call me when you land.”

Turns out I didn’t need to call her. She apparently guessed the gist of my situation while I was sitting in a metal tube 30,000 feet in the air and came to her own conclusions. By the time I landed, I had a dozen text messages from her, each one berating me for my impulsiveness and apparent irrationality.

Helen: *Is this all a game, or are you actually leaving Andrew? I’m not going to start calling in favors for you if you’re just going to quit and fly back to California in a week.*

Seems cold, right? Well, here’s the thing: Helen and I don’t exactly see eye to eye. We never have. We’re ten years apart in age, and our father left her mother for mine. In her eyes, I had the glorious, perfect childhood that was taken from her...and okay, sure, those first few years were pretty good. I got to go

on family vacations and every year I had one big Christmas instead of two small ones, but then just like he'd done before, our dad got bored and moved on to the next woman. We should have bonded over our soap opera-worthy father figure, but she graduated and moved out the second she had the chance. Ever since, we've both basically been pretending the other sister doesn't exist.

When I made it outside the airport in Texas, I tried to call her. I dialed...scouted forward in the taxi line...dialed again. I wanted to explain the situation as quickly as possible, and I couldn't do that over text. It was a lot to explain, and well, my fingers were still shaking from what I'd done. Also, the sordid truth is best explained sans emojis.

When she didn't answer, I was forced to text her and keep it brief.

Meredith: *I left Andrew for good. I need a job and a place to stay. If you can help, that would be wonderful. If you can't, that would be less wonderful.*

Helen: *Fine. I'll ask Jack if he needs a temp. I'll send you instructions for how to get to Blue Stone Ranch.*

Meredith: *You are wonderful.*

Helen: *Don't make me regret this.*

So anyway, that's why I'm here, spending what little money I have on a road trip across Central Texas.

Blue Stone Ranch is where my sister has worked for the last six years. I can't begin to imagine what she does as the executive assistant to the owner. *Shine his spurs? Shear his sheep? Bale his hay?* It's all a little out of my realm, but I'll do it all and *more*—gladly.

My stomach growls again so loudly that I know the cashier manning the gas station counter can hear it. Thankfully, she seems too distracted with problems of her own.

I peek out the front window just as the taxi driver finishes up at the pump. No one knows the truth about my life except him. He's heard it all. In the few hours since he picked me up from the airport, he's acted as my chauffeur and silent therapist.

Even better, there's no way he'll be repeating any of the details I dumped on him because I'm pretty sure he's had headphones in the entire time. All morning, he's responded with resigned grunts and sighs—the universal language of annoyance. I'm pretty sure he's tempted to get back into the taxi and leave me to fend for myself in the Texas badlands.

I need to get a move on.

Driven by a primal urge, I yank the can of peanuts off the shelf and carry them to the counter.

This feeling in the pit of my stomach is new, and I'm pretty sure it's not hunger-related. This is like nothing I've ever done before. I've never stood on my own two feet—I've never had to. I married Andrew right out of college. He was seven years older, already well on his way up the ladder at a big production company. I moved out of my college apartment straight into his multimillion-dollar house in Beverly Hills.

It's funny how much I used to fear what is now happening to me. I assumed it was a fate worse than death to end up alone, poor, and directionless. If Andrew taught me anything, it's that I was wrong.

I plunk the nuts on the checkout counter and the attendant meets my eye. She offers a weak smile, and I can see the strain of life etched in the crow's feet around her eyes.

“How are you this morning?” I ask with a small, empathetic smile.

For a second, her mouth starts to form a generic answer, but she must see something she recognizes in my expression because she laughs quietly and shakes her head.

“Honestly? I've been better.”

I nod. “Same here.”

“Just this?”

She's pointing to the can of peanuts. I look down and the light catches brightly on my diamond wedding ring. It's my last tie to the life I'm trying to leave behind, the last vestige of a man who for five years covered me with shiny things while trying

his damnedest to dull my own sparkle. I could sell it and use the money as a cushion—Lord knows I need it—but I won't. I don't want any more of his money. Besides, soon, I'll have my own. I basically just got hired at Blue Stone Ranch. I can see it now: me in full denim overalls, bandana tied around my neck, wheat stalk between my teeth. I will be the best employee that ranch has ever seen, just as soon as I get there.

Without a shadow of hesitation, I slide the heavy jewel off my finger and drop it on the chipped linoleum counter with a clack.

“Get a good price for that,” I say, shaking the can of nuts. “I know I did.”

Jack

“Fuckin’ hell. Who left the damn gate open!?”

There are pigs everywhere: in the garden, the barn, down the gravel drive. I even found one in the house, a chunky little piglet rooting around in my kitchen, canvassing for crumbs. I snatched him up and walked out onto my porch to find half my ranch hands running low to the ground with arms outstretched, trying to catch as many pigs as they could before I noticed.

Pigs are squealing, ranch hands are tripping and cursing to high heaven, and the head gardener is over near the parsnips looking like an outmatched bouncer at a 21-and-up bar. It looks like a ridiculous rodeo sport that should involve elementary school-aged children, not grown-ass men.

“Max!” I shout, catching the attention of one of the younger guys as he runs in front of my porch. He stops pursuing a pig, whips off his baseball cap, and wipes sweat from his brow. “Weren’t you on hog duty today?”

His eyes go wide in fear. “I swear to God I closed the gate after the morning feed!”

“Might wanna take back that oath because it sure doesn’t look like you did.”

He frowns and looks away, swallowing slowly. His voice cracks with fear as he answers, “Damn sure I did, but I s’pose —”

I step forward and drop the piglet in his hands. “You have ten minutes to fix this. If these pigs aren’t put up by then, I’m docking your pay.”

“Yes sir.” He tips his head in a nod and then he’s off again, running full speed with the piglet in hand.

On another day, I’d find this scene amusing. Today, I’ve reached my wit’s end. It’s Monday and I’ve nearly lost my

mind. My executive assistant, Helen, is gallivanting halfway across the world. My housekeeper quit last week to move closer to her daughter, and now my ranch hands are recreating Three Stooges skits on the clock. I have too much on my plate and I feel overwhelmed. I don't like it. I've run Blue Stone Ranch for a decade and I hate to think I've gone soft in the last few years and relied too much on Helen. She warned me I wouldn't be able to function with her in Paris, and now I regret giving her time off. Is it too much to ask that she work every damn day from now until she croaks? What's so great about France anyway? That place made Van Gogh so depressed he cut his own ear off.

I stomp up to my office on the second floor and slam the door. My grandmother is downstairs, standing at the living room window, thoroughly enjoying the pig debacle taking place outside. The old bird takes too much pleasure in my problems.

I take a seat at my desk and heave a deep breath. My ball cap gets tossed onto the desk and I drag a hand through my hair, no doubt making it stand every which way. I need a haircut. Normally, Helen would've scheduled something. I sigh and put the cap on backward, saving that problem for another day.

There are 32 emails waiting for my reply. I don't answer a single one of them. Instead, I turn my attention to the blinking red light on my work phone. I have no doubt I have enough voicemails to occupy my entire morning. Once again, I curse Helen for leaving me to fend for myself.

Blue Stone Ranch used to be a 1000-acre cattle ranch. In the late 1960s, during a bad drought, my grandfather sold off most of the cattle and started a restaurant, Blue Stone Farm. With its farm-to-table fare and world-class barbecue, it was an overnight success. My father expanded that endeavor with a winery, and since then, the company has grown tenfold. Now, families travel from all across the south to experience everything Blue Stone Ranch has to offer. We have a small luxury bed & breakfast, a vineyard, a restaurant, and a wedding venue. Some might call it being diversified; others might say it's a good way to get stretched too thin.

It's been ten years since I took the helm, and even with managers running each arm of the business, I still feel like I'm in over my head most days.

I start scrolling through voicemails, listening to a few seconds of each before I skip to the next one. When I get to one Helen left late last night, I try not to get my hopes up. *Please say France sucks and you're coming back to work.*

"Hey Jack, call me when you get this. It's urgent."

I call her back immediately and she answers after the second ring.

"Missed me too much? Understandable. So when's your flight home?" I ask in lieu of a greeting.

She sighs, annoyed. "Stop that. I'm not coming home."

"Aren't you sick of traveling yet?"

"We've only been here a week."

"Paris can't be that entertaining."

"Brent and I are really enjoying it."

"Seen the Mona Lisa yet? Starry Night? Stuff's all on Google, hi-res and everything."

"*Jack—*"

"Right, well, did you hear that Mary left two days after you did? Yeah, moved back to Houston to be closer to her daughter. I've lost my assistant and my housekeeper in one fell swoop, so I don't really have time to chat about how much you're enjoying your vacation. I have enough on my plate as is."

"Well, that's why I'm calling—I have a solution for that. I found you a temp."

"I told you I don't need one."

"And *I* think you do." She trudges on before I can argue. "My sister will be there later today and she's going to fill in for me while I'm gone."

"*Sister?* I didn't know you had a sister."

I lean back in my chair, suddenly interested. I imagine Helen 2.0: an older, no-nonsense brunette with a tight bun. Picture your favorite elementary school teacher, the hard-ass who managed to wrangle a group of disobedient nine-year-olds *and* teach them long division—that's Helen.

“Yeah, well, I don't talk to her much, which is probably why you didn't know she existed. She's ten years younger and we didn't grow up together. In fact, I hardly know her. Still, she says she needs a job, and it's perfect timing since you sound like you're pulling your hair out without me running the show.”

I can hardly believe my luck. I didn't think I'd survive three months without Helen, and here she is, fixing my problems from across the pond.

“Perfect. Send her my way. If she's anything like you, she'll save my ass.”

Helen laughs. “Bad news: she and I couldn't be more different if we tried.”

“Well if she has even half your work ethic, she'll still be a pretty damn good employee.”

There's a pregnant silence that gives birth to a 10lb-4oz baby silence. Helen should be singing her sister's praises, but she isn't, and I'm suspicious.

“Helen, what aren't you telling me?”

“I don't want to taint your image of her before she even arrives.”

“If you want me to hire her, you'd better start talking.”

“Well...I guess I just don't want you to expect her to be like me. Meredith is...” She sighs. “Meredith is one of those lucky people who life comes a little easier for. She was spoiled rotten growing up. We have different moms, and she looks just like hers: petite, beautiful, you know the type. Our father and—hell, half the world always gave her more attention.”

“Is this leading somewhere?”

I can practically hear her roll her eyes.

“Anyway, she moved to California for college, married some rich movie producer right after graduation who dotes on her nonstop. All I’m saying is she’s used to a certain kind of life. Don’t expect too much...grit.”

“Now I’m confused. Why the hell does she need a job working for me?”

“Apparently she’s up and left her husband.”

“The doting, rich movie producer? Makes sense.”

“Exactly. There’s no way she would have left him willingly. If you ask me, I bet Meredith got herself into some kind of trouble. Maybe she has a spending problem or a boxed wine habit and he threatened to cut her off. Rich people always find some way to fill up their time with vices. I wouldn’t be surprised. Like I said, she was spoiled when we were younger. This is what happens when you’ve never wanted for anything.”

As she drones on, I swear another ten emails pile up in my inbox. I have too much to do to be sitting on the phone listening to a story about some woman I have no plan to employ.

I sit up and sandwich the phone between my shoulder and ear so I can start replying to the first email. “Well, you’ve given quite the glowing recommendation for this suspected overspending alcoholic. Good thing she’s someone else’s problem.”

“Jack, I already promised her I’d get her a position with you.”

“Why the hell would you do that?”

“She’s family. If I were there, I’d help her.”

“Let’s compromise: you get on a flight home, and I’ll consider it. Deal?”

“*Jack.*”

She sounds exasperated, but then so am I.

“I gotta go. My *assistant* left me high and dry and I have emails to answer.”

“She’s my sister.”

“And?”

“And I’m calling in a favor. I’ve worked for you for six years and have never once called in a favor.”

“You’re telling me you’re going to waste that on some spoiled brat who’s bound to go crawling back to California when she gets her first splinter?”

“Isn’t that what you want? The sooner she leaves, the sooner you get your peace and quiet back.”

She makes a good point.

“You owe me.”

“I’ll log in to your email remotely and answer those emails you have stacked up. How’s that?”

“Let’s see if the princess shows up first. Something tells me she’ll take one look at the place and suddenly decide her valley girl life doesn’t look quite so bad anymore.”

Meredith

“I can’t go on,” the taxi driver says, pulling over to the side of the road and putting his car in park.

“Boy, do I know what you mean,” I agree ruefully.

“No, I mean, you gotta get out.”

“Oh, actually, I don’t think we’re there yet. We still have a while.”

I lean forward and point through the front windshield as if to prove my point. There’s nothing but trees and dirt road until the sky meets the horizon.

“Lady, this is it. Odometer says I’m officially losing money on you. I run a business, not a church shuttle.”

I officially regret my bold, symbolic gesture with the diamond ring.

“How about you give me your address and I’ll send more money after my first paycheck—”

“Yeah right, I’ve heard that one about a million times.”

I’m going to have to get creative.

“If only there was something I could do for you...” I say, making my eyebrows dance suggestively. “Non-sexually, of course. I could clip those hard-to-reach toenails, or—*or*, how about plucking back some of that unibrow you’ve got going on —”

“GET OUT,” he insists, and I know it’s hopeless.

The crabby old man kicks me to the curb—or rather, the edge of the dirt road. His tires stir up dust and he turns back for the main road. A sign back there claimed Blue Stone Ranch was only a few miles in this direction. *A few miles...shit.*

For the first time all morning, I'm grateful I don't have much with me, just my purse. Inside, hilariously, I have what used to be my life's essentials: a dead cell phone, a makeup bag for touchups, a bottle of perfume, my wallet, breath mints, a tub of La Mer moisturizer, and the wrapper of a protein bar I failed to ration properly.

No tennis shoes. No GPS tracking system. Hell, a compass would be much appreciated at this point.

As it is, I'm on my own, for real this time. I even left the last of my precious peanuts in the seat pocket of the taxi.

It's fine. I'll be fine. Everything is fine.

I hoist my purse higher on my shoulder and set off down the road. The soles of my loafers have such little padding that I feel every pebble. I'd walk in the grass beside the road, but it's thick and overgrown, and I fear snakes more than I fear pebbles digging into the soles of my feet. I have nothing but time as I trudge along in the dirt. I try to convince myself I only have a little bit longer, but truthfully, I have no way to gauge how far I've gone. I left the fancy watch that tracks my steps back in California.

I distract myself by trying to see the positive details of my current situation: I am alive and well, I've taken back control of my life, and I am on my way to building something new. I am at the start of a grand adventure. Sure, there will be bumps along the way, but anything is better than the direction I was headed with Andrew.

I think I hear the rumble of a car behind me. I whip around, half convinced I'm hallucinating from dehydration (should've opted for low sodium peanuts), and spot an old truck rumbling down the road. It's coming straight for me, and two things run through my mind at once. First: *Hallelujah! My salvation has arrived!* Second: *In what part of Texas did that chainsaw massacre take place?*

Honestly, I'm just happy to see another human being, even if he turns out to be a cannibal with power tools. The truck barrels closer and it's too late to escape detection, so I settle for a cheerful wave and one of my big, enchanting smiles. The

gesture should say, *Hi there! Look at me, I'm too pleasant to murder!*

The truck pulls to a stop beside me and two older, tanned men with beat-up cowboy hats take up the entire bench seat. The one closer to me rolls down the window and props his elbow on the sill. I scan the front seat for killing implements but instead spot a tub of chewing tobacco and two matching Big Gulps.

“Lost, darlin’?”

DARLIN! I swoon and forget I’m supposed to be fearing for my life.

“As a matter of fact, I am.” I smile and explain confidently, “I’m looking for Blue Stone Ranch.”

The man near me frowns and tips his head, confused. “You mean Blue Stone Farm?”

I’m pretty sure Helen said Blue Stone Ranch in her email.

“Umm, now I’m not sure. Is there a difference?”

“Blue Stone Farm is the fancy restaurant a few miles that way.” He points back in the direction I’ve been walking and my heart sinks. *No. NO.* I am not turning back. “Blue Stone Ranch is...well, a ranch.”

“Where would I find Jack McNight?”

He nods. “Jack’ll be at the ranch.”

“Okay then that’s where I’m going.”

They exchange a glance, and then the one closer to me nods toward the bed of the truck. “We’re going that way too. It ain’t the smoothest ride, but you’re welcome to hop in there if ya want.”

The driver thumps his friend on the head. “Karl, don’t be an idiot—you get in the back and let the nice lady sit up here. Didn’t your mama teach you jack shit?”

I leap into action before Karl can move. “No! No. It’s all right. I insist on riding in the back. It’ll remind me of hayrides when I was a kid. I’m very nostalgic.”

My survival instincts have kicked in again: at least if I'm sitting back there, I can toss myself out of the truck if I get the feeling they've decided to kidnap me.

It takes me a few tries before I'm able to hoist myself into the bed of the truck using one of the back tires. I am a picture of grace and elegance as I take a seat near the tailgate, situate my purse on my lap, and then smack the bed twice to signal that I'm ready. The truck shifts into drive and away we go.

I spend the next ten minutes in hell as we trudge along the neglected country road. It's a bumpy ride, to say the least. I spit dirt out of my mouth and squeeze my eyes closed to keep dust out of them. Pebbles ping off the tires and somehow fling themselves at my head. I'm getting assaulted on all fronts, and that doesn't even include what the wind is doing to my hair. It takes me too long to realize it's much more pleasant to sit with my back against the cab of the truck rather than the tailgate. As we pull up to a tall, arched wrought iron gate that boldly announces that we've arrived at Blue Stone Ranch, I am convinced I look as if I've just stepped off the front line of a war. I think I even have some blood on my forehead from a particularly beefy bug.

My current physical condition aside, I'm shocked by the sight before me. I've never set foot on a ranch before, but I had concocted a pretty dismal picture in my head, preparing for the worst so I wouldn't be disappointed. Instead, it seems I've stumbled upon what can only be described as an adorable movie set. The main road we're on dead-ends into a circular gravel drive, smack-dab in the center of it all. On one side of the circle, there's a two-story white farmhouse with a metal roof and an inviting porch swing swaying in the wind. There are potted plants and flowers soaking up the sun on the rim of the porch. Beyond that, cows amble in a pasture beneath the shade of massive oak trees. I scan past a large chicken coop and a field with a few glistening horses, and beside that, a massive red barn divides the animals from the largest garden I've ever seen.

There are people at work everywhere—scratch that, not people, *men*. There isn't a single female in sight, which is

probably why I garner quite a few sideways stares as I ride up in the back of the truck like I'm the grand marshal of the saddest one-car parade in history.

The truck pulls up and parks beside the other ranch vehicles. I hop down from the bed and try my best to restore my battered appearance, dabbing tentatively at the blood on my forehead, patting my hair down, and then heaving a sigh of defeat. At this point, it is what it is, and it's gonna be what it's gonna be.

"He'll probably be up in the house," Karl says, pointing in the direction of the farmhouse I was just admiring. "Jack."

I tip my head in thanks and offer a limp wave before I set off to meet my new boss. All eyes are on me as I walk the few yards between the truck and the front porch. I stick out like a sore thumb in this setting, but instead of giving in to the sudden flood of nerves, I try to recall any details Helen might have mentioned about her job over the years.

Let's see, I know she's an executive assistant, and in that role she...assists. *Damn.* I know nothing. *Has she ever said anything about her boss?* I can't remember. I mean, she must enjoy her job if she's been here for almost six years...or maybe she's stayed so long because it's her only option? It's probably hard to find work in such a rural area—and I mean *RURAL*. The journey from San Antonio to Cedar Creek felt like I was going through some kind of time warp. With each passing mile, the countryside became less and less populated, the roads transitioned from concrete to asphalt to dirt, and I'm not sure they even get cell service out here. That's what I'm thinking about when I knock on the front door of the farmhouse and it's whipped open a second later.

A tall, thin woman stands on the threshold wearing jeans and a pearl snap shirt. Her white-gray hair is cropped short in a pixie style and her steel eyes seem to cut right through me. She's not wearing a stitch of makeup. Still, she's beautiful, regal almost, with a few wrinkles rimming the corners of her eyes.

I open my mouth to introduce myself, but she beats me to the punch.

“Whatever you’re sellin’, we either don’t want it or already got it.”

Then she steps back and slams the door in my face.

I’m so shocked that it takes me a minute to gather my wits before I knock again. This time I hear her sigh on the other side of the door before she pulls it open.

“Oh, and we’ve all heard the story and found the Lord, and we don’t need any more, thank you.”

Another slam.

I don’t knock again because I can see the woman watching to see if I’ll leave.

“Don’t you people ever listen? Do I need to go get my shotgun or are you gonna leave this porch without me having to chase you off it?”

My eyes are wide as saucers. Is she really going to shoot me if I don’t get off her porch? What kind of place *is* Texas?

I put my hands up like she’s a police officer and I’m under arrest, then I proceed with caution.

“I’m not selling anything. Please don’t shoot me.”

The door swings open again. She frowns and gives me a once-over before meeting my gaze again.

“What do you want then?”

“A job.”

She finds that pretty hilarious, laughing so hard she has to reach out for the doorframe to steady herself. She slaps her knee with the other hand, looks up at me, and then folds back over in laughter.

“You came all the way out here lookin’ for a job? Oh man, that’s funny,” she says, drying her eyes. “Okay, what’ll it be, missy? Carpenter? Welder?”

“I—”

“Who put you up to this? Dotty? That old trickster. I’m gonna get her back so good, she won’t even see it coming—”

“I don’t know who Dotty is. I’m Helen’s sister, Meredith. She was supposed to call ahead and mention that I was on my way?”

With that announcement, her laughter finally dies. She inspects me with new eyes.

“You don’t look like Helen.”

“We have different moms.”

Her eyes thin in speculation. “Hmm. Well your daddy must’ve had broad tastes.”

I smile, unsure whether or not to take that as a joke.

“Right, well, if it’s a job you need, you’ll have to go talk to Jack. He’s over by the barn doin’ an all-hands.”

“An all-hands?” I ask, turning to see where she’s pointing.

There’s a group of men circled up outside the barn, their attention fixed on a tall figure who seems to be giving orders. From this distance, I can’t make out his features.

“It’s a meeting with all the ranch hands.”

“Ah, got it.” I turn back to her. “Maybe I can wait until he’s finished.”

I have nowhere to be.

She shakes her head. “Normally, I’d agree, but he’s got a lot on his plate today what with your sister gone. I doubt you’ll be able to catch him again.”

Perfect. Just *great*. I was hoping my day would continue down this path. Why would I get to meet with Jack one on one and plead my case when instead, I can slowly limp toward the all-hands meeting, grinding my teeth together as my blisters start to get blisters?

In another life, my knees give out and I face-plant in the dirt, too damn weak and tired to get up. No one helps me. I perish. My Gucci loafers decompose.

But, in this life, I hobble closer to the group and one by one, every head in the circle turns in my direction. Jack’s booming

voice carries over the crowd.

I have no clue what he's talking about, but I like the sound of his voice. It's rough, almost gritty, and strong enough to command the attention of a dozen ranch hands—well, right up until *now*, when all eyes are on me.

“Looks like we have company,” someone says, and I finally work up the courage to peel my gaze from the ground. It's like I just walked onto the stage of a cowboy-themed Chippendales show. I'm surrounded by a dozen young, strong guys wearing jeans and sweating through their work shirts. I scan from one cute face to another, taking in the amused grins until I finally make it to their fearless leader and stop short.

My gut clenches as if my ovaries both lean in toward my uterus to say, *Hello! We're here and we like what we see!* My heart stops and then speeds up, confused about how to proceed. My eyes scan up and down him four times before I finally regain enough sense to break the cycle.

Don't get me wrong, this reaction is not about me being love-struck. Seeing as how I just left a pretty bad relationship, oh, I don't know...14 hours ago, I'm immune to the chiseled jaw thing he has going on. Really, I'm just surprised. Just like with the ranch, Jack is nothing like what I was expecting. He's young—mid-thirties, maybe—with a tall frame and wide shoulders. You know that calm confident look every NFL quarterback carries around, that gleam in their eyes that challenges you to try to screw with them? He's got it. On top of that, he has a wide-set jaw, strong cheekbones, and dark brows.

He's wearing a baseball cap backward, and the ends of his dark brown hair wing out from beneath it. These are all things I don't *want* to notice, I just do. The fact that his black t-shirt stretches across his chest when he props his hands on his hips is a fact, not an opinion, and his steely gaze leveled on me? Yeah, that's also kind of hard to ignore, especially now that everything has gone silent.

What a strange turn of events to find out that my future boss is a very attractive man. Good for him. I don't care. I'm too

focused on the fact that his chiseled features are locked in an annoyed scowl. Everyone else seemed amused by my interruption of the all-hands meeting, but not him. It's probably hard enough keeping control of these guys in normal circumstances, and I've just waltzed in and stolen their attention.

"Can I help you?" he asks with a hard tone. What he really means to say is, *Go away*, just like my taxi therapist and the old woman from the house.

I straighten my shoulders and dredge up every ounce of confidence I have left in me. It's not much, and my voice barely carries over the group.

"What was that?" he asks, impatient.

"Speak up!" someone shouts.

I clear my throat and try again. "I'm here for a job."

There's another round of laughter. These people seriously need a comedy club, or at least a few Adam Sandler movies on DVD. They find the most mundane things hilarious.

"Hey Jack, she could be your first manicured ranch hand."

The guys really crack up at that.

Jack, to his credit, doesn't laugh.

He shakes his head and steps forward. "You must be the princess."

"What?"

"I heard your story. I was hoping you wouldn't show."

My mouth drops open, but before I can come up with a fiery reply, he wraps his hand around my bicep and drags me away from the group. There are catcalls and profane comments behind us. I scowl at the guys over my shoulder, but it only fuels the fire.

"What about the all-hands, Jack? Watch where you put yours!"

"She can help me out in the fields! I'll train her quick!"

“This must be that fine southern hospitality you always hear about,” I hiss, trying to yank my arm out of his hold.

His sharp eyes cut to me as he continues leading me toward the house. “You’ll have to forgive our poor country folk manners,” he replies in an affected drawl filled with sarcasm. “We aren’t used to entertaining royalty.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He whips open the screen door and pushes me inside the house.

Without a doubt, it’s the worst introduction I’ve ever had.

Jack

“You’re a little rough around the edges, aren’t you?” she says, no hint of amusement laced in her words.

I look up from my desk to see her studying me with an angry scowl. I’ve really pissed her off. *Good*. The sooner she starts to hate it here, the sooner she’ll leave.

I gesture to the chair in front of my desk.

“Have a seat.”

“I’d rather stand.”

“Suit yourself.”

She locks her arms across her chest, and we participate in what feels like the world’s longest staring contest. Smoke plumes from her ears. If she had a six-shooter, it’d be aimed at my heart.

I tip my head, studying her. “You’re really Helen’s sister?”

“We have the same eyes.”

No kidding—they’re light blue, rarest color I’ve ever seen—but the similarities start and stop there. I’ve never thought of Helen as attractive. She’s squared away safely in my mind as my matronly executive assistant; she doesn’t exist to attract or un-attract me. She’s my employee, and a damn good one at that. Meredith, though...she’s different.

“Helen said you need a job.”

Meredith nods. “Correct. I can start today.”

I chuckle at that. “Seems like you and I haven’t gotten off to a great start, and sometimes your gut knows something before the brain catches up. Maybe you oughta look for employment elsewhere.”

With that, something in her expression breaks. She's still fuming, but her shoulders sag. Her attention darts past my shoulders, out the window. Her lip quivers. I'm not very good at reading women, but I'm damn near sure she's about to cry. I thought I'd be happier getting to this point.

"You ever work on a ranch before?"

"I think you can probably guess the answer to that," she snaps, blue eyes slicing back to me.

I resist the urge to smile at her fire. "You can put the claws away. We're just talking."

She sighs and steps forward, finally sagging down into the seat I offered her. Her purse drops to the floor at her feet as she relaxes back against the cushion, and I take advantage of the opportunity to study her. Her hair is the color of dark coffee, almost black, probably fake. Her nails are trimmed and manicured. Her features—though currently smudged with dirt and what looks to be a few drops of blood—are feminine and beautiful. I have no doubt she was a heartbreaker back in California. Her husband is probably missing her right about now.

Once she's situated, she looks back up at me, waiting.

"So, no ranch experience. Have you ever had a job?"

She swallows and tips her chin up. It's clear that what she lacks in experience, she makes up for in confidence. I doubt she's ever let anyone walk over her.

"I've volunteered at a hospital for the last few years."

"I'm talking about a real *job*, with a paycheck and a boss—accountability."

Her lips purse and she shakes her head. "My parents always wanted me to focus on school."

Parents?

"How old are you?"

"28." She guesses where my questions are leading. "After college...well, certain circumstances meant I didn't work, but

I assure you I will be a very good employee. I'm timely and dedicated."

"Can you use QuickBooks?"

"I'm a *quick* learner!" she jokes. "Heh."

"What about Outlook?"

"I always maintain a positive outlook."

Jesus Christ.

"Your sister tells me you're married to some millionaire. Why do you even need a job?"

My eyes narrow as I study her, looking for motive in that pretty face. I catch the subtle shift in the air at the mention of her husband.

"I *was* married," she bites out with a locked jaw. "We're separated."

"As of?"

"Last night," she announces confidently.

I finally lose the battle with myself and laugh. It's all so ridiculous. I whip the hat off my head, smooth my hand over my hair, and then drop it back into place. She tracks my movements with careful attention.

"Don't they make you wait 24 hours to report a missing person? Seems like you should give it 48 for ending a marriage. You might change your mind."

"I won't."

"Excuse my French, but I don't have time for this shit."

Even now, problems are piling up outside the door of this office.

Anyone else would stand up and leave. I've been known to bring grown ass men to their knees, but she doesn't seem to care. In fact, she leans forward, props her hands on my desk, and locks her gaze with mine.

"I need this job."

“I disagree.” My niceness is gone. My patience is all used up. “Look, you’ve made your dramatic gesture, now I think you should run back home to California. No doubt you’ve taught your husband a lesson. I’m sure he’ll buy you whatever pretty thing he’s been holding out on.” I stand and start dialing my ranch manager’s number so I can return the call he left earlier.

She reaches forward, picks up the phone from its holder, and slams it back down.

Damn. She’s spoiled *and* crazy.

“I know Helen’s gone, and you need somebody. Give me the job.”

“You’ve never worked a day in your life. By the time I train you, Helen will be back.”

“We’re not talking rocket science—how hard could it be? I’ll stay out of your way.”

I level a steady gaze down her small frame. “Somehow, I doubt that.”

“I’m not leaving this office until you give me a job—any job.”

Just then, a light bulb flips on that illuminates the way out of this mess. It takes all my energy to keep my face neutral. She can’t know it’s a trap or she’ll see right through my intentions. Meredith wants a job, I want her to get the hell off my property, and it seems we can kill two birds with one stone.

“Any job? That works for me. I need a housekeeper. Mine quit last week.”

She arches a delicate brow. “Couldn’t stand her boss?”

I grind my teeth. Isn’t she supposed to be groveling? Ingratiating herself as best she can? Instead, it feels like she’s calling the shots in *my* damn office. “She moved to be closer to her daughter. That’s the only job I have for you. Take it or leave it.”

She stands up, dragging her hands from my desk. “So I’d be your maid?”

“You’d also cook meals, do laundry, wash the dog—that sort of thing. Toilets need cleaning at least once a day—you saw the guys that’ll be using ’em, and tonight is chili night.”

I’m laying it on thick at this point. No way she’s staying.

She glances away for a moment. “I don’t—that is, I’ve never...”

I return my attention to my desk, writing her off. I’ve never had to fight a grin so hard in my life. I figured it wouldn’t be hard to scare her away, but this was a little too easy. One mention of scrubbing toilets and her knees are quaking. She’s a second from bolting. Once she’s gone, I’ll finally have a minute to catch up on work. I’ll give my manager a call and shoot off an email to Helen, demanding she return early in exchange for putting me through the trouble of dealing with this brat.

It occurs to me that Meredith hasn’t moved. *Oh, right.* She’s stranded out here.

“Or”—I glance up at her from beneath my brows, speaking offhandedly—“I’ll get one of the hands to give you a ride back into town.”

She’s looking at me like I’ve grown a second head. “What are you talking about? I’m not leaving. I’m taking the job—on one condition.”

Oh good grief.

* * *

Apparently, her rich husband really has cut her off because Meredith requests room and board. No doubt she was planning on staying with her sister, but Helen’s house is currently under construction. Her only option is to stay here, but I’ll be damned if I have her in the house with me. She’s been here fifteen minutes and I already have a raging tension headache.

Adjacent to my house, there's a small shack tucked in the tree line of the property. Yes, I used the right word—it's a shack. I've lent it out to ranch hands in the past, resourceful guys who don't mind spending a month or two on a crappy twin bed so they can save up for rent. The slats in the floorboards have some gaps and there are a few cobwebs dangling in the corners, but it has a makeshift shower and a sink, more than Meredith probably deserves.

Just like with everything else, I expect her to take one look at the place and run screaming right back to California, but she steps into the small space and turns in a slow circle. I watch her carefully, waiting for a lone tear to roll down her porcelain cheek. I don't like watching women cry, but something tells she's very much in need of a dose of humility.

"Does that shower work?" she asks, pointing to the corner.

I smirk. "Only the finest 68-degree Texas well water."

"And I'm assuming there's no A/C?"

Even though it's shaded by trees, it feels like a hundred degrees in here.

"There's a breeze at night if you open the windows."

She nods and takes her lower lip between her teeth. She's thinking, probably contemplating how far she's willing to go to stick it to that husband of hers. Surely if she let him know about these living conditions, he'd give her enough cash to rent a room at the nice hotel down on First Street.

Her pale blue gaze shifts from the dingy bed to the bare floor and then finally, she faces me. The expression I see is one part resilience, one part defiance. It's fuel and flame.

She heaves a sigh and drops her purse at her feet, effectively setting up shop.

"Thank you. I'll take it."

Meredith

I don't know which problem to address first—I'm drowning in them. Jack left me standing alone in the middle of my new apartment. I'm referring to it as an apartment and not a dilapidated lean-to because I believe in the power of delusion. If I look at this day and this *quaint country cottage* as an adventure, then it becomes fun and exciting (!) instead of bleak and depressing.

The place is tiny, about the size of my freshman dorm room... except my dorm was outfitted with Pottery Barn decor and a spunky roommate named Janine. This apartment is outfitted with permanently airborne dust and the unmistakable smell of mildew. My only companion is a tiny spider staring down at me from his web. I now know the true meaning of the word inhospitable is a place that might put you in the hospital. There's a rusty rake leaning against one wall, and a merry band of loose nails scattered about on the threadbare floor.

I feel sense and reason trying to creep back into my brain's control room, but I shut them out in favor of blind optimism. Sure, the structure should probably be condemned, but it's nothing I can't spruce up with a little imagination and a lot of elbow grease.

I decide to start small and turn my attention to the twin bed resting against one of the walls. With a nice place to fall asleep tonight, my entire perspective on life might brighten. *Look*, I tell myself, *it already has a blanket and a pillow. Jeez, is this a shack or the Ritz? I sure can't tell!*

I pick up the blanket and the pillow twitches. I furrow my brow and cock my head to the side, because my entire life thus far has led me to believe that inanimate pillows should not be capable of independent movement. Feeling as if I'm on the brink of a major scientific breakthrough, I slowly reach out

and tug on the corner of the pillowcase until I see what's underneath it.

FUR. BEADY EYES. LONG, HAIRLESS TAILS.

I jump four feet into the air and shriek as a small field mouse followed by the largest rat I've ever seen both scurry out from underneath the pillow and through a jagged crack at the base of the wall.

BE OPTIMISTIC, BE OPTIMISTIC, I chant as my heart rate slowly returns to a survivable level.

I suppose it's sorta beautiful, I think. *A mouse and a rat, driven by illicit passion and forbidden romance, risked it all to build a life together in this shack—ahem, apartment. If they can do it, so can I.*

I'm smiling in a deranged reverie, thinking sweetly about rodent Romeo and Juliet, when I notice the impressive amount of droppings on the floor.

Just like that, my sunny disposition is doused by despair and an overwhelming desire to give up. Except, there is no giving up. With Helen gone, I have nowhere to go. My mom lives in a retirement community in Boca Raton. No one under the age of 60 is allowed to reside there, ostensibly because limber hips and full-frequency hearing would ignite jealousy amongst the osteoporotic masses. Besides, if I called her, she'd just try to convince me to reconcile with Andrew. Same goes for my dad. They're blinded by his wealth and reputation, and I haven't tried hard to convince them of his darker side. Truthfully, we're not very close, and they have a habit of hearing and believing whatever is most convenient for them.

With my parents and Helen off the table, I'm all out of options. Even more sad, I didn't really have friends back in California. When you slide right into a life of comfort and luxury when most of your college friends are still crushed under the debt of student loans, you quickly find yourself alienated. Sure, I had women I went to lunch with and met for yoga a few times a week, but they were Andrew's friends more than mine, wives of his colleagues, and they—like my parents—firmly believe the sun shines out of his ass.

I'm truly on my own.

Everything in my possession sits in my purse on the floor of this dwelling.

I have nine wrinkled dollars.

I have a new boss who already thinks the worst of me.

I have a job that will put my face near men's toilets every day.

I have a sad little apartment—okay, NO, a sad little *shanty shack* with mice and spiders and a blanket with an odious yellow stain. At first I was going to overlook it, but it's like trying to overlook the damn sun.

Before I realize it, I'm marching back across the yard, toward the farmhouse. I'm sure Jack is already long gone, off taming wild mustangs or cutting cattle rustlers off at the pass, but I will sit outside his office and wait for him to return. I will demand that he see reason. Surely he's playfully hazing me and doesn't actually expect me to stay in that shack.

I yank open the back door of the house and immediately go on guard, tiptoeing with my shoulders up near my ears. He could be around any corner, sitting in any of the rooms I pass on my way upstairs, but the house is quiet and empty. My stealth is wasted.

On my second journey through, I discover that the farmhouse is extremely nice, new construction. There are hardwood floors, a pleasant pale gray color on the walls, and a lot of family photos and knickknacks. Somehow, it doesn't feel cluttered. It's warm and inviting—or at least it would be if there wasn't a soulless monster lurking somewhere inside.

I hear his voice behind his office door and am grateful I won't have to march all over the property hunting him down.

I shrug, roll out my neck, and prepare myself. Quickly, I run through my argument so I have all my points in order. I'll tell him the shack is an employee health hazard and point out that his house is huge—there have got to be at least six bedrooms. I passed a game room, living room, and breakfast nook, and I will happily sleep on the ground in any one of them. I'm not picky.

I know I have a winning defense, but I still can't work up the courage to knock on his door. My heart is beating so fast, no rhythm, just quick pulses. I've turned into a hummingbird. *Is this what desperation feels like?* It's wild, like a drug.

I try to remember why I'm here, why I left Andrew in the first place. For the last five years, I was the perfect wife. I studied the news and stayed abreast of current events. I was polite and witty and funny, and when necessary, I was demure and thoughtful. I ate well-portioned meals and worked out every day, lathered myself in night creams and face masks and consequently have the skin and the ass of an eighteen-year-old, and in the end, it wasn't enough. Nothing was enough.

My mental pep talk works—I'm out for blood. I pound on his office door with the side of my fist then let myself in. Poor Jack. He doesn't know what hit him. If he'd caught me last week, I would have been gentle and meek. I would have used a sweet tone, an "on-the-phone" voice when I spoke with him, just like Andrew preferred. Now, he gets the unfiltered version, the angry, wild hellion I've caged in for too long. I wouldn't be surprised to find streaks of black war paint under my eyes.

"By all means, barge in whenever you please."

His words drip with sarcasm. It's clear he's angry about the interruption as he glares at me from behind his desk. That look and his annoyed tone shift my perspective, and I remember I *don't* feel bad he's getting the unfiltered version. No, he started this mess by being rude to me: calling me a princess, dragging me away from the all-hands meeting, and then tossing me into that glorified lean-to that gives other respectable shacks a bad name. He thinks I'm a spoiled brat—no doubt the result of Helen's handiwork—and instead of giving me the benefit of the doubt, he's done nothing but doubt my benefits. He's been nothing but brusque and unwelcoming, so *no, NO POOR JACK*.

He's still wearing that backward baseball hat, and he looks like the cool jock from high school all grown up. I try not to be intimidated. I give him what I can only hope is a serious, no-

nonsense glare. My hands go to my hips. My elbows bow out. It's a power pose, it's Wonder Woman, and I'm nailing it.

"I'd like to propose an alternate living arrangement." His brown eyes try to sear through me. Still, I continue. "I passed a bunch of decent rooms on my way up here. There's a bedroom down the hall—"

"None of the rooms in this house are available to you. I'm not running a bed and breakfast."

Obviously. If he were, it would be called Bad Manners Manor, and the one-star Yelp reviews would read, *Surly owner scares would-be guests away.*

"Don't worry, I'm sure you'll be able to rent a better place after your first paycheck—if you make it that long."

"Fine. When exactly is payday?"

He leans back in his chair and rubs the scruff along his jaw. "Payroll went out last Friday, so you'll get your first paycheck two weeks from now, just like everyone else."

Two weeks? I won't last that long. I have one pair of underwear.

"I could really use an advance."

I say this very calmly, like I've seen in movies, and I think he will respond in turn. He doesn't.

"That's too bad."

"Signing bonus?"

He really laughs at that, cracks up like I'm the stupidest person he's ever encountered. His laughter makes me feel a little sick, and my hands form little fists by my sides. If we were closer, I think I'd swing and try to give him a black eye, just to see how it'd feel. He's at least twice my size, but I'm scrappy. He'd never see it coming.

"Why do you need the money? A new purse?"

The accusation wraps around my heart like talons and it *pops* like a balloon, deflating any courage I had left. God, he thinks

so little of me. *He thinks I'd subject myself to this humiliation for something as frivolous as a new purse?*

I should tell him the truth, that I want the money so I can go into town and buy some essentials: a new pillow and a clean blanket. I need a pair of tennis shoes because my loafers have rubbed my feet raw. I have no clothes, nothing to change into. I am utterly destitute, and completely at his mercy. I came to Texas hoping to find some comfort from my sister and instead I found *him*—the rudest, most inconsiderate man west of the Mississippi.

I open my mouth, prepared to pour everything out, to make him feel terrible for the things he's said to me, but I quickly realize I can't. As soon as I speak, I'll sob. I'm one of those people who inexplicably cries when angry. It's annoying. Any time I want to shout at someone, it comes out as a teary mess. Anger and sadness comingle in my brain, no hope of harnessing one without the other. I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry; therefore, I have no choice.

Without another word, I turn on my heel and walk out of his office, slamming the door behind me. It's a strange thing to do considering we were in the middle of a conversation. I've just given him more reason to think I'm insane, but at least I still have my pride. *Do people with a single pair of underwear have pride?*

I limp away on my blistered feet, repeating a short mantra over and over in my head: *Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry.*

Amazingly, my brain listens. I don't shed a single tear as I make my way downstairs, through the kitchen, and into the laundry room that leads to the back door. I'm so laser-focused on making it out that I miss the bags piled up beside the doorframe until I trip over one of them. I've apparently met my quota of embarrassing moments for the day, because the universe saves me from face-planting completely. I catch myself and check over my shoulder to make sure there was no audience for my little stumble—the coast is clear. I turn back for the door, prepared to whip it open and make my escape, but then I look down.

The trash bags aren't filled with garbage—they're filled with clothes, clothes that are undoubtedly waiting to be loaded up and taken to Goodwill for donation. I know this because there's a little sticky note on one of them that says, *DONATION! TAKE WHAT YOU WANT!*

I have half a mind to fall to my knees and weep. Instead, I turn one ear to the stairs, confirm that Jack hasn't followed me down, and then get to work rooting through the bags. I justify the fact that I'm stealing because the clothes are about to be donated to the less fortunate, and guess what? I'm currently the least fortunate I've ever been. These clothes are mine.

I find a few pair of worn but clean black socks folded into pairs. Maybe a few weeks ago, I would have balked at the idea of wearing a stranger's old socks. Today, right now, they are more valuable than gold. I even slip a pair on right then so they'll act as a buffer between my loafers and my blistered feet. I look like a mall walker headed to *Nifty After Fifty*.

Once I'm satisfied I have enough socks, I rummage through a collection of folded t-shirts and skim a few off the top. I unfold one to discover it's an XL and will undoubtedly drown me, but it doesn't matter; I'll manage. I dump the shirts on the ground beside me and keep rifling through the contents of the bags right up until a voice speaks behind me and I jump out of my skin.

"As I understand it, the point of having a housekeeper is so they'll clean up messes, not make new ones."

I whip around, surprised to find the older woman from before, the one who answered the door when I first arrived on the ranch. She's standing in the doorway of the laundry room with her arms crossed over her chest.

"You're right. I swear I'll put everything back."

I start shoving clothes in bags, but she shakes her head, holds up a finger, and then disappears back into the kitchen. She's gone for a moment before she reappears with a new black trash bag in hand. She whips it open then bends low beside me, starting to shovel clothes inside.

“Is that enough? You only have a few t-shirts here,” she points out.

“Oh yes, it should be just fine. I can wash them.”

“And you found some of the socks I put in there, that’s good. What size shoe are you?”

I’m dumbfounded by this turn of events, but I have enough sense to reply quickly, “Seven and a half.”

“Right, well, I’m a nine, so they’ll be a little big, but I put a pair of tennis shoes in that bag over there.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I damn well know that, now shove over. You’re sitting on one of the shirts.”

I lean over so she can tug the t-shirt out from under me and then she stuffs it in the bag with all the others.

“Whose clothes are these?”

She scowls at me. “Silence is a virtue. Get virtuous.”

If they’re Jack’s—and I suspect they are—will I toss them aside? No. In fact, he’ll have to chop off my feet if he wants these socks back.

I’m surprised she’s taken the time to collect the clothes for me, and I have enough good sense to accept her charity. Unless...

“Does he know you took this stuff out of his closet?”

Her mouth flattens in a thin line. “They say there’s no such thing as a stupid question, but does that mean you have to try so hard to think of one? It’s damn annoying.”

I can’t tell whether she loves me or hates me, so I play it safe and just keep my lips zipped after that, watching as she continues going through the bags, taking things I wouldn’t have had the courage to grab before. There’s fresh white linen and towels. She gives me everything. My trash bag is bulging.

“I know this isn’t enough. I don’t have any shorts for you—you’re too damn skinny to wear mine—but those jeans you’re wearing should work until we can make it into town.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

I’m surprised by how overwhelmed I feel.

“No. Stop. If you cry right now, I’m taking all this to the burn pile. If there’s one thing I hate, it’s blubbering. Now listen, my grandson is a tough cookie, an arrogant devil through and through. I tried to talk him into letting you stay in the house, but he’s got his mind made up, something about teaching you a lesson. If you ask me, there’s more likely a lesson in there *for him*, but this is his house and I won’t disrespect him by sneaking you in here.”

“Your grandson?” I ask, cutting in.

“Was that another question?” She pauses her work and glances over to me. From this proximity, there’s no pretense between us. I can see every shade of blue in her hard eyes, every wrinkle etched in her tan skin. I have no doubt she can see the absolute despair reflected back at her. She can probably also smell the peanuts on my breath. “Oh, hell. All right. We haven’t been properly introduced.” Her hand darts out for mine. “Edith McKnight, the devil’s grandma.”

I take her hand and shake it, surprised by how strong her grip is.

“Meredith Wilchester—er, Avery. Meredith Avery,” I say, catching myself and dusting off my maiden name, the one I’ll be reverting back to from this day forward.

“Pleased to meet you, Meredith. I wish it were on better terms, but we’ll make the best of this situation. Now here, take this. It’s too heavy for me or I’d help you.”

She hands me the bag and pushes to her feet. She brushes her hands on the back of her jeans then turns to walk away, just like that, as if she didn’t just turn my entire day around.

“This doesn’t make sense,” I call after her. “Why are you helping me?”

Without bothering to turn around, she rambles off a string of countryisms. “My grandson is a good man, but he often thinks the sun comes up just to hear him crow. He could strut sittin’

down. I mean, I love him, but sometimes it's like hugging a rose bush."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I'm helpin' you because I know he can't yet, but when you get to be my age, you learn that a wounded bird eventually needs a peaceful nest."

It's like she's speaking a foreign language.

Jack

I've got big plans for today: I'm going to keep my temper simmering near a low boil, I'm going to avoid the princess, I'm not going to let my ranch hands pull any shit like they did yesterday with the pigs, and I will have my inbox empty by the end of the workday. This is the plan—at least, it was. My alarm clock is still due to go off in five minutes, but I'm already up on the edge of my bed in my boxer briefs, listening to Christine talk my ear off. Alfred is snoring at my feet. I think dogs sometimes like to rub it in.

“You *promised* you'd come to San Antonio later this week.”

I blink sleep out of my eyes and chance a glance at the clock beside my bed: 5:10 AM—too damn early for a fight.

“And I explained that it's just not possible. Helen left last week and—”

“You're kidding me. Jack, do you know the last time you made the effort to come here? To show me you care even the tiniest bit?”

I rest my elbows on my knees, squeeze my eyes closed, and pinch the bridge of my nose. I really could've used those last five minutes of sleep. “I'm sure I could come up with a good example if you hadn't called at the crack of dawn. I haven't even had my coffee.”

That response doesn't go over well.

“You are the most emotionally vacant man I've ever met. We've been together two years—*TWO YEARS*—and I get the feeling you wouldn't care if I broke up with you right here and now.”

Has it really been that long?

“Chrissy, c'mon—”

“No. Don’t bother.” She pauses, inhales a deep breath. When she speaks again, her voice is softer, sweet. “I’m just...I’m upset. I miss you, that’s all. We hardly see each other.”

“You know I’d be there with you if I could.”

“Would you?”

Just then, my alarm clock starts blaring loudly. *BEEP BEEP BEEP*. My eyes pop open and I reach over to slam my hand down to turn it off. Alfred hops up and starts wagging his tail, flaunting the energy from his extra sleep.

“Chrissy, I gotta—”

“Yeah, I know, you gotta go. Going’s what you do best.”

Her words are meant to sting, but they don’t.

“Will I see you later this week?” I ask, trying to end the phone call on a good note.

“I don’t know. I’ll think about it.”

We both know she’ll cave and make the drive out here. That’s how our relationship works. For two years, she’s lived in San Antonio and I’ve lived here. We see each other once or twice a month, when it’s convenient. It’s not nearly enough for her, but it’s all the time I have to give at the moment. With Helen gone, I’m not even sure I can swing that.

After we hang up, I get going, speeding through a shower before I tug on a worn pair of Wranglers and reach for one of my favorite Blue Stone Ranch t-shirts, except my hand comes back empty. There aren’t any shirts hanging where they should be—I guess that’s what happens when Mary isn’t here to do my laundry. I settle for a pearl snap button-down then reach for my trusty ball cap. Until I make it into town for a haircut, it’ll have to do.

Downstairs, I let Alfred out the back door. Edith is already by the coffee maker, filling up a mug.

“Hope you made it extra strong today.”

She hands it off to me with a trademark sneer.

“It’s somewhere between crude oil and jet fuel. I don’t know how you stand it.”

I take a big sip then tip the mug toward her in thanks. “It’s perfect.”

“I heard you upstairs on the phone. Little early for Christine to be callin’, isn’t it? Some of us would have appreciated sleeping in a little bit.”

“You haven’t slept past 5:00 in thirty years.”

“Not for lack of tryin’, and I’d still like the option.”

She pours some coffee into a mug for herself and cuts it with cream before proceeding to answer most of my questions with more questions.

“Christine was chewin’ my hide.”

“What’s new?”

“Maybe I should put in more of an effort with her.”

“Do you think she’s worth it?”

“I can’t remember the last time I drove out to see her. Must have been a couple months back.”

“You could ask her to move out here.”

“You think I should?”

“Do you love her?”

“I don’t know. She told me this morning we’ve been together for two years—do people usually love each other after two years?”

“It’s hard to say. Generally speaking, seeds don’t sprout in rocky soil.”

“Damn.”

She levels me with a thoughtful gaze. “I could have told you two years ago she wasn’t for you.”

I smirk. “You’re biased. You two never got along well.”

“Yeah? Well, whose fault is that? I get along with everyone.”

I quirk a brow, pointing out the obvious. “Half the town is too scared to love you. The other half is too scared not to love you.”

She chuckles and steps toward the window near the sink. “No, that’s *you* half the town’s scared of. I’m just standin’ next to you. Oh, look who’s ready for her first day of work.”

I follow her gaze out the window and find Meredith stepping out of the shack. Color me shocked. I didn’t figure her for an early bird, and I feel deprived—I thought I’d get the pleasure of performing a cowbell wake-up call.

She turns toward the horizon and shades her eyes with one hand, taking in the sunrise. I know exactly how beautiful it is from that angle—vivid yellow and orange. The view is made even better by the fact that there are no skyscrapers or high-rises obstructing it. After spending the night in that dreary shack, it’s probably a welcome sight. I’m surprised she stuck around.

I’m still watching her when her gaze snaps to the back yard. Her eyes widen in fear as she lets out a shriek. Her hands go up in defense. She takes a hesitant step back, then another, until her back hits the door.

Shit. Must be coyotes.

I move quickly, yanking the back door open and shouting for Edith to get the shotgun. There are coyotes and mountain lions in this part of the state, and while it’s uncommon for them to stalk too deep onto the property, it’s not unheard of.

“Don’t run!” I shout to Meredith as I step out into the back yard.

Edith isn’t far behind me with the shotgun. She hands it off and I scan the area, trying to spy any animals that don’t belong. When the coast looks clear, I check the tree line, narrowing my eyes and listening for the sound of snapping twigs or shuffling paws.

“Where are they?” I snap.

“Right there!”

I turn to where she's pointing and spot my golden retriever standing a few yards away from her.

"You mean Alfred?"

He trots closer to her and she unleashes a barrage of Hollywood-style karate kicks and chops at the air between them. "No, no—don't come any closer!"

Alfred doesn't listen.

"No!" she demands. "I said NO! Sit!"

Alfred sits.

Edith laughs, yanks the shotgun out of my hold, and tromps back inside, mumbling something under her breath.

"It's just a dog," I point out.

"Feral? Untamed?!"

Alfred hops back up and starts to stroll toward her again, tail wagging. He gets right to her and starts lapping at her legs in between flails.

"Nope—golden, as in retriever."

She squats and her hands cover her face. "Please don't eat me!"

I try to make myself feel bad for how amusing I find this situation. I really ought to do something, but Alfred is the most harmless animal in the world. He's beloved by everyone... except, I guess, Meredith.

"Are you afraid of dogs?"

"No!" she declares emphatically while trying to wiggle away from Alfred's licks.

"You sure seem like you are."

"I'm afraid of strange shapeless forms charging toward me in the dark!" she explains before turning and pointing her finger at Alfred. "And you—can't you take a hint?! I do not consent to this!"

I emit a short, high whistle and Alfred jerks to attention then trots toward me. Meredith coolly drops her hands and presses

her hair back into its high ponytail. She's trying to play it off like she didn't just beg for her life, but when our gazes lock, I can tell she's pissed.

"Did you order that attack? Is this more of your hazing?"

I try not to find her amusing. "I think you've spent too much time in that shack. Alfred was just happy to see you."

"Well, he just—I just—wasn't quite ready for that level of intimacy, but I forgive you, Alfred."

I glance down to where Alfred is sitting politely at my feet. He is the picture of docile innocence, unlike the brunette Barbie standing a few yards away from me.

"My life just flashed before my eyes."

"I bet that was a riveting little highlight reel."

At that, her eyes narrow into two slits. It seems I've really pissed her off this time. Her arms cross over her chest. Her chin juts out. Her brows knit together. I should be shaking in my boots, but it feels like I'm staring at an angry kitten.

She takes a few steps closer to me and props her hands on her hips. That's when I finally notice what she's wearing: the same tight jeans as yesterday, but she's traded in the white blouse for a t-shirt. It's tied off in a knot at her midriff and the sleeves are rolled up as best as possible. It's way too big for her, and well, it should be considering it's *mine*.

"Where the hell did you get that shirt?"

Her eyes go wide and her cheeks flush, but she tries to cover the embarrassed reaction as best as possible.

"Edith gave it to me," she says confidently.

"She had no right to do that."

"It was in a bag of clothes meant for charity."

Well that explains why all my t-shirts were missing this morning.

"Don't you have enough fancy designer clothes to wear?"

"Not while I clean your toilet."

It makes no sense. Her tone isn't any softer than it was yesterday. I wonder if this is how she always acts—proud and pissy, even when she clearly has no right or reason to back it up. She's the one who slept in a spider-infested shack, and yet she's still walking around like she's the Queen of England.

“I want my clothes back.”

She grits her teeth and reaches for the t-shirt as if to pull it over her head right here and now.

“You really want me to take the shirt off my back?”

I'm quiet. Her hands drop and there's a tiny smirk at the corner of her lips. She's pleased with herself for winning this round. Little does she know that if we were alone, I would have let her strip down as far as she wanted to go, but my ranch hands are starting to arrive for work and a few of them are watching our exchange from over by the barn. I'd have to replace the whole staff, because they'd never let me hear the end of it. If I'm just patient, she'll break, and the problem will solve itself. She won't be here for much longer.

Although, I'm less sure of that today than I was yesterday. Helen convinced me to hire Meredith with the assumption that she wouldn't last very long, but here we are, day two, and I'm not getting the impression that Meredith is all that eager to head back to California.

In fact, she's up early and dressed (in my clothes), seemingly ready to get to work. I decide to test the boundaries of her resolve.

“Follow me.”

Meredith

You know those California tourism commercials? The ones where they show celebrities sunbathing or doing yoga or teeing off or parasailing or shopping on Rodeo Drive? That was my life—well, minus the parasailing. I don't have many rules in life, but a nonnegotiable one is to never entrust my safety to a high schooler tying knots in a rope for minimum wage. I know, it's a very specific rule.

Everything else in the commercial, though, was eerily similar. I had a maid, a gardener, and a house manager. I drove a pearl white Range Rover and carried the last name of a man who mattered. I was invited to glamorous parties and exclusive red carpet events. I schmoozed with movie stars (I would never name names, but let's just say Jennifer Janiston actually does have incredible skin in person) and they hung on my every word, assuming if they cozied up to me, Andrew would want to work with them on his next project.

To the world, I had it all.

That's how it works when you build a life from the outside in—it ends up hollow.

Strangely enough, Andrew and I were happy once, riiiiight in the very beginning. We were so happy, in fact, I was blind to the subtle changes taking place between us. When we first met, Andrew was a fledgling associate producer at a production company. He made okay money, worked semi-normal hours, and acted the part of the doting husband. We were that couple with a standing date night every Wednesday. *Mexican food this week, babe? How about Italian, babe?* He brought me flowers once a week. *Yellow roses, my favorite!* He was older, handsome, successful. Enough people, including my parents and Helen, told me he was the best thing that had ever happened to me, and I believed them.

The problems began once Andrew started the corporate climb. The more impressive his job title became, the more stress he carried on his shoulders. The execs were tough on him. All day he'd absorb their poison like a sponge, and at night, he'd wring it all out on me.

I still remember the first time he snapped. I'd just returned from a yoga class and was in the kitchen making us dinner when he walked in the door. My sweaty appearance set off something in him.

"You sit around all day and you can't even look presentable when I come home?"

I stood frozen in place, absolutely shocked that he'd have the audacity to say something so hurtful. It wasn't like him to act that way and he apologized right after, said he was out of line, it was the stress talking, but a few weeks later, it happened again. This time it was because I didn't feel up to going out to a Hollywood party with him.

"Thousands of women would give anything to be invited, to be with me. You don't know what you have anymore."

When I called him out for being unreasonable, he went for blood.

"You might be a pretty face, but in this town, there are a million women who look just like you. You're nothing without me—remember that."

After he spewed that venom, he still went to the party. I stayed home and replayed his words until I started believing them. Obviously now, I can see those are the words of a deeply insecure and troubled human being, but over time, I feared he was right. I know that's sick, but Andrew was my husband, my supposed soul mate, *the best thing that had ever happened to me*. We'd been together for a while, and I trusted him implicitly. If he was upset with me, my first instinct was to figure out what I'd done wrong.

So, I tried to be better. From then on, I always made sure I was dressed and made up when he got home from work. I never turned down an invitation to attend a party with him and while

we were together, I made sure to be a sweet, doting wife. In return, our marriage stayed the course. Andrew continued to bring home flowers (*Yellow roses, my favorite!*) even though I suspected he'd delegated the task of retrieving them to his secretary. We continued going on a date every Wednesday night, but more often than not I shared the time with his phone, which was never on silent.

Andrew kept climbing higher at his company, closer and closer to the American dream. His stress filled the empty space beneath our thinly constructed veneer, until there were too many cracks to control. It became impossible for me to differentiate between normal marital blowups and insidious emotional abuse.

“Jesus, what the fuck is wrong with you!?” he yelled at me one night after he'd lost his erection in the middle of sex. It was an impossible situation to navigate. If I consoled and reassured him, he would lash out defensively. So, I said nothing at all, and he seized the silence like a weapon. *“I can get it up just fine—guess you just don't turn me on anymore.”*

In case you're wondering, I'm a fucking *excellent* lover, I'd just reached the point where I couldn't stand his touch, and he must've felt it. Of course, now I can look back and spot the abuse and manipulation like a vandalized copy of an *I Spy* book. *Oh yup, there it is—circled right in front of you.* But, when I was in it, I didn't realize I was *in it*, living it—a complacent participant. The incidents were so spaced out that during the peaceful periods in between, I'd convince myself he'd changed, that he'd learned to cope better with his stress and wouldn't say another hurtful thing to me. Even worse than that, I started to expect the abuse. I'd grown calluses. When he said I was pathetic, dumb, and worthless, I believed him because he coupled each insult with a dose of gaslighting. *“Who else would want to be with you? If you left me, no one else would have you. You're a boring wife and a boring fuck. Be glad I'm with you.”*

Be glad I'm with you.

Be glad I'm with you.

He was holding my head under water, and I didn't drown, didn't break. I grew gills.

Four years into our marriage, it looked like Andrew was perfect. Everyone agreed, and I was glad.

I hadn't spoken a word about his behavior to anyone around me, and that was an intentional choice on both of our parts. After the first few arguments, he'd hold me in bed and rub my back and tell me our personal life was ours. *"We're stars, babe, and stars burn hot. People won't understand."* Of course, I wholeheartedly agreed. In the beginning, I still believed the best of him. I didn't want to betray his trust and spew our dirty laundry to the world, especially since I was so sure each bad time was the last. Somewhere in the middle though, denial that it would continue dissolved into shame and embarrassment that it had and would.

I turned inward, pushing my family and everyone else away even more, and Andrew capitalized on that. He kept in touch with our friends when I didn't. He put on a warm, friendly facade when we were out at parties. He was such a clever puppeteer, especially when you consider the fact that you can't file a police report for words like you can for punches, and Andrew knew that. He never once hit me.

I did finally work up the courage to talk about it with Rebecca. She was the closest thing I had to a friend back in Los Angeles. We'd get lunch a few times a month and meet up for yoga here and there.

I broached the subject in a whisper, after a scripted answer about being annoyed with his adorable quirks.

"Actually, I don't think I'm happy...with Andrew."

She looked up from her salad, confused. "What do you mean? Is he working a lot?"

"Yes, but it's not about that," I said, talking in a stream-of-consciousness confession I was piecing together in real time. "I feel like I've told myself I'm happy so many times I've totally forgotten what the word means."

She waved her hand as if to say, Nonsense. "That's just life. God, Jeff has been in the office more than ever. I swear he's screwing his receptionist."

She laughed and continued eating her salad like, chomp, chomp, chomp, my husband is cheating on me, can you pass the salt?

I focused on my untouched pasta. "I'm thinking about leaving Andrew. I'm really considering it, actually."

"Because he's working a lot?"

"No." I was annoyed we weren't on the same page. "I've been thinking about this a lot, trying to objectively say whether or not I'm happy." I shook my head, trying to make my point clear. "I don't think it's something you can measure. It's just—when I wake up in the morning, my first thought is to run, to get away." I leaned closer and lowered my voice. "He's not who everyone thinks he is."

She rolled her eyes, sat back in her chair, and dabbed her mouth with her napkin. "Listen, Andrew might not be the best husband in the world, but your marriage seems pretty perfect to me. Didn't he just buy you that bracelet last week? The last thing Jeff bought me was an air freshener for my car."

I looked down at the diamonds shimmering on my wrist. It was true, he'd bought the bracelet for me out of the blue, but we both knew it was an apology for the hurtful things he'd said. The night before that lunch, I hadn't been wearing it, and he'd told me I was ungrateful. I'd learned my lesson: it would never leave my wrist so long as he was around.

Rebecca took my silence as an admission of guilt. "Listen, if you're trying to get some kind of settlement from him after the divorce, you'd better be careful. I have a friend who went down that path, and she ended up with nothing. Now her husband is married to some woman half her age and she's waiting tables in Santa Monica."

It was pointless. I was getting nowhere. She didn't want to hear the truth any more than I wanted to speak it. I knew then that if I was ever going to leave, I'd have to do it on my own,

so I did. That diamond bracelet is sitting in some pawn shop in Beverly Hills and here I am, the new housekeeper for Blue Stone Ranch.

It feels pretty good, though technically, I haven't started yet. I'm still working out where to begin. Jack spent all of two minutes pointing me in the direction of the cleaning closet, all the while reminding me of my duties.

"Clean the house, do the laundry, make sure the fridge and pantry are stocked. Cook lunch for Edith and me, sweep, vacuum, that sort of thing."

"Sounds good."

My go-getter attitude seemed to poke at him. "Right, and of course, I'll need you to feed and bathe your new furry friend, too."

I swear his eyes held an evil gleam.

I wasn't kidding earlier when I said my life flashed before my eyes as Alfred ran for me. Dogs just aren't my thing, not since one latched onto my butt when I was a kid. I still have a tiny scar on my right cheek.

Of all my duties, I'm most excited about cooking, but Jack mentioned he and Edith were planning on eating leftovers from last night for lunch. So, that leaves cleaning and dog duties. *Cleaning it is! No problem. Awesome.* I root through the closet then make my way through the house, collecting any supplies I think I'll need to complete my tasks. I'm going to start with the bathrooms, mostly so I can prove Jack wrong.

I saw how gleeful he looked at the concept of me on all fours, scrubbing toilets. He thinks I'm going to cave and leave, or beg for another job, something a little more glamorous. Little does he know, I'm done with glamour. It's not what it's cracked up to be.

Once I'm properly outfitted, I get to work in his bathroom. It's not as dirty as I anticipated, probably because his housekeeper didn't quit all that long ago. I'm disappointed he isn't a total slob, but then, maybe it's a good thing considering I'm the one who now has to clean up after him.

I can only imagine what my “friends” from my old life would say if they saw me now, scrubbing a toilet seat with enthusiasm. It’s really not so bad. I hum an upbeat tune, spritz a little more cleaner, flush. A droplet from the spray gets in my eye and I don’t even break character. I am Meredith Avery, maid extraordinaire.

I’m still bent over his toilet when Jack walks in. I didn’t expect to see him again so soon, especially considering how eager he was to be rid of me earlier.

I pause my scrubbing and sit back on my heels. From my angle on the floor, he seems even more large than usual, looming there like a demon and blocking the light from the bathroom window.

He takes in the sight of me with my rubber gloves up to my elbows and a mask stretched across the lower half of my face. His mouth twitches like he’s fighting a smile.

“A little overkill, don’t you think?”

I tip my head to the side and stay silent, hoping he’ll take the hint and leave.

He doesn’t.

“Have you ever cleaned a toilet before?”

I sigh and yank the mask down. “Well, I’ve used toilets before—how hard could it be to do the *opposite*?”

He points out my first failure of the day. “Pretty sure the sponges are for the kitchen sink.”

Right.

“Well now they’re for the toilet.”

“There’s a toilet scrubber in the corner there.”

Truthfully, I thought that was for the shower. I’m glad I don’t say so.

“I was under the impression that you were a real busy guy. Do you plan on micromanaging me the whole day?”

He opens his mouth, thinks better of whatever he was about to say, and then turns to leave. *Ha. Victory.* I listen to him walk toward his office and once I'm sure he's really gone, I reach for the toilet scrubber. It's a lot easier to use than the sponge. I'd thank him for the tip, but alas, I would rather stick this entire toilet sponge in my mouth.

Jack and I have definitely started out on the wrong foot. Though rare, I have given and received bad first impressions before. This takes the cake, and it's unsettling. I'm not used to having problems with people. I pride myself on being easygoing and gregarious. In fact, back in California, I'm sure all my acquaintances would corroborate my genuine social proficiency. My whole life wasn't just an act to please Andrew. I'm nice, dammit!

But for some reason, around Jack, I play defense. I get angry and snappy. He rubs me the wrong way, gets under my skin. It's his arrogance, his utter lack of sympathy for somebody clearly down on their luck. I can't stand him, which is a problem considering he's my new boss.

If he hadn't assumed the worst of me right off the bat, we might've even become friends, but the word didn't take long to form on his lips: *princess*. If he ever calls me that again I'll grab that thick head of hair and give him a swirly in this toilet. That stupid baseball cap would clog the pipes and he'd have to clean it up himself.

I finish up in his bathroom and move on to the next one, all the while thinking about the conundrum I've found myself in. It's interesting to think I might've just swapped cards, a Drew for a Jack. One is arguably just as arrogant as the other. Not only that, they're both good-looking and confident too, but the similarities end there. Andrew is smooth edges and refinement. He's sly and cunning. In two days, I've already seen that Jack is rough around the edges, crass, and opinionated. Yesterday, he dragged me away from that meeting in front of all his ranch hands. Andrew would have never done that; he would have bottled his anger until we were behind closed doors.

Most curiously, I almost never had the courage to fight back or speak up with Andrew. He sapped my confidence down to the point that by the end, I was little more than a Stepford wife, subservient in every respect. Yet, with Jack, I can't help but speak my mind. My voice is back and ten times louder than I remember.

Jack

Edith didn't save me any coffee this morning. Not only that, she poured the excess down the sink while I watched. *Oh, were you not finished?* She's upset with me, thinks I'm being too hard on Meredith, but she doesn't know the whole truth. Meredith isn't here as some destitute damsel seeking sanctuary; she's here to stall until her husband begs her to come home, a sheep in sheep's clothing. Helen confirmed as much when we spoke last night. I called her, surprised Meredith had lasted her whole first day.

"You know she hasn't even bothered to call home?" Helen said. "I bet Andrew is worried sick."

"Maybe she really is planning on leaving him."

"No way. Meredith is anything but independent—spoiled by parents, doted on by boyfriends, and then completely provided for by Andrew. Remember when you were a kid and you'd get mad, run away, then be back home in time for supper? My guess is whatever this little tiff is about will be forgotten by Friday, and she'll be in your rearview mirror."

The phone call left a bad taste in my mouth. What kind of petulant woman just up and leaves her husband like that? He's probably really worried about her while she's off playing hide-and-seek a few states over. It doesn't make sense. Then again, Helen hasn't exactly painted Meredith in the best light, and I trust Helen's judgment. She's been a good employee for years while I've only known Meredith for 48 hours.

All day yesterday I kept waiting for her to fold, to feed into the impression Helen gave me, but she didn't. She cleaned the whole day and only took a quick break for lunch—I know this because Edith said she felt bad seeing her eat out on the porch by herself. A few times throughout the day, I heard things crash to the ground followed by a loud curse, but the house

was clean, nothing was broken (that I could see), and better yet, she didn't bother me once.

I think over my conversation with Helen while I make a new pot of coffee. I wonder how well Helen really knows Meredith. If she never once mentioned that she had a sister, they can't be all that close.

The back door opens and I turn to find the subject of my thoughts scurrying into the adjacent laundry room and yanking the door closed behind her. She presses her back to the door and her hand to her chest. Her eyes are closed. Her breathing is erratic. It looks like she was just running for her life.

"Was Alfred out there?"

Her eyes pop open and her light blue gaze locks with mine as her cheeks turn a rosy shade of red. She clearly thought she was alone.

"I found that if I throw a rock at the barn, I can distract him long enough to sprint from the shack to the house."

"Whatever works." I chuckle, turning back to the coffee maker so she can compose herself without me watching. "But the more you try to avoid him, the harder he's going to try to win you over. He's smart, and he likes a challenge."

"Can't you just train him to avoid me?"

It sounds like she really thinks that's an option.

I glance back at her out of the corner of my eyes. "I don't really keep an org chart with all my employees' ranks, but it's safe to say that Alfred is your superior. Besides, I doubt you'll be here long enough to bother."

Her brows furrow and her gaze drops to the floor. If Edith were watching, she'd jab me in the ribs with her elbow.

I sigh. "Are you actually scared of him? He's a giant teddy bear."

"No. Of course not," she says haughtily, pushing off the door and lifting her chin as she steps into the kitchen. "I just...don't reciprocate his enthusiasm."

“You sure about that?”

“Positive.”

Her pride will be her downfall. If she'd just admit she was scared, I'd make an effort to keep Alfred away from her. Since she swears she's not, I won't bother.

I flip the switch on the coffee machine and it starts percolating right away. The smell is better than sex.

“When the coffee's done, bring a mug up to my office, will you?”

She quirks a brow. “Is that part of my job description? Waiting on you hand and foot?”

“It's a cup of coffee, not a seven-course meal.”

“Okay...” She hesitates, her gaze turning toward the coffee pot like it's her salvation. “Am I allowed to get some for myself?”

The question, delivered in a gentle tone, catches me so off guard that I turn to look at her, *really* look at her. Obviously, I'm aware she's beautiful—that's the minimum working requirement for trophy wives—but even with her dark hair twisted up in a bun and a fresh face, she's the sweetest thing I've ever seen. I ignore the thought and focus on the fact that today she's wearing another one of my Blue Stone t-shirts. It's tied just like the one yesterday so it doesn't completely drown her. She's wearing her same pair of jeans, but they're stained now, and there's a hole just above the left knee. I don't think she'd be wearing them again if she had any other clothes. The thought is unsettling.

“Stop sizing me up like that,” she accuses suddenly.

My gaze jerks up to her face. “Are you kidding me? I wasn't sizing you up.”

She props her hands on her hips. “Oh yeah? What were you doing then?”

Her ice blue eyes dare me to tell the truth.

“I was feeling sorry for you.”

I should've known my reply wouldn't go over well. Her hands ball into tiny little fists. Her lips tug into a thin, angry line.

"Why? I don't want the coffee that badly."

I wave my hand, gesturing to her appearance. "No, because you're obviously a very unstable person."

"*What?*"

"You pack up and leave your life behind, and you don't even bring a change of clothes. You're either crazy, or you didn't think you'd be gone this long," I point out with a flat, disinterested tone.

"Oh, *braaaaavo*, Dr. Phil," she shoots back, temper flaring. "Excellent psychoanalysis. Don't you have your own business to mind? Like, literally?"

Jesus Christ. This woman is going to be the death of me.

I tug a hand through my hair and make a move to step around her. "Just bring the coffee when it's done."

"Fine," she snaps.

"And go to the grocery store. We're out of damn food."

I stomp up the stairs.

"Sure thing, boss!" she shouts after me.

"And cook something for lunch!"

"*With pleasure!*"

"I'll know if you spit in it!"

At that, I slam my office door closed.

I'm fuming and pissed, more so with myself than with her. I had every intention of keeping my cool, but she pushed me, just like she has since she first arrived. I've never in my life talked to a woman the way I talk to her. I should march right back downstairs and fire her on the spot.

I stay seated, seething.

A few minutes later, there's a soft knock and then Meredith opens my office door. My blood spikes with adrenaline as if

we're about to pick up right where we left off. My hands grip the edges of my desk. Her gaze hits mine, and I'm surprised to see that it's softer than it was down in the kitchen. Her lips are trained into a small, absent smile.

In her hand is a steaming cup of coffee—the coffee I'd completely forgotten about.

I watch her as she carries it carefully toward my desk, where I'm currently on the phone with the general manager over at Blue Stone Farm. He's talking my ear off about a few improvements he wants to make at the restaurant. I motion for Meredith to set the coffee down by the phone, and she listens. Then she reaches over and gently sticks a note onto my computer monitor.

In girly, scrolling script she wrote: *I didn't mean to snap at you. You're right, I am a little crazy.*

That's it. No apology, just a joke.

Still, it's something. Without waiting for a reply, she turns, and I watch her saunter out of the room, dragging my gaze from the strands of dark hair that have fallen from her bun to the curve of her ass in the only pair of jeans she owns. My stomach tightens and my heart pounds. A heat creeps up my neck.

When she's gone, I stare at her note, trying to refocus my attention on the phone call. In reality, I'm only half listening, too damn focused on the princess.

Meredith

Jack has shown his face once all morning, and it was so he could come down to make another pot of coffee. When I heard him walking down the stairs, I made sure to look extra busy. I was already vacuuming, but I vacuumed harder, heaving the thing back and forth as fast as I could. I looked like I was racing against an imaginary clock. He completely ignored me.

When he walked back by with his new cup of coffee, I'd moved on to the hallway. He had to walk right by me to get to the stairs and I held my breath, quietly praying he would trip on the vacuum cord. His spilled coffee would be my mess to clean, but I'd do it with a half-hidden grin.

Sadly, he stepped purposefully over the cord without acknowledging me then trotted right back up the stairs.

His quiet indifference is a silent weapon I can't fend off. I'm jumpy and on edge, listening for every little sound and jerking my attention to the stairs each time I think I hear him walking down them.

He hasn't made another appearance, but that hasn't stopped him from hanging around in my thoughts. I can't get the image of him from this morning out of my head. When I walked into his office, he was sitting behind his desk, phone pressed to his ear, gaze straight on me. His hatred plumed off him like smoke. He had a sharp stare and cool confidence, and I took one good look at him then nearly spilled his coffee all over the floor.

It's bad enough that I don't like his personality, but his appearance isn't exactly helping matters. I really want to find him unattractive, but I don't. He might be rougher around the edges than the men back in California, but with his chiseled jaw and piercing gaze, it's impossible to call him anything less than handsome. I try to tell myself his hair needs a trim and he's too sun-kissed. He could use a shave—his face would feel

all scratchy. *Wait, what? Pull it together Meredith. There will be no feeling his face.*

I'm not a fool. If his personality weren't so unyielding, I have no doubt there'd be a different woman warming his sheets every night. Even so, I bet he isn't lacking for female attention. I shiver at the thought of having to wash sweaty sheets or empty condoms from his trashcan.

Ugh! Okay, enough, brain. You've had your fun.

I snip that line of thinking and decide it's time for me to get out of this house. I think Jack's proximity is tainting my thoughts. Some fresh air will do me some good.

It's time for a grocery store run.

I jot down a list of everything I want to make for meals then survey the pantry and fridge. Edith and Jack have enough barbecue sauce and baked beans to last them well into an apocalypse. Veggies and fruits are nowhere to be found, unless you count the dusty jars of pickled okra labeled *Edith - July 2002*. Yum. That will change once I make it back with the groceries. I grab the envelope with the grocery money from the counter then find Edith out on the porch throwing the ball for Alfred. Fortunately, the activity seems to be holding his attention so well that he doesn't care to acknowledge me. Still, I aim to make my time near him as brief as possible.

"Hey Edith, is there a car I can borrow to drive to the grocery store?"

She turns and holds up her hand to shield the sun from her eyes. "Yeah, go ask one of the hands, they'll set you up with a truck."

I turn toward the barn and spot a half-dozen ranch hands at work. There are varying shades of cowboy hats and an ample amount of denim. I can smell the testosterone from way over here.

"Umm...is there one in particular I should aim for?" *Perhaps the weakest one in the herd?*

"Don't think it'll matter really. I'm sure they'll all be dying to help you as soon as you make your way over there."

She's right, of course. After I skirt around the house as stealthily as possible to avoid Alfred's interest, I don't even make it halfway to the barn before the first cowboy catches up with me. He falls in line right beside me and holds out his hand. "Hey there, name's Chris."

He doesn't look a day over eighteen, especially with the sunshine glinting off his blond hair. With a goofy lopsided grin and sunburned cheeks, he seems relatively harmless.

"Nice to meet you, Chris. I'm Meredith."

"I saw you at the meeting the other day. I've gotta say, I'm surprised to see you around after that. You workin' up in the house now?"

"Started on Monday."

We continue heading toward the row of vehicles beside the barn.

"What do you think so far?"

I squint one eye to study him. I don't know how loyal Chris is to Jack, but something about his gentle manner makes me want to give him an honest answer.

"Let's just say I've had an interesting start."

"That bad, huh?" He chuckles and shakes his head. "He gets better, I promise. When I first started working here, I couldn't even look him in the eye."

"Really?"

"He sure can be a mean son of a gun."

I'm still deciding if I actually heard him correctly—*what exactly is a son of a gun?*—when another ranch hand joins us.

"Chris! Why are you bothering this nice lady?"

"David, Meredith," Chris says. "Meredith, David."

We shake hands and David flanks me on the other side as we keep walking. Suddenly I'm surrounded by boots and twangs on all sides. David looks a little older than Chris, tall and lanky with a beard so long and thick my chin gets itchy just

looking at it. I notice then that they're both wearing matching work shirts with BLUE STONE RANCH monogrammed just beneath the left lapel. I wonder if Jack would have offered me the same uniform if I hadn't already stolen his t-shirts.

"Meredith was just saying how Jack's been a real asshole to her," Chris informs David matter-of-factly.

Jesus! Keep your voice down. The guy probably has the place mic'd up or something. Just to be sure, I loudly and clearly enunciate, "I have not!"

David bumps his shoulder with mine. "It's okay. You'll get used to it—everyone does. He's a good boss, just can be a real mean sonuvab—"

"Gun?" I finish for him.

He winks. "Sure."

"Where you stayin'?" David asks. "Downtown? Not much to rent around here unless you can afford the motel down off 173."

"No, I'm staying on the ranch."

They exchange a confused glance, and then Chris asks, "*Here?* You mean he has you up in the house with him and Edith?"

"No no no. He's letting me stay there." I turn and point toward my shack-sweet-shack nestled in the tree line behind the farmhouse. The distance has not softened its appearance. The last of the ancient window shutters—barely hanging on by one rusty hinge—finally breaks and falls to the ground as if on cue.

"*Lettin' you?*" echoes David, laughing as he keels over. "You're kidding! Where ya really staying?"

It takes a bit more convincing on my part before they actually believe me. Apparently even they wouldn't deign to sleep there, and it makes me hate Jack even more than before. He made it sound like I should have been grateful with the provided accommodations.

"That ain't right," David says, shaking his head. "Does it even have a kitchen?"

“It’s really not so bad. I’ve been making do.”

Yesterday, for dinner, I ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich while hovering over the sink. I would have sat on the bed, but the mice and spiders were embroiled in a vicious turf war.

“Last time I went in there, I saw holes in the floorboards.”

I nod. “Yeah, those are still there.”

One of them is so big my foot nearly fell through.

“Miss Meredith,” Chris says solemnly, taking his hat off and holding it over his heart. A look of deep concern is etched across his baby face. “As good Christian men, we can’t let you keep livin’ like that.”

My brows arch. “Do either of you have a better solution?”

He thinks hard about it. “Well, David here’s getting married soon, so he can’t have you movin’ in with him, and well, I still live with my parents or I’d invite you to stay with us. My mom got pretty mad the last time I brought a stray woman home.”

He says it like I’m a flea-infested mutt he found on the side of the road. *Please Mom, can we keep her? She’s housetrained and everything!* I don’t take any offense. Other than Edith, Chris and David are the two nicest people I’ve met so far in Texas.

“Well guys, I appreciate your concern, but I won’t be staying in that shack long. I’m saving up so I can move somewhere else.” We finally make it to the row of mud-splattered farm vehicles ranging from ATVs to trucks. “Now, can either of you get me the keys for one of these? I need to run down to the grocery store.”

David tips his cowboy hat. “You stay right here.”

While he’s gone, Chris gives me detailed directions for how to get to the grocery store. “Take the third left after the Lutheran church, and then the next right after First Baptist, and, now, if you see St. Mary’s, you’ve gone too far.” By the time I hop up behind the wheel of an old Ford truck, I think I’ll just let Jesus take the wheel.

Chris shuts the door for me and puts his hat back on his shaking head. “Godspeed Miss Meredith. We’ll figure something out for ya.”

I turn to the dashboard to see what I’m working with and try not to show my concern. The truck is from an era when designers figured getting impaled by a steel steering column was as good a safety feature as any. The seatbelt, which is draped loosely over my lap, has a few knots tying the pieces together.

“Are there any other trucks available? Maybe an automatic? It’s been a while since I’ve driven a manual.”

David frowns. “That’s all we’ve got. I’d give you a quick refresher, but Chris and I really gotta get back to work.”

Right, of course. I’ll have to make do. I will not march back into the house and announce to Jack that I’ve had yet another failure. He probably keeps a list of them stowed in his top desk drawer. It’s laminated, and he pulls it out from time to time just to make himself smile. Sometime soon, he’ll splurge and have it framed.

To my credit, I manage to peel out onto the main road before I stall for the first time. The truck is old—it belongs beside a horse and buggy—and its lower gears are proving ornery. With every grind of the transmission, it’s like the vehicle is saying, *Please just kill me.*

I restart the truck and continue down the winding country road, trying to glance down at the directions from Chris while also remaining in my designated lane. I’m chugging along at 15 mph, because third gear seems to be the most cooperative. It’s slow going, but I try to enjoy the ride. I roll the window down, and the summer breeze carries the scent of honeysuckle and jasmine. Every now and then a car comes up behind me and I wave them past. They offer fun little greetings as they swerve around me: “Lady! The speed limit’s 40!” and “GET OFF THE ROAD!” I smile and wave, because I’m taking a summer cruise, and summer cruises are meant to be slow. Unfortunately, there’s a hill up ahead and I’ll need to speed up

or move to a lower gear if I have any hope of actually cresting it.

I take a deep breath, let off the gas, push in the clutch, and try shifting into second gear. *Wait, is second gear up or down?* Before I know it, the hill has slowed me to a complete stop in the middle of the road. I plop my head down on the steering wheel before I register the feeling of backward motion.

“No, no, no!” I shout, stomping on the brake pedal.

A truck blasts its horn behind me so loudly I jump out of my skin.

“Go around!” I shout out the window and they listen, whipping past me at a million miles per hour.

After that, I’m left alone again, just me and the hill. I restart the truck yet again, make several attempts at forward progress, but the backward rolling freaks me out every time, causing me to stall out. Finally, I reach the bottom of the hill—*actual rock bottom*.

I’m no longer just grumbling under my breath; I’m shouting curse words at the top of my lungs (for every nearby church to hear) as I stare at the insurmountable hill. I’m smack-dab in the middle of a children’s fable, *The Little Meredith That Could*, except I’m pretty sure I can’t.

I catch another truck coming up the road in my rearview mirror and prep myself for another blaring horn, but it never comes. The driver pulls up behind me, flips on the hazards, and then opens the door. I’m prepared to see a farmer or another ranch hand, not a handsome golden-haired man dressed in a suit. I think he’s a figment of my overactive imagination, but I’m so desperate, I’ll take any help I can get, even in the form of a hallucination. I blink. He’s still there. His tie is a dark blue, and I focus on it in my rearview mirror as he rounds the back of the truck and comes up to the driver’s side window.

“Are you having car trouble, ma’am?”

He leans on the windowsill. I should warn him that the rust will probably rub off on his suit, but I’m too focused on

ma'am. If that's not the cutest thing in the world, I don't know what is.

I smile gently. "Not exactly. More like driver trouble. It's, uhh...well, it's been a while since I've driven stick."

I nod toward the hill and he finally gets it. "Keep stallin'?"

"Unfortunately."

Here is where he could either say, *Well, good luck*, and head back to his truck or offer to help me out of my bind. Instead, he takes a minute to survey me. I imagine what he's seeing: wild ponytail, oversized t-shirt, ripped jeans. If he sniffs, he'll catch the scent of my perfume of choice lately: eau de Lemon Pledge.

"You're not from around here."

No question, all statement.

I quirk a brow. "How could you tell?"

He chuckles and shakes his head. "Question is, what are you doing driving one of Blue Stone's trucks?"

Of course. I'm sure there's a massive logo somewhere that I overlooked—or maybe this truck is so old, it's legendary.

"I'm their newest employee."

I'm all smiles, proud of my new job. *Job. Jobjobjob*. It stills sounds funny in my head.

His light brown eyes widen. "You're kidding. Don't tell me they have you working at the new vineyard."

"No." I didn't even realize there was a vineyard.

"Are you at the restaurant then?"

"The ranch," I answer simply.

"Ranch hand, huh?" he teases.

"Something like that."

"Since when?"

"Three days ago."

He nods. “What do you think of the guy who runs the place?”

“Jack? Is he a friend of yours?”

He laughs and shakes his head. “Not exactly. He and I went to high school together. Never could quite get along.”

An enemy of my enemy? This just got interesting.

“We’ve had a rocky start,” I admit sheepishly.

A gleam of interest sparks in his light brown gaze. “I can’t imagine why. You seem sweet enough to me.”

I KNOW, RIGHT! Finally someone gets it.

“I don’t think I’m the problem...”

His handsome smile stretches wider. “No, I doubt you are.”

We are definitely flirting and he is definitely good-looking, a welcome sight in the middle of an eligible-men desert. I know it seems crazy, thinking about men like this so soon after leaving my husband, but it’s been so long since I’ve *flirted* and not just *appeased*. It feels good, like scratching a leg that’s been buried under a plaster cast for months.

This guy’s clothes are nice. His face is nicer. He’s cleanly shaven. His hair is trimmed short and he has one of those classic, pearly smiles. I bet he gets along with most everyone, unlike a certain dark-haired, darker-eyed devil waiting for me back at the ranch. I know he didn’t give me the keys to this clunker, but he’s still to blame for my current predicament. I don’t have any proof, but I have a gut feeling he’s somehow the reason I got the flu before my seventh grade trip to Disney and couldn’t go.

“I’ll make you a deal: you scoot over on this seat, and I’ll get you over this hill. Where are you headed?”

I start to slide across the bench seat, and he pulls open the door to take my place behind the wheel. “The grocery store.” I hold up my piece of paper. “According to my incredibly detailed directions, I’m nearly there.”

“Yeah.” He nods before he starts the truck and maneuvers it like a pro. “You should be good. The store’s just around the

bend up ahead, and don't worry, there aren't any more hills after this one. I'd drive you the rest of the way myself, but I have to be in court in fifteen minutes."

"Court, huh? Are you the law breaker or the law upholder?"

He laughs. "You'll be happy to know I have a clean record, ma'am. Good thing considering you just let me hop into this truck with you."

My eyes widen. How stupid could I be?

"Oh god. I did, didn't I?!" I drop my face in my palm. "You could've been a—a highwayman or something!"

"Aren't too many of those still around this century." He smiles. "I just wouldn't recommend doing it again in the future. Cedar Creek is pretty safe, but you never know when a few bad apples might be passing through."

It's kind of fun that small towns have a rosy euphemism for everything. In big cities they're hardened criminals. Here, they're just spoiled fruit.

"I'll remember that for next time," I promise.

"Maybe I could give you my number and you can call me if you ever find yourself in a bind again, roadside or otherwise."

I swear he's blushing a little bit.

If I were in the market for love, he'd be the perfect candidate: handsome but sweet, gentle and kind. He's a golden retriever, anxious to please in hopes of a treat.

I think it's best that I don't lead him on though, so I offer the truth: "I don't keep a cell phone on me."

"You're kidding."

I pat my jean pockets for proof. "Nope. I'm not Amish or anything, it's just—well, it's complicated."

I keep it back at the ranch on my bedside table. I hardly check it, and I would get rid of it completely but I'm scared Helen or my parents will need to reach me. Most of the time I just keep it turned off.

He puts the truck in park. “So I guess that means I’ll have to settle for the ol’ fashioned way: maybe I’ll see you around sometime.”

I smile and shrug. “I’m sure I’ll stall out again soon, or maybe I’ll commit a crime and need a lawyer to defend me?”

He brushes his hand across his chin, brows furrowed. “Won’t work. I’m a prosecutor.”

“Wow, so you really are a hero. Slaying dragons and rescuing damsels—all you need is a suit of armor.” He can’t meet my eyes, as if he’s embarrassed by the attention. I smile and reach over to extend my hand. “I’m Meredith, by the way.”

He smiles as his warm palm meets mine. “Tucker.”

After that, we part ways. Tucker dashes off to court, and I’m left chugging along the last mile or two to the grocery store with a dopey smile on my face. I take my time perusing the aisles, pleasantly surprised by the turn my day has taken. Jack might have started it off with a bang, but thanks to Chris, David, and Tucker, I’m starting to think people in Texas are just as friendly as rumor has it. I check off every item on my grocery list and manage to stay under budget. Food is so much cheaper here than in California, and I even find a section of the store full of organic, local produce from a few of the surrounding farms.

By the time I make it back to the ranch—after only stalling once on the way home, thank you very much—I carry all the groceries in and get to work making lunch. It’s already 12:45 PM and Jack and Edith are hungry. Edith won’t leave the kitchen. She’s taken up residence on one of the bar stools and is watching me work.

“What’s that?” she asks.

“Garlic-infused olive oil.”

“And that?”

“Panko.”

“Pank-what?”

“PANK-OH. Breadcrumbs to you. I like it on salmon.”

“Jack isn’t a big fan of fish.”

I purse my lips. “You don’t say.”

“Yeah, we’re more a meat-and-potatoes kind of family.”

Just then, Jack’s booming voice carries down from the top floor. “Is Meredith back from the store yet? I just got a call from Marty, said he saw a brunette stalled out on the side of the road in one of our trucks.”

“Yes I’m back!” I shout back, annoyed with this Marty person for being such a narc. “And I don’t know what you’re talking about! I got to the store and back just fine, no thanks to that rust bucket your ranch hands lent me!”

“That truck runs just fine when I drive it!”

“Yeah, the engine’s probably running from you like everyone else around here!”

Edith throws her hands in the air. “That’s enough shouting! Jack either come down here and talk to Meredith like a normal human being or get back to work. Lunch won’t be ready for another thirty minutes!”

“Forty,” I whisper.

“Forty minutes!” she corrects.

Jack’s footsteps clomp back into his office, and Edith and I exchange a conspiratorial smile.

Forty minutes later on the dot, Jack and his grandmother sit down for a lunch of summer kale salad, cauliflower rice, and baked salmon.

I stand at the end of the table, twisting a towel in my hand and waiting for them to take their first bites. They both stare at the food like it’s some kind of alien sustenance.

“There’s not a potato on this plate,” Jack points out.

“I think you’ll like the cauliflower. It’s rich and garlicky.”

“Is this the first course?” he asks, peering up at me from beneath his dark brows.

“Jack, don’t be so rude,” Edith scolds. “Meredith, sit down and eat with us.”

“Oh, I’ve been eating this whole time—y’know, checking the seasoning levels.”

“Eat s’more then,” she demands. “You’re too skinny.”

I laugh. “Where I come from, that’s a compliment.”

Truthfully, I *could* eat. I’m starving, but I’m aware of the fact that Jack hasn’t asked me to join them. In fact, his body language sends the exact opposite message. If we were in elementary school, he’d drop his backpack on the empty seat beside him and proclaim loudly, *Seat’s taken*.

I take the hint and leave them to it. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to finish organizing the groceries.”

“Thank you for lunch,” Edith says. “It looks very...*exotic*.”

I shake my head as I walk back into the kitchen.

There’s silence for a few minutes as forks and knives meet plates. I start to organize the groceries in the pantry, but my ears are trained on the dining room, listening for feedback.

“The salmon’s really good,” Edith says.

Jack grunts.

“I notice you’ve nearly cleared your plate there,” she points out.

“A man’s gotta eat.”

“Uh-huh. You’ve about licked it clean—I’m sure Meredith would give you seconds if you asked.”

I can’t hear any conversation after that, and then a few minutes later, Jack walks into the kitchen with both of their plates. There’s not a speck of food left on either.

I hold out my hands to take them from him, but he steps around me.

My brows jump to my hairline, but I keep my lips zipped.

He opens the dishwasher and bends down to load their plates and silverware. I don’t stare at his butt in his worn Wranglers,

and I definitely don't snap my gaze away before he stands and turns to face me. He drops his hands onto the counter and leans forward. I busy myself by folding a towel and hanging it over the side of the sink. I pick at a speck of dirt on the counter. I open a cabinet, look inside, and then close it again. It's clear he wants me to stop what I'm doing and give him my attention, but I can't do it. Everything inside of me wants to fight him tooth and nail, even for something as simple as this.

"So the truck gave you some trouble?"

His tone is the same one my parents used when they knew I'd done something wrong but they wanted me to fess up to it myself. *Meredith, do you know what could've happened to the entire sleeve of Oreos?*

No clue, I'd mumble through pursed lips, cheeks bursting at the seams, teeth looking like an active coal mine.

"Nope. No trouble at all."

"That's strange, because Marty—a trusted friend—asked me if I'd had any trucks stolen by a raven-haired woman."

I suppose Marty, with his level of observational detail, must be the sketch artist at the local police department. I have no choice but to adjust my current strategy of denial.

"Ohhh, he must've seen me when I pulled over to admire the wildflowers."

"What kind?"

"Sunflowers."

"I haven't seen any yet this year."

"They were massive, big as your head." I spot the obvious flaw in my plan and sidestep it masterfully. "Somebody was out mowing though, so they're probably all gone now."

"Y'know, it's an old truck. It could have given anyone a hard time."

He's playing good cop, trying to bait me into an easy confession. I turn and give him a blank, innocent stare.

He tips his head to the side.

I mimic him.

He puts his hands on his hips, and so do I.

He narrows his eyes, and I mirror the gesture.

Finally, he cracks. When he's gone, I'll pump my fist in the air in victory.

"Next time come get the keys for my truck."

His truck?

"Is it from the Stone Age or the Bronze Age?"

He heaves a heavy sigh like he's lost all his patience with me—that, or he's trying not to laugh.

"It's brand new."

"And you'd trust me with it?"

"Do I have a reason not to?"

His gaze is so warm, and yet so cold all at once. Meeting it makes me feel like a tiny fist is punching me repeatedly in the gut. I'm surprised I still sound normal as I ask, "What'd you think of lunch?"

He shrugs, glancing down at the shirt I have knotted off at my waist, yet another of his hand-me-downs. His eyes narrow almost imperceptibly before his gaze finds mine again. "I don't usually like salmon."

There's a compliment in there somewhere, but I'd have to use a pickaxe to find it.

"Right, well, I saved the skin. It's good for dogs."

His brows rise as if he's impressed. "Going to give it to Alfred?"

"Give it, drop it out back through the cracked door—tomato-tomahto."

He shakes his head and pushes off the counter. "We really gotta work on that fear of yours."

"Total avoidance is working out pretty well," I quip. "I'll just continue that forever."

“Forever, huh? Strong words for someone on their second day.”

I try not to smile. “That’s how long I plan to stay—either that or until we’re so sick of each other that you fire me.”

“That’s how you think this is gonna end?”

Now we’re both fighting smiles. “I won’t be quitting, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

He rubs the back of his neck as he turns for the back door. “We’ll see.”

It’s a cheeky little sendoff, and just like with everything else concerning Jack, it digs under my skin. *We’ll see*, I mouth snarkily to his back like a snotty grade-schooler, all the while watching him walk away. He reaches for his baseball cap on the hook by the door, slips it on over his chestnut brown hair, and then he’s gone.

Later that evening, after I’m done working for the day, I find an envelope tucked halfway underneath the door of the shack. Inside, there’s a small advance: \$500 in cash.

Jack’s jagged handwriting adorns the front of the envelope:

Stop wearing my clothes.

Jack

With summer in full swing, we're right in the middle of our busy season for Blue Stone, and the restaurant is more popular than ever. This morning I went over there to meet with the head chef and the GM, and I approved a new seating layout so we can fit a few more tables out on the back porch.

Our vineyard and winery have been expanding for the last few years as well. I've been working on opening up a distribution channel between us and a few regional grocery store chains, but we're still working out the terms. The dry weather last year hit us hard, and we weren't sure we'd be able to keep up with supply. Funny enough, the shortage sparked more interest than usual, and what wine we were able to stock sold out as soon as it hit shelves. I've hired a few more growers to ensure that this season fares better than the last.

The manager for our wedding venue assures me we have more events booked than ever, says brides are having to inquire a year in advance to secure their desired dates, and even then, most of the highly coveted weekends are already double-booked with a wedding in the morning and another in the evening.

The fact is, with everything going on with the various Blue Stone businesses, I rarely find time to step out from behind my desk. It's a shame considering how much I enjoy working outside, so I take advantage of every opportunity I can get—like right now, I'm in the middle of an all-hands meeting, checking in with the guys about the progress on a few projects around the ranch.

Too bad not a single one of them is listening to me. A few yards away, Meredith is stealing the show.

She's out on the front porch with Alfred, attempting to conquer her fear by treating him to some of the salmon skin from yesterday's lunch.

“Sit!”

Alfred sits for two seconds, gets overwhelmed with self-pride for obeying, and then leaps excitedly at her outstretched hand.

“I said sit! Sit!”

The problem is she’s holding the treat way over her head to keep it out of his reach, but he thinks she’s giving him a challenge: *Oh! You want me to jump higher?!*

“Very bad!” she admonishes, wagging her finger as if he’s fluent in sign language. “I’ll feed it to you as soon as you can hold a sit for more than a blink!”

He jumps up again and she squeals and flings the salmon skin away like it’s a hot potato. Alfred makes it disappear in two seconds.

It’s pitiful. None of us can look away.

“Where’d you find her, anyway?” Garrett, my ranch manager, asks. “They got mail-order California brides now?”

“She’s his new housekeeper,” Chris, my youngest ranch hand, interjects. “She just started a few days ago.”

He’s wearing a proud smile I find confusing.

Garrett wags his thumb toward her. “Why’s she wearing your shirt?”

Yes, why *is* she wearing my shirt? I groan thinking of the note I left on her doorstep yesterday afternoon. Apparently she decided to disregard it. Even worse, it looks like she’s actually cut the sleeves off of this one. Now I don’t even want it back.

“So is she a Russian bride or is she single?” someone else asks, inciting a round of snickers.

All heads spin to me as if they’ve been waiting for the answer to that question all day. A few of them rub their necks from whiplash.

I answer swiftly, tacking on my most gruff tone, the one that makes them pee their pants. “She is nobody’s goddamn business. Show her some respect and get back to work.”

I catch Chris smiling, seemingly happy with me for sticking up for her. What the hell is wrong with him?

I get my answer when he and David catch up to me as I'm walking back toward the farmhouse.

"Hey boss, is there any lumber we could use to fix up that shack you've tucked Miss Meredith away in? I figure we could patch up the floor pretty quick, shouldn't take longer than a day or two."

"First of all, why are you calling her Miss Meredith like she's your mommy's friend? Second, what are you talking about?"

They exchange a glance like, *here we go again*, and then David speaks up. "Which part are you confused about? The lumber or the—"

"Who said anything about fixing up the shack?"

Chris' eyes go wide. "Haven't you been inside there lately? There are gaps in the floorboards this far apart." He stretches his arms out as wide as they'll go. It's an exaggeration...I think. "A snake could crawl in sideways."

David nods. "Not to mention, it's about to get hot as hell. Once we fix the floors, we could drop in a window unit from the hardware store. They're pretty cheap these days—"

I hold up my hand so they'll both shut their yaps. "Why do you two care? You don't even know her."

Chris frowns, clearly offended. "We met her yesterday."

"Oh yeah? Now y'all are buddies?"

He shrugs. "I gave her directions to the grocery store."

"And now she has y'all running around working for her?"

He stops walking and props his hands on his hips. David follows suit. "Oh no, she didn't ask—just seems like the right thing to do. You know she made us muffins this morning, brought 'em out to all the guys, still warm from the oven, just like Gammy used to make."

What is going on? When did all my ranch hands go soft? And why didn't I get any of these muffins?

“So what do you think?” Chris asks, his eyes comically large and brimming with hope.

“We’ll do it on our own time if that’s the problem,” David adds.

“I’ll think about it.”

They beam, and I leave them there like two little love-struck schoolboys.

Meredith is sitting on the porch steps, soaking up the sun and watching me approach. When I get within earshot, she holds up her hands. “Before you accuse me of slacking on the job, I’m taking my fifteen-minute break. I asked around and all the guys said we’re allowed two a day.”

I tip my head down to hide my amusement. “I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Oh sure.”

I reach the stairs and crouch down to pet Alfred, who’s lounging on the grass there. “I’m surprised you’re sitting so close to him.”

“It’s intentional. I’m trying immersion therapy.”

I peer up at her and squint to keep the sun out of my eyes.

“How’s that working out for you?”

She shrugs and scoots a smidge away from him, trying to play it off like she was just readjusting her seat. “It’s not so bad now that his attention is on you.”

I make a point to scratch his belly so he’ll roll onto his back. His tongue lolls out of the side of his mouth and his hind leg starts to kick the air.

“Well now you’re just showing off,” she says in a clipped tone.

“I promise you, he’s a lover, not a fighter.”

“That’s odd.”

“Why?”

“Well, they say pets are a reflection of their owners, but I guess there must be some exceptions.”

I turn to see her lean back on the stairs, coy smile hinting that she was teasing, not trying to land a punch. I should push to stand and get back to work, but I’m stuck focusing on the sprinkling of freckles across the brim her nose. Were they there when she first showed up?

“The guys said you brought them muffins this morning.”

She tips her head to the side and her smile fades. “If I say I did, will I get in trouble?”

“Of course not. Why would you think that?”

“I don’t know, you sounded kind of annoyed just then.”

I frown. “I think that’s just my default tone.”

She laughs at that—a rich, warm laugh that stops me in my tracks. My gaze hitches on the deep dimple dotting the left side of her smile. When she notices me staring, she clears her throat and motions back to the house.

“I saved one for you, though it wasn’t easy—Edith already sniffed out the two I hid behind the breadbox.” I don’t think she can tell how shocked I am by the gesture because she continues nonchalantly. “I could bring it up to your office with some coffee.”

“I thought you were resisting the notion of waiting on me hand and foot?”

She looks away, eyes narrowing. “If you don’t want it, just say so.”

That hurt expression twists my insides, and my first instinct is to fall to my knees and beg for that damn muffin, but I catch myself. What the hell am I doing, standing here and chatting? I shouldn’t be warming up to Meredith. I shouldn’t be letting my guard down with her at all. She’s a heartbreaker. She’s spoiled and flighty. If Helen is to be believed, she left her husband to teach him some kind of bratty lesson. I’d be wise to keep my distance, even if that means hurting her feelings to do it.

I push to stand. “Yeah, I had a big breakfast. You can give it to Edith.”

* * *

Later at lunch, Meredith sets down another one of her healthy meals. This time there’s baked chicken, asparagus, and some kind of tiny grain that looks like it should be sprinkled into a fish tank.

“Couscous,” she announces softly.

I feel my mouth turn down with disdain and have to fight against it.

Still, she senses my reluctance. “It’s wheat, country boy. Give it a try. I promise you’ll like it.”

Edith pats the empty place setting beside her. “Take a seat and eat with us.”

If she wasn’t my grandmother, I’d kick her shin under the table. What is it with her and Meredith? Edith never tried this hard to be friendly with our old housekeeper.

I aim daggers at her, but she’s too busy making googly eyes at Meredith to notice, so I have no choice but to speak up. “Mary never used to eat lunch with us.”

Meredith bristles at the comment and spins on her heel to head back into the kitchen.

There. Problem solved.

Edith sends me a scathing look from across the table. When I was younger, that look would have made me recoil in fear. I’m surprised it hasn’t completely lost its effect.

“That’s because Mary used to prefer watching Jerry Springer up in her room during lunch.”

I shrug and scoop a pile of couscous onto my spoon. *Here goes nothing.* “It’s better this way. I’m still pretty sure she’ll be gone in a week anyway. There’s no sense in getting friendly with her.”

She rolls her eyes. “Believe me, you’re in no danger of that.”

I straighten my shoulders, fish food forgotten. “You think I’m being too hard on her?”

“Well she’s scared shitless of Alfred, yet I still think she prefers his company to yours.”

I grind my teeth, and for the rest of the meal, we don’t bother with conversation. There’s no use. She’s angry with me for the way I’m treating Meredith, and I’m angry with her for not seeing my side. If she’d heard the way Helen spoke about her sister, she wouldn’t be so welcoming either.

I’m focused pretty hard on stewing, but not so much that I don’t notice how good Meredith’s food is. I’ve never willingly eaten asparagus, but she roasted it so well I’m a little disappointed when my plate’s clean.

I scoot my chair back from the table and carry our dishes into the kitchen. Meredith is in there cleaning, and she makes a point to completely ignore my presence. Not only that, she turns and angles herself away from me. Her shoulders are hunched over and her head is tilted down as she scrubs hard, cleaning the stove.

All right. Okay. I’ve had enough. This is what it must feel like to be the mean, responsible parent. It sucks. Why do I have to be the bad guy? So what? I didn’t want her eating with us and getting cozy, but I can’t stand her moping like this. Not to mention, the sooner she and I are back on semi-decent terms, the sooner Edith will come around as well.

“Food was good. Two for two.”

She hums and keeps her back to me.

“I’d never tried kooz-kooz before.”

She makes a little bored noise, unimpressed, and then I’m left with nothing else to say.

My temper starts to boil up inside of me, though not at her—at myself. I hate this. I hate that I can't decide how I should handle her. One minute I want her out of my house. The next, I want to play nice and get on her good side. I can't help but wonder what that would be like: fresh baked muffins with my morning coffee, sweet smiles, the returned love and affection of my grandmother. I could get used to that real quick.

And that right there is the problem.

Meredith

“I feel compelled to defend my grandson.”

I shake my head. “There’s no need, really.”

Edith comes around me and turns off the faucet for the kitchen sink. I’m elbow-deep in suds, but apparently this conversation is more important than the dishes from lunch. I reach for a towel and dry my hands before turning toward her.

She’s eyeing me with unveiled curiosity. “He thinks you’re using us as a stepping stone.”

“Oh yeah?” I cross my arms. “Who’s to say he’s not right?”

She nods, running with it. “Who indeed?” After a brief silence, she plunks me in the forehead with her pointer finger. “You are, dummy! So are you or are you not headin’ back to California as soon as that rich husband of yours figures out where you ran off to?”

My jaw ticks with anger.

“Whatever you think you know about me, go ahead and believe it. It’s all true.”

I’m so sick of everyone shoving their nose in my business. If this were a normal job with normal hours, she wouldn’t be asking about my personal life, but this hasn’t been a normal setup from the beginning. She and Jack know Helen, and therefore they feel like they know me. They don’t. It’s like looking out a single window and thinking you know what the whole world looks like. Whatever snippets I told Helen about my life back in California were only half-truths. My life back there wasn’t complete hell, but it wasn’t all rainbows and cotton candy either.

“Maybe I do come from a cushy life, but there’s a lot more to it. All you need to know is that I’m not going back. End of story. Now if you’re done, I need to get back to these dishes.”

“Was it ever good? Your marriage?”

Her question is so jarring that a sharp memory hits me like a bird smacking into a clean window. The last time Andrew and I were intimate, I was lying face down on our bed with him on top of me, letting it happen, trying to think of anything other than how revolting it was to have him touch me. I turned and my gaze caught on the framed picture on my nightstand: us, on our wedding day...me, smiling up at Andrew like he was my shining prince.

“Yes, we were happy once.”

“Well, marriage is hard. You gotta work at it to keep the love alive.”

I think back to all my desperate attempts to change him. In the end, I only succeeded in changing myself.

I pretend like her advice is blowing my mind. “Wow, *really*? Guess I just didn’t try hard enough. Any more sage advice? Maybe I should have spiced it up in the bedroom to keep him interested? Maybe I should have been a little more attentive? More doting? Funny? Aloof? Mysterious? Please tell me how I could have saved a marriage you know nothing about.”

My explosion misses her completely. She hums with confirmation then turns for the back door. “Yep, that’s what I thought.”

I frown. “What?”

She keeps on walking. “Nothing. You can go back to your dishes now.”

“Edith!”

The back door slams behind her, and I throw up my hands in defeat. *Jesus, what is with this family?*

* * *

It's early evening and I've quarantined myself in the shack. It's just me and the local wildlife I've yet to evict. I have a hardback cracked open on my lap, a brand-new thriller I found Edith reading yesterday. Apparently we share the same literary tastes—we sat in the game room chatting about books for a good thirty minutes. When I heard Jack's office door open, I leapt to my feet. I didn't want him to catch me slacking on the job; I won't gift him any ammunition against me. Other than our little blowups, I want to be the best employee he's ever had. I want my likeness framed above a small plaque that reads: *Employee of the Year!* That way he won't have any grounds to fire me.

He didn't see me lounging there with his grandmother, and she insisted it didn't matter anyway. Still, I didn't want to abuse his trust, so I got back to work, and Edith must have finished the rest of the novel because it was waiting for me on my doorstep earlier.

It's great so far, lots of murder and blood—everything a girl needs—but I'm having trouble focusing on it because it's so damn hot in here. The sun is on its way down for the day, but the air is still humid and stifling. I took an ice-cold shower after work then put on one of Jack's t-shirts, and instead of knotting it, I'm wearing it like a dress while my jeans hang up to dry. I finally got around to washing them, but this weekend I have plans to go into town and spend a little bit of my advance on some shorts. I can hardly wait.

I push the window open and stick my face out, hoping for some cool wind, but instead, I'm greeted with stale, warm air. A bead of sweat rolls slowly down my forehead. This is ridiculous. Texas is a sauna. In California, it's probably a breezy 70 degrees. At this moment, a woman is out with her boyfriend and begging him for his jacket. He's annoyed she didn't bring one of her own. *I didn't realize it'd be so cold!* Boyfriends in Texas must not have this problem.

Without another thought, I rip my book off my bed and fling the shack's door open. I'm aware that Jack's t-shirt cuts off pretty high on my thighs, but I don't care. The idea of shoving my legs into wet jeans makes me want to dry heave. Besides,

no one's going to see me in this ensemble anyway. The guys are already gone for the day since ranch work starts early and ends early, and I'm pretty sure I saw Jack's truck drive off an hour or two ago, so there's no reason to suffocate myself in the hot tub I call home.

If there was a pool on the property, I'd jump into it head first. I'd stay there, floating on my back until the sun burns out. As it is, I'm aiming for a hammock nestled under two oak trees behind the house. I spotted it my first day on the ranch, but I haven't seen anyone use it. It might be a little dirty, but I don't mind. My hope is that if I really get it swinging, I'll generate a little air flow to cool me down. If not, I'm marching into Jack's house and Tetrising my entire body into the freezer. I'll happily perish beside the frozen peas—just the thought sends a shiver of pleasure down my spine.

I relish in the feel of the soft grass beneath my bare feet as I make my way across the yard. I decide this is already infinitely better than the shack, right up until I hear a low whistle that says, *Hey there, pretty lady.*

My attention snaps to the left, toward the barn, and I freeze mid-step.

A group of ranch hands are circled around the front of the ancient truck I drove to the grocery store the other day, apparently working on it. Two of them are already staring in my direction—Chris and another boy about his age that I haven't met yet. Chris' eyes go wide and then he quickly averts his gaze as if I'm tiptoeing around outside in lingerie instead of a loose t-shirt. The other ranch hand doesn't look away, and I'd bet money the whistle came from him. He's focused on my bare legs like they're two juicy cheeseburgers and he's starving. The third ranch hand—the one with his head tucked under the hood of the truck—finally steps back and pauses his work. With a start, I realize it's Jack. He wipes the grease from his hands with a rag and mutters something I can't hear. Neither of the guys respond. He looks up to find them distracted then follows the gaze of the second man right...to...me. When he finds me standing in the middle of the lawn, my knees nearly buckle.

I do the only thing I can think of: hold up my book as if to say, *Hello kind fellow, nothing to see here, just doing a bit of light reading.*

He scowls, and just like that, the look is completed. It's the perfect cowboy fantasy I never knew I had: he's over there working on a farm truck with grease-stained hands, the beginnings of a five o'clock shadow on his chiseled jaw, his dark hair winging out from beneath his backward baseball hat. His t-shirt is stretched tight over his chest and his dark jeans are so worn in, I bet they're perfectly molded to his thighs. His dark eyes warn me away. In fact, they do more than that. They're a visual growl, rumbling in the waning light, but I can't seem to take heed because in that moment, he's the hottest man I've ever seen, and that's a problem.

A major problem.

He catches the ranch hand still focused on me and smacks him in the back of the head, knocking his cowboy hat off. The boy scurries to pick it up and make his apologies, and I use the opportunity to turn tail back toward the shack as fast as possible. My legs move so quick, I break the sound barrier and a random window four miles away shatters as a result.

Once I'm there, I throw the door closed behind me and start pacing. I get it; it doesn't look good. He already thinks so little of me—hell, he probably thinks I'm some kind of west coast nudist, forcing my liberalism on these good Christian people.

There's a heavy knock on the door a second later, and I curse and squeeze my eyes closed.

"Meredith," Jack says, pounding again. "Open up."

"No!" I shout back. "I'm busy."

"I just saw for a fact that you are not busy."

"I'm busy not dealing with this right now!"

"Bullshit. We need to talk."

"Fine!" I groan. "Okay!"

I reach for the jeans, which are still hanging up to dry, and try to yank them on. I get them up to my knees, but they won't go

any higher; they're too wet and tight. *DID I HAVE TO LEAVE MY HUSBAND IN A PAIR OF SKINNY JEANS!?* I hop around, yanking as hard as I can. I'm Ross Geller trying to stuff his sweaty gams into those leather pants, but it's no use. The jeans won't budge, and Jack is growing more impatient outside.

"Meredith!"

"Just hold on a minute!"

I lie back on my bed and tug with all my might, and finally the denim starts to work with me. *YES YES YES*. I zip and button them, leap off the bed, and fling the door open with an angry huff.

Jack breezes right past me and stomps into the shack so heavily that the fragile walls quake. It'll be a fitting end, both of us suffocating under the rubble. Just as we're gasping for our last breaths, I'll offer to make peace, and very quietly, he'll whisper back, *Go to hell*.

"Yes please," I mock rudely. "Invite yourself in and make yourself at home."

He turns to face me.

"What the hell was that?" he asks, flinging his arm toward the yard.

I scowl. "*That* was an accident. I thought I was alone."

"Alone!?" He shakes his head like I'm a certifiable idiot then takes two deliberate steps closer to me. I'm made aware of how small I am by comparison. I have to tip my head back to meet his brown eyes. I'm a child standing at the feet of a giant. "Let me make something perfectly clear: this is a working ranch. You'll never be alone on this property. Also, you're a young female employee—correction: *the* young female employee. It's hard enough trying to keep the guys in line, and then you go out there dressed like that!"

I fist my hands in my damp hair, resisting the urge to scream as I shout up to him. "I get it, okay?! I'm not an idiot. It was an honest mistake and it won't happen again." I walk to the door, yank it open, and motion for him to get out. "Now if

you're done yelling at me, I'd like to try to salvage the rest of my evening."

He doesn't budge, and his angry scowl only deepens. His gaze is on his t-shirt. "I thought I told you to stop wearing my clothes."

"I plan on it, as soon as I get some of my own."

"When's that gonna be?"

"This weekend."

For a few seconds, neither one of us speaks. In fact, we don't even breathe. We stand there, staring each other down. His hands are on his hips. There's a deep line etched between his dark eyebrows, and that line says, *You're more trouble than you're worth.*

I'm staring up, memorizing every tan contour, when he suddenly breaks. He puffs out a heavy sigh and pinches the front of his shirt so he can tug on it and get a little air down his collar.

"Shit, it's hot in here."

"See?!"

I want to wrap my hands around his neck and shake him like a doll, but it would only annoy me more when he wouldn't budge. *Maybe if I throw my whole weight into it like I'm trying to break down a door...*

"That's why you weren't wearing any clothes?"

I purse my lips, unimpressed with his hyperbole. "I was wearing clothes."

"Not enough."

I roll my eyes and resist the urge to plunk him on the forehead. "I feel like we're going in circles."

He shakes his head and slowly spins, taking in the shack with fresh eyes. I wonder what he thinks of it now that I've been here for a few days. My clothes are hanging on a line near the window. My cream-colored lacy bra flutters beside his t-shirts and I blush, resisting the urge to yank it down. If he notices it,

he doesn't say anything. His gaze sweeps over to the twin bed and then down to the floor.

It's no Taj Mahal, but all things considered, it's a hell of a lot cleaner than it was when I found it. I have plans to purchase a few necessities, like a lamp and a rug, this weekend—that is, if my budget extends that far. I'm hoarding most of my advance, so unless the going rate for a rug is a few dollars and a winning smile, chances are I'll be going without.

"I'm getting you an A/C unit this weekend," he declares suddenly.

My face is a mask of indifference. I refuse to give him the satisfaction of seeing my excitement before he breaks and admits he's kidding.

He doesn't notice my resolve, too busy staring down at the floor. "And I'll have Chris and Daniel come in here and repair these floorboards. Could have them do it Monday while you're working so they aren't in your hair."

I nod very, *very* slowly. My mouth is hanging open so wide at this point that I'm bound to catch a fly.

"After that, we'll see about fixing the walls."

At that, he turns for the open door, apparently finished with me for the time being.

Wait...

"Was that all a joke?!" I burst out after him. "Honestly, if this is another one of your weird mind games, I don't want any part of it!"

He doesn't even bother acknowledging me, just keeps on walking, which I *think* means he was serious.

I can hardly believe it.

Soon, I will have cold, air-conditioned air blasting my face like I'm some kind of queen. I think I could cry. On second thought, it's still too hot to cry—I have to stay as hydrated as possible until I get that A/C unit.

* * *

Friday flies by and before I know it, it's close to quitting time. I'm about to experience my very first weekend of freedom here in Cedar Creek. I'm so excited, I don't even get annoyed when Jack tells me he has a girl coming into town for a visit. *Christine*. He gives me zero details about her. In fact, I'm pretty sure he only brought her up so he could make sure I put extra towels in the master bathroom. I'm disappointed in his lack of gossip. Are they dating? Friends? Lovers? *More?* Luckily, Edith has no qualms about filling me in. We sit at the kitchen table during my break, sipping coffee and talking while Jack is out with the ranch hands doing all manner of manly things, I'm sure. (Earlier in the morning, I saw him carrying a rope—an actual ROPE! I always thought those were more for show. Anyway, at the sight of it, my recently kindled cowboy fantasies may or may not have ramped up tenfold.)

I get the following information about Christine from Edith: she's a "city girl" like me, though she used to live in Cedar Creek and went to the same high school as Jack. They didn't date back then—I asked. Also of note, Jack was valedictorian of his graduating class. I didn't ask about this, Edith just offers the tidbit up like any proud grandmother would. She also offers up the fact that he had a dozen girls chasing after him on any given day. Also, he was the starting pitcher for varsity baseball. She'd probably keep on rambling about him all day, but I pull her back to the topic at hand.

"But are they dating *now*?"

"Right, yeah...well," she continues, "Christine lives out in San Antonio and has some fancy fashion job."

This piques my interest, but when I ask for details, Edith drops the ball.

“I don’t know what she does,” she replies, waving away my question like it bores her. “Looks at clothes, dresses mannequins—something like that.”

She goes on to say that Christine used to be sort of sweet, but in the last few years, she’s changed. Edith’s direct quote is that Christine’s “got her nose so high in the air, she’d drown in a rainstorm.” I’d ask her what that means, but she leans in close and whispers, “I think she’s overcompensating for growing up in the trailer park across town with her mama.”

My stomach twists and suddenly, I feel bad for contributing to gossip about this woman I don’t even know. “Edith!”

“It’s the truth!”

I shake my head. “She might be ‘high falutin’, as you called her, but if she makes Jack happy—”

“She doesn’t.”

“Well if she’s good for him—”

“She isn’t.”

“Sheesh, remind me never to get on your bad side.”

“Where do you think Jack gets his?”

She stands up and carries both of our coffee cups over to the sink even though I was only half finished with mine.

“I’m not trying to be mean,” Edith says, clearly hurt.

“I know. It’s just...I know how it feels to be the subject of... rumors.”

She turns then and smiles warmly, her blue eyes twinkling. “See that? You try not to see the bad in people. You’re already nicer than she is. Prettier too.”

I throw my hands up and get back to work, though I can’t help but think about Christine. It’s not my business what (or who) Jack does in his spare time, and I definitely don’t care about the type of women he invites to sleep over. Who cares if she’s stuck up or hoity toity? You know what I care about? Whether or not she cleans up after herself. That’s all. I hope she puts the used towels in the dirty clothes hamper and loads her dishes in

the dishwasher when she's done with them. She can be as mean as she wants as long as she doesn't make my job harder come Monday morning.

Still, I am a little bit curious about her. Call it boredom, but I've been imagining what she'll be like all day, and I nearly jump for joy when I hear a car pull up out on the gravel drive.

"Christine's here!" Edith calls from the living room.

I'm moving clothes from the washer to the dryer when the front door opens and she strolls in. I'm so anxious to see her that I stuff everything in as quick as I can and dash into the kitchen just as Jack greets her in the front hall. They hug instead of kiss, which I find interesting. Christine seems distant, offering Edith a polite nod, but nothing more. They obviously have bad blood.

She's beautiful—though, I obviously expected nothing less. Her light blonde hair is cropped short near her chin. She's wearing a white dress and sandals that tie up around her ankles. Dainty gold necklaces are layered around her neck, and I'm immediately envious of how put-together she looks. It's been easy to forget about comparing myself to other women when the only one I've seen for a week is more than twice my age.

I'm still staring at her outfit when she rolls her suitcase into the room, bringing a trail of mud along with it. *Dammit*. I just mopped that floor this morning. The farther into the house she goes, the messier it gets.

"Oh, *oh!* Hold on, looks like you have something on your wheels."

I rush forward with a rag I grabbed from the kitchen counter and make quick work of the mud. When I finish, I push off my knees to stand and smile. *There, no more mud streaking my wood floors.*

All three of them are staring at me like I'm crazy.

"Meredith, aren't you off the clock?" Edith quips.

I point back to the kitchen. "I was just finishing up some laundry, didn't want to leave it in the washer all weekend."

“Laundry?” Christine frowns, glancing from me to Jack and then back again. “I’m sorry, I don’t believe we’ve met.”

She’s looking at me like I don’t belong. It’s the exact same look I give the fauna in the shack, but it doesn’t faze them. If anything, they’ve invited even *more* of their friends. *Come on! Tell Jerry and the other spiders we’re throwing a barbecue later! Yup, havin’ flies again!*

“Meredith is helping out around the house for a little while,” Jack explains simply.

Christine isn’t satisfied, so I smile and hold out my clean hand. “I’m the new housekeeper. Pleased to meet you.”

In a flash, her expression softens. Apparently, my job as Jack’s housekeeper immediately whisks away whatever jealousy might have been building inside her. It’s as if I held up a sign that read, *Don’t worry, you’re better than me—on the inside and out.*

Still, she can’t help but size me up. Her gaze scans over me quickly, clearly assessing as she goes. I wish I’d put on a little more makeup this morning. She’s decked out like a blogger at fashion week. Meanwhile, I look like I’ve been hauled out of the ocean after a year alone on a deserted island. I should be the least threatening female she’s ever met. Still, when she scans down to my jeans, her eyes go wide with wonder. “Are those the new distressed skinnies from J Brand?”

I glance down. “Oh, umm...I don’t—”

She walks around me so she can see the back pockets. “They are!” She jerks back around to face me, gripping my shoulders in her hands, shaking me gently. My brain rattles in my head. “Where did *you* get these?! They’ve been on backorder on every website I search.”

I laugh, slightly embarrassed, slightly aware of the emphasis she put on the “you” of that question. “I got them back in California, actually.” Truthfully, they were just one of a dozen designer pairs hanging in my closet. I didn’t think much of them and now I feel slightly guilty that I wore them all week while scrubbing toilets. She’s so impressed, I think she’d rip

them off me if she could. “I’d let you have them, but they’re kind of all I have at the moment.”

She laughs and finally releases me. I breathe a sigh of relief.

“I know what you mean,” she says while flipping her hair. “When you find the perfect pair of jeans, it feels like you can’t wear anything else.”

Edith opens her mouth to inform her she misunderstood, to tell her these are actually the only pair of pants I own, but I beat her to it.

“Preach it, sister.”

She beams and I smile back.

“California, huh?” she asks. “What are you doing in this hellhole?”

Jack scowls behind her, but I do my best to ignore him.

“It’s kind of a long story.”

Her manicured brows arch with interest. “Well, I’m dying to hear it.”

Jack

Christine won't stop talking about Meredith. We left the ranch thirty minutes ago and we're supposed to be on a date, talking about us and our future. Instead, she's going on and on about my new housekeeper. Don't get me wrong, I love most any excuse to avoid talking about our relationship, just not this one.

"Is it weird that I have a girl crush on her?"

Not that weird considering every ranch hand on my property has an *actual* crush on her.

"She's really pretty," she continues, a little too airily.

"Hadn't noticed."

I swing my truck into the first available parking spot outside of Hill Top Vineyards and kill the engine.

She laughs as she unbuckles her seatbelt. "Thank you for that, but it's not necessary. I'm not accusing you of wanting her, so there's no sense in pretending you're blind."

I know a trap when I see one.

"She's my employee, and Helen's sister," I point out, hoping that will force her to drop the issue.

It does. We walk in silence up to the tasting room at the top of the hill. Hill Top Vineyards—aptly named for its location—has been around for a few years. They're a leader in Central Texas vino, and I've been meaning to drive out and experience the place myself for a while.

"It's annoying, really. That whole fresh face, no makeup thing only works for like five percent of women."

So I guess we're back to talking about Meredith. I want to groan.

"I always say you don't need that crap," I tell her.

She laughs and pats my shoulder. “That’s sweet of you to say, but you’ve never actually seen me without a full face of makeup.”

I narrow my eyes, racking my brain. *Surely...* “How’s that possible? We’ve been together for two years.”

She shrugs. “That’s what happens when you see someone once a month. We might have been together for a while, but in some ways it still feels like we just started dating.”

I know what she means. There have been door-to-door salesmen I feel like I know better than I know Christine. It’s an unsettling thought, but I shake it off and usher her inside the winery.

Since it’s a Friday evening, the place is packed, but I planned ahead. We have reservations for a tour and tasting, and we arrive just in time to go with the next group.

My dad started the vineyard at Blue Stone Ranch nearly 20 years ago, and even though I have someone else heading the day-to-day operations, I try to stay as educated on the industry as possible. It’s not like I’ll glean any trade secrets from a public tour at Hill Top (unless I’m lucky), but that’s not my aim. I like tasting the wine, talking to the employees, checking out the atmosphere. It’s important to see how we stack up against our competition.

I’m enthralled through the entire tour. Most people are there to get shitfaced while feeling superior to poorer people with Bud Light. The level of pretense and false interest is high, but by the time we’re out in the vineyard, we’ve lost half the group. Meanwhile, I’m glued to the tour guide’s side as if there’s a written exam at the end. The guy hates me, wasting my time with fluff. “And did you know one vine produces roughly ten bottles of wine?” No one cares.

I chime in. “Are you guys administering the fertilizer after the vine has blossomed or closer to when the grapes are about a quarter inch?”

He doesn’t know the answer and we move along to the outdoor receiving area where the growers deposit the freshly

harvested grapes. From there, we head inside to see the fermentation vessels: the huge, stainless steel tanks that house the pulp while it turns into wine. They have a larger facility than we do (I ask the tour guide the exact square footage, but he doesn't know), and I'm especially impressed by their aging rooms. We age our red wine in oak barrels as well, but from the looks of it, they produce nearly twice as much volume as we do. After that, I grab Christine and skip the part of the tour that leads through the bottling room—we just paid a branding company an arm and a leg to design our packaging. Besides, I'm getting hungry.

Finally, I've found a weakness: their food is shit. I know it's common to have light fare like fruit and nuts in tasting rooms, but at Blue Stone, we make sure there are better, more filling options available. After all, these people eventually need to drive home.

While we're sampling various white wines, the owner—a man about my age, named Vince Davies—comes to find me. He claps me on the shoulder and I turn to greet him.

“My tour guide says you were harassing him,” he teases.

“Just getting my money's worth.”

“You know I would have taken you around the place myself if I'd known you were coming.”

I wave away his offer. “How am I supposed to steal all your secrets with you shadowing me?”

His eyes sweep over to Christine and I introduce them.

Vince smiles. “Ah, now I see the real reason why you didn't want me around.”

I laugh good-naturedly then go back to shoveling birdseed into my mouth. I'm starving.

“Oh stop,” Christine says with a subtle blush. She's obviously impressed with Vince, and I'm actually glad she's so eager to talk to him for a while because I'm happier taking a back seat in social settings like this.

“You have a beautiful winery,” she says with a flirtatious smile. “I think we’ll head out and watch the sunset in a little while.”

“To be honest, the view is probably 90% of why people come out here,” Vince admits. “The wine is just the cherry on top.”

“It really is breathtaking!” Christine continues, reaching out to touch his arm.

That’s one of the things Hill Top has over us: location. From their large back patio, guests can look out over a deep valley where all the grapes are grown. The view extends for miles, and it’s the reason their sunset tastings sell out months ahead of time.

Vince motions to the patio. “I actually keep one of the best tables in the house reserved out there. I’d be happy to offer it up to you guys for the night.”

It’s tempting, but I don’t think I’ll last through the sunset. My plan was to take the tour, speed through the tasting, and then find a place to eat with Christine on the way back to the ranch, preferably somewhere with a drive-through.

“I appreciate the offer, but—”

“Yes! Please, that would be great.” Christine cuts me off. “But you must join us!”

Vince chuckles and glances over to see what I want to do. I swallow a sigh. “Sure, yeah. Sounds great.”

For the next hour, the three of us sit outside while the Texas sun paints the sky pink and orange as it disappears behind the horizon. Christine does most of the talking. Vince tries to keep up, and I mostly stay quiet, sipping my wine, ignoring the loud grumbles coming from my stomach, and trying to figure out why I’m not having a better time.

It’s not the people I’m with. Vince is a great guy—we’d be better friends if I had the time for it—and Christine is always good company. They aren’t the problem. No, I feel uneasy, like I’m sitting here missing out on something.

Yeah, something like a double cheeseburger with bacon.

As soon as Vince excuses himself to get back to work, I sigh with relief and start to stand.

“Christine, you about ready to go?”

She jerks her gaze to me, and I get stabbed by a million tiny daggers. *Oof*. She’s pissed.

“We haven’t even been here an hour!”

“I’m starving.”

“Then eat some nuts.” She shoves the nearly empty bowl toward me. “Jesus, do you even know how to relax? You’ve been sitting over there jiggling your leg under the table for the last hour.”

I frown. “I can relax.”

“Prove it.”

“I will—*at home*. I’m hungry and ready to go.”

She bites back a response, grabs for her purse, and storms off ahead of me. I have no clue what I’ve done to piss her off, and truthfully, I can’t muster the energy to care. I’m working on an empty stomach here. I just hope she’s not so mad that she’ll object to stopping for fast food on the way home.

Tense silence fills the truck as we start the drive. She’s sitting over on the passenger side as far away from me as she can get, arms crossed and attention laser-focused out the window. I ask her if she likes this radio station, but she doesn’t respond. I ask her if she’s hungry, and she shifts more of her back to me. If we weren’t currently flying down the highway, I think she’d open the door and fling herself out.

Okay then.

Silence it is.

We drive another thirty minutes like that, and while I don’t mind the quiet, I have enough sense not to pull into any of the restaurants we pass. The only thing worse than being inattentive to her needs would be attending to mine—and I don’t really want a milkshake dumped over my head.

When we finally make it back to the farmhouse, I park my truck and turn to her, prepared to say whatever it is she needs me to say so we can continue on with our night.

“Listen, I know I haven’t been the perfect boyfriend.”

“*Boyfriend?!*” she snaps, throwing her hands in the air and finally turning in my direction. “We’re hardly *acquaintances* at this point, Jack!”

“You don’t mean that.”

Her eyes turn into angry slits, and I realize she’s way more worked up than I thought she was. On a scale of one to ten, she’s a twenty-five, and I’m hovering somewhere near a two.

“It doesn’t matter what I mean. You’ve been checked out of this relationship from the very beginning, and I’ve been too in love with you to do anything about it!”

My stomach tightens at the L word.

Her face crumbles. “Do you know what it feels like to want someone who can’t even make time for you?”

Shit. Now I feel bad. “I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you.”

“Yeah?” she prods. “How are you going to do that? Say you love me? Move to San Antonio? Buy me a ring?”

Sure... those are some really good options, but I know I won’t do any of them. I’m sitting here with a woman I’ve been involved with for two years. She’s crying and shouting and there’s still 40% of me that’s focused on getting some dinner. What the hell is wrong with me? She’s called me emotionless before, and maybe it’s true. Maybe I’m made of stone. Maybe when I lost my parents when I was younger, something inside me shriveled up and died.

My silence is louder than any response she’s waiting to hear.

She huffs out an angry sigh and turns to stare out the front windshield.

“I drove three hours in Friday after-work traffic to see you, and you dragged me to a winery.” I open my mouth to defend my actions, but she doesn’t give me the chance. “You realize

the last four times I've come up here, we've done the exact same thing? You aren't taking me on dates—you're dragging me around wine country on research trips."

That's not *entirely* true.

"What about a few months back when we went out to Fredericksburg? I took you to that little bed and breakfast."

"Conveniently connected to a vineyard."

Is that what that was?

"To make matters worse," she continues, "I sat there tonight, openly flirting with Vince, trying to work up some fire in you, and in the end, I got nothin'. Nada. Squat."

I shrug. That was a waste of her time. "I'm not the jealous type."

She laughs acerbically and shakes her head. "Of course you aren't. To get jealous, you have to actually *value* something. You have to be scared of someone else having what you want. You're not scared of losing me."

"C'mon, that's not true. I know I'd be a damn fool if I let you go."

"Be that as it may," she says, her gaze falling to her lap, "you know you're doing it anyway. You're just too comfortable to break things off with me for good."

"You're a catch, Christine."

She pinches her eyes closed. "You say that like you're a robot."

Do I sound cold? I don't mean to. I don't know how else to be, how else to sound. I don't know what to say or how to act. I'm walking a tightrope here. I don't want to lie to her and feed her more bullshit just to keep her, but I also don't want her to leave this truck thinking less of herself. Objectively, she *is* a catch. I *am* a fool if I let her go.

"You're a great guy, Jack, but it's time for me to move on."

"So you're breaking up with me? Just like that?"

She turns and offers me a wistful smile. There are tears in her eyes, and I reach out to take her hand and squeeze it once before she pulls it away.

“Tell Edith bye for me.”

“You don’t want to tell her yourself?”

She shakes her head and pushes open her door to hop out of the truck. “Nah. She never did like me. Honestly, I’d rather just head home.”

“Why don’t you stay the night? I don’t want you driving in the dark. You can stay in a guest room or have my bed if you prefer it. I can sleep on the couch.”

She declines and we hop out so I can walk her to her car.

She buries her face in her hands. “God, this is the weirdest breakup ever. We’re supposed to be shouting at one another.”

I frown. “I’ve never shouted at you.”

“I know.” She drops her hands and levels a steady gaze at me. “That’s exactly why we’re breaking up.”

* * *

No amount of urging can get Christine to stay the night, but she promises to text me when she gets home to let me know she got there safely. I watch her drive off, turn for the house, and promptly decide to get back in my truck. I don’t want to go in there and face Edith. Besides, there are practical considerations at play: I’m still very hungry.

I drive to the closest Whataburger, order my favorite combo, sit in the parking lot, and eat by myself. The food tastes so good, it makes up for the fact that Christine’s words have made a mess of my psyche.

I’ve never shouted at you.

I know. That's exactly why we're breaking up.

I'm clever enough to read between the lines. Christine didn't want me abusing her, she wanted me to give a shit. It was a running theme in all of our arguments, and ultimately it was the reason she broke up with me earlier tonight. Love, jealousy, fear, anger—those are all emotions she would have gladly dealt with from me, yet for some reason I just couldn't give them to her. For two years, I was gentle and levelheaded, logical and distant. It's the way I've always preferred it. A wiser man would take the problem to a therapist, but maybe I'm not ready to admit I need help.

Besides, I *do* have emotions.

I've experienced anger. Jesus, I've shouted at Meredith so much this week my throat should be sore.

I've experienced love. It's the feeling I get every morning when Alfred props his head up on my pillow and licks my cheek until I wake up.

I've even experienced fear and loss, and maybe I'm not so eager to relive that pain any time soon.

So, I process my breakup with Christine over a double cheeseburger and fries, and by the time I drive out of the parking lot, I've already come to terms with it, just like that.

Damn, I *am* heartless.

Maybe Christine really is better off without me.

Meredith

I'm not *spying*, per se, when I hear Jack and Christine get back from their date. I just have the windows open because I'm still living without A/C (so far I've lost four pounds in water weight, and I've only had *several* hallucinations!). I hear them pull up on the gravel drive because there are no other noises in the country. None. I mean, there are cicadas and the occasional moo from a cow, an oink from a pig, but all in all, I'm shocked at how quiet it is out here in the evenings. I'm not quite used to it, and that's why I get so excited when Jack and Christine pull up the gravel drive. It's not that I think they will ask me to hang out with them. I mean, Jack definitely won't want to, but Christine seemed really nice and she liked my jeans, and *OH MY GOD I AM GETTING SO BORED IN THIS SHACK I'LL DISCUSS AMNESTY WITH THE SPIDERS IF THEY'LL JUST BE MY FRIENDS!*

The first few nights here were great, like an LA detox. I was satisfied letting the last few loose threads of my old life fall away in the balmy air, but now I need some companionship. I'd bother Edith, but she's out with friends. She has more of those than I do even though she's 104. Meanwhile, I'm here, alone, pretending to do yoga—which, by the way, is extremely difficult to do considering I have no yoga mat. Not only are there a few gaps in the floorboards, there are splinters too. It's hard enough convincing myself to work out on a Friday night without having to worry about being impaled by a jagged piece of timber.

So, yes, I'm very eager to run out and become a third wheel on their date, but then I remind myself that they probably want their alone time. Christine drove in to visit him, and more than likely they're going to head up to Jack's room and have wild, haven't-seen-you-in-weeks sex. *Oh god, what if I can hear them?* I don't even have a TV or radio I can blast to drown it out. I'll have to sing hymns to myself. *Oh please no.*

I'm still in the middle of yoga, wondering if it's worth risking another drive in the clunker-mobile just to escape the imminent sounds of sweaty copulation, when I catch their voices and realize something is off. They aren't laughing and teasing. They just sound...sad.

For the record, I want to be a good person. I want to close the windows and let them argue privately, but it's hot, and I'm bored, and as long as I angle myself against the side of the window just so and keep most of my face hidden, they should never even realize I'm here. I feel like a child with one eye open, watching TV during naptime.

I spot Christine as she steps out of his truck and shakes her head.

"God, this is the weirdest breakup ever," she says. "We're supposed to be shouting at one another."

Say whaa?

And then Jack says, "I've never shouted at you."

My mouth drops open. Is that a joke? *How is that possible?!* I've been here a week and he's shouted at me so much I'm not even sure he can speak at a socially acceptable volume.

She dabs at her eyes, wiping away tears, and Jack pulls her into a hug.

Oh wow, this is sad. I lean forward. *Poor, poor Christine.* I wish I had binoculars.

It's such an awkward exchange, and still, I can't look away. Mostly, I'm amazed at how gentle he's being with her. He's rubbing her hair! It's like the moment you bump into your teacher at the grocery store—all of a sudden, he seems like a normal guy.

After a little more back and forth I can't really hear—I think it's boring logistics about the breakup—they hug again and then he opens her door for her. I have never in my life witnessed such maturity, such restraint! They're smiling, for crying out loud! Christine is *laughing*, and Jack makes her promise she'll text him when she gets home safe! This must be one of those "truly mutual" breakups I've only heard about in

books. I wouldn't know how that feels. I left my husband in the middle of the night and didn't even have the sense to pack two pair of underwear. Compared to them, I'm a petulant child running from her problems.

Christine drives off after that and then Jack stands outside of his farmhouse, momentarily frozen. I have no clue what he's thinking. I have no clue if he initiated the split or if he was just dumped out of the blue. All I know is that in this moment, my heart goes out to him. I stand by the window watching him for a few seconds, waiting to see what he'll do. Then, without thinking of the consequences, I decide I'm going to go make sure he's okay. I was just talking to myself about how I needed to make some friends, and consolation is what friends do best!

I change into my jeans and the white blouse I haven't worn since first arriving on the farm. I check my reflection in the mirror over the sink and am pleasantly surprised by what I find. My tan skin is even and slightly flushed from yoga, my hair is up in a high ponytail, and a few wisps soften the look. I check my teeth: straight, white, and mostly free of the food I had for dinner. I could probably use some mascara or something, but there's no way I'm dolling myself up just to go check on Jack.

I turn, heart racing. I have no clue what I'll say when I see him. Do I act oblivious about his breakup? Or do I cut to the chase, admit I heard it all, and offer my condolences? It's not like it really matters what I decide to say—chances are, I won't even have time to get any words out before he storms off and slams the door in my face.

I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans then head outside, surprised by the little pep in my step. The world always seems so much more pleasant after spending time in the shack. I'm excited to see Jack, and maybe he'll actually be friendly for once. I glance to the spot where he was frozen a few minutes ago, but he isn't there anymore. Then I hear gravel pinging off metal and jerk my gaze in the direction of the main road. He's in his truck, heading back down the gravel drive. His red tail lights fade in the distance, and then he's gone.

Shit.

I wonder if he's going after her. Maybe. At the very least, he's leaving here. He probably has other places to be on a Friday night, a local drinking hole or something. I am back to square one, alone and bored, and worse, I am now fully dressed. Thank God I didn't fuss with my hair or do my makeup.

I laugh it off and look around, cheeks burning. It's one thing to know I almost put myself out there, quite another to do it in front of anyone else. My gaze snags on a cow standing near the pasture fence, staring at me, probably embarrassed to be near me.

"No worries! I didn't really want to talk to him anyway!" I shout over to it. "False alarm."

It doesn't move, just keeps slowly munching on some grass, judging me.

"Oh, because your Friday night is so much better. Pfff. Yeah, okay," I taunt.

The cow turns then and walks away, as if it, too, cannot wait to get away from me.

"Good talk!"

Okay, now I'm just shouting into the void. No one, not even the cow, is listening.

Get a grip, Meredith!

I march right back into the shack and lock the door. *Good.* This is better—a night of no distractions. I have a ton to do. I need to roll up my pretend yoga mat and fold that t-shirt over there. Really, it'll take me all night to decide if I like the twin bed where it is or if maybe I want to switch it up. I could put the bed against that wall, or that wall, or that wall. The possibilities are endless. *Phew.* Honestly, I'm booked. *If that cow could see me now.*

* * *

Thank God I made plans with Edith for Saturday morning. We're going into town to shop at a thrift store, and then she's going to take me to her favorite lunch spot. I'm so excited, I'm ready and waiting for her out in front of the farmhouse fifteen minutes before we're due to leave. I spent all morning getting ready as if we were going to the Oscars. I showered and gave myself a blowout with the Cold War-era blow dryer Edith lent me (I needed a break from the ponytails) then I applied a little bit of makeup from the bag I had stashed in my purse for on-the-go touchups.

I put my jeans and white blouse back on since no one saw me in the outfit last night (cow not included), and then I slip on the loafers I've been avoiding for the last week. Thankfully, my blisters have morphed into calluses. In the end, I look nearly like I used to back in California: poised and polished. Who cares that I'm wearing the only outfit I actually own, or that I put it on in a dingy shack? By the time I get back from the thrift store, I'll have a few more options for clothing, and hopefully a few things to soften this place up.

I have all of my cash on me, safely stashed in my wallet. I don't plan on spending all \$500, instead capping today's purchases at \$75. A week ago, I wouldn't have blinked at spending that amount. Now, it makes my stomach ache. It's nearly one-fifth of my entire savings. Too bad I really don't have a choice. I need some more clothes, and while Edith's sneakers have worked so far, I need a pair that actually fit.

The rest of the cash is going straight to the bank. I'm opening up my own account today—one Andrew has no claim to. \$425 might not be much, but it's better than nothing, and more importantly, it's all mine.

The farmhouse's screen door swings open and I glance up with a smile, expecting to see Edith. Jack strolls out instead. He has

a steaming mug of coffee in one hand and a to-go cup in the other. I'm surprised to see he's still wearing his pajamas: loose gray sweats and a white cotton t-shirt. Usually by this time, he's already been working for a few hours, and this weekend version of my boss is an intriguing sight. His hair is slightly ruffled. His expression is soft, almost as if the effects of sleep haven't totally worn off yet. He almost looks sweet, but I know better.

He stands there, squinting to keep the morning sun from blinding him while he surveys me.

I check for signs of a broken heart: puffy eyes, downcast gaze, slumped posture.

I see chiseled features, broad shoulders, and a face that looks well rested and tan. He looks like he's never slept better.

"Edith told me to get you coffee," he says by way of greeting.

Oh. I was planning on getting some in town, but now that I think about it, that's not really an option. A \$5 cup of joe is now a luxury, not a necessity.

I meet him halfway and reach for the to-go cup.

"That was nice of you," I say, holding it up in thanks. Even if it was Edith's idea, it was still a nice gesture.

He shrugs and brushes me off. "Probably put too much creamer in."

The coffee is the exact shade of light brown that I prefer.

"Looks good. I can't even tell you spit in it," I tease.

"Your hair looks different."

I jerk my gaze back up to find him staring down at me with a confused expression. His head is tipped to the side, and from this angle, the morning light is sparkling in his eyes so they look more golden than brown. I've seen that exact shade once before, on a lion at the San Diego zoo. He had his face pressed right up to the viewing glass and I forced myself not to look away. Looking at Jack from this perspective feels eerily similar.

“Did you cut it?” he asks.

I resist a smile. “No, I’m just wearing it down for a change. I finally had time to style it this morning.”

“Oh.” He nods and averts his gaze, turning toward the pasture and sipping his coffee. It’s probably the closest thing to a compliment I’ll ever get from Jack. “Been meaning to get mine cut.”

“I think it’d look good a little shorter.”

He takes another sip of coffee, and I catch myself staring at his profile...not just staring at it, totally transfixed. It’s the strong jawline and the scruff—he’s a type of handsome I’m not quite used to. Andrew was good-looking in a pretty way. Jack’s sort of handsome makes my stomach twist tight and my hands get a little clammy. He notices me staring out of the corner of his eye and I jerk my gaze away quickly, narrowing my attention on a meadow in the distance. *Yup, flowers—thought that was what those were.*

Edith—bless her heart (as she’s taught me to say)—chooses that moment to join us outside. She pushes open the screen door with Alfred hot on her heels. The golden retriever gets one look at me and bounds down the stairs for a greeting. *Oh god, I’m about to be trampled to death. Goodbye, cruel world.* I brace myself, holding the to-go cup out in front of me to keep hot coffee from spilling all over my white blouse, and then I pinch my eyes closed, thinking it’s best not to look death straight in the eye.

Jack must foresee the incident a moment before it happens, because he emits a loud, sharp whistle. I peek just as Alfred’s attention jerks to him and in a flash, he sits and stays, happy to obey his owner.

“Good boy,” Jack says, patting his head.

Damn. “I really need to learn how to do that whistle.”

“Jack, please tell me you’re going to get a haircut today,” Edith interrupts with a disdainful shake of her head. “You look like a damn hipster.”

Hipster? Edith is full of surprises.

“Plannin’ on it,” he says as she waves me over to her truck.

“Let’s go,” Edith says briskly. “If we don’t get there early, the thrift store’ll be overtaken with old biddies, and we still need to stop by the bank on the way.”

Edith seems to be oblivious to the fact that she is technically a biddy herself, but I sure as hell don’t point that fact out to her. I just keep my lips zipped and dutifully hop into the passenger side of her truck. Jack waves us off from the porch before he pats his thigh to summon Alfred and they both turn back for the house.

We stop at the bank and somehow turn a task that should take 20 minutes into an hour-long affair. Edith knows everyone. Every employee inside the branch stops to chat with her, which inevitably leads to an introduction with me, “Helen’s little sister”. As a newcomer in a small town, they want to know it all: where I’m from, why I’m here, blood type, SAT score. I get it, and while I’m careful to sidestep their personal questions, I’m still happy to chat. I’ve had very little in the way of human interaction for the last few days, so I will happily accept the company of Lisa, the rambling teller, and Dotty, the elderly manager, with their bouffant hair and southern accents and nosy niceties. By the time we leave, I feel like I’ve made a whole group of new friends. This must be what it feels like to have a girl squad.

When we arrive at the thrift store, I expect the same kind of greeting, but other than the short white-haired man with the coke-bottle glasses behind the counter, we have the place to ourselves, and boy, do I clean up. I was expecting California prices, but these tags have me feeling like I can walk out and buy a Coke for a nickel.

“EDITH! THESE SHORTS ARE FIVE DOLLARS!”

She yanks them down from where I’m hoisting them over my head, looks at the fabric, and shakes her head. “We can talk him down to three.”

Am I dreaming? How is everything so cheap?!

I find a few fitted t-shirts I can wear while working and snag two pairs of denim shorts. I even toss in some pajama shorts and two sundresses, one of which is a little fancy. I have zero places to wear a dress like that, but it's too pretty to leave on the rack. After that, I stumble into a section of the store filled with bras and unopened packages of underwear, and I'm shaking with excitement. Sure, they're Fruit of the Loom tighty-whities, but the entire pack costs \$3.50, and if I buy them, I won't have to wash the same freaking pair over and over again.

I basically acquire an entire wardrobe for \$18.25, and then we head to the back corner where home goods and knickknacks are piled up, one on top of another.

I crack my knuckles, accepting the challenge. By this point, I am a scary good negotiator.

"Hey Robert! Robbie! There's a little stain on the corner of this rug. I'll take it off your hands for \$5!"

Between you and me, the stain is minimal and nothing I can't scrub out once I get home.

"How bad is it?" he hollers back, too lazy to get up from behind the counter.

"I think it's blood! It's probably evidence from some horrible crime—"

"Fine! I'll give ya half off."

I turn to Edith, eyes wide. "Edith," I hiss. "That's six bucks!"

I add the blue Moroccan-style rug to my growing pile of purchases, along with a little antique lamp and a worn wooden stool I want to use as a bedside table. It looks artfully distressed, which makes me laugh. I know people back in Beverly Hills who pay interior designers thousands of dollars for furniture like the stuff I'm finding in this hole-in-the-wall shop.

When I happen upon an antique mirror that looks straight out of an Anthropologie catalogue, I bring out the big guns. It was originally marked at \$25, and I wear Robert down to \$10 ("Think of it as a new-in-town discount!"). Edith throws me a

conspiratorial thumbs-up, and I decide to call it a day. I feel like I'm basically robbing the place at this point. Besides, the cute picture frames (4 for \$1) we pass on the way to the register aren't necessary. Edith tries to convince me to get them, but I tell her we have enough stuff as is. In reality, I'm just too embarrassed to tell her I have no one I'd want to fill them with. My parents? Hard pass. A ripped-down-the-middle photo from my wedding? Yeah, I'm good. I seriously consider just keeping the generic stock photo of a family enjoying a beach day. It's tempting, but too sad even for me. Plus, the kid's eyes follow me wherever I move—no thanks.

We load up my purchases in the truck and then I hop in, ready for lunch.

“What are you doing?” Edith asks, standing out on the sidewalk with her hands on her hips.

I pause in buckling my seatbelt. “Aren't we going to eat now?”

We better be. All that deal-making really worked up my appetite.

“Yeah”—she points across the street—“the diner's right over there.”

I chuckle and hop out of the truck. Small towns, man. It's crazy. Every place we've gone to this morning has been located in the town square—a sight I haven't really admired until now. It's another adorable movie set, just like the ranch. There's no other way to describe how old-world and quaint everything is. The buildings are historic and stately, but they're filled with antique shops and clothing stores, a bakery, a coffee shop, a dentist, and a handful of boutiques that are probably more hobbies than businesses. I spot an independent bookstore and make a mental note to stop there after lunch. We pass a bustling restaurant, but Edith shakes her head.

“Love that bistro—best chicken salad in town—but I'm in the mood for something greasy.”

We continue around the square toward the diner, passing a gourmet cookware store and a wine tasting room. People are

everywhere, strolling through the shops and enjoying the late-morning weather before the blazing sun hits full force. Quite a few of them are gathered in the center of the square, where a well-manicured park surrounds a gleaming limestone courthouse. There are kites in the air and adorable children running around giggling. Parents are smiling. In one corner of the park, beneath a shady oak tree, an ice cream vendor sells chocolate-dipped cones as fast as he can make them. It's all so cute, it feels slightly like the start of a thriller. Any minute now, we'll all look up to the sky as a meteor or UFO spells our doom, or a horde of zombies will rush in and start gnawing through cowboy boots.

"Is there a festival going on this weekend or something?"

Edith shakes her head. "There's a barbecue cook-off in a few weeks. Don't think there's anything special going on today though."

"So the town square's always this packed on a Saturday?"

She follows my gaze, not as impressed as I am. "People drive down from around the hills looking for a weekend getaway. It's the way it's always been—country folk make a big to-do out of going into the city, while city slickers look for an escape out here."

She says slickers like it's a bad word, and I can't help but smile.

"Blue Stone has a hotel of its own, right?"

She nods. "It's nestled beside the vineyard, booked up a year in advance these days thanks to all the weddings."

There's a short wait at the diner, and as we're seated in a booth by the window, I'm still thinking about the scene I saw outside and considering whether or not I could ever live in Cedar Creek permanently. There's no mall or movie theater within 50 miles. I haven't seen a yoga studio, and Edith confirms there isn't one. If I stayed here, I'd probably miss the amenities of living in a place like Los Angeles, but I still can't help but think that people here might have figured something out. Small town life looks pretty great.

With that thought, I glance up at the adorable blonde teenager waiting to take my order.

Edith and I both order All-American Scrambles then pass off our menus.

I sit back against the cushioned booth and meet Edith's studying gaze.

"So, you survived your first week," she comments.

I smile. "Sure did."

"Any scars?"

"From Jack?" I laugh. "No. He's nothing I can't handle."

"He wasn't always like this."

"Like what?" I feign innocence.

She scowls and pours some creamer in her coffee. "Don't bother sparing my feelings. We both know my grandson is stubborn as a mule and kicks like one too. Won't listen to a damn thing I tell him these days—"

"What changed?"

She looks up at me, confused. "Huh?"

"You said he didn't used to be like this."

"Ah." She nods thoughtfully and sips her coffee before replying. "You probably ought to be hearing this from Jack, but he'll never tell you, so I'll just have to do it. When he was a junior in college, his parents passed away in a car accident out on I-38. He was only 20, and I know that might not seem all that young to you, but we were a close-knit family and he didn't have any brothers or sisters. Still a kid, really. He should have been worrying about tests and goofing off with his friends. Instead, he had to cope with their passing while struggling with the newfound responsibility he wasn't quite ready for: running Blue Stone. I tried to do my best to soften the blow, but the fact is, the day they died, the ranch and everything that went with it became his responsibility to bear."

"How'd he handle it?"

Her focus is on her coffee as she continues, as if she can't look me in the eye while she divulges details about Jack's life. "He buckled down in school, graduated a year early. He was damn near ready to drop out and move home, but I made him finish. I knew he'd regret it otherwise."

"Was he in over his head when he got here?"

She moves her gaze out the window as if recalling that time. "You know, as crazy as it sounds, that boy hit the ground running and never looked back. It had never been the plan for him to enter the family business so young, but he'd worked with his dad enough over the summers to know how the business worked. Not to mention, his grandpa and dad never went to college, so he was actually more prepared to take up the reins than he realized."

I'm impressed. Even at twenty-eight, I don't think I'd be able to do what he's done.

"It's come at a cost though," she continues, guilt laced in her tone. "He's not that same lighthearted kid he used to be. I think that part of him died with his parents on the highway that day."

I cast my eyes down to the table. "I'm sure. There's no way that kind of loss doesn't change a person."

"It's not all bad, but I don't think he gives himself enough time off from work. It's like he's constantly trying to make his parents proud, but they'll never get another chance to say so, to tell him he's allowed to take a break. Plus, living on the ranch offers no separation from work and life."

"It's just all work."

She nods, agreeing. "It doesn't help that ever since the accident, he pushes people away—friends, acquaintances, relatives. Arm's length isn't good enough for Jack. He wants a couple feet between him and everyone else, and he gets it... except for me, of course. It takes more than a little shoving around to shake me."

"What about Alfred?"

She smiles, recalling the memory. “I brought Alfred home a couple years back without Jack’s consent. Boy was he pissed, and he didn’t give in easy, either. For weeks, the dog followed him around the house, just a little orphan fluff-ball who knew nothing but love.” She holds her hands out to cradle her palms, showing me how small he was back then. “Jack wanted nothing to do with him in the beginning, and he succeeded in keeping his distance there for a while.”

I laugh, thinking of the way the two are now. “Clearly you won in the end.”

She beams proudly. “That’s because I know Jack. I know deep down, he still wants love and affection. He just won’t open himself up to that vulnerability. It’s logical in his mind: he’ll never have to deal with another loss like that if he doesn’t let anyone get too close.”

I lean forward, more interested in the topic than I should be. “How’d you convince him to give Alfred a chance?”

She slaps her knee, laughing. “Convince him?! Haven’t you been listening? There is no convincing Jack. I used dirty tricks. I pushed Alfred into Jack’s room every night. That puppy would sleep on the foot of his bed and lick his face to wake him up every morning. Jack took to locking his door after a while, so I had to get creative. I trained Alfred and made sure he was the best dog anyone could ever ask for. I made sure Jack was around him as much as possible. I even complained about an ache in my shoulder so Jack would have to step in and throw the tennis ball for him a couple times a week.” She winks. “I’m just a frail old lady, y’know.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t done the same thing with a woman.”

Her eyes alight with mischief, but I don’t get the chance to dig deeper. Just then, a deep male voice interrupts our conversation.

“Meredith? Is that you?”

I jerk my attention toward the speaker, stunned by the man I see standing there.

Jack

“And do you know who surprised us at lunch?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

Edith is unmoved by my obvious indifference.

“Tucker Carroway!”

“Makes sense, considering he works in the courthouse across the street. He probably eats there all the time. Will you hand me that wrench? No, not that one. To your left—that one.”

Edith slaps the tool impatiently into my open palm then continues. “Yes, obviously he eats there all the time—that’s not the weird part! The weird part is that he already knew Meredith! Did you know they were friends?”

Huh. I grip the wrench a little tighter.

“Had no clue.”

While that’s an interesting piece of information, I’m hoping this conversation will end soon. Edith found me as soon as she and Meredith returned from town. I’ve been out in the barn most of the morning, working on an old tractor, trying to see if I can get it to run again. It’s probably futile, but some part of me thinks the rusty beast still has a little life left in it. It belonged to my dad, and he took pretty good care of things when he could.

“Apparently the other day, when Meredith drove that old Chevy to the grocery store, Tucker helped her when it stalled on the side of the road. How sweet is that?”

I focus my attention on the tractor, trying to figure out why the carburetor’s flooding. The needle and seat could be dirty. There could be too much fuel pressure, and I’d just need to test the fuel pump—

“*Jack.*”

“Yeah, sure. Nice of him.”

“Anyway, Tucker didn’t just come over to say hello and dash off. He asked Meredith out on a date right in front of me.”

“*What?*”

I jerk up so fast, I knock over my workbench and tools go scattering to the ground. Edith smirks, having hit her mark. Now that I’ve given her a reaction, there’s no stopping her. She starts circling around me, sizing me up. If she had a pocketknife, she’d be flipping it open and closed menacingly.

“Oh, what with my old age, it’s been so long since I’ve seen romance like that.”

“What’d she say?”

“She tried to politely decline, but I wouldn’t let her. The attraction was obvious, so I invited him to sit down and stay for a cup of coffee. They talked the whole time—I couldn’t even get a word in edgewise. He’s such a nice man, and easy on the eyes too.”

“You are aware she’s *married*,” I point out caustically.

Edith rolls her eyes. “Something in her eyes tells me she’s been checked out of that relationship for a long time. Now that they’re separated, what is she supposed to do, shrivel up into an old maid at 28?”

“It’s only been a *week!*”

Her eyes go wide. “Boy, what’s got your panties in a twist?”

I bend down and start yanking tools off the ground. “It just says a lot about her sense of loyalty if she’s willing to jump ship like that. I’m not sure that trait makes for the best employee either.”

Edith’s brows arch with interest and her tone takes a sharp left turn. “Well she seems like a *fine* housekeeper so far, so you needn’t worry about that, and you’ve made yourself very clear about thinking she’s the scum of the earth. We’ll see what Tucker thinks.”

I furrow my brows and murmur, “She’s not the scum of the earth.”

I jerk up, having realized my mistake, and find Edith grinning like the cat that caught the canary.

I point an accusing finger straight at her. “I see what you’re doing.”

She ignores me and goes right back to telling me about lunch. “Anyway, Tucker couldn’t stay long—had to run back to the courthouse, I’m sure to a very important case—but long story short, he’s going to take her to David’s wedding!”

“David, my hand David?”

She beams. “One and the same.”

“Bullshit. She better’ve turned him down,” I say before explaining why I care. “I don’t want everyone pissed at me when she disappears back to California.”

Edith bats away my anger like it’s a wiffle ball, too accustomed to it by now. “She tried to, but I agreed for her, told her most of the town would be there and seeing as how she already has so many friends here, it’d be weird if she *didn’t* go.”

“You aren’t making any sense. Meredith has lived here for a week—ONE week. There’s no way she has that many friends.”

* * *

I’m wrong, of course. Meredith has more friends than I do, and this becomes painfully obvious when I’m in town on Sunday morning. I’m down at the hardware store bright and early, checking out their selection of window air conditioners for the shack, when Chris and David show up unannounced.

“Hey boss!”

Apparently, they *also* had plans to come down here and get a window unit for Meredith. *Isn't that thoughtful of them?* The pair hardly has two nickels to rub together between them, but they were about to fork over two hundred bucks so Meredith could have a little cool air blowing on her face.

“We were maybe gonna ask you to reimburse us,” David explains with a proud smile.

And if I said no?

Something tells me they would have just put it on the credit card and hoped the Lord would provide.

What the hell did she put in those muffins?

I expect them to leave once they see I'm going to take care of it, but instead, they hang around and offer up unsolicited advice about which model I should buy—they seem to think she deserves the most expensive unit the store has to offer. Once we're done with that, they bring up the wood floors again. I've already made up my mind to repair them, but they lay it on thick with prepared monologues about how quick they'd fix it up, and “how little trouble it'd be, *really*.” I agree, but I'm going to help them, because while they're decent ranch hands, I'd bet money they're shitty carpenters. We spend a few minutes grabbing those supplies, and then I think better of it. *While I'm doing the floors, I might as well fix a few other things around the place.*

By the time we check out, I've racked up over a thousand dollars in construction supplies for Miss California, though David and Chris are quick to point out that the shack is on *my* property, so really I'm fixing it up for *myself*. “You're really making money on this whole thing.” *Right.*

We're headed out of the hardware store to go load everything in my truck when I spot Dotty bee-lining down the sidewalk toward me. She's the manager of the First National Bank, and she's been there since I was a little kid.

“Jack! Yoo-hoo! Hold on there for a second.”

I motion for the guys to keep on loading the supplies then turn to greet her. “What can I do for you, Dotty?”

“Brought you a Dum Dum!”

I like Dotty—she helped me open my first bank account—but apparently, she’s another one of Meredith’s new friends.

“Oh, also, I was just hoping you could pass these along to Meredith for me?”

She’s holding out a Tupperware full of cookies, homemade from the looks of it.

“She came in yesterday to open an account, and she tried one of these,” Dotty explains, patting the lid. “I had them out for the patrons—open more accounts with cookies than with sales pitches, y’know. Anyway, she said they were the best cookies she’d ever had and she asked me for the recipe.”

“So you decided to bake her a batch?” I ask, amused.

She bats my arm playfully. “Well, I just felt so bad for forgetting to give her the recipe. She really was such a dear and went on and on about how good they were. Plus, we got a new teller down at the bank, young girl—Patrick Smith’s daughter? Anyway, it was her first day and Meredith was real patient with her. Mr. Rogers had come in just before and was so snippy, so her nerves were jumbled. He nearly made her cry —”

“I’ll make sure Meredith gets the cookies,” I say, cutting her off so I don’t get trapped here talking to her for God knows how long.

“Oh, okay, I’ll let you get to it. Just remember that the recipe card is right there on top. Make sure she gets that.”

I nod. “Will do.”

“It’s real nice seeing you. Oh! And my business card is there too in case she has any questions about the baking...or banking!”

“Got it.”

“We’ll make sure she gets the cookies, Miss Dotty!” Chris calls from behind me.

“Thanks boys. I’m sure y’all have a big day ahead of you,” she says, waving and backing away. Then she thinks better of it and steps toward me, holding her hand up like she’s just thought of one more thing. “You know what? Just have her call me. It’ll be easier to walk her through the steps. My handwriting probably isn’t all that good.”

I tip my head, tell her approximately twenty times I’ll have Meredith call her, and then make a break for it. In Texas, people have a knack for turning a simple goodbye into an all-day affair.

When I make it back to the ranch, I pull my truck up right over near the shack so unloading won’t take so long. David and Chris offered to come back and help, but I turned them down. I’m not planning on doing any work today other than installing the air conditioner, and that’ll take me five minutes to set up on my own. I pop the tailgate and start unloading building supplies. Normally, I’d store everything in the barn, but the weather should hold and it’ll be more convenient to have everything at my fingertips when we get started tomorrow.

I expect Meredith to step outside to check on all the commotion, but I’m nearly finished unloading before the door opens.

I peer over at her from beneath the brim of my hat, jarred by her appearance. She’s still in her pajamas—one of my t-shirts with sleeping shorts creeping out from underneath. I open my mouth to demand—*yet again*—that she return my ill-gotten clothes, but then I glance up at her face. Normally, she’s glowing, one of those women with tan skin and a healthy complexion, like she just got back from a tropical vacation. This morning, however, her cheeks are splotchy and her eyes are a little red and puffy. She sniffs and crosses her arms over her chest.

“What are you doing out here?” she asks, her tone somewhere between annoyed and angry.

“Did I interrupt a call?” She’s clutching her cell phone in her right hand. It’s the first time I’ve seen her with the thing since she moved in. “I didn’t even know you had one of those.”

Even Edith carries hers around all day. She claims it's so she can call me when she falls and breaks a hip, but we both know she's addicted to Candy Crush. She's the highest scorer among all her friends, and she can't let the title slide. Also, she's already had two hip replacements. At this point, if she falls, she's liable to break whatever it is she lands on.

Meredith glances down as if just remembering the phone was in her hand. "Oh, no. It was Helen. She—" She pauses and shakes her head. "Anyway, no. You didn't interrupt."

I wonder if she's upset because she had a bad phone call with Helen or if maybe she's starting to have regrets about leaving her old life. Helen said it would only take a week or two before she realized her mistake and fled back home.

Either way, it's not really my business.

I nod toward the stack of supplies. "I'm just unloading a few things. Got you—the shack—an A/C unit this morning." Her gaze follows to where I'm pointing. "It's the best one they had."

"You can take it out of my paycheck," she says quickly, her words clipped and hard.

I bristle at the response. It's not exactly the thank you I was looking for. In fact, it sounds like she's angry with me for helping her out.

"No. I said I'd get you one, so here it is."

"I hope you didn't go through any trouble. That thing looks heavy."

"I can lift a box on my own."

I don't know why we're doing this—why she and I mix like oil and water, why she's not cheery and upbeat with me like she is with everyone else, why we flare up over stupid shit. We aren't fighting, but we aren't exactly playing nice either.

"What's all that other stuff for?" she asks, pointing to the supplies stacked up neatly beside the shack. "Please don't say you're adding on to the farmhouse—that place doesn't need any more floors to mop."

A second ago, I'd been excited to tell her my plans for the place. Now, I don't think I'd be able to stand her reaction. Hell, a part of me wants to load everything back into my truck and drive it right back to the store.

"It's just building supplies," I say after clearing my throat, eager to change the subject. "Mind if I install this A/C now? I have other things I need to get to today."

She nods and steps aside to usher me through the door. I pause on the threshold, shocked to see what it looks like inside. Sure, the shack is still in need of some renovations—there are still gaps in the floorboards and the walls really need new drywall and paint—but she's done her best to make it a home. There's a blue rug on the ground that covers most of the floor, and a wooden stool stands beside the twin bed with a delicate antique lamp on top of it. A paperback I saw Edith reading the other day sits face down beside it.

"Did you buy all this with the advance I gave you?"

"Yes," she answers hesitantly.

I frown, confused.

"Why waste your money?"

What I mean to say is, *What's the point in sprucing up a place you have no plans of living in for much longer?* but my words come out twisted and meaner than I intended.

"I found some very good deals, thank you very much." Then she brushes past, knocking her shoulder into me accidentally (or probably on purpose). She grabs for her sneakers and heads back for the door at an angry pace. "Now if you're going to get started, I'll go take a walk."

I turn to stop her, to smooth over the situation, but the right words fail me. I'm not surprised; that seems to be a running theme with Meredith. Every time I think I'm making headway with her, I end up putting my foot in my mouth one way or another. Part of it has to do with my prejudices, but I see no way around them. Meredith isn't here for good. One morning I'll wake up and find her gone just like her husband did, and I see no reason to soften my heart or give her the benefit of the

doubt. She might have convinced everyone else in this town to love her, but not me.

Meredith

There is no way around it: I am truly on my own. My sister has officially taken up forces with the dark side (A.K.A. Andrew) and there's no talking her out of it. I don't have the strength to keep trying. Not only does it feel like a dagger in my heart every time she sides with him over me, it feels like I'm fighting a losing battle.

Apparently, over the last week, Helen and Brent have been brainstorming ways to get me back to California. That's why Helen called me this morning. I was expecting her to ask me how I was doing, possibly inquire about my mental health, but the conversation felt like a politician stumping on a pro-Andrew platform.

"Have you tried calling him and working this out?"

I heaved an annoyed sigh. "I've been busy working. Besides, this isn't a workable issue. It's over." *Unless Andrew's had a lobotomy in the last few days.*

"Has he reached out to you?" she asked, sounding like she already knew the answer.

"Some. We're playing phone tag. I'm not avoiding him on purpose."

It's true. He's left two voicemails, both of which were eerily sedated and thoughtful. He went on about how much he misses me and implored me to come home to California so we could work things out. I listened to them in the hopes that he'd break and speak to me over the phone the way he did in private—then I could play the messages for Helen and say, *See? This is the monster you want to send me back to.*

I should've known he would never be that stupid.

A few minutes later, our conversation took a turn for the worse.

“I stuck my neck out for you, Meredith. You need to start being honest with me.”

My eyes narrowed in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t tell me you’ve done this before. Andrew gave me his side of things earlier this week. He told me last year you disappeared out of the blue just like this.”

WHAT?!

“No. I went to stay in a hotel for a few days to clear my head.”

It was a Best Western down the street. There were roaches in the bathroom, and the man staying next door definitely resembled a MOST WANTED poster I’d seen on the news—that’s how badly I didn’t want to go home.

“According to him, you left then had a change of heart and went crawling back.”

Her tone sounded so accusatory, I had to grit my teeth to keep from screaming.

“Well, he’s *lying*. He knew I went to get some space. He and I had just had a bad fight and I needed time away from him to think.”

“That’s not the way he made it sound.”

“Then he’s lying!” My arms were flailing at that point. “Jesus, Helen, I’m your sister—why is it so hard for you to just take my word on something?”

“Because whether you like it or not, Andrew is your husband and my brother-in-law, and I’m having a little bit of trouble assuming the worst of him when you’re the one who randomly boarded a plane in the middle of the night!”

“So instead you’ll assume the worst about *me*?”

She sighed, clearly exhausted by the entire thing. “That’s not what I’m doing. I’m trying to be the voice of reason in all this. Listen, obviously if Andrew is the monster you say he is, I don’t want you to be with him, but you can see how this seems from my side, right? You’ve been with a man for years and up

until recently, I've heard nothing but good things. On Facebook, your life looks amazing—it's hard to believe it could have all been a lie.”

“Well it was,” I insisted, angry with myself for how close I was to tears.

We both took a few clearing breaths. I was half convinced we'd turned some kind of corner, but then she just had to keep going.

“Meredith, I need you to calm down and assess the situation with a level head. The easiest way forward is reconciliation. Divorces are messy and expensive and you—”

“You think I care about that? You think I'll stay married to someone like him because I'm scared of what it will cost to leave him?”

The phone call didn't last much longer after that. I was crying and hiccupping and feeling stupid for losing control of my emotions. I could tell my sister wasn't sure how to handle me, not to mention I knew anything I said would be used against me if she decided to call Andrew again. In my head, I cursed her for her disloyalty before I realized she *was* being loyal, just to a version of me that doesn't exist anymore.

I had just finished the phone call and was vigorously wiping tears and snot from my face when I heard Jack unloading stuff outside the shack. He caught me at the wrong time, and per usual, he took a bad situation and made it even worse.

Why waste your money? he'd asked dismissively when he saw the new decorations inside the shack.

You know what, buddy?! Maybe it's because living in this dingy shack is making me miserable! Maybe it's because I've had to pry four splinters from my foot in the last week! Maybe it's TO SPITE YOU FOR INTENTIONALLY MAKING ME SUFFER SO I'D WANT TO LEAVE!

Obviously I didn't shout any of those things at him. I stormed off, and now I'm out walking his property in my pajamas and sneakers. I have no idea where I'm going or how far his land extends. *How close are we to Mexico?* I've been angrily

stomping my way in one direction for a few minutes and there's still no end in sight. I didn't have time to put on a bra or socks or deodorant, and all my blubbering on the phone and that angry getaway have really worked up a sweat.

I should definitely just turn around and head back, but I know he'll still be there, installing that window unit. I felt so guilty when I saw it, thanks in part to my phone call with Helen. Before launching into her lecture about my marriage, she inquired about Jack.

"So, he gave you a job?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Where are you staying?"

"On the premises." I was hesitant to admit I'm living in the run-down shack.

"Yeah? What about rent and food?"

"It's included."

Her tone turned cold then. "You better not be taking advantage of him, Meredith. It sounds like he's going out of his way to help you, a complete stranger, and if you're just going to run right back to Andrew in a few weeks—"

"I'm not!"

She wasn't convinced.

"This is a mess. I asked him to give you a job, not to roll out the red carpet. I'll need to figure out some way to pay him back. Maybe I should cut our trip short. We'd still have to pay for the hotels but—"

"No, Helen, don't do that. It's not like I'm just mooching off him. I've been working hard—"

She cut me off, annoyed. "Listen, this is my livelihood, Meredith. I don't expect you to understand, but Brent and I depend on my income a lot, especially with this trip and renovation." I could hear the stress in her voice. "Please don't do anything to screw up my relationship with Jack while I'm

gone. Keep your head down, work, and try to make yourself as useful as possible.”

I realize now that I’ve done the exact opposite. I’ve been nothing but a hassle for Jack since my arrival. He spent his entire morning buying building supplies to fix up the shack for me, and I know I never asked him to do it, but I still feel responsible. There was a lot of stuff in the bed of his truck and I have no idea what it cost him, much less how long it will take him to do the repairs. I want to be more help than hassle, and I cringe thinking of how Helen would react if she saw him unloading supplies like that. She would be *livid*.

I have no clue what to do...demand he take it all back? Decline the repairs? I don’t want to be rude, but I also don’t want to use up all the goodwill Helen has built up for herself.

If I had money, I’d consider trying to find another place to live; at least then I’d only be depending on him for a job. I could leave the ranch at quitting time like the rest of the employees and be out of his hair. Unfortunately, with the paltry amount of money in my new checking account, that just isn’t an option right now, and probably won’t be for a while.

I have no choice but to march right back to the shack and stop him before he gets started. I’ll convince him I don’t need any repairs. With the rug there, I almost forget there are gaps in the floor, and plenty of people lived in Texas before the advent of air conditioning. It’s kind of nice living in a sauna, and the spiders don’t bother me in bed because enough sweat pools around me to form a moat.

I knock on the open door when I make it back, as if I’m encroaching on his space instead of mine. He’s over at the window near my bed, using a power drill to anchor the air conditioner. His baseball hat is gone and I see now what I didn’t notice before: he got a haircut. The dark strands are trimmed short, sharpening his features. He’s the grown-up man version of a boy who was already intimidating to begin with. My stomach squeezes tight as I fight back the words that are spilling into my thoughts: kissing, touching, wanting, *yearning*.

“Not a very long walk,” he notes, oblivious to the fact that my mouth is open and there is drool dribbling onto the floor at my feet.

I’ve forgotten my agenda, my name, the year. *The president? What’s a president?*

He stops what he’s doing and turns to look at me. The profile—which was already killing me—changes to the full-frontal view, and I’m hit with the realization that I was married to Andrew for five years and never once felt weak in the knees like I do now, but that can’t be right. Maybe I’m just exhausted from my walk—all four minutes of it.

“Meredith?”

“You got a haircut.” I sound like English is my second language.

“Yeah.”

“You look different.” I’m a three-year-old, stringing beginner words together to form my first sentence.

His brow arches and he shakes his head. “What’s up with you?”

I force my attention to something else and my gaze lands on the air conditioner. *Box thing make cold? Very brr-brr-freezy-freezy?*

Oh, right.

I have a purpose for rushing back here, and it’s not to swoon.

“I don’t want you to do any repairs in the shack,” I declare confidently. “I do appreciate the thought.”

“Thanks boss,” he retorts sarcastically, “but last time I checked, I don’t need your permission to work on my own property.”

Then he turns and gets back to work.

I pinch my eyes closed for a second. It’s so hard to be nice to a dick. “No, I just mean...you’re not doing them on my account, right?”

There's no pause before he replies, "Right."

I step forward, trying to angle myself so I can see his expression. Spoiler: it's not happy.

"So you'd be willing to go on record that you've been wanting to fix the place up for a while?"

"Uhh...sure?"

I exhale.

"Okay, because it's just that I don't need you to do anything on my account. I won't be living here that long."

"You're leaving?"

"No, I just mean after payday I should be able to get my own place, get out of your hair."

I can't help but notice that, in the confusion over my departure, he looked disappointed rather than jubilant, but he regains his composure in an instant.

He goes back to installing the air conditioner, and I'm left standing there aimlessly. I turn on my heel and then pivot back. I have nowhere to go. I need deodorant and a bra, but I'd die before I put a bra on in front of him.

I try to make myself useful by picking up a wrench off the ground (at least I think that's what it is). "Err...do you want my help or—"

"Yeah, can you not touch anything?"

I drop it quickly then declare I'm going to take another walk, though it's the last thing I want to do. I'm still sweaty from the first one.

This time, while I stroll around his property, I think about my conversation with Edith at the diner. She really let it spill about Jack. It's like she opened up his case file, pushed it toward me, and said, *Here, catch up*. All those secrets, all those emotions were foisted on me, and now I don't know what to do with them. Up until yesterday, I saw Jack as two-dimensional. He was an angry, hotheaded cowboy. His main tasks in life included barking orders and wearing tight denim.

Given the choice, he wanted me off his property and out of his life. He'd made that abundantly clear, and I was okay with that, but then Edith had to change things. She had to take a man I generally disliked and stuff him full of explanatory emotions.

Up until then, I could almost believe Jack had spontaneously sprouted up from the underworld one day just the way he is: jeans, hair, smoldering gaze. Edith disproved that theory. She turned him into a scared twenty-year-old kid, grieving the loss of his parents and learning to carry the weight of his newfound responsibility with the ranch. Of course he's angry! Of course he's stressed and short-tempered! No one's a happy-go-lucky person after going through an experience like that.

I hate this. I hate Edith for telling me his secrets. We could have gone right on bumping heads and throwing jabs, but it's not fun anymore. I can't look at him the same way. I can't go back into that shack without apologies spilling out of me. *I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry you had to live through that.* Then I'd probably try to offer him a hug, and I know how that would go: he'd shoot his hand out, smack me on the forehead, and stiff-arm me so I'd be left swinging my arms in vain.

Therein lies the problem: just because I know *why* Jack is the way he is doesn't mean he's going to stop being that way. He still wants me off his property and out of his life. He still finds me to be a general nuisance, and I'm pretty sure he still thinks I'm a spoiled brat from California who's never worked a day in her life. *Well, guess what, buddy boy? I've worked FIVE DAYS NOW! So ha!*

All this...this *knowledge* about Jack paired with Helen's warnings about not taking advantage of him has left me feeling like things have to change between us.

I'm just not sure how.

Meredith

I start the week with one clear goal: to be the most productive, useful employee Jack has ever had, like if Mary Poppins and Monica Geller had a love child. On Monday, I wake up at the crack of dawn, toss my thin sheet aside, and get to work. I clear everything out of the shack so Jack can have easy access to the floors for his repairs. Then, I make sure to stay out of his way by cleaning, cleaning, cleaning. By the end of the day, the farmhouse is gleaming, and I'm confident Jack could lick any surface and come away with the lemony taste of Palmolive on his tongue. *Yum!*

My efforts are thwarted when I see that Jack has half a dozen ranch hands working on the shack all day. By the evening, they've not only fixed the floors, they also repaired the drywall and moved all my stuff back inside, *plus* there's a new pendant light hanging in the center of the ceiling. It doesn't even look like a shack anymore, more like one of those adorable tiny houses from HGTV.

With the A/C on, it is—dare I say—*chilly* inside. I lie awake that night with TWO soft blankets tucked around my body, worried sick about Jack having gone to all this trouble.

Helen's words keep reverberating in my mind, leaving bruises.

You better not be taking advantage of him, Meredith.

Keep your head down, work, and try to make yourself as useful as possible.

My only choice is to redouble my efforts on Tuesday. Jack sends a few guys in to retile the shower in the shack-turned-tiny-house, so I decide to draft a list of menu options for him. I've seen the way he scowls when I put down a plate of salmon or try to pass off baked asparagus as a carb. No more! If he wants burgers with mac and cheese by the boatload, by golly he's going to get it! The list I compile includes

everything I'm comfortable making (or attempting to make) for his lunches, that way he can cross off anything that doesn't sound appetizing.

Later that morning, when I'm sure he's not too busy, I tap, tap, tap on the door of his office and let myself in after he gives me the go-ahead.

"Good morning!" I chirp like a songbird.

"What do you need?" he asks gruffly, skeptical of my cheer.

I pass him the menu across his desk.

"What's this?" he asks, not even looking up at me.

"I thought I'd get your taste preferences so I can avoid making anything you don't want to eat for lunch. I've separated things out in categories for you. There are protein options and side dishes—"

He shakes his head and pushes the menu back to me, gaze already falling back to his work. "Just keep doing whatever you're doing. I don't have time for this."

My upper lip wants to curl with annoyance, but I don't let it.

"Are you sure? You could just—"

"I'm sure."

Alrighty then. I take the menu and march right on out of there, determined to find some other way to be useful.

I'm loading clothes into the washer when Edith finds me.

"I've been looking for you everywhere!"

I smile and keep tossing clothes in. "I've been in here, loading and unloading. Tell me, how *do* two people produce so much laundry? It's like you both change your underwear forty-five times a day."

She ignores my question and holds up two yoga mats still in their original wrapping. My eyes go wide with wonder.

"Where'd you get those?"

"In town, yesterday."

My fingers reach out as if to say, *Gimme, gimme, gimme*. My eyes glisten. My fingers twitch anxiously. I want one of the mats so badly. I *need* it. Even with the prospect of new floors, yoga on a thrift store rug is getting kind of old.

Too bad my conscience prods me to remember my mission for the week: *Be useful! Happy! Helpful! Especially do not accept any more help from Jack or his well-meaning, impossible-not-to-love grandmother.*

I drop my hand and turn away.

“I hope they’re both for you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. The blue one is yours. My new year’s resolution is to start doing yoga, and you’re going to help me.”

“It’s June,” I point out.

“I’ve learned that if I don’t start resolving until midway through the year, it’s much easier to make it to the finish line.”

I smile at her genius. “Right, well, you’ll have to find someone else to help you. I need to keep cleaning.”

“No, you need to come help me yoga. Can yoga be used as a verb? Anyway, it’s nice out and you need a break from this laundry room.”

“I don’t think Jack would agree with that.” I close the door on the washer and the machine rumbles to life.

“I just asked him, and he did.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Well, his exact words were, ‘I don’t care. Leave me alone,’ but coming from Jack, that’s all the approval we’re ever going to get, and all the approval I need. Now c’mon. I’ve been meaning to get in touch with my child’s pose.”

“That’s really more for resting.”

“Good. Best to start slow.”

I’m helpless to resist her, not only because I’d love a break from laundry, but because doing yoga outside under a shady oak tree sounds too good to pass up. I convince myself

accepting the mat isn't going against my mission for the week because technically helping Edith with her yoga practice will make her stronger and healthier. Jack wants his grandmother healthy, ergo I must become her yoga Yoda.

Once I reassure myself my logic is sound, I run to change into the yoga pants I got at the thrift store then meet her outside. I've been practicing yoga for years, but I've never led anyone else through a practice. I'm a little clunky, not sure how to best explain certain poses for a beginner, but Edith is a good sport. We start slow, and by the time we roll up our mats, she's proven I shouldn't have underestimated her. I wasn't even really going easy on her; all in all, it was a pretty decent workout.

"Same time tomorrow?" she asks, standing up with her mat.

I grin. "Sounds good."

I feel amazing as we head back to the house—better than I have in a long time. Not only did I get a little break from cleaning, it was actually really fun to practice yoga with Edith. I liked guiding her and coming up with poses, and I already have ideas for what I want to do tomorrow.

Later, Edith tries to get me to eat lunch with them, as she's done every day, but I insist that I need to keep working. The rest of the afternoon passes quickly as I continue scrubbing, and shining, and folding, and generally staying out of Jack's way. I figure my best chance of keeping under his radar is to steer clear of him altogether.

It works remarkably well. We don't fight at all. In fact, it's been so many days since we fought (two, for those of you counting at home) that he's probably already warming up to me. Bonus: I'm so preoccupied with Jack and my work ethic, I hardly have time to remember my own crumbling life. Thumbs-up.

On Wednesday, I turn into Betty Crocker in the kitchen. I don an apron, use a rolling pin, and have half a pound of flour caked in my hair by the time I finish trying out the recipe Dotty sent home with Jack. A few dozen cranberry oatmeal cookies litter the counter. I put extra white chocolate chunks in

them, and the result is nothing short of a culinary masterpiece. After a quick thank-you call to Dotty—that lasts 45 minutes—I fill up little take-home bags with cookies and deliver them to all the ranch hands. They thank me so profusely. “Meredith, you’re the best!” “Thanks Meredith!” “Aw Meredith, can’t you stay and chat?”

Though they’re remarkably good for my ego (much better than Jack is), I don’t let the hands coax me into staying. I don’t want to be a distraction. Instead, I tell them to enjoy then scurry back inside so I can take a plate filled with the very best cookies and an ice-cold glass of milk up to Jack’s office. The glass numbs my hand as I walk up the stairs, and the cookies are the perfect mix between crunchy and gooey and straight out of the oven. They could force an entire squadron of bake-sale moms into early retirement.

The door to his office is open, and he glares at me from behind his desk as I stroll in and out again without so much as word, just a pleasant smile and a wave. He scowls like he’s confused by this version of me. Meredith Avery: non-nuisance. That *Employee of the Year* award has my name written all over it.

I grin to myself as I walk back downstairs. Obviously, I would have liked to stay and watch him roll on the ground, weeping at the glory of my baking abilities, but that’s not part of my plan. Instead, I just have to imagine it.

I think I’m kicking butt, proving Helen wrong, and staying focused. Later on, I’m in the kitchen making a marinade for tomorrow’s lunch when Jack shouts my name through the house. *Uh oh*. That doesn’t sound like cookie ecstasy. When I find him, he’s in his closet, one hand on his hip, the other gesturing to his racks of clothes. He’s wearing his Angry Jack face, his shoulders blocking out part of the overhead light. I wonder if he could squash me beneath his shoe or if it just feels that way when he’s worked up.

“What the hell is all this?”

His voice makes me jump.

“What is *what*?”

He points to the clothes, reminding me of the task I undertook earlier while the cookies were baking.

“Oh, right. I organized your clothes by color and category.”

“Why?”

I sweep my hand across the impeccably organized garments. “It was all a jumbled mess before—I’m surprised you could figure out where anything was.”

I don’t find it necessary to mention the fact that I did a fabulous job. His jeans are in descending shades of blue. His shirts are grouped together so that his black t-shirts (of which there are many) are all in their own section. His work shirts are separated from his nice long-sleeve shirts. The suits I was surprised to find are hanging together near the back. I also don’t mention the fact that I imagined him wearing those suits and had to prop my hand on the closet wall and pause my organizing for a solid five minutes while I let the fantasy play out in my mind. It was jarring, to say the least.

“Looks good, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t like change.”

“Okay-okay-okay,” I say, immediately deferent. “I’ll put everything back. Just...in the meantime, don’t look in your underwear drawer. No reason.”

* * *

After I finish work for the day, the guys are still wrapping up some tile work in the shack, so I’m left with no place to go. I could stay in the farmhouse, but Jack still seems annoyed about his closet and I don’t want to impose on him. I already did yoga with Edith, so I don’t really need the exercise, but I decide I’ll take another stroll around the property anyway. When I was chatting with Chris earlier, he mentioned that there was a nice creek due west of the house. He said it was a

quarter mile or so to get there, but there's a trail to follow and it's worth the trek.

I set out in that direction and am a few minutes into my walk when I get the feeling that I'm being tailed.

I turn and see Alfred trotting behind me at a distance. He tucks himself half behind a bush. If he could, he'd be wearing a pair of those disguise glasses with the comically large nose and mustache. I continue walking and so does he. I stop and he stops and sits, tongue wagging, eyes shining with stupid love.

"Go back home, Alfred!" I shout, assuming my words will hit their mark.

He doesn't budge. His tail swings back and forth in the grass.

"Go on!" I wave my arms menacingly. "Get!"

I've become Frankie Muniz in *My Dog Skip*. Alfred is supposed to walk off dejectedly and the audience is supposed to cry, but Alfred, who promptly listens to every command Jack utters, seems to turn a deaf ear to me.

I sigh and tell him to stay—adding in a dramatic STOP hand motion—and then I continue my walk. He does stay for a little while, but then he hops right back up.

It's not like I'm *that* scared of him anymore. In the last few days, I've even gotten used to having him around. He's always in the farmhouse, sleeping on his bed or under the kitchen table, and I feed him and replenish his water bowl. Earlier, he came to lie down near my feet while I was baking, and I didn't even notice until I nearly stepped on him.

Still, there's a difference between tolerance and active friendship. I'd prefer the former; Alfred clearly disagrees.

He gets closer to me and trots along at my side. I glance down at him with pursed lips, and he nudges my palm with his nose, like he's saying, *See? I'm nice. Please love me.*

He is pretty cute with his floppy ears and golden coat. *Dammit.*

I sigh and give in to him. We walk together for a few more minutes in silence before I ask him how he likes the weather.

He ignores me. Then, because why the hell not, I start to tell him about my day, and then that somehow morphs into me explaining to him why it hurts my feelings that I don't have a better relationship with Helen. I divulge the fact that even when we were younger, we didn't get along that well. He's the perfect listener, doesn't interrupt me even once, and before I know it, we crest over the top of a hill and I spot the creek.

Except, it's not a creek—it's a river! Or at least it looks like one to me: wide, crystal clear, and rimmed with cypress trees, wildflowers, and ferns. The path I'm on dead-ends in a little clearing on the bank of the creek. It looks like a perfect, pebbly beach entrance.

Alfred and I step closer. Even though the creek flows pretty quick, I figure it's not going so fast that it'd sweep me away to the Gulf of Mexico.

I can't gauge how deep it gets in the center, which means it probably goes well over my head. To my left, there's an overgrown oak tree with a rope swing hanging down. The knot at the top cuts into the tree's limb, and it's probably been up there for a while.

Even though it's early evening, the sun is still blazing overhead. The temperature has to be in the high 90s, and our walk built up a nice layer of sweat on my skin. Swimming sounds heavenly.

I turn to Alfred and dab sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. "What do you think? Should we swim?"

Alfred leaps into the water before I even have time to remove my shoes, splashing and pouncing and lapping it up like he's having the time of his life.

"Looks like we've finally found some common ground," I say, kicking off my sneakers and stuffing my socks inside. "You go on ahead and make sure to scare off any snakes."

I chance a quick glance behind us to confirm we're alone then strip off my t-shirt and shorts—not that it even matters if a ranch hand sees us since my underwear and bra provide more coverage than most of the bikinis I used to own.

“How is it?” I ask after I stow my things on dry land and make my way to the creek’s edge. The water’s so nice and clear, I’ll be able to see my feet on the algae-covered pebbles. “Refreshing?”

My toes hit the water and I let out a wild “*AH!*”

It’s FREEZING.

Alfred turns and looks at me, head tilted.

“How is it so cold!?” I cry. “Is this runoff from a freaking glacier?”

He ignores me and goes back to leaping around in the water. Right. I take another few steps, hissing and huffing and puffing as I get acclimated to the temperature. I know I’m being a wimp, and I’ll never make it all the way in at this rate. There’s only one way to swim in cold water, and that’s by plunging under in one quick go. So, I inhale, hold my nose, and dive.

Cold water blasts me from all sides like I just dropped myself into an ice bucket. It’s so cold it burns, but then just like that, my body is used to it. I break the surface and whip my hair out of my face.

“Woo!”

Alfred barks and doggy-paddles toward me.

We swim farther from the edge, but I’m still a few yards away from where the current looks the strongest in the center of the creek. Where I am, there’s nothing to worry about.

Alfred swims toward me with a stick then drops it on the water’s surface, nudging it forward with his nose. I take the hint and toss it toward shore, and he darts after it, fetching it back to me in record time. We repeat the cycle for a while. My arm starts to ache, but I push through the pain because he looks so damn happy. Eventually, out of desperation, I toss the stick into the current and say, “No more!” then flop back to float on my back. My arms and legs stretch out around me as I tilt my chin to the sky and close my eyes. He circles me like a shark.

“What do you think of your master?” I ask lazily.

He barks.

“I know, handsome, but that *personality*—rough around the edges, to say the least.”

He licks my hand.

“Oh, you think he has a softer side too? Maybe. Edith seems to think there’s still some love left in him, but I’m not so sure. I wonder if he ate those cookies or if he just tossed them out the window as soon as I left the room.” He doesn’t say anything and I feel like a jerk. “Oh I’m sorry, Alfred! I just realized I didn’t give you any. How rude of me to bring it up.”

He forgives me because he’s a dog and he doesn’t speak English. Also, I think he’s my best friend.

We keep swimming and I lose track of time. My fingers turn into prunes. I’m starting to feel the temperature of the water again and I’m pretty sure my lips are purple by this point, but I can’t get out yet. All this alone time has given me the chance to reflect on how far I’ve come, how much I’ve accomplished since that cab driver kicked me out in the middle of nowhere. Additionally, I’m inspired by my progress with Alfred, how far I’ve been able to get out of my comfort zone. With that in mind, I have a mission before we head back to the house: test out that rope swing.

“Alfred, if I die, you can have all the money in my checking account.”

Jack

Meredith has done a complete about-face in recent days. Ever since Sunday morning, when she told me—with splotchy cheeks and puffy eyes—to not bother fixing up the shack, she’s been hardly recognizable. It’s like she’s walking on eggshells around me, and if possible, I find it more annoying than when she was giving me hell. I don’t have a problem with being nice; I have a problem with people being *fake* nice. I can tell she’s keeping herself restrained. When I snapped at her for color-coordinating my closet, I could see the shackled passion behind her eyes. I think she wanted to tell me to eat shit, but she just smiled and cowed.

Something isn’t right.

Edith swears she hasn’t noticed the change, but then again, I can’t really trust Edith when it comes to Meredith. She’s been on her side from the beginning.

This morning, she told me to go easier on her.

“She’s a nice girl,” she said in Meredith’s defense. “One who, for reasons beyond my comprehension, puts up with you.”

“Yeah, well it seems everyone’s seen Meredith’s ‘nice girl’ side but me.”

“A mean dog doesn’t ever see a cat purring. You make her hackles go up. You’ve been nothing short of cruel since she first arrived.”

Maybe that’s why Meredith has changed her attitude around me. Maybe she agrees with Edith about how I’ve been acting and she’s sick of me losing my temper with her.

Who cares? I remind myself I don’t have time to worry about Meredith or her opinion of me.

After I wrap up work for the day, I go looking for Alfred. It’s been a few days since I’ve played fetch with him. Normally he

hangs around me all day, but he's been noticeably absent lately.

I don't find him around the farmhouse, and when I ask Edith, she says the last time she saw him he was heading down to the creek.

Odd.

He's never wandered down that far without me. Our property is huge, but he prefers to stick close to the house, which is convenient for me because then I don't have to chase him down at the end of the day.

I set off down the trail, appreciating the solitude. I haven't gone down this way in a while. When I was a kid, I lived at the creek in the summer. My friends and I would fill our inner tubes and hike over to the top of the property so we could catch the current and float all the way back down. For my twelfth birthday, my dad installed a rope swing on one of the oak trees and I spent months doing fool-ass backflips to impress *the* Carrie Suthers. My efforts weren't in vain—she let me kiss her at the end of summer, right on the edge of the bank.

I'm smiling, thinking about that summer, when I stumble upon a pile of clothes stowed on the path just up ahead. I don't hear any voices, but Alfred's definitely down here swimming with someone, and from the look of the jean shorts, it's Meredith.

I continue down the path, hear a small splash, and spot Alfred swimming in a circle in the creek, barking and whining with worry. There's no Meredith in sight, but then a few seconds later, she breaks the surface of the water with a wild laugh.

"There!" she declares proudly, wiping her dark hair away from her face. "Did you time me like I asked you to? I counted to 35 Mississippi, which is like four minutes in dog time!"

Alfred barks right in her face, obviously glad to see she wasn't drowning like he thought she was, and she doesn't even flinch like I expect her to.

"Okay, well then," she continues, "you'll just have to take my word that I just set a world record."

When I take a step toward the creek, a stick crunches underneath my shoe. Alfred's ears perk up as he turns, spots me, and a second later, he's bounding out of the water to say hello.

Of course, he stops a foot in front of me and shakes like crazy, covering me with water. I hold out my hands, but it's no use.

"All right, all right! You got me!" I crouch down and pet him while he pants. He's breathing hard and his barrel chest is heaving, which means they've probably been swimming for a while.

"Okay, you've had your look! You can go now!"

I jerk my head up and find Meredith retreating to the deep area, leaving only her head visible above the surface.

I frown. "What?"

"I don't have a bathing suit on!"

Jesus Christ, she's naked?! Fuck. My gut clenches at the idea and in a flash, I push to stand and prop my hands on my hips. "You'd better not be skinny dipping in my damn creek!"

Of all the idiotic things she could be doing. Any ranch hand could easily wander down here and find her like this. I thought we discussed this the other day—her respecting the fact that this is a working ranch with dozens of young, hormonal dolts wandering around.

"I'm not skinny dipping! I have my underwear on, you perv!"

"Then there shouldn't be a problem, and for the record, I came down here to find Alfred, not spy on you."

She stands and her shoulders become visible above the surface. They're tan and freckled from the sun.

"He followed me down here, uninvited—clearly takes after his master."

I glance down at my dog, who looks mighty proud of himself. "Yeah, well, he loves this place, and I haven't taken him in a while."

"Why?"

“You know why.” I sigh. “I’ve been busy.”

I glance over to see her bottom lip sticking out just a bit, her eyes downcast on the water. It almost looks like she feels sorry for me and I’m about to tell her not to bother, but then her eyes brighten and she smiles, snapping her attention up to me. I can see an idea forming in that pretty little head of hers.

“Actually, I’m glad you’re here! Does that rope swing still work?”

She’s pointing over to the old oak tree.

“What do you mean?”

“Is it safe? Like if I try to swing off will it break and send me to my death?”

I wipe away a smirk. “It’s sturdy. It’s been up there for years and it’s held much heavier than you.”

She thinks about that for a second before replying, “Oh, you’ve used it before? So it’s held, what, like 400 pounds?”

My eyebrow quirks like she just issued a dare. “Ha ha. You’re looking at the reigning backflip champion of Cedar Creek.”

“Well, perfect. The truth is, I’ve been working up the courage to use it for the last thirty minutes, but I don’t want to go first.”

I look around as if trying to find another willing participant. “I don’t see how you have any other option.”

Her eyes meet mine as she smiles, and the air leaves my lungs like someone just drove a dagger straight into my chest. In that moment, there’s no denying that she’s gorgeous—not just pretty or sweet, but the most tempting heartbreaker I’ve ever seen. Her dark hair is wet and hanging in a tangled sheet around her face. Her eyelashes are long and thick, boldly framing expressive blue eyes. Her lips are dark red, and her small nose has the same dusting of freckles her shoulders have. She’s the girl next door all grown up, and she’s swimming in my creek in nothing but her underwear.

“I want a tutorial from the supposed champ.”

“I don’t have my bathing suit on.”

My voice is flat and emotionless. I’m trying hard to step back in time to a few minutes ago, to when I hadn’t allowed those thoughts about her to take root in my mind. Acknowledging my attraction to her is a dangerous game I don’t want to play.

“That’s a pitiful excuse,” she says, completely oblivious to what she’s doing to me right now. “I got in without a bathing suit. Also, I wash enough of your underwear to know you don’t go commando, so either shimmy out of those Wranglers and show me how it’s done or prepare to lose the crown.”

I can’t resist giving in to the subtle temptation to flirt with her.

“Y’know, you’re trying pretty hard to get me to strip. In fact, the last time a woman told me to take my jeans off and ‘show her how it’s done’, she wasn’t talking about a rope swing.”

Her face goes beet red. “That’s not what I meant and you know it!”

I grin and turn back to make sure we’re alone. If it’s just her and me, I can pretend like this isn’t a terrible idea. I can give in to the here and now and worry about the rest later.

“Wait!” she shouts. I pause. “If you do stay and swim, you can’t get weird on me. Just pretend I’m wearing a tastefully conservative bikini instead of my undies.”

I roll my eyes and start to work my t-shirt off over my head. “Meredith, don’t kid yourself. I’m not like those hands back there—I don’t lose control of myself at the first sight of bare skin.”

“You’ve never seen my skin,” she taunts.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I don’t know. It sounded cool in my head. Now just promise me.”

I sigh as I kick off my boots and work the zipper of my jeans. “I promise that I, a grown man and not a horny teenage boy, won’t think twice about seeing you in your—how did you put it? *Tastefully conservative underwear*. Besides, I have the benefit of knowing you’re a married woman.”

I meant to say the last part as a reminder to myself more than her—I'm practically panting at the idea that she'll walk toward the shore and I'll get a glimpse of her wet bra clinging to her curves—but the mention of her past and her husband back in California dampens the light in her eyes in one fell swoop. It's like I just cut the music and flipped on the lights—party's over.

She turns to look up the creek, and I berate myself for once again putting my foot in my mouth. We were having a surprisingly good time, and I bet it could continue if I swallow my pride a little bit.

“Forget I said that, okay? Here, look, I'm in my underwear now too, so we're even.”

She turns back and I catch the subtle way her eyes widen when she sees me standing on the shore in my boxers. She does the quickest scan from head to toe I've ever seen and then her gaze flips to the sky. She looks like she's praying.

“I thought it was implied that the whole ‘not getting weird’ thing goes both ways.”

“No, no, I'm fine.” Her voice is high and squeaky, but she recovers fast. “Wait, so you really know how to do a backflip?”

She sounds thoroughly impressed, and I can't help but think, *Move over, Carrie Suthers*. Looks like my rope swing skills are still paying dividends.

It takes her a few tries to toss the rope up to me on the shore, but then I grab hold of it and climb up to the highest part of the bank.

“Shall I count down?” she asks.

Alfred barks from a few yards down, anxious about what I'm about to do. He's seen me swing plenty of times, but it still makes him nervous.

“Sure.”

“Twenty-five, twenty-four, twenty-three—”

“Meredith.”

“Okay, threetwoone GO!”

I jump off the ledge and arc out over the water. When the rope extends to the farthest point, right over the deepest part of the creek, I let go and allow muscle memory to take over. Warm wind rushes around me as I flip then plunge into the icy water with a splash. I kick up to the surface and shake off the feeling of tiny needles stabbing into my skin. I always forget just how intensely cold it is in the spring-fed creek. The water bubbles straight up from an underground aquifer, so it’s never warm, not even in the heat of summer.

Meredith claps as I break the surface. “Bravo! I totally thought you were bluffing.”

“It wasn’t bad for my first of the season. I’ll get more air next time.”

“More air!? You were practically flying there for a second. How’d you do that?”

“You’re just trying to talk your way out of your turn.”

She feigns shock. “What? Me? No! I just want to hear all about how you learned to do a backflip. Tell me in excruciating detail. Don’t leave anything out.”

“Meredith.”

She throws up her hands and they splash back into the water. “All right! Okay. I’m going...”

With a sigh, she starts swimming for the shore while I hold the end of the rope. For the record, I don’t try to leer at her as she walks out of the water. I have every intention of keeping my promise about not letting things get weird, but then the water starts to slip away inch by inch and I’m a man at a complete loss. The sun shines on the water in just the right way to create a shimmering reflection, and the effect is two Merediths, different but the same. One is an illusion, the other all too real.

Holy hell.

Her tan, toned back gives way to a small waist and long legs. Her bra is lacy and pale cream, sexier than I was expecting. Her underwear are full-coverage cotton panties, yet somehow I

find them cute as hell, especially while they're clinging to her ass.

I knew she had a good body, but not a killer body—not a body that makes me abundantly grateful that the water concealing the lower half of my body is ice cold.

Get a fuckin' grip, I scold myself.

Once she's on the shore, she wraps her arms around her chest, as if she's embarrassed, and then makes a mad dash to the rope swing.

"Don't look, don't look, don't look." She turns to me and probably sees that my brain has lost all control of motor function. "I said don't look!"

I slap my hand over my eyes comically. "There? Better?"

"Yes. For the record, these aren't thrift store tighty-whities. They're designer tighty-whities."

"Really? I'm pretty sure they're the same ones Edith wears. Cute that you guys match."

"Why do you know so much about your grandma's unmentionables?"

"Haven't you heard the rumors about us in the Deep South?"

"Wow, is that a genuine joke from Jack McNight? Color me shocked. Now just throw me the rope, will you?"

I drop the hand covering my eyes so I know where to aim. She's forced to uncross her arms so she can catch it, and I really fucking wish she was wearing a different bra, something that matched her underwear, because the tiny lacy thing covering her chest is sopping wet and I doubt she realizes just how translucent it is. I'm pretty sure I can see the tips of her breasts, and for *some* reason, I miss the mark on my first few throws.

"Jeez, you suck at this."

I don't even respond because I know my voice would come out hoarse and crackly, like a twelve-year-old in his first week of puberty. I've never seen a sexier sight. A naked woman is

one thing, but a woman barely concealed, covering just enough to make you wonder if you're seeing something or if your eyes are just playing tricks on you? It is without comparison.

I try my damndest to keep my attention on her face.

I toss the rope and she misses it.

I think this is what they refer to as cruel and unusual punishment.

“Okay! Just like that. I swear I’ll catch it now.”

If she doesn't, I'm going to drown myself as penance for my sins. I promised her I wouldn't let it get weird, and I'm a goddamn liar.

I toss the rope one last time and she catches it at the last second. “Woo! Okay, now move back so I won't hit you.”

I do as she says, though I know there's not a chance in hell she'll make it out this far.

“Either hold your bent elbows close or let your arms extend out fully, because once you get to the bottom of the arc it's going to feel like you weigh twice as much.”

“Yeah, yeah. I'm sure it's not that hard.”

She jumps and barely clears the edge of the bank before inertia wins out and yanks her into the water. It was less of a rope swing and more of a rope drop.

“Oh my god! I barely even made it off the ledge.” She laughs once she surfaces, burying her face in her hands. “You made it look so easy!”

“About average for your first try.”

It was below average.

“Oh please, I basically just flopped into the water like a dead fish.”

I laugh. “Next time leave your arms fully extended like I told you and make sure to bend your knees. Want to try again?”

“I don’t know.” She bites her bottom lip, thinking it over.
“That was pretty embarrassing.”

“No one saw it but me,” I reassure her.

“And Alfred.” She points over to where he’s lounging on the bank, basking in the sun, half asleep.

“Something tells me he didn’t care. Here, c’mon. Now that you know what to expect, it should go a lot better.”

She swims over and climbs back out onto the bank. Her underwear have crept up and I can see the edges of her tan butt cheeks. I’ve seen bikinis more revealing than what she’s wearing, but it’s still such a turn-on. I shift my gaze up to the oak tree and focus in on a nest. *Yes, look at that—ahhh, the beauty of nature.*

“Ready!” she declares.

This time she does what I tell her and actually manages to swing out toward me before she lets go of the rope and drops into the water like a pro.

She’s so proud of herself when she surfaces. I swim toward her and see she’s beaming then realize my mistake after its too late. I shouldn’t have gotten this close. Her eyelashes sparkle as small beads of water catch the light, highlighting the bluest pair of eyes I’ve ever seen, a blue so vibrant it looks electric, like the sky right before a thunderstorm.

The water laps up around her shoulders, and it’s tricking my brain into thinking she’s not wearing anything at all. She’s a siren. She stands, and the water barely conceals her breasts. I want to skim my hand down her delicate neck and smooth shoulders and tug down one of those delicate straps.

Then I blink and realize my wants and desires have turned into actions. My brain is the last thing to catch up. My fingertips are already on Meredith’s shoulder, dipping beneath her bra strap. Everything I imagined doing, I *am* doing. Her skin is wet silk. A gentle tug and she’s standing right in front of me. Her hips brush against mine in the water.

She’s holding her breath, lips parted as she stares up at me.

“You’re trembling.”

“The water’s cold,” she explains, wetting her bottom lip. “Wh- What are you doing?”

Her tone is perfect innocence.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

I’m about to kiss the hell out of her.

Her hands hit my chest and I blink my eyes closed, inhaling the feel of her palms on my bare skin.

Then she whispers my name, trying to snap us out of this moment, but I won’t let her.

“I really should get back,” she says, voice wobbly.

I snap my attention back to her face and see an expression that punches me in the gut: fear.

Before I can tell her to stay, she turns and starts swimming for the bank. “Thanks for the lesson. I’ll see you back at the house.”

I’m already swimming after her. “I can walk back with you.”

“No! No, you stay and keep swimming. I need to go home and shower. My fingers are shriveled and it’s getting late. I haven’t eaten dinner, and I should clean up a little bit.”

She’s firing off excuse after excuse as they come to mind, one after another—“Big day of cleaning tomorrow, I’m tired, I really need to call my parents”— then she’s out of the water and covering herself as she runs to gather up her clothes. She’s sopping wet yet she still tugs her shirt and shorts on rapid fire. I make it to the shore as she’s slipping her shoes on, but I don’t rush after her. I know when someone’s trying to get rid of me. She’s being smart, putting distance between us. I’m sure she saw the way I was looking at her, but it doesn’t come close to what I was thinking, the seduction I was planning in my mind. She should run away. She should scurry right on back to the shack, or better yet, all the way back to California, because the thoughts flitting through my head were filthy. Had she been a little closer and I a little more naive, I would have tugged her close and wrapped her legs around my waist. I’d have angled

her face up to mine and pressed a string of kisses to her lips, her chin, her throat. That bra would have been peeled off and those panties would have followed. Nothing good would have come from it. Everything good would have come from it.

I might've had my first kiss underneath that oak tree, but I'd have taken a lot more than that from Meredith.

Meredith

The next day, I don't bring up what happened in the creek, and neither does Jack. As far as I know, we both would rather forget the entire sequence of events, so that's what we do. Sure, I was nearly naked, and sure, I watched him strip down to his boxers and had to pretend my heart wasn't falling out of my butt. There are good bodies, and then there is Jack's body. You know the sort of muscles that come from mutant protein shakes and sporadic bouts of CrossFit? Yeah, Jack isn't like that. He has long, lean muscle that comes from years of daily hard labor. In fact, he has the type of tall, muscular frame that would make any woman feel small and delicate in his arms, like—*ahem*—me, for instance, just a random example.

Standing there, watching him strip, my gaze pinballed from one detail to the next: his broad shoulders, his toned forearms, his Adonis V. HE HAD THE V, HALLELUJAH—except, from what I saw with my own eyes, his should really be called the Adonis Y for reasons I'll leave up to your imagination. All I know is that I was turned on and fidgety. I wanted to fan my face and shout *Lawd have mercy* with a serious southern twang.

And that was before he completed the effortless backflip into the water. I'm ashamed to admit how impressive that was. Sure, I was mostly focused on his biceps as he was swinging (eat your heart out, Tarzan), but it was pretty cool that he could just pull his legs up with his abs (heavy breathing) and spin backward into the water, especially considering I barely made it off the shore at all.

I regretted swimming with him *even as* we were swimming. I knew it would set us down a path that would lead to all sorts of question marks, and awkward encounters, and conversations where we avoid eye contact, and that was before I stripped off my sopping clothes back home. Now that...*that* was the real *pièce de résistance*. I stood in front of my mirror

to see myself the way Jack had seen me, and I realized with a blush so strong it nearly set my face ablaze that he could totally see my entire boobs—not just a shadowy peek or a sultry suggestion, but LIKE THE ENTIRE NIPPLE AREA AND THEN SOME.

My emotions overwhelmed me so much that I had to sit down and resist the urge to dry heave. Embarrassment gave way to denial (*He probably didn't notice! I bet the sun was too bright.*), denial gave way to anger (*How dare he not inform me that I was flashing him?!*), and anger eventually gave way to acceptance. My boobs are not bad boobs. In fact, they're pretty great. In Europe, women wouldn't even blink at traipsing around like I was. In conclusion: I am a cool, relaxed *femme Française* with no qualms about hanging out in nipple-ville with my boss.

That logic works surprisingly well, especially since I pair my newfound European attitude with a total avoidance of Jack. We're talking zero face time for two whole days. I keep myself excessively occupied with the usual busy work around his house. I scrub toilets, tubs, showers, walls, nooks, crannies. I launder like it's my God-given talent to make clothes shockingly clean and wrinkle-free. If I hear him coming, I find a reason to tidy the inside of the coat closet. During lunch, I leave his and Edith's hot food waiting for them on the table and head back to the shack to eat on my own while pacing feverishly near the window, just in case I need to leap out at the sound of footsteps approaching.

I anticipate that the weekend will present a new set of problems. I won't have work to occupy me for eight to nine hours like I do during the week, but heaven smiles down on me because Jack is busier than ever down at the winery and restaurant. He's hardly ever around. Edith and I go into town for dinner on Friday and then Saturday night we watch a movie in our pajamas. Jack comes home in the middle of it and I freeze, popcorn kernel halfway to my gaping mouth, hyperaware that I've made myself comfortable on his couch. My feet are on his ottoman. My body is nestled under his throw blanket. If he had a fancy massage chair, I'm sure I would be using that too. Sure, Edith invited me, but it's

technically still his house and I'm supposed to be keeping my distance and generally causing less trouble than I make. He strolls in, looking tired from a long day of work, tosses his keys in the bowl near the door, and then glances up. Edith asks if he wants to join us, and she even picks up the end of the blanket I'm hurriedly trying to shove off my legs.

"It's a romance, but you'll like it. I promise!"

He shakes his head, avoids eye contact with me, and heads for the stairs.

I don't see him the rest of the night.

Sunday afternoon, Edith informs me that she's invited a few of her friends over for yoga. There's Dotty and Lisa from the bank, a few women from Edith's book club, and Daniel's fiancée, Leanna. She's the closest to me in age and she has a bright, bubbly personality and curly blonde hair. She chats my ear off about her wedding next week and I sheepishly admit that I've been invited to go with Tucker Carroway. I expect her to be annoyed that a random stranger will be in attendance, but she throws her arms around me and tells me she and Daniel will be excited to have me there.

"And I'm so glad Tucker invited you! He's so cute and he's been single for way too long."

Everyone agrees that Tucker's a great guy. *Charitable! Generous! Easy on the eyes!*

"So *very* kind too," Leanna continues. "Last year, my grandmother needed someone to look over her outdated will and Tucker volunteered to do it for free. Isn't that sweet? She tried to pay him but he turned her down."

I feel awkward with so much attention focused on my date with him considering it's not a date at all. I didn't even agree to it—Edith did. I try my best to turn the attention back to Leanna and Daniel's wedding and after we spend a good hour chatting about floral arrangements and last-minute freakouts, we finally get started on yoga. There are a dozen of us altogether, and I set up class out in the yard where the ground is level and there's a nice breeze and tons of shade. I'm

nervous to lead so many women at once, but everyone is so complimentary and easygoing that I relax and we end up having a good time. After that class, we decide we'll make a weekly thing of it. Sunday afternoons, we'll meet for yoga, and if we happen to throw in some food and gossip afterward, well at least we got a good workout in beforehand.

* * *

I start my third week of work hoping for a few more days of avoidance from Jack, but I don't get my wish. On Monday, I'm in the kitchen cleaning up after lunch when he walks up and pauses near the counter beside me. Then, he says the most shocking thing anyone has ever said to me.

"I'd like you to eat dinner tonight with Edith and me."

I don't look his way. If I did, he'd know how much his invitation means to me.

I suppress my voice to a normal octave. "Thank you, but it's okay. I was just going to eat on my own."

Like usual.

"I insist."

"It's okay. Tell Edith you offered, but I turned you down."

She's the one who wants me at dinner, not him, I'm sure.

"C'mon, you're wounding my ego here."

I smirk. "Edith thinks your ego can stand to take a good beating."

I finally chance a quick glance toward him and find that his dark eyes are studying me thoughtfully. Today, he looks irresistible in a red work shirt, and I have no idea what is going on in his mind, but he doesn't seem to be playing a trick.

In fact, he pushes off the counter with his hip and declares with a final, end-of-discussion tone, “I’m going to grill some steak and vegetables. It’ll be pretty damn good, and I’d hate for you to miss out.”

I arch a challenging brow. “You’d ‘hate for me to miss out’? Who are you and what have you done with the real Jack?”

He goes right on ignoring my taunts. “It’ll be ready at 7:30 sharp. If you want to make yourself useful, you can set the table.”

And just like that, I’m a dinner guest.

It’s quite a coincidence, because today, I’m also starting a new beauty routine that definitely has absolutely nothing to do with Jack inviting me to dinner. I wrap up my workday and rinse off in my newly tiled bathroom, taking extra effort with my conditioner. Then, I blow my hair out until the dark strands are silky smooth. I apply makeup because you know what they say: it’s important to look your best on Monday nights after work for no particular reason.

I peruse the two sundresses I bought at the thrift store and tug on the less fancy of the two. It’s white and the material is soft, hanging loose around my legs. The spaghetti straps are perfect for a summer evening in Texas.

True to his word, Jack is manning the grill when I stroll from the shack (which no longer even closely resembles a shack) to the farmhouse. He takes me in from head to toe and I *think* I catch the shadow of a smile on his lips before he turns back to the grill. My new nightly not-for-Jack beauty routine was clearly worth the effort.

Inside, I tell Edith I’m going to pull down the good china, the stuff they never use, because tonight is a special occasion. She laughs and says she always figured it wouldn’t get used again until her funeral wake. When Jack heads in with the steaks and vegetables, Edith is sitting at the table and I’m arranging the plates and cutlery. Everything is set except for my water glass in the kitchen. I run back in to grab it and don’t watch where I’m going because I know the route by now with my eyes closed...aaand I trip right over a sleeping Alfred and go

crashing to the ground along with the fancy heirloom. The good crystal glass shatters into a thousand good crystal shards, but my attention lies elsewhere. The incident throws me so quickly and so vividly into a memory of Andrew that I lose my breath. It feels like *déjà vu*, but worse.

Nearly a year ago, Andrew was sitting at our dining table while I brought in dinner. He'd had a bad day at work and started in on me as soon as he walked in the door. He was starving and annoyed dinner wasn't ready, and I was so worked up that on my way into the dining room, I accidentally dropped one of the serving platters gifted to us at our wedding. Food went everywhere. Ceramic shards cut into my hand. All the first instincts you'd expect a picture-perfect husband to have—*Are you okay honey? Don't worry, I never liked that ugly dish anyway, honey*—were nowhere to be found. Instead, he shot to his feet and berated me for bleeding on the rug, for ruining dinner, for not appreciating nice things.

“Meredith, *leave it.*”

I remember the exact tone of his voice when he told me to clean it up, like I was an animal—no, *worse*.

“Meredith!”

Jack's voice rattles me back to the present and I realize with a start that I'm down on my knees, picking up individual glass shards and depositing them in my open palm.

“Oh my god, I'm so sorry,” I mumble as I start to cry. I'm so embarrassed. “I can't believe I broke this. I shouldn't have pulled these glasses out in the first place.”

“It's nothing.” He's tugging on my arm, trying to get me to stand.

I know he's just saying that to make me feel better. Andrew would be screaming his head off right now. I could tell the glasses were really nice when I got them out, and I'll have to figure out a way to replace it.

“Meredith! *Stop.*”

His voice is gentle but direct as he bends down to hook his hands underneath my arms and lift me to my feet. He deposits

me away from the mess just as another glass shatters at the head of the table. I jerk my attention toward Edith to see her hand still outstretched, having just finished tossing hers down as well.

“Grandma, what the hell?” Jack asks incredulously.

She shrugs, trying to be nonchalant, but I can see the emotion in her eyes, the empathy she feels for me in that moment. “What? There’s nothing special about those dusty old glasses. I’m glad to be rid of them, honestly. This yoga kick has been making me more mindful, less occupied with material possessions.”

We both stare at her, stunned silent. To Jack, she may as well be speaking Greek.

“Don’t believe me?”

She shrugs, casually reaching out and nudging Jack’s glass to the edge of the table.

He lurches forward and grabs it before it falls. “Jesus woman! I get it. Now can you throw the rest in the trash instead of flinging them around the whole damn ranch?”

I whip around and find the dustpan in the kitchen so I can get to work cleaning up the mess. Jack steals it out from under me and tells me to go sit down. His voice isn’t exactly harsh, but it still leaves no room for argument. I take a seat beside Edith and she tugs at my hand to take a look at it. There’s a small cut, but nothing that really needs attention. I close my palm quickly, wanting to hide the traces of my clumsiness. I’m embarrassed that I not only broke a glass but also had a weird flashback like that right in front of them. It’s not like I was in a war; I shouldn’t have PTSD.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I say, unable to meet her eyes.

“At my age, I don’t *have* to do anything,” she declares with her usual matter-of-fact tone. “I *wanted* to do that. Hell, I’ve been wanting to do that for years. Now, Jack, will you finish up and sit down so we can get back to dinner? This steak smells amazing and Alfred here is about to leap up and eat ’em if we don’t beat him to it.”

I try to get up to make new glasses of water for us, but she keeps me seated right beside her, insisting Jack can do it. He serves dinner as well, making sure to ask which of the steaks I want and heaping up a mountain of homegrown vegetables on my plate. I expect him to sit across from me, on the other side of Edith, but he takes the seat right beside me, so I'm sandwiched in between them. We don't talk about the glass at all, even though I know they're probably both wondering why I had the bizarre reaction that I did. Edith carries the conversation for the pair of us, but even so, I hardly listen.

By the time dinner is over, I've only eaten a quarter of the food on my plate and I'm ready to dart back to the shack and bury my face in my pillow. I want a few minutes of peace and quiet to process what the hell just happened and try to figure out how to stop it from ever happening again.

I finish loading the dishes in the dishwasher—a task neither of them could talk me out of—and then Jack finds me in the kitchen with some Neosporin and Band-Aids.

“Can I see your hands?” he asks, but it sounds more like a demand than a question.

I wave him off. “It's nothing. I don't think I need any of that.”

“I don't believe you,” he says, his voice gruff and full of all the annoyance he harbors for me.

I hang the dish towel and offer up my best version of a reassuring smile. “I appreciate your concern.”

He ignores me, steps forward, and takes my hands in his, turning them palm up. I want to yank them away, but I don't want to look like a petulant child. Besides, I've caused enough drama for one night.

He holds my hands like they're delicate little birds, and the gentle touch cracks my chest wide open. There's something about a man capable of such strength choosing tenderness instead. I can't remember the last time Andrew touched me like this—I'm not sure he ever did.

“You're right, it doesn't look too bad,” he says, sounding relieved.

I nod and try to pretend my throat isn't growing tighter.

I turn my head away and blink back tears.

Finally, he releases my hands, and I take the ointment and bandages from him with a quick nod of thanks. Then I'm out the back door as quick as my feet will take me.

* * *

The next day, Edith and I meet outside for our yoga session.

"I got something in the mail for you this morning," she says as we roll out our mats.

"Oh yeah? What was it?"

"Flowers from your ex-husband. Yellow roses."

Wonderful. I guess he got the ranch's address from Helen.

"You want me to trash them?" she asks.

"Yes please—or better yet, isn't there a burn pile out back?"

"I brought the note that came with them in case you want to read it." She's holding out a tiny white envelope. I take it and rip it open. Now that my eyes are open to his insidiousness, the words are almost comedic. The same artfully contrived remorse that might've fooled me before rings utterly hollow now.

"Want me to trash that too?" she asks with a pragmatic tone.

I hand it off to her. "Please."

I love Edith. I love her because she takes that envelope and doesn't bring up the flowers again. I love her because she understands exactly what I need before I even work up the courage to ask. I love her because she never asks me to open up to her and never demands my secrets. Still, she offers hers. While we're out there under the oak tree that day, Edith confides in me that before she met Jack's grandfather, she was

in a rotten relationship, one she didn't think she'd ever make it out of.

"He had a real mean streak," she says, staring off in the distance. "He'd get drunk and hit me every now and then, and I'd let him because it's not always clear what love is, what love allows. I was lucky though—it didn't last long. My family moved south and I never saw him again. Didn't bother following me, though a part of me thought he might."

"I'm a little worried about that," I say, more to myself than her.

"The bastard following you?"

I don't answer.

"Well," she says, "you know what? It's one thing to *follow*, and another thing entirely to *get*. We have a little saying down here in Texas—a taunt, from a battle where a small group fended off a powerful army."

I look at her questioningly.

"It goes like this, dear: *Come and take it.*"

Jack

I know Meredith and Edith do yoga every day at 10:00 AM because productivity stalls around the ranch. On Wednesday, I head outside and find half my ranch hands congregating near the fence beside the oak tree. A few of them have the decency to act like they're working—Max has a hammer in his hand (though not a single nail)—but most of them are just openly gawking.

“This is now the most solid and secure section of fence we have on this whole damn ranch.” My voice booms and they scatter like cockroaches. “You think we can get to work on the east pasture now?”

There are muffled apologies and half-hearted excuses, but most of them are smart enough to get to work without another word.

Chris doesn't scatter. He comes right up to me and hands me some wildflowers wrapped in parchment paper.

“Can you deliver these to Meredith for me?”

“Why in the hell would I do that?”

He frowns like I'm a blubbering idiot. “Because you just said I need to get back to work.”

He misunderstands me.

I look down at the colorful flowers. “No, I mean why are you trying to deliver these to Meredith?”

He smiles extra wide, really proud of himself. “Oh, yeah. Well, she sent me home with those cookies last week, and I wanted to return the favor. These are from my mama's garden.”

I yank them out of his hand and motion for him to get back to work, mumbling under my breath.

I don't deliver the flowers to Meredith. I carry them up to my office and set them down on my desk. I stare at them so long they should catch fire, but they don't. They stay wrapped up, a pretty gift for the pretty woman everyone on this damn ranch seems to be in love with, and I study them right up until a phone call distracts me.

I answer with a clipped greeting.

"Jack! This is Tucker—Tucker Carroway. How are you?"

"I'm fine, busy." I push the flowers out of my line of sight.

"What can I do for you, Tucker?"

"Oh I'm good too, *thanks for asking*." His sarcasm annoys me, and I'm reminded why we didn't get along in high school. "I'm calling for Meredith. She's supposed to be my date for Dan and Leanna's wedding this weekend and I just wanted to confirm pickup time with her."

"So call her cell phone. I can't have you two blocking the ranch's main line."

"I would, but she never gave me her number."

I lose the fight against a smug smile.

"Sorry to hear that, man. I hope you figure it out."

"McNight, why do I get the feeling you're intentionally being obstinate?"

I hang up.

The phone rings, I pick it up off the base just long enough for him to get the silent message, and I hang it up again.

* * *

In the late afternoon, I stroll into the kitchen, though not because I need anything. I'm still full from lunch, and I'm not thirsty since Meredith brought me some lemonade an hour

ago. It was a nice gesture, but her gentle smile successfully distracted me for the half hour after that. Now, I'm down here again. I have enough to occupy me upstairs, but I still tug open the fridge and stand in front of it like I'm looking for something. I even shuffle around some yogurt cups for good measure.

"Was lunch too light? I can make you something else if you want to top it off?"

Meredith is by the sink doing dishes. I'm not looking at her, but I still know exactly what she looks like today. She's wearing cutoff denim shorts and a white t-shirt, her dark hair piled high up on her head in a messy bun. She has more freckles across the bridge of her nose today than she did last week, and I wonder if it's because of her outdoor yoga sessions with Edith.

I can even tell she's smiling because of the way she asked the question. I think she knows I'm in here for no good reason.

I close the fridge door at the same time she moves to take the trash out.

It's filled to the brim, and she has a hard time lifting it out.

"Here, let me get that."

I try to nudge her out of the way and take the bag from her.

"No, no, I can do it. It's my job—I'm a *professional*."

She groans as she lifts with all her might, but the bag only makes it halfway out of the bin before she's forced to drop it again.

"Meredith."

"You *pay* me to do this. You do realize that, right?"

I level her with a stubborn gaze, and she aims one right back at me.

"It's my own fault for letting it get too full," she points out.

I take her shoulders in my hands and gently shift her a foot to the right so I can empty the trash.

“Fine,” she hollers after me as I head out back. “I guess this counts as my first break.”

I pull the lid open on the outdoor trashcan, and just as I’m about to toss the bag on top of the pile, something catches my attention: a bouquet of expensive-looking flowers scattered as if they were dumped straight out of the vase and an envelope ripped down the middle sitting on top. I drop the trash bag on the ground and grab the two halves of the note.

It’s a private message, one definitely not meant for my eyes, but I read it anyway.

Meredith, my love, please come home. I can't think of any way to convince you of how sorry I am. I've racked my brain for ways to convince you you're making a mistake, and I know these flowers and this note won't be enough. You're the love of my life, my wife, my everything. Please don't walk away now and throw away the vows we made to each other five years ago. I knew the moment I saw you that you were mine.

Come home. Please.

I love you,

Andrew

They’re the words of a heartbroken man, words that cut through my chest as painfully as if I was the one who wrote them. I knew Meredith left her husband when she came to Texas. I knew she had a whole life back in California, but reading this puts it all in perspective. She’s still married to a man who loves her and expects her back. She didn’t leave a loveless marriage; she left a heartbroken husband who’s still foolishly pining for her. I bet he went half insane when he woke up and found her gone that day three weeks ago. No warning, no discussion—she just vanished and left him to pick up the pieces. I wonder how many times a day he calls her. I wonder what her reasons were for leaving him. I wonder if what Helen said was true, that her husband doted on her and gave her the world, that she is spoiled and bored and left to teach him a lesson.

Honestly, though, I'm not sure her reasons matter. Regardless of why she left, I'm still a fool. I've been letting my guard down around her, allowing her into my life inch by inch. I'm acutely aware of her when she walks into a room, and I try to catch every one of her smiles as if they're meant just for me. I'm smitten, and I have been for longer than I care to admit.

Worse, I'm not the only person under her spell. I'm standing in line clutching a number. The ranch hands, Tucker, her husband—everyone wants Meredith, and I'd bet Meredith wants no one. She's a heartbreaker, a self-centered woman who wants nothing more than to be wanted.

I think of how she cried when she broke that glass at dinner the other night, how she looked so delicate and fragile in that moment that my heart softened for her.

Was it all a crock of shit? All for show?

I pick the trash bag up off the ground and toss it inside.

If so, it's about time Meredith took her act back to where it belongs.

Meredith

I can't believe how quickly I've settled in here. It's been nearly three weeks since I first arrived, and I'm already building a life for myself. I commute places in a pickup truck. I use the word y'all un-ironically. Just yesterday, I accidentally drank water with my lunch instead of sweet tea and I gagged.

I like it in Cedar Creek way more than I thought I would. The work is hard, and I don't exactly love what I'm doing, but it does come with perks: I love cooking lunch for Edith and Jack, and they actually seem to be enjoying my healthier dishes. Jack even requested my salmon this week. I really enjoy doing yoga with Edith, and yesterday, she told me she was pretty close to touching her foot to her face.

"I haven't been able to do that in years!"

However, my absolute favorite perk is Jack. Talking to him, annoying him, staring at him when he's not paying attention—there's really no end to my obsession at this point. He and I aren't friends exactly, but I still enjoy our exchanges. I'm aware of where he is in the house at all times, as if he's wearing a tracking device. Still, I try not to disturb him too much. I mean, bringing him lemonade or a snack isn't necessarily *disturbing* him, and it affords me a quick glimpse of him working, a little snapshot to hold me over while I'm in laundry hell.

Yesterday morning, he was out helping the guys clear a section of the garden. I have no clue what they were doing—tilling? Harvesting? I really don't care, and it doesn't matter because whatever it was, it meant Jack was out there in plain view wearing jeans, a dark blue work shirt, and his baseball hat. I stood at the kitchen window, repeatedly drying a single plate as I watched him get his hands dirty.

I was biting my bottom lip.

Clutching the towel.

And then he lifted the bottom of his work shirt to wipe at some sweat on his face and Edith walked in on me, bent over the sink, eyes pinched closed as I recited what I knew of the Lord's Prayer, which was pretty much just the first few lines. I lose track after the part about bread.

"Are you having a heart attack or something?"

"Menstrual cramps," I lied.

"Go lie down and rest. I'll finish drying those."

Here's a little secret: I let her dry the last of those dishes so I could go take a break in the shack, and I did lie down, but I didn't *rest*.

I *didn't rest* THREE TIMES.

I know. It's probably a sin to *not rest* so soon after saying the Lord's Prayer, but sometimes you just have to *not rest* right when the mood takes you.

I should feel guilty about fantasizing about my boss, but a part of me is so relieved that I'm even interested in fantasizing about anyone at this point. Andrew and I hadn't slept together for months near the end, and before that, sex wasn't something I took pleasure in. He was like a soul-sucking, libido-killing leech.

Now...*nowwww* that's all I'm interested in.

It's like I have an unquenchable thirst and no matter how many times I *don't rest*, it never seems to sate me. I think I've got it under control and then Jack will say something in his gruff tone that's meant to get under my skin, but really it just feels like a whole lot of foreplay at this point. Getting under his skin has somehow gotten tied up in my horniness neurons, so now, it's not just fun working him up...it's *fun*. I know—bad, bad Meredith. *Whatever*. I have problems, and I have every intention of sorting them out, just as soon as I see where this obsession with Jack could lead.

It's Thursday, and I haven't seen him all day. He left the ranch earlier and didn't return until after lunch. I was down in the

living room, straightening up when he walked in the front door and breezed right past me. No smile, no wave, not even a grumpy comment.

Huh.

Later, I knock on his door and ask him if I can get him anything, perhaps a snack or something to drink. He shouts back that he's on the phone, and he sounds pissed that I'm interrupting him. I feel bad, not to mention slightly embarrassed that he sounded so put-off. Like I said, we aren't friends, but it feels like we've been heading in that direction. Okay, maybe not *friends* in the traditional sense, but we've at least been dialing down the hatred to a sustainable level.

Him dismissing me is a tiny step in the wrong direction, but I shrug it off. Maybe he's had a hard day. Maybe he's got a burr in his saddle. (*See? I really do belong in the country.*)

I wait for Jack to make an appearance after his phone call ends, but he doesn't. That burr must be wedged deep.

In the early evening, I brew a pot of decaf coffee and Edith joins me at the table with some shortbread cookies. We're ruining our appetites for dinner, but neither one of us mothers the other. We talk about how excited we are for the wedding on Saturday and what sort of snacks we should make for yoga on Sunday afternoon. After I've got her really talking, I work up the courage to ask her if she's noticed anything weird with Jack.

"Oh, and no big deal at all...just while I have you here...I was wondering if maybe, by chance...never mind—oh, do you want more coffee? Here, let me get it for you."

She swats my hand away when I try to take her mug.

"Spit it out, woman!"

"Have you noticed anything weird about Jack lately?"

"I get less information out of him than a month-old lemon. All I know is he ate dinner out last night and he's been gone all day." She shifts her gaze up to me. "Is he giving you trouble again? I can knock some more sense into him—"

“No! No, it’s fine.” I smile covertly down at my coffee.
“We’ve sort of come to an understanding, an equilibrium.”

“Equi-what? Y’all are getting along now?”

His tone from earlier leaps to mind. “I don’t think you’d say that *exactly*. It’s like when a baby tiger and a baby pig grow up together to be buddies in adulthood, but you just know deep down that it might all blow up the next time the tiger skips a meal.”

“Huh...okay. But he’s not upsetting you anymore?”

“No.” A flush warms my body. “He’s not upsetting me.”

After we finish, I clear the table and start prepping lunch for tomorrow. I’m technically off the clock, but I don’t want to go back to the shack just yet. A part of me is still hoping Jack will come down, act like his usual arrogant self, and put me out of my misery. Just one little teasing comment from him and I can go on home and keep myself occupied for the rest of the evening.

The sound of a truck pulling up out on the gravel drive takes my attention from the cutting board. That’s another thing different about the country—gravel is the universal doorbell. Alfred barks like crazy at the sound. It could be one of the ranch hands, but they all left an hour or two ago so I doubt that’s who it is. I wipe my hands with a kitchen towel and go investigate. There’s an ominous feeling in my gut, like something bad is about to happen, but when I step out onto the porch, I’m surprised and relieved to find Tucker hopping out of his truck.

It’s weird, but a part of me was worried it’d be Andrew.

I shake away the fear and trot down the steps to greet him. He’s in full lawyer mode, wearing slacks and a white dress shirt. His tie is a little loose, as if he tugged on it the moment he left the courthouse. His blond hair is short and neatly styled.

“Tucker, the knight in shining armor himself! Here to see Jack?”

He furrows his brow. “Of course not. I came to see you.”

Me? I'm not sure why I'm surprised he's here for me, but I am. I know we're supposed to go to the wedding together, but a part of me half expected him to forget the invitation. It's not like we've talked since he first mentioned it. That's my fault; I didn't give him my cell phone number, but it was a strategic move on my part. I didn't want him to get the wrong idea. I'm not currently dating. Hell, I'm not even divorced. I have a whack job ex sending me flowers, and I'm currently loopy over a dark-haired devil who seems to be avoiding me.

Before I get splattered, I quickly step off the tracks of that train of thought and accept a quick hug from Tucker.

"Oh? Well it's good to see you," I tell him, motioning back to the house. "I just brewed a pot of decaf, there's a little left if you want some?"

The screen door creaks open behind me. *Speak of the devil.* Jack steps out onto the porch, and I swallow down my nerves. He's the complete antithesis of Tucker: dark and foreboding, a menace to society. His short dark hair is slightly mussed, and he's wearing a black t-shirt and jeans. His expression is so steely and aggressive against Tucker's honey-sweet smile, and it's like an old western standoff—the desperado in black against the righteous lawman.

"Tucker. Good to see you." His tone says the exact opposite.

"Such enthusiasm! You do know it's my job to tell when people are lying, right?"

He ignores Tucker's jab. "What can I do for you?"

"Nothing. There seemed to be something wrong with your phone system, so I thought I'd come out here myself to have a conversation with Meredith, if that's all right with you."

"Of course," he answers, but he doesn't leave, and he doesn't take his eyes off Tucker. He shoves his hands into his jean pockets and leans against the porch beam at the top of the stairs.

When I turn back, I can tell Tucker's trying hard to keep his temper from flaring.

“Tucker?” I ask, trying to regain his attention and diffuse the situation. I’m seconds away from snapping my fingers or flailing my arms.

Hey, remember me? The girl you’re apparently here for?!

He finally turns to me and his expression softens. “I tried to call you this week, but Jack didn’t seem to want to pass along the message.”

“My secretary is in Europe,” Jack calls from the porch, his tone a touch defensive.

“And I guess you didn’t have a pen and paper handy?” Tucker shoots back quickly.

“I don’t have time to pass notes.”

Oh, come on. This is ridiculous.

I step toward Tucker, trying to block his view of Jack. “It’s fine. I’m here now. What were you going to tell me?”

“I just wanted to confirm that you still want to go to Dan and Leanna’s wedding with me.”

“Oh, right.”

He must sense my hesitation because he continues. “I know we don’t know each other well, but I think it could be fun.”

Jack is standing behind us, listening to this exchange. I nibble on my bottom lip. *Yeesh*. This is awkward. I’m sure Edith is upstairs peeping through the blinds. Alfred is smart enough to keep his distance, and most of the farm animals have probably run to the barn to bury themselves in hay.

“Unless you agreed to go with someone else instead?” he asks, gaze shifting pointedly to Jack.

His meaning is obvious. I don’t need eyes on the back of my head to know Jack is currently scowling at the idea of accompanying me to an event. Just the mental image is preposterous. Me in a fancy dress, him in a suit...our hands linked...his warm breath on my neck as he leans in close to pay me a compliment instead of an insult.

“No!” I’m quick to reply, pricking the fantasy with a pin. “I don’t have another date, but...”

A part of me wants to turn Tucker down and be done with all this, but the fact is, I was actually really looking forward to attending the wedding. It’s been a while since I’ve gone to an event like that and not been terrified of upsetting Andrew, and I was going to get dolled up and wear the fancier of my two thrift store dresses. Everyone I’ve met so far in Cedar Creek is going to be in attendance, and then there’s obviously the most important part: wedding cake. Maybe I’ll volunteer to help dole it out and they’ll let me go home with some leftovers. *Oh no, I couldn’t possibly...But we insist!...No, I actually can’t—my purse is already completely full of cake.*

“Good.” He grins, relieved that I’ve agreed to go with him. He really is cute, like a little blond cherub all grown up.

“I can meet you there. Edith and Jack are both going so I can catch a ride with them.” I’m trying to wrap things up because I’m aware of dark eyes beaming lasers into the back of my head. *Sniff sniff—is that the smell of burning hair?*

Tucker doesn’t like that idea; I can see it in the way his jaw shifts and his eyes narrow just for a split second as he decides to force the issue. “I’d prefer to pick you up. I’ll swing by here at 5:00.”

“Well I’m so glad this all worked out,” Jack says sarcastically, effectively ending the conversation. “It was great to see you, Tucker. G’bye now.”

What he means is, *Get the hell off my property.* If he had a shotgun, he’d pump it.

Tucker chuckles and shakes his head, trying to assure me that Jack doesn’t ruffle his feathers. He does move to leave, but not before he bends to kiss my cheek and whispers in my ear, “Looking forward to Saturday.”

It’s a slightly dirty tactic on his part. I wonder if he ever gives the judge a little peck in the courtroom. *Your honor—mwah—I rest my case.*

I stand there as he drives off and when I turn back, Jack is gone. He's back up in his office with the door closed.

That no good, rotten...

I march right in.

“What was that?!”

“I'll have to call you back,” he says before hanging up his phone.

“Why were you so rude down there? You're Mister Busy Busy Bee all day, but apparently you had time to moderate my conversation with Tucker? You stood over us like the Grim Reaper.”

He watches me stomp around and shout with a steady, narrowed gaze. “Done?”

“Not even close.”

“Tucker and I don't get along.”

Ya think!?

“Yes, obviously I understand that now. Why didn't you just tell me that instead of acting like that down there?” I force a deep breath and attempt a calmer tone. “If you don't want me to go with him to the wedding, I won't. I'm not trying to cause trouble.”

“I don't want you to go with him.”

I'm surprised he's being honest about that.

“In fact,” he continues. “I don't think you should go at all.”

I realize then that we're both trying hard to stay calm, but it's a losing battle. He and I burn hot, and this conversation isn't going to end well. Still, I press on.

“Are you upset with me?” I ask, slightly embarrassed that my voice sounds so wobbly.

Throughout all our antics, I've never seen him act like this. I have a feeling he's mad about more than Tucker's visit.

He leans back in his chair and assesses me coldly.

“No, I’m not upset with you. I’d just like to know how long you plan on doing this.”

“Doing what?”

“Playing this game. Staying here and acting like you belong.”

Something twists in my stomach, a feeling as painful as a sucker punch. I don’t like his tone, and I don’t like where this conversation is headed. I’d turn and leave, save myself from the sharp edge of his temper, but he continues before I can move.

“It’s been almost three weeks. I admit, Helen and I—we thought you’d be gone by now.”

“What gave you that impression?” My voice is shrouded in confusion. “Haven’t I been a good employee? I work nonstop. I do everything you and Edith ask of me—”

“Look at it from my point of view. Some rich housewife from fucking California shows up on my doorstep with blood on her face, asking for a job. The only intel I have on her is that she’s a spoiled girl with a history of dramatic, short-lived gestures. The only reason you’re here is as a favor to your sister—a favor I’ve regretted ever since I granted it.”

“Why’s that? Haven’t I done everything you’ve asked me to? Scrubbed your floors? Put up with your shit?”

“You’re a distraction.”

“For whom?”

I know he’s referring to his ranch hands, but I have a sneaking suspicion that he might be included in there too. I won’t let him skate by that easily. If he wants to hurt me, he’d better do it with the truth.

He sidesteps the question. “I think it’s time for you to go home, don’t you? I saw those flowers in the trash. I read that note.”

I step toward his desk, shifting my pain to anger. “That’s none of your business. If you want me gone, look me in the eye and tell me I’m not good at my job. I don’t think you have one

legitimate reason for hating me, just a bunch of secondhand bullshit from other people.”

My hands fist by my sides and my upper lip curls. His brown eyes are shooting daggers as we stare across his desk at one another.

“It just doesn’t make sense. What game are you playing? You’re not from here. You have no real family, and the family you do have wasn’t thrilled to hear you’d shown up. No real friends. There’s no reason for you to be here anymore.”

“Sounds like you’ve figured it all out. You know exactly who I am, Jack.” I add in a condescending round of applause.

“Flirting with the ranch hands, accepting dates with Tucker—does your husband know you’ve already moved on? I bet not.” He pauses for just a beat. “Yeah, I have a pretty good idea of who you are, Meredith. You have a husband back home worrying himself sick over you, and I don’t even think you care. I think you like the attention, and I think you like playing games with men you have no intention of loving.”

It’s one thing to stand here and have my faults and failures thrown at me, and quite another to stand here and let him fling baseless accusations at me. He’s decided to play judge, jury, and executioner. He thinks I’m a bored sociopath with a doting husband waiting for me back in California and a trail of idolizers in my wake. To hear him actually say it makes me so angry that my fingernails dig into my skin as I fist my palms even tighter. There’s fire burning up inside of me so powerful, I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to douse it. It’s anger like I’ve never felt. If I were a juvenile superhero, this would be the moment I lose control of my power and blow up a city. But, here in reality, the only things I lose control of are the tears gathering in the corners of my eyes.

Ever since I married Andrew, I’ve been misjudged and misunderstood by the people around me: my parents, Helen, my so-called friends in California. I’ve dealt with their assumptions and mistruths, and I’ve accepted their loyalty to Andrew over me in stride. Sure, it’s painful, but I’ve tolerated it because *I knew* the real truth.

But, to hear Jack so taken in by Andrew's manipulation from over a thousand miles away is unbearable. It's the knockout punch. There's nothing left because now I fully realize that whatever evil is inside Andrew, he's poisoned me with it. No matter where I go, I'll carry it around with me forever, ruining my hopes for a new beginning.

If I weren't so furious, I think my trembling knees would buckle. My heart is beating so wildly it scares me. I feel numb and tingly and so full of helplessness that I want to scream until my throat is sore and my voice is gone.

I realize then that Jack is looking at me with new eyes, not quite as full of rage as they were a few minutes ago. It's obvious my reaction is scaring him—I'm glad. I hope he sees how deeply his words have wounded me.

“So the story of Meredith is open and shut. Why don't we move on to you, Jack?” I dig deep to conjure up a wicked, half-crazed smile. “I used to think the rough appearance you wear was all for show. I thought deep down, you weren't really the demon people think you are. I was wrong, just like you're wrong about me. You're the meanest asshole I've ever met, which is saying something because I was married to a monster, but you? You might have him beat.” I laugh acerbically. “I even find it all a little hilarious—I escape from hell just to run right into the arms of the devil.”

Meredith

Jack's not at the farmhouse on Friday, and I don't care to ask Edith where he went—back to the underworld, most likely. I still do my job; I scrub that asshole's kitchen and I hang up his clothes and I make his lunch and I don't burn the place down. If anything, that would probably make him more comfortable, sitting amongst the flames and charred embers.

I think of all the ways I could sabotage his life, from the extreme (poisoning his mouthwash) to the mundane (brewing decaf in the morning so he gets caffeine withdrawal). I replay our argument in his office and insert different responses. A part of me wishes I'd just given him a classic *fuck off*—simple and straight to the point. Maybe the next time I see him, I'll say it.

I know I won't though. I will be the picture of docile civility. I'll greet him with a smile and a pleasant hello. I'll continue being on my best behavior because I won't do anything he could use as an excuse to fire me. No, that jerk is stuck with me until I decide I've had enough, until I find some way to move on. I have one paycheck in the bank, plus my measly advance. Even if I wanted to (which I don't!), I don't think I could even afford to get back to California at this point.

Asking either of my parents to bail me out is still an option, but I just can't bring myself to do it. As far as they know, I'm still happily married to Andrew, living the sunny beach life. I won't tell them otherwise until I have some kind of plan for the future. The only thing worse than dealing with Jack would be facing them in my current state. I can just imagine the look of disappointment on my mom's face. She thought I hit the jackpot when I met Andrew and married young. Before I even walked down the aisle, she admitted how relieved she was that I'd never have to worry about money.

Oh well. I learned my lesson. I survived Andrew, and now I know better than to depend on a man ever again. I'm going to pave the way for my future on my own. I just need to, y'know, narrow down what that future will actually entail.

* * *

Saturday morning, I wake up early to start getting ready for the wedding. I eat dry cereal while standing at the window of the shack, trying to spot Jack inside the farmhouse. I check the upstairs office window, kitchen window, bedroom window, repeat. He's nowhere to be found. After that bout of titillating reconnaissance, I do some light yoga to calm my nerves. I don't know why I have butterflies in my stomach and a weird feeling in my chest—well, other than the fact that I'll likely have to face Jack at the wedding, but whatever. I can handle him. I have a plan, remember? Polite indifference. Sometimes, a smile says *eff you* even louder than words can.

I shower and take extra time with my hair so by the time I'm done, it's smooth and wavy. I apply my makeup carefully and slip into my dress. It's dark blue with a triangle neckline and spaghetti straps. The top fits me like a glove, and the skirt flows just a little when I move. I wish I had a nice pair of shoes to wear with it, but I did manage to snag some nude heels at the thrift store. They're pretty worn down, but hey, they were three dollars, so if they last the night, I'll call it a win.

Edith comes to check on me a few minutes before Tucker is due to arrive.

“Well don't you clean up nice. Sure you don't want to cover up though? Maybe grab a cardigan? I have a wool coat you could button up over that thing.”

“Edith, this dress isn't even that revealing.”

“Yeah, well, I've seen the way Tucker looks at you.”

“You’re the one who insisted on this date—you practically signed on the dotted line for me!”

She shakes her head at that, annoyed with me as if I’m missing something.

“Yes, right. Whatever. Are you sure you don’t want to ride with me and Jack? These country roads can be treacherous.”

“Oh, I’m sure.”

“It sprinkled earlier, so the roads are slick. Tucker probably doesn’t know how to maneuver as well as Jack does.”

“I don’t care. There’s no way I’m getting in a truck with Jack.”

“Listen, I don’t blame you. After you told me what you two fought about, I don’t really want to be in a truck with him either. We can leave him here, go by ourselves?”

Tucker pulls up and honks his horn before she can convince me to change my mind.

She sees me off, not bothering to wave to Tucker. I don’t know why she suddenly hates him considering how hard she pushed me into being his plus one.

Jack doesn’t show his face.

As we drive toward the church, Tucker and I have painful first date conversation that makes my pits sweat.

Did you have a good rest of your week?

Weather’s been nice hasn’t it?

What kind of music do you like?

I’m itchy from how much it seems like a cross-examination.

He compliments me on my dress and tells me he’s been excited to pick me up all day. He looks handsome in a dark blue suit. Everything we talk about is light and pleasant. I should be enjoying myself. Instead, I nearly barrel roll out of the truck after he swings into a parking space.

The church is a block over from the town square. There are cars lining the street, and Tucker tells me most of the restaurants and shops around Cedar Creek are closed for the

night because so many people will be at the wedding. He's not kidding. When we walk into the church, it's overflowing. There's no bride's side and groom's side of the aisle; seating is simply first come, first served. There's a good chance I'll end up scooted onto Tucker's lap during the ceremony.

It seems most everyone knows each other, and Tucker is extra popular. For every one step we take, two friends come up to greet him. He introduces me to everyone and just about all of them proclaim that they're huggers. I see a few women from yoga, and they're all excited to see me here on Tucker's arm. I get a few conspicuous thumbs up and one rather loud, *Giddit, girl!* It seems the whole town sees him as their golden boy.

"C'mon," he says after we've finished making the rounds. "My friends saved us some seats up toward the altar."

Of course it takes another ten minutes to fight through the crowd of people congregating in the aisle, but we eventually break through to the other side.

A short guy in a gray suit waves us down, and Tucker tells me that's his best friend, Jacob.

"Tucker's told me a lot about you," he says, shaking my hand enthusiastically.

My smile falters for a moment, and fortunately Tucker saves me from having to reply.

"Nothing much, I swear—just said I had a smokin' hot date to the wedding."

Aw!

Nice compliment considering my entire outfit cost me less than a cocktail back in California.

I let him step past to sit beside Jacob then I take the aisle seat and turn to scan the crowd, looking for the one person I haven't seen yet. He left after me, but the ceremony is due to start soon.

It's not hard to find him.

Tall, dark, and handsome, Jack sticks out like a sore thumb.

He's sitting in the fourth pew across the aisle all by himself, staring straight ahead, jaw locked tight. He's focusing on the altar like he's deep in thought. All the while, life continues on around him—chatter and laughter among the adults, ringing giggles from the little kids. He's separated from it all, a black cloud sitting in the middle of that church. He doesn't turn to greet anyone, and in turn, everyone gives him a wide berth. They've completely written him off. Even Edith has abandoned him, opting instead to sit with her reading club friends on the other side of the church.

I surreptitiously study him while Tucker talks to his friends. His broad shoulders are clad in a black suit jacket—the one I imagined him wearing the day I organized his closet. His dark hair is tamed and sexy, and his strong jaw is clean-shaven. He could be so popular, so beloved, if only he'd let it happen.

I'm focused as if I'm going to try to paint him from memory later when his eyes cut to me, like he's known I was there all along. A cascade of goose bumps roll down my body and I jerk my attention back to the altar. My heart pounds. My breathing is erratic. Luckily, I can just pretend to be emotional about the holy matrimony about to take place before me.

Jack's loner status doesn't go unnoticed. One of Tucker's friends mentions it.

“Think someone ought to go save the poor guy? I feel kind of bad.”

Tucker sneers. “He does it to himself with that damn attitude.”

They chuckle and agree, and I'm left sitting there biting my tongue. My gut instinct is to defend Jack, but how? By admitting that he's treated me poorly too? By confirming that he's as mean as everyone thinks he is?

“Don't you agree, Meredith?”

No.

His actions might be indefensible, but I won't pile on him with everyone else.

I shake my head. “He's fine.”

“You could run for office with a poker face like that.” Jacob laughs heartily. “You live on that property with him day in and day out. He’s probably chewed your head off more times than you can count.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve given it right back to him.” *Now shut up.*

Tucker chuckles and wraps his arm around my shoulder, jostling me. “That’s my girl.”

I chance another glance at Jack and if possible, he looks even more annoyed and grumpy than he did a minute ago. His brows are furrowed and his attention is once again on the altar up ahead, unwavering. I want to crack his skull like a clam and read his thoughts. *Why are you all alone? Why’d you have to push me away?*

The group of friends around me goes right on chatting, but I’m oblivious to their conversation. My attention is on Jack right up until Dotty walks up to his pew and asks if she can sit beside him. His brows arch in surprise and he scoots over, giving her the aisle seat.

“Why are you smiling?” Tucker says, following my gaze.

I blink and think quick, pointing to some floral arrangement a few feet beyond Jack’s pew. “I was just thinking those are some of the prettiest roses I’ve ever seen.”

He laughs and rubs his thumb along my shoulder. “You like roses that much? I’ll be sure to remember that.”

I strain my ears to try to catch a bit of Jack and Dotty’s conversation, but there are far too many people separating us. A few minutes later, I do catch his laugh though—deep and throaty—and my gut clenches tight.

Then the ceremony starts and we all stand to watch Leanna walk down the aisle. For the first time since I arrived, I have no trouble keeping my attention on someone other than Jack. She walks toward Daniel with the biggest smile on her face and happy tears slipping down her cheeks. Her gown is a whole lot of dress. She’s gone for the full princess look, and it’s paying off—she’s breathtaking. Daniel obviously agrees,

the look of pure adoration in his eyes spawning more than a few tears in the audience.

It's a heady experience to watch a marriage begin knowing my own is in the process of being dissolved. I think about that as Daniel and Leanna say their vows, staring into each other's eyes and promising to stick together through thick and thin. I made those same vows, and a part of me feels guilty that I'm breaking them. Then I remind myself that Andrew was a different person when we got married, someone I trusted to take care of me and safeguard my heart. He chose to break our contract long before I did.

Maybe I should be cynical about marriage now, but I'm not. Not every man is like Andrew. There are Daniels floating around the world, you just have to keep an eye out for them. *Oh yeah, Meredith? And what about the Jacks of the world? What do you do for them?*

I glance over to see him fidgeting in his pew. He angles his head toward the back of the church then scans the crowd, hopping from person to person before landing back on me. Our gazes click into place like two puzzle pieces. This time, neither one of us looks away. His dark eyes are all I see.

The pastor speaks as Leanna and Daniel exchange rings: "May these rings be a visible symbol of the love that unites these two young hearts. May they serve as a daily reminder of the promises you made here today."

I know the words aren't meant for us. We aren't the ones standing up on the altar, but I can't look away, and he isn't either.

"Meredith," Tucker whispers. I jerk my gaze back to the altar like he's just caught me red-handed. "Do you need a tissue?"

"Oh, no thank you." I'm not crying. In fact, I'd forgotten about the wedding altogether.

I chance another quick peek and find that Jack is facing forward again.

While the bride and groom snap photos with their family members after the ceremony, most of us walk one block over

to the reception. It's in the middle of the town square, in the park surrounding the courthouse. Twinkle lights glow overhead, and all of the tables are covered in red and white gingham tablecloths. For centerpieces, mason jars are filled with sunflowers and white roses. Whiskey barrels serve as cocktail tables, and booze flows in every direction. Tucker goes to get me a glass of wine while I hang back with his friends. They really are nice, and even though they all grew up together, they don't make me feel like an outsider. Jacob even promises he'll teach me how to two-step after finding out I've never done it before. They all latch onto that, completely shocked that I could exist for twenty-eight years without ever having stepped foot in a "honky-tonk".

"Here you are," Tucker says, rejoining the group with a Corona for himself and a glass of white wine for me. "Sauvignon blanc, hope that's okay."

The wine is delicious, so crisp and refreshing. It's been a while since I've tasted wine this good, and I make a mental note to pace myself or I'll be acting a fool out on the dance floor later with Jacob and Tucker.

Once the bride and groom make their appearance, they open two buffet lines and everyone makes quick work of piling their plates with barbecue from Blue Stone's restaurant. I'm carrying my plate back to our group's table when I catch sight of Jack.

What is it about a handsome man sitting alone that makes your heart ache, even if you know the handsome man is sitting alone for a very good reason? He's probably offended half the people in attendance and yet deep down, I know I shouldn't give up on him.

No!

I shake off the feeling.

I'm not about to march over there and save him. He made his bed, and now he can lie in it. I follow Tucker back to the table and start eating. I fork some potato salad into my gullet then nibble on some bread, but I have no appetite and just can't

handle the thought of Jack sitting by himself through the entire wedding reception.

God help me.

I turn to Tucker and offer up an easy smile. “I’ll be right back.”

Jack

Edith talked me into coming to this wedding. They aren't really my thing. In fact, given the choice between attending a wedding and getting a root canal, I'd lean back and say, *Ahhhh*.

Daniel's a good guy though, and he's worked for me for years. I'm glad I'm here now, though I plan on leaving as soon as they cut the cake. I hate weddings; I do not hate cake. Maybe I can talk Edith into snagging me another piece on her way out. Unlike most old-timers who grumble about the lateness of the hour, she'll be here until they shut the place down—except, she won't agree to the cake idea. She's not talking to me right now. She's pissed about my fight with Meredith.

“You think she left that husband for the attention?! How thick is that skull of yours?”

Those were her exact words. Then, she called me an idiot and thumped me on the back of the head before walking right out of the room. Edith can scold with the best of them.

I wonder if I'm really that far off about Meredith. I thought I was the only person in Cedar Creek thinking clearly about this woman, but I suppose it's possible that the opposite is true. Should I not have trusted Helen's judgment of her own sister? The day she showed up, she fit the stereotype I'd been warned about to a T: gorgeous, dolled up, headstrong. She didn't seem like a wounded bird to me. Hell, she pecked at me every chance she got.

I thought I'd finally pinned her down in my office the other day. I voiced every suspicion swirling in my head and then I watched, waiting for the fury, the anger, and the lies. I knew she'd deny it all, and she did, but something felt...off. I've never witnessed hurt like I saw in her eyes. My words weren't just insulting, but deep affronts to her pride. I realized in that moment that my accusations might have been out of line.

I hate to admit a mistake, because I try so hard not to make them, but there's a possibility I'm wrong. Okay, there's more than a possibility. I'm pretty sure she wouldn't have stuck around this long if she were just trying to get a rise out of her husband. I was told she was entitled and spoiled, but other than the advance, she hasn't asked for a single thing. She's worked damn hard and then some. I never told her she had to bake cookies for the ranch hands or organize my closet. She puts in more hours than anyone else besides me, and I thanked her by—how did I put it? Ah yes, I accused her of being a spoiled, heartless flirt. Boy do I have a way with words.

Christine would be howling with laughter if she could see me now, sitting alone at a wedding—well, not totally alone. I've somehow found myself at the kids table. They're supposed to be minding their manners and eating their dinner, but between you and me, the brown-haired boy—the one who reminds me of myself—is acting like a little snot, putting ice down the dress of the girl beside him. I tell him to knock it off and his eyes get wide with fear. It's pretty much the same way everyone has looked at me tonight. I wonder if the kids around Cedar Creek think of my house as the dark, scary, haunted house on the dead-end road. Apparently, I've created quite the reputation for myself.

It's why I'm here by myself.

Meredith isn't alone though. Even now, she has all of Tucker's friends circled around her, eating out of the palm of her hand. She has a way with people. She makes them laugh and puts stars in their eyes. Two days ago, I accused her of using her charms on purpose, but now I'm not sure it isn't just her natural effect on people. *Add that to the list of things I need to apologize for.*

I push barbecue around on my plate because I can't stomach another bite.

I catch movement out of the corner of my eye. It's Daniel's brother walking over—nice guy I've hung out with once or twice. I smile and pull out a chair for him to sit.

“Oh, actually I was just gonna ask if anyone was using the chair...”

The troublemaking boy laughs. It’s just him and me at the table now. Seems fitting.

“They say you’re mean as the devil.”

“And what do you think?”

He looks at the top of my head, in search of red horns.

“I think it’s true.”

“Well, you’ll find out if you keep messing with that girl who was sitting by you earlier.”

He scowls and stomps off.

“Oh yeah, and also if you don’t eat your vegetables!”

I push away from the table and head for the bar. They’re serving Blue Stone wine tonight. I donated a few cases as a wedding present to Daniel, plus a fat check and a week off from work. Apparently he’s taking Leanna down to Cancun. I might treat myself to a trip there later this year; I could use a few days away from the ranch. Of course, it doesn’t occur to me in this moment that Christine tried for two years to get me to take a vacation and I turned her down every time. The thing is, I didn’t want to go away with her. Now, the feisty brunette who hates my guts? I wouldn’t mind being on a beach with her. Piña coladas, coconut bikini, tan lines...*sí señora*.

I’m thinking about the prospect when she comes up right beside me at the bar. I haven’t spoken to her in two days and now here she is, within arm’s reach.

I glance down at her and offer a conciliatory smile.

She doesn’t respond.

“You just skipped the line,” I joke, trying to coax some kind of conversation out of her.

She ignores me, orders another sauvignon blanc, and then tells the bartender to put it on my tab.

I smile wider. “It’s an open bar.”

She emits a little annoyed humph then spins on her heel. Before I know what I'm doing, my hand reaches out and I catch her elbow, spinning her back around to me and gently leading her away from the bar.

"Still upset with me?" I ask, leaning down to try to catch her blue eyes. Tonight they're more electric than ever, alive with disdain for me.

"Upset is putting it mildly."

Her voice is biting, but mine's not.

"Fair enough. Still, I saw you watching me during the ceremony."

"We were in a church, so I was waiting to see if you'd spontaneously burst into flame. I didn't want to miss it."

I'm smiling, even though I know I shouldn't be. I just can't help it. She's funny.

"Dance with me."

Her eyes turn into two huge saucers.

"You're kidding."

I've never been kidding less.

My hand releases her elbow and I hold it out palm up, waiting for her to accept it.

"Don't say no."

Not with everyone watching.

She looks at my hand like it's a snake.

"I *did* just buy you a drink."

"It's an open bar," she points out, throwing my words back at me.

"Yeah, but that's Blue Stone wine."

She sneers at her glass and sets it down on a nearby table.

I have no choice but to take matters into my own hands. She's not going to accept a dance with me—and she shouldn't—so

I'll just have to guide her toward the dance floor while she's too stunned to turn me down.

I pull her into my arms, appreciating the slow song playing over the speakers. Her hands hang like limp noodles at her sides and I tug her closer. We aren't hip to hip, but we're not far off.

"Why do you want to dance with me?" she asks, her voice devoid of any real anger. "After everything you said in your office, I'm surprised you can even stand to look at me."

"You're supposed to put your hands on my shoulders," I say, ignoring her question. "Or if you're feeling fancy, you can clasp them around my neck."

"That might give people the idea that I like you. Where should I put my hands if I want to show that *I can't stand you*?"

Her dig garners a few suspicious stares and awkward laughs from the couples dancing around us.

"Guess I'm not alone in thinking you're a jerk," she continues, firing shots every chance she gets.

I smile. "Alfred doesn't think I'm a jerk."

She snorts. "You don't deserve Alfred."

Finally, resigned, she moves her hands tentatively up to my shoulders. I use the opportunity to bring us a little closer. She feels good in my arms even though every atom inside of her is trying to pull away from me. A more polite guy would respect that and move away, but I think we've established that I don't have much respect to lose in her eyes.

"What about you?" I ask gently. "Do you hate me?"

She's focused on the edge of the dance floor, her profile facing me. I can still see anger building behind her blue gaze. "I do."

"Then I won't try to talk you out of it."

She nods. "There's no point. You won't convince me you're anything but an arrogant jerk."

"Glad that's settled."

My capitulation only makes her madder. She's fuming for a fight, but I'm ready to humble myself and apologize.

"No. You know what?" Her temper flares. "One second you're hot, the next you're cold. What you said in your office was unforgivable."

"I completely agree."

She jerks her gaze to me, and I hope she can see the regret buried there. For a second I think she does, but then she shakes her head and tries to move away.

"Please don't leave. Everyone's watching us."

Her expression breaks and I know I have her. Her heart's too big to walk away now. She won't embarrass me.

"This isn't fair. I don't want to dance with you, not after what you said."

"I want to apologize."

"I don't accept."

I lower my voice. "Look, Helen painted a picture of you early on that wasn't pretty, and I didn't know any better than to believe her. But, I'm starting to see that she doesn't know you any better than I did three weeks ago."

"I don't want to listen to this."

I tip my head down and whisper against her hair. "Meredith, I'm sorry. I wanted to make sure you weren't the person I thought you were. Once I saw your reaction in my office, I realized I was wrong."

"Oh yeah? Is that why it's taken you two days to apologize?"

"It's not an easy thing for me to do." I smile. "Besides, you can run pretty hot too. I know what it's like to need time to cool down."

She's a ball of fiery anger in my arms. In fact, I'm pretty sure she's thinking about socking me in the jaw.

The song ends and she finally steps away, dabbing at the corner of her eye. *Fuck*. I made her cry.

“I want to go home.”

“I’ll take you.”

“I’ll ask Tucker.”

“He’s been drinking.”

I saw him have a beer earlier, so technically I’m not lying.

“Then I’ll ask Edith.”

Edith, smart woman that she is, tells Meredith she’s not ready to leave yet.

“Just have Jack drive you,” Edith says, pointing to me.

“I’ll walk.”

Edith shakes her head sternly. “I won’t have my yoga teacher end up being coyote food.”

Meredith pauses, as if really contemplating the choice between a car ride with me and being picked apart by a pack of wild canines. For her, it’s a tough call.

Fortunately, she has enough sense to agree, but Tucker isn’t happy about it. When I walk over with her to say goodbye, his eyes are focused on me accusingly.

“You really want to leave? Don’t you want to stay for the cake and bouquet? I thought girls loved that stuff.”

She offers a weak smile. “Thank you, but I’m tired. I’ve had a long week and it’s finally caught up with me.”

“Are you sure you want to go with him?” His eyes slice to me.

“I could take you.”

“She’s sure.”

The ride home is tense and silent. Meredith is stewing in the passenger seat, arms crossed, gaze out the window. I can’t leave things the way they are. I know she’s still upset with me and I want her to get it out, to shout at me like she wanted to back on the dance floor.

I turn off the main road, down a street that leads to the old quarry. On either side of the dirt road, cornstalks jut toward the

sky. There's nothing but night beyond my headlights. We're alone.

I put the truck in park, cut the engine, and turn toward to Meredith.

"I get it, you feel cheated—you want a fight," I say calmly.
"Okay then, let's fight."

Meredith

We're parked on a dirt road in the middle of a cornfield, and I have no clue where we are or how to get back to the ranch from here. I should have been paying attention while we were driving, but I was too busy stewing. It's pitch black outside. If I got out and tried to walk, I'd end up marching blindly into the comically large open mouth of a mountain lion.

"You want a fight. Okay then, let's fight."

That's what he says to me.

I turn to him just as he kills the engine and turns to face me on the bucket seat.

"I don't want to fight."

I don't have the energy. I'm so tired, so defeated. I can't keep putting on a brave face for the world. I've used up all my confidence, burned through all my false bravado. I almost cried on the dance floor, and I'm dangerously close to actually doing so now. Once I start, I don't think I'll be able to stem the flow of tears.

"How about we talk then?"

I shake my head and turn to the cornfield.

"Take me home please."

We sit there for a few more minutes, but then he sighs and restarts the truck, turning back for the main road.

When we pull up to the farmhouse, I jump out before he's even put the truck in park and bee-line straight for the shack. I don't thank him for the ride, and I definitely don't stick around to listen to any more of his apologies. I'm so sick of people, of the back and forth, of the emotional rollercoaster. Maybe I should go live on a private island somewhere, just me and a bunch of wild swimming pigs. That sounds fucking great.

I change out of my dress and kick off my heels. I tug on one of Jack's t-shirts—the one I didn't return with all the others a few days back—and then stare at my bed. It's still early. I'm too wired to go to sleep. I want a stiff drink—a big one, something bigger than a shot but smaller than a swimming pool. I step toward my window and check the farmhouse. Jack's bedroom light is on, but it's dark downstairs. I could probably make it to the liquor cabinet and back without him even knowing.

I know from cleaning it that it's well stocked. I hesitate, really not into the idea of having another confrontation with him, but my need for alcohol wins out. I'm special agent Tom Cruise weaving in and out of red lasers as I tiptoe across the lawn and tug open the back door. Alfred is there, tail wagging, excited by my impromptu visit.

“Shhhh,” I hiss, petting him behind his ear before he starts barking or something. “Go away—can't you sense that I'm fighting with your human? Stop hitting the wall with your tail! You're making too much noise.”

I pause and listen for Jack, hear footsteps upstairs, and know I'm in the clear. I dash toward the liquor cabinet, grab whatever my hand lands on first, and then sprint back outside.

Alfred follows after me, acting as my accomplice, and together, we hightail it back to the shack. Once we're inside, I slam the door closed and press my back against it. Mission: Possible, apparently.

I glance down at my bounty. I managed to nab a bottle of Jack Daniels. Fitting. I pour myself a bit and barf a little in my mouth when I take my first sip.

“It's so bad,” I tell Alfred, trying to keep the rest of it down.

He looks at me with sad, questioning eyes as if to say, *Hmm, and I thought you weren't a little bitch.*

I nod. “You're right. Here goes nothing.”

I drink my glass in one long swallow then sit down on the floor and pet Alfred.

I continue like this for a while, so long that I lose track of time and space and the number of times I've forced myself to

swallow more disgusting brown liquor.

What I do know is alcohol is great and Alfred is soooooo soft. My fingers feel tingly. I forget I have any problems. I know nothing beyond this tiny shack and this adorable golden retriever licking my toes. I'm lying on the rug, spread out like a snow angel.

"I'm considering moving to Mexico," I tell Alfred. "I get that most people only flee to Mexico if they've committed a crime, but what's so wrong with good ol' fashioned fleeing? Do I gotta robbabank or something to JUSTIFY running away from my problems?"

He splays out beside me.

"Of course, you can come with me if you want. I'll just have to reteach you your commands in Spanish so we don't stand out. Okey, hello is *hola*. Sit is *siéntate*. Stay is...I dunno, let's go with...*estée lauder*."

A fist pounds on the shack's door and makes me scream out in fright.

"Relax," Jack says from outside. "It's me. The door was ajar back at the farmhouse, so I'm just making sure Alfred didn't run off. Is he in there with you?"

"Uhh..." I look over at the dog in question. He licks my foot. "No! But I have a very strong feeling he's fine!"

"He was in the house when I got home, but now I can't find him."

Apparently excited to hear his owner's voice, Alfred hops to his feet and pads over to the door, scratching it with his paw.

"Alfred?" Jack asks, apparently hearing said scratching.

I contemplate telling him it's me, etching hatch marks into the wall like a prisoner counting my days.

Alfred whines.

I cover my eyes with my arm. "Ugh, fine. He's in here."

The door opens and owner and dog are reunited once again. *Whoop dee doo*. I don't have the energy to move off the

ground...or open my eyes.

“Meredith?”

“Swat they call me.”

“Are you drunk?”

“What’s with the twenty questions?”

“Did you polish off that entire bottle of Jack?”

Depends on how much was in it when I started—I can’t remember.

“Who’s can say, really, in this day and age?”

“Why are you on the floor?”

“Be-*cause* it’s comfortable and my twin bed isn’t big enough for me *and* Alfred.”

He steps into the shack and toes the glass of liquor away from my hand.

I still have my arm thrown over my eyes, but I hear what he’s doing. “Hey, I was going to drink that.”

“I think you’ve had enough.”

“There you go again, with the *I thinks*. I think *this* about Meredith, I think *that* about Meredith. Well guess what? I don’t need Jack to tell me when I’ve had too much...JACK! Pffffff. Now please leave.”

“Not until I’m sure you won’t get sick. I can’t remember how much liquor was left in that bottle.”

“Okay, but can you close that door? You’re letting all the freezy-freezy air out.”

He obliges then I hear him take off his shoes and sit down on my bed. Meanwhile, I’m lying in the shape of a chalk outline from a homicide, legs splayed on the floor.

“I didn’t realize you were a drinker,” he says gently.

“I’m not. I hated every sip. Alfred peer pressured me.”

“Well watch out around him, he’s also a big fan of tattoos.”

“Ha ha, funny man. Now, please be quiet. I was in the middle of wallowing and I’m not finished. You can stay, but you have to stop asking me questions.”

The bed creaks, and maybe he’s getting comfortable where I sleep. Maybe he’s stinking up my blankets with his sexy scent. I’ll have to run the linen through the wash twice tomorrow morning, or I could just leave his scent there...maybe that wouldn’t be so bad. I push the rogue thought aside and try to get back to what I was thinking about before he so rudely interrupted me. Oh, right, Mexico. *Mexico*...I can’t remember why I was thinking about Mexico. I groan, fling my arm away, and sit up, eyes blinking open as I try to find my balance.

Jack’s sitting on the bed, just as I imagined, except he’s not in his suit anymore. Like me, he changed when we got home. Sweatpants and a t-shirt—how adorable of him.

“Have you been here long enough to confirm I’m not going to get sick?”

The very edge of his sexy mouth tips up like the smirking emoji. “No.”

I glance away. “Right.”

“Why were you drinking?”

“You.”

I sigh and lie back on the rug. My head is spinning.

“Are you okay?”

I hold up both thumbs. “Peachy.”

“Why did I drive you to drink?”

“Because you hurt my feelings on Thursday.”

“I’m sorry for that, Meredith.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before. I know the routine. It goes like this: make me fall for you, be mean to me, say you’re sorry, and then repeat. It’s the same thing Andrew used to do.”

“He was mean to you?”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

“How was he mean to you?”

There’s a long silence as I stare up at the ceiling.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I enunciate the words like they each make up their own sentence.

“How about we trade off?” he goads. “A secret for a secret?”

“I know all your secrets.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Edith told me about your parents’ accident. She told me how you changed. It’s why I know you’re not as mean as you pretend to be.”

“You told me on Thursday I’m the meanest person you’ve ever met.”

“It might still be the truth, but I just wanted to make you feel bad for hurting me.”

“See? You just went first. That’s a secret.”

That wasn’t so bad, I guess.

“Tell me one of yours.”

With my gaze on the ceiling, it’s like I’m lounging on a therapist’s couch. It almost feels like he’s not really there, like we aren’t really talking at all.

“All right. I actually like your cooking,” he admits.

I smile then wipe it away quickly before he sees it. “That doesn’t count. Everyone likes my cooking. I want a real one.”

“Okay fine. You want to go deep?” He thinks for a second, and then he sighs. “The way I figure, there’s only a handful of people who really give a shit about you in this life. I’m not talking about friends you see at Super Bowl parties. I’m talking about people who would take a bullet for you. There just aren’t that many, for a lot of people.”

“I know what you mean.”

“I used to have three people like that, and the day my parents died, I lost two of them. Now it’s just me and Edith.”

I turn my head so my gaze catches his. He's staring down at me from his perch on the bed. I think he's been watching me this whole time, studying me with indecipherable emotion in his eyes. It's that gaze that makes the truth tumble out of my mouth.

"You want to know something even sadder?" I swallow and look away, back to the safety of the ceiling. "I don't think I have anyone."

"What about your parents? Helen?"

"Sure, on paper, they're my family, but I'm not close with them. I hardly even know them anymore."

When he speaks again, there's remorse in his voice. It's so heavy and sad it breaks my heart.

"In my office, when I said you didn't have any family or friends here—"

"Yeah, that hit the mark."

"I'm sorry."

I wipe away the tear slipping down my cheek and shake my head.

"This game fucking sucks."

"It's my turn."

"Fine. Make it something juicy."

"I was jealous you went to the wedding with Tucker."

That *is* juicy.

"How jealous?"

When he doesn't answer, I turn to find he's still studying me, except now his gaze is on his t-shirt, my pajama top of choice. I wonder if he's annoyed I didn't give it back with all the others.

I sit up and turn to face him, sitting cross-legged on the rug.

"If it helps, every single woman at the wedding was infatuated with you, except maybe Leanna. You might have been putting out some major *fuck off* vibes, but had you smiled at any one

of them, you would have had her falling in love with you on the spot.”

He tilts his head to the side. “I smiled at you and as I recall, you nearly ditched me on the dance floor.”

“Those were different circumstances.”

“Right.” He frowns, and it might be the alcohol, but I swear he’s looking at me with desire. Yeah, he definitely is—it’s the same look Alfred gives his food bowl.

“My turn?” I say quickly, anxious to break up the tension starting to brew in this tiny shack. “Okay here’s mine: I’m really bummed I didn’t get to eat a piece of wedding cake. I really wanted a corner piece.”

He smiles. “Cute. Now take your turn.”

“That *was* my turn.”

“I just told you I feel like I’m alone in this world.”

“And I confessed I have an addiction to icing.”

Seems equally as important to me.

“Fine. Okay.” I sweep my hands though the air and turn away, eyes narrowed on my bathroom mirror. He wants honesty? He’s about to get it. “I think you’re handsome—h-o-t.”

“How handsome?”

I scold him with my stare, and he doesn’t even have the decency to hide his arrogance.

Enough. I’ve had enough. I push to stand and yank the door open.

“How about we change this into a game of truth or dare?” I quip. “I dare you to leave this shack right now.”

“That’s a terrible dare.”

“Fine, truth: did you mean all that stuff you said in your office? Do you really think so little of me?”

“Meredith, I was wrong. I was angry, and jealous, and worried that you were too good to be true. I’m sorry.”

I want to delve into every single word he just said, but I'm too drunk. I've already forgotten half of them.

I nod. "Okay, fine. Let's just forget about it."

"How was Andrew mean to you?"

I pinch my eyes closed. I knew he'd bring that back up, knew he wouldn't be able to leave well enough alone. I've learned the hard way that it's better to keep my lips zipped about my marriage. The reasons are stacked one on top of another at this point: I'm embarrassed that I put myself in that situation in the first place. I'm ashamed I stayed as long as I did. I'm hesitant to call it abuse and to open up about the things Andrew used to say, because then I'd actually have to acknowledge that I was a victim. I don't like that word. I don't want to have to wear it like an albatross around my neck. I just want to move on.

Those are all good reasons, but there's still one more: I *have* tried to open up about Andrew in the past, and it hasn't gone well.

Honestly, why do I care if Jack knows the truth about my marriage? Up until a few days ago, he wielded incorrect assumptions about me and my life as hurtful weapons. Maybe he's realized the error of his ways now, but I'm still annoyed. I want to quote Clark Gable and say, *Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn*. I don't give a damn what he thinks of me or my choices.

Not anymore.

"Meredith."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"How was he mean to you?"

"I said I don't want to talk about it!"

I think I'm doing a good job of voicing my resistance to this topic, but he isn't so easily swayed.

"I'd like to know what he did to you."

Jesus Christ! He's not going to drop it.

I slam the door closed again and throw my hands up in defeat. “It was the way he spoke to me. It was the things he said to me...the things he called me.”

There, he has his answer.

“Like what?”

“Does it matter?” I move to straighten a towel hanging near the shower. Then I go check on Alfred.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but you should talk to someone about it.”

“I have talked to someone,” I grumble, “and it didn’t go over well.”

“Why didn’t it go well?”

“Because it’s hard to explain! It makes no sense to other people. If I was living with an abusive monster, why didn’t I just leave? He wasn’t holding me captive, wasn’t threatening to kill me if I left. He was such a manipulative asshole, it took me years to realize what he was, what I’d become! It makes no sense. He’s this outgoing, happy person. To the world, Andrew Wilchester is perfect. No one wants to believe he has another side to him—just ask Helen.”

“You told her about the abuse?”

The way he says the word makes my skin crawl. I don’t like that label. I want to lay no claim to it.

“I tried.”

“And she didn’t want to hear it?”

He sounds angry, but I’m careful with my next words. Helen helped me get this job; I don’t want to throw her under the bus.

“She wasn’t trying to hurt me. We aren’t close—that’s my fault. I kept the truth from her for too long, and now it’s too late. To her, it’s all so confusing. She wants me to reconcile with him.”

“That’s what she told me would happen.” His voice is steady and calm. I’m envious of his sobriety. “She said you’d go back

to California once you got a dose of reality.”

I laugh, and I’m embarrassed to find it’s not a laugh at all but a broken sob.

It hurts knowing she said those things about me to someone else. It’s one thing to suspect it, another to hear it confirmed. I heave in a deep breath and try to get it together. This is embarrassing. I’m drunk.

“I swear I’m not weak. I didn’t stay because I was scared of being on my own.” I’m pacing now, worked up from all the truth spilling out of me. “It was just really confusing—the cycles he put me through. It was like being on the end of a line. He’d toss me out and reel me back in. Human beings gravitate toward cycles, routines, and that became ours.”

“I’m sorry.”

“My marriage to him is part of the reason I feel so isolated now. I put distance between myself and the people around me because I was afraid people would find out I was living this... lie.”

He’s off the bed now, bending to where I’m sitting on the rug. I don’t remember sitting down, but he’s here now, right in front of me, catching my tears and cradling my head.

“It’s not your fault Helen didn’t believe you.”

“Please don’t be angry at her. She’s not to blame in all this. I should have left earlier—”

His eyes flare with fury. “Stop talking like that. You’re the victim, not Helen, and not Andrew. You left when you could, and that’s all that matters.”

He’s cradling my face and I’m weeping like I’ve never wept in my life. I’m losing water weight by the gallon, shriveling up like a raisin. I will be dehydrated and dead by the end of this sob session.

“I just want to move on.”

“So do it.”

“I thought I *was*,” I cry, angry now. “But Andrew still followed me here! I’m still married to the man for Christ’s sake! That’s why I have to go to Mexico—*MEXICO!*” I snap my fingers. “*That’s* why I was thinking about Mexico earlier!”

“If possible, I think you’re getting more drunk. Here, blow.”

I don’t realize I was creating snot bubbles until he forces a tissue under my nose. That’s...fun. I’ve successfully solidified my role in his life as Crazy Housekeeper To Keep At Arm’s Length. I wonder if I can use my tenuous emotional state to finagle some benefits like health insurance or paid time off. There has to be a bright side to having a mental breakdown in front of your boss.

“I *am* more dunk.” I try again, losing my fragile grasp on language. “Durrunk.”

“Do you feel sick?”

“Just weepy and sleepy.” I laugh at my rhyme. “If you move your hands away from my cheeks, I think I’ll drop right to the floor face first. I’m so tired.”

“I’m going to put you to bed.”

He hooks his hands under my arms and hoists me off the ground. Cold air blasts my bare legs. I wrap them around his waist to warm them up. God, he’s so warm...so warm and tall and strong. I want him to set me down and pick me up again. It turns me on that he can just pluck me up off the ground like that. It fulfills some vestigial cavewoman need I didn’t even know I had.

He hoists me higher and I’m reminded that I’m still wrapped around him like an anaconda. *Damn*. This is hot, but it’s not right. When I imagined having sex with him on this twin bed, I was fully sober and on top, riding him like...well, a cowgirl.

“I didn’t think this was how tonight would end,” I whisper against his cheek. “I think you’re really handsome, like so so so bangin’ sexy, don’t get me wrong, but I’m pretty drunk and sleepy.”

I’m pawing at his chest. I’m running my hands along his strong jaw, feeling it for the first time. It’s magnificent. He is

magnificent.

“Meredith, I said I’m *putting* you to bed, not *taking* you to bed.”

“Oh, I see, Mr. Verb Man, got different verbs for all occasions.”

He sets me down on the bed and tugs my blankets aside so I can slip my legs underneath.

I wait for him to pat my head and tell me to go to sleep like a good little girl.

Instead, he tugs the covers up and sits down beside me.

His brown eyes are pools of sympathy. I wonder if I was imagining the desire I saw in them earlier.

“How ya feelin’, champ?”

He brushes his hand across my forehead, pushing my hair back.

“Like I’d keel over if I wasn’t already lying down.”

“I’ll stay with you until you fall asleep.”

“That reminds me—can Alfred stay with me tonight?”

“He’s already asleep at the foot of your bed.”

“Whew.”

“Go to sleep.”

I close my eyes.

“Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“I really wanted to hate you after the things you said on Thursday, but I couldn’t. When you were at the wedding all by yourself, I felt so bad. I only came up to the bar because I wanted to talk to you, but I didn’t know how. I was so...angry. Maybe I should still be angry, but I’m not.”

“Well if you wake up tomorrow and realize you’re still mad at me, that’s okay. I know this is probably just the alcohol talking.”

“Thanks. Yeah...maybe I’ll be double pissed in the morning.”

“Maybe.”

“Could you tuck the blanket around me now?”

He laughs. “Like you’re a kid?”

“Yes, exactly. It’s been a really long time since someone put me to bed like this.”

He chuckles, and I keep my eyes closed as he leans over and tucks, tucks, tucks around my entire body. I’m in a little cocoon of warmth when he’s finished. I think he’s about to go, but I’m not ready for him to leave.

I keep my eyes closed, but I’m smiling as I ask, “Wait, are we still playing that game? Because I have one more thing I want to know.”

“You’re supposed to be sleeping.”

“I’ll go to sleep as soon as you answer,” I promise.

“Okay, shoot.”

“That day we were swimming, did you see anything you weren’t supposed to? Like underneath my bra?”

I can hear his smile when he asks, “You mean, was your bra completely see-through? Yes.”

“Right. That’s what I thought. If you could go now, I’m going to turn over and suffocate myself with my pillow.”

He laughs, kisses my forehead, and then I must really be drunk because five seconds later, I’m dead to the world, completely conked out.

When I wake up, Jack and Alfred are sleeping, splayed out on the rug together.

They never left.

Meredith

Jack slept on the floor in the shack all night. He was supposed to leave once I went to sleep, but he stayed. He's still there, lying on his side, using one of my blankets as a makeshift pillow. His t-shirt is scrunched up so I can see a little bit of his abs and the top of his boxer briefs. If I had a camera, I'd snap two photos. The first I would send to Calvin Klein so he could be their new model. The second I would put in a maximum-security safety deposit box.

I roll over and poke him with my finger.

"Are you awake?"

He groans and keeps his eyes shut.

Alfred—who's excited to see that I'm up and moving—trots over and licks my hand then turns and starts lapping at Jack's face.

"Get," Jack says, feigning a stern voice. "Get back."

He tries to fend him off, but it's no use. He's not getting back to sleep now that Alfred and I are both awake.

He pushes to sit up and holds the dog at arm's length so he can't get to his face. Then he rubs sleep from his eyes and tugs a hand through his hair. I sit very, very still, as if I'm dressed in camouflage, observing the habits of a wild animal in its habitat. The sight of Jack there on the ground is a little funny and a whole lot sexy. His hair is askew from his blanket-pillow. His chin has a light dusting of black stubble, and his cheek sports a red imprint from sleeping on it. I want to slink off the bed and tackle him, pin him to the ground, and rub my cheek against that stubble.

"Shit, my back hurts," he groans.

I smile. "Shack-sweet-shack."

He twists right and left, trying to wring out his spine.

“You were supposed to leave after I fell asleep,” I point out.

At least that’s what I remember, but there are clearly gaps in my memory because the most recent browser tab on my phone shows a search for burro rides in Mexico.

He nods and pushes to stand. “That was the plan, but then I kept worrying you’d drown in your own puke or something. Freaked me out.”

My cheeks turn a nice rosy shade. “It was stupid of me to drink that much.”

He turns to me with one eye winked as if he’s trying to keep the early morning light from blinding him. “Everyone needs to get out of their head once in a while.”

I nod, appreciating that he doesn’t feel the need to scold me for my poor choices.

I push the blankets aside and kick my legs over the side of the bed. “I really should get going, eat breakfast or something. Edith has me teaching yoga to half the town this afternoon, and I think I’m still a little drunk.”

I stand and stretch my hands overhead. My head decides to take the opportunity to remind me that I basically poisoned myself last night and I’m now going to pay the price. I press a hand to my forehead and wince.

“Ahhhh...also, I should probably drink some water.” He laughs and I drop my hand. “What?”

He turns away, but he’s unsuccessful in wiping the smile from his face. “Your shirt’s tucked into your tighty-whities.”

I glance down and sure enough, he’s not kidding.

Well, that’s a great way to start my morning.

“Oh god,” I groan, yanking on the t-shirt until it’s back to hanging on me like a dress.

“It looked kind of stylish,” he assures me.

I go to grab some sleeping shorts, slightly embarrassed that I didn’t put them on to sleep. How many times did I flash him my ass during the night? *Oh right—the limit does not exist.*

“I’ll make you pancakes if you promise to erase that image from your memory.”

He slips his shoes on and heads for the door. “I like them topped with banana slices.”

“Obviously. I’m not a pancake amateur.”

We walk together to the farmhouse, Alfred darting in between our legs.

Edith is sitting at the kitchen table sipping some coffee when we walk in. She’s reading the Sunday paper and when she hears us enter, she folds down one corner and eyes us over the top of it.

“Mornin’, you two. Jack, I didn’t know you were doing wake-up calls nowadays.”

Jack clears his throat and heads for the coffee pot. I head for the pantry to grab pancake supplies.

“Long night?”

“No,” I say quickly, voice shrill and obvious.

“When did you get back from the wedding, Edith?” Jack asks, changing the subject.

“Oh, not too late. Must have been before you ’cause I saw your room was empty.”

Jack holds a cup of coffee out to me and I greedily accept it, hoping the caffeine will dull my headache. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, I went to bed pretty late,” he admits smoothly.

“What about you, Meredith? Did *you* go to bed pretty late too?”

“Edith,” Jack warns.

“Just trying to make polite conversation, sheesh.” She shakes out her paper and pretends to get back to reading.

“Do you want any pancakes, Edith?”

“No thank you. I already ate. Unlike you two, I’ve been awake for a few hours.”

Jack sighs and I finally cave. “Edith, we aren’t keeping secrets. There’s nothing to tell. I got drunk like an idiot, and Jack had to make sure I didn’t die in my sleep.”

She seems disappointed. “That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“Well dammit, that’s boring.” Her chair screeches away from the table then she grabs her coffee and her paper. “And it means I owe Dotty and Deedee twenty bucks a piece.”

Jack and I exchange an amused glance and something sparks between us—a feeling that could easily overwhelm me if I let it. I shift my attention to the pancakes and fill them up with bananas and blueberries. Jack gets me an aspirin and some water and I’m so grateful, I let him pick his pancakes from the first batch. He takes the big ones, which is fine because everyone knows the little ones are tastier, with a better crust-to-fluff ratio. We sit at the table across from one another with Alfred lazing at our feet, hoping to catch an errant crumb.

My attention is pinned on the window in front of me while Jack’s is on the kitchen wall—we’re suddenly playing a game of chicken. We don’t talk for long minutes as we cut into our pancakes, fork bites into our mouth, and chew. Last night, we saw hidden sides of one another, the deep, secret parts you’re supposed to expose after like three years of dating, when you already share a lease, and a couch, and possibly an animal, when you aren’t afraid to make bodily noises in front of each other. We did it all wrong. We cut through the bullshit layers of polite conversation and small talk. I told him the truth about Andrew. We bonded over the debilitating fear of being alone, just a casual Saturday night between attractive, single employer and attractive, “it’s complicated” employee.

How unsettling. I really thought he was the devil. Now, I know it’s a disguise. Beneath all that arrogance and good hair, he’s funny and thoughtful and kind. He slept on my rug because he didn’t want me to aspirate my vomit—not exactly the MO of a fallen angel and leader of the damned.

I know the truth about him now, and it’s impossible to know how I’m supposed to navigate from here. Do I try to wipe my

memory completely clean of last night? Do I pretend he was just being polite? Nothing more, nothing less? I don't think it's possible. I'd have to hit myself in the head with a rock or something.

Maybe instead, I could bring it up casually and laugh it off. *Ha ha, I have a crippling fear that Andrew has broken me in a way that can't be fixed. LOLOL, FUNNY RIGHT?!*

Obviously neither of those choices will work.

I sigh, and then, like fools, we try to talk at the exact same time.

“About last night—”

“I was wondering—”

I laugh and he smiles, waving for me to go first.

“I was just going to say, thanks for last night. You didn't need to be that nice. I think I remember 90% of what happened, but it's that 10% that really scares me. I'm worried I might've flashed you, or joined a Mexican cartel or something.”

“You might've done both, but I hear those guys have a 24-hour try-it-before-you-buy-it policy.”

I drop my head into my hand and pinch my eyes closed. “It was pretty bad, huh?”

“Pretty bad? No. You were honest with me, and I'm glad. Also, yes, you flashed your underwear a few times, but I was raised a gentleman and I didn't look.”

I glance up at him and arch a brow.

The right side of his mouth perks up just a little. “Well, when I could help it.”

“What is it with me?! First the swimming debacle and now this. I swear I'm not usually such a weirdo around my friends.”

“Friends, huh?”

I can feel heat spread across my neck. Funny how *friends* feels intimate after being enemies.

“I mean, we are, right? Friends?”

“I guess so.”

He doesn't seem all that enthusiastic. *GIVE HIM AN OUT BEFORE THINGS GET WEIRD.*

“But don't worry, I have a 24-hour try-it-before-you-buy-it policy too.”

“Nice.” He laughs.

“Because maybe you want friends who can hold their alcohol better than I can? Or better yet, friends who don't get snot all over you? Or most of all, friends who don't hysterically cry about their disastrous marriages?”

He smiles and shakes his head. “You don't have to feel weird about last night. I don't.”

“Even though you had to blow my nose?”

“Even then.”

Interesting.

“What were you going to say earlier when I cut you off?” I ask.

He swallows and turns back to his half-eaten plate of pancakes. “Well, I was just wondering if maybe you'd woken up still upset about our fight? Remember, I told you I'd give you an out. You were drunk.”

“Not that drunk.”

He gives me a teasing smile. “Pretty drunk.”

After that, we go back to eating in content silence. I have to hurry and finish so I can clean up and get ready for yoga. People will be arriving soon, and I still need to change. I could really use a shower, but I'll save that for after since I'm about to get sweaty anyway.

I finish my last bite then push to stand.

Jack catches my hand to stop me. “Meredith?”

His voice is barely louder than a whisper.

I swallow and stare down at my hand tucked in his. I bet he can feel my wild pulse—his thumb is pressed right over my artery. I stay focused there as he continues.

“Do you remember what we talked about last night? How you told me you don’t have anyone to care for you? To put your needs above theirs?”

My throat constricts. I was hoping that part of the conversation was an alcohol-induced delusion. *If that was real, did I also tell him I think he’s handsome? Did I spell out the word h-o-t?!*

“Um...” I stall, waiting to see if a meteor will strike and save me from having to admit I said something so sad and depressing. The earth keeps spinning, so I have no choice but to mumble, “Uh-huh.” I clear my throat and wear a mask of feigned coolness. “I mean, yes.”

He lets go of my hand and I step back.

His brows are furrowed, his voice steadfast and thoughtful when he says, “I know you haven’t known us long, but if you want, Edith and I could be your people—that is, if you decide not to join the cartel.”

My chest cracks right down the middle.

Emotion squeezes my throat and makes it impossible to speak.

He pushes away from the table and carries our plates to the sink. “Think about it.”

He doesn’t need to angle himself that way to wash a dish. He doesn’t need to keep his attention on the sink. He could have pressed me for an answer, but he didn’t. He’s letting me stand here with tears filling my eyes and overwhelming gratitude bubbling up inside of me, and he’s giving me privacy.

I’m pushing out the back door and stumbling out into the back yard before I can even process that I’m moving.

That...that is so not what I was expecting from him this morning.

A pat on the shoulder and a sad, pitying smile—*maybe*. A one-way ticket away from this ranch—much more likely. Instead, he just looked me in the eye and told me I’m his brand of

crazy, that my flaws and failures don't scare him, that he believes me about why I left my marriage.

I'm nearly back to the shack when I turn on my heel and run right back to the kitchen. He's still there, washing dishes when I whip the door open and lean inside.

"Okay! But I want Alfred too!"

* * *

In the days following the wedding, Jack and I solidify what can only be described as a friendship. We smile at each other a lot. We joke and tease and I picture him in his underwear. *Friend stuff.*

Edith and Jack don't have an official adoption ceremony for me, but I'm theirs all the same. I have a standing invitation for dinner every night. Most of the time Jack grills chicken or steak and I whip up a side dish or two. Edith provides two things: sweet tea and local gossip.

If someone were going to make a movie about my life, this chunk of it would be contained in montage-style scenes backed by an upbeat song from a band with banjos. I'd be laughing and cleaning one second then running in gleeful slow motion through the lawn sprinkler with Alfred the next.

It's great.

Everything is great.

There's just one tiny, microscopic problem: I have developed what I can only describe as the world's biggest crush on Jack.

To anyone watching the montage play out, it's painfully obvious. There are quick cut scenes where I watch him and the second he turns my way, I jerk my gaze in another direction so fast my neck breaks. The montage then gets a quick dose of

comedic relief as I visit a chiropractor to fix my new neck problem.

But it doesn't end there. I spend extra time doing my hair and makeup in the mornings, as if he will notice that I look prettier than usual as I empty his trashcans. I make his favorite foods and bring him coffee in the afternoon just to have an excuse to see him. It's pathetic. *I'm* pathetic. All the viewers shift uncomfortably in their seats.

In the early weeks of working at Blue Stone, I was so consumed with the turmoil surrounding us that my attraction for him wasn't at the forefront of my mind. I was discovering the art of survival and learning how to share the shack with woodland critters. I was basically Harry Potter in a parallel universe where he never gets a Hogwarts letter, instead living in the spidery cupboard under the stairs all the way through his late twenties, cursing the mean Muggles he lives with. Now that things have settled down, however, it feels as if someone has tweaked the connection between us like a TV antennae. All the static and background noise are gone—he's coming in loud and clear. That handsome face of his is showing in full HD glory, and there's no going back now.

I like him. I really like him. However, I'm smart enough to sit on my crush, to push and shove and poke it so that maybe, just maybe it'll go away. Why? Because nothing good will come from wanting my boss, the man currently providing me with a safe haven and who also sort of happens to be my only friend (besides you Alfred! You'll always be my numero uno).

To his credit, he is nothing but respectful and kind. I never get the sense that he's harboring feelings for me like I am for him—and believe me, I look for the signs. There are the obvious things men do when they're interested in a woman: spending time with her, laughing at her jokes—but he *has* to spend time with me because I'm always around, and he's probably laughing at me rather than with me. Beyond that, there are more subtle ways to tell if a guy is interested, like if he finds excuses to touch you (he doesn't) or if you catch him checking you out (I don't) or if he creates situations to get some alone time with you (I wouldn't know—Edith is always around).

My infatuation is screwing with my head. The fact that all day I actively try to push Jack out of my thoughts means at night, my desire comes back stronger and more demanding than ever. Night after night, my sleeping hours are filled with raunchy sex-filled dreams. I wake up with my hands on different body parts (boob, thigh, stomach, halfway down my Fruit of the Looms), or I wake up sweating and so turned on I have no choice but to finish what my incorrigible subconscious has started.

It's a real problem. Night after night of bad sleep means I have less energy to stand up to my crush on him come morning. I'm jittery and self-conscious and worried my true feelings are becoming too obvious to ignore. All these harbored fantasies have to be manifesting somehow. I bet I'm leaching pheromones like a farm animal in heat.

Without a doubt, Jack knows I have a crush on him. There's no way he doesn't know. I'm just not sure what he's going to do about it.

Jack

Meredith has been here for almost seven weeks now, and I'm officially stuck between a rock and hard place. It's a dingy hellhole I like to call *the friend zone*. I can't act on the feelings I'm developing for her. She opened up to me about her marriage, I'm newly single, she's only been single for a month and a half, and technically, that's not even true considering she's still legally married. I know she's in a fragile place. She's probably glad to be free of her crazy husband and on her own; the last thing she wants is another guy sniffing around. I need to keep my distance and help her get back on her own two feet, at least that's what I tell myself while I stand under the shower stream and wrap my hand around my dick.

What? I'm trying to be a gentleman, not a saint.

I close my eyes and prop my hand against the wall, remembering how hot Meredith looked the other day while she was bathing Alfred in the back yard. She was wetter than he was, her t-shirt clinging to her curves. It was spring break in South Beach. She kept saying things like, "Okay, big guy, you're gonna get it!" and "Stay still, I'm about to finish! I just need to get your face." It was pornographic, and if any of the ranch hands had seen it, I'd have needed to put them down like a rabid dog.

"Jack!" Her voice sounds from the other side of the bathroom door. "You in there?"

I jerk my eyes open, tilt my head back, and stare up at the ceiling. *Wow, is my imagination this good?*

"Jack?" Meredith calls again, all sweet and naive. Her voice is honey, and my dick hardens even more.

I grit my teeth. "Yup. What's up?"

"I just realized you don't have any clean towels! I bleached them earlier and forgot to put one in here before your shower."

“Just leave one by the door!” *Or better yet, turn around and walk about a thousand yards the other way.* I don’t need a towel—I’ll just shake myself dry like Alfred.

“You sure?” she asks. “I can close my eyes. No big deal!”

No big deal? NO BIG DEAL? If she comes into this bathroom to bring me a towel, there’s a 100% chance I will fling open this shower door and drag her in here with me. I’ll haul her up against the tiled wall and cover her body with mine and roll my hips against her ass and give her the employee review I so badly want to.

“I just know I hate getting out of the shower without a towel nearby,” she continues.

Oh good, now I’m thinking about her in the shower with me... suds running down her stomach, slipping down between her legs. I think the majority of the blood in my brain has left, headed south for greener pastures.

“Meredith, just leave the towel outside, okay?”

My voice is gruff and she calls me on it.

“Sheesh okay, *sor-ry*. I didn’t know I was interrupting some private ‘ranch *hand*’ time.”

“*What?* I’m just showering, nothing else.”

“Uh-huh. The lady doth protest too much.”

After she leaves, I’m left there, staring down at my hand, frozen. I can’t finish, not because I’m not horny as hell, but because I feel like a disgusting perv lusting after Meredith like that, not to mention she obviously guessed what I was doing. I cut the water and pad out to get the towel she left on the other side of the bathroom door.

She’s incapable of meeting my eyes when I walk down into the kitchen a few minutes later.

“Feeling better?” she asks with a high-pitched, helpless voice.

“From my shower?” I ask, fooling no one.

She clears her throat a half-dozen times. It’s like she’s got a whole pond’s worth of frogs stuck in there.

I try to catch her eye, but she looks everywhere but me—ceiling, wall, cutting board.

I sigh. “I wasn’t masturbating.”

“I know that,” she answers quickly, pale eyes going wide. “Don’t you think I know that? Ha, obviously.”

“But just to be clear, even if I was, it’s perfectly normal,” I point out, walking over to pluck a slice of the apple she’s chopping. Between you and me, I don’t really want the apple. I want to get a closer look at that pink flush on her cheeks.

“Of course it’s normal,” she says defensively. “Everyone does it.”

“Everyone?” I taunt.

“*Jack.*”

“What?” I tease. “Now we’re even. We both know what the other is doing when they’re in the shower.”

“I don’t do it in the shower,” she mumbles, almost as if she doesn’t realize she’s saying the words out loud.

“Interesting.”

She catches herself and shakes her head, chopping at double speed now. She’s entered some kind of apple-chopping competition with herself.

“This is inappropriate.”

Chop, chop, chop. She’s about to lose a finger.

“You’re the one who tried to come into the bathroom while I was showering.”

“To give you a towel!”

She’s getting hysterical.

I turn to head up to my office. “Uh-huh.”

A piece of apple hits me smack-dab in the back of the head as I walk away. Alfred snatches it up before I can.

* * *

A week later, Meredith convinces me to watch a chick flick with her. Edith is out with her friends, so it's just Meredith, me, and Alfred. He's up on the couch between us, taking up more space than the both of us combined. Meredith is wearing a tank top and pajama shorts. Her legs are hidden under a blanket, and her attention is focused squarely on the TV.

On her lap is a bowl of popcorn she just made for us. I'm watching her bring each kernel to her lips, and I have a pillow strategically placed on my lap.

Alfred is scowling at me like, *Really, dude? Can't the girl just eat her popcorn in peace?*

Meredith smiles. "I love this part."

I make a noncommittal sound and it sounds a lot like someone just kneed me in the groin, but she doesn't notice. She holds the bowl of popcorn out for me.

"Want some?"

I hold up my hand. "No thanks."

She sets it down on the table and stands. "I gotta go wash my hands. You want a beer?"

"Yeah, that'd be great." *And while you're at it, would you mind grabbing a weapon and putting me out of my misery?*

She drops an ice-cold bottle of Blue Moon over my shoulder a few minutes later.

"Here, I put an orange slice in there for you."

My favorite.

She saunters around the couch and scoots Alfred to the floor. "Ah," she sighs, stretching out with a content little smile on her face. "Much better."

Her legs are stretched out toward me now, and her toes hit my thighs.

“Whoops,” she says, scooting them back a little.

“It’s fine.”

I reach out and tug them back where they were. It’s nothing—or it should be. I’m touching her ankle, and yet it’s erotic. The pillow’s fabric is straining.

The movie continues, and I sip my beer, all the while trying to reason with myself about why it’d be a good idea to turn and kiss her. Maybe she wants to move on from her ex? Maybe she’s just as sex-deprived as I am? *Maybe you’re an opportunistic asshole. Leave her alone.*

Characters I’m not invested in are suddenly ripping their clothes off on screen. They’ve been avoiding each other for the whole movie, building toward this sexy scene. They’re really going at it—stumbling into things, bumping against walls, making picture frames crash to the floor.

“Wouldn’t it be funny if sex was actually like that?” Meredith laughs. “Like if you kept having to run to IKEA to replace all your broken lamps and shattered vases because you were so turned on that you lost all spatial awareness?”

I can’t help but smile. “That’s actually happened to me before.”

“You broke a lamp?”

She makes it sound like it’s completely absurd.

“Didn’t shatter the base, just the bulb.”

“You’re kidding.”

I sip my beer, anxious for the next subject.

“*How?*” she asks, amazed.

“I needed to use the side table for...well...” I clear my throat, aware that there’s no way of continuing without getting graphic. “Leverage, and I accidentally knocked the lamp to the ground. The light bulb shattered, but you’re right, it wasn’t as dramatic as this.”

“Oh.”

She sounds like she’s in a daze. I stare intently at the TV.

“So you were on top of the girl.”

Her voice sounds shaky.

“Woman,” I correct. “Yes.”

“And just how much...leverage...do you usually need?”

This question, asked with her innocent lilt, is made worse by the fact that the characters on screen are going all out, scene after scene of rhythmic gyrations overlaid with moaning and groaning. Time seems to slow to a crawl.

I push to stand, finish off my beer, and deposit the empty bottle on the coffee table.

I know when I’ve reached my limit, and talking about having sex, while listening to people have sex, while Meredith is just sitting there, perfectly...well, perfect, is...*fuck*.

“Anyway, I’m going for a run,” I announce, tugging on the sneakers I left by the door.

Then I just turn and walk out.

Running is not something I do. I don’t need to; working around the ranch is enough of a workout on its own. Lately, though, I’ve been running a lot—all the time, in fact. I run after I catch sight of a sliver of Meredith’s stomach when she reaches for a glass on the higher shelf in the cabinets. I run after she makes a joke at dinner and brushes my arm gently. I run after she walks into my office with some afternoon coffee and a freshly baked muffin. She sets it down on my desk and winks then just strolls right back out, hips swaying. I run because it’s the only damn thing I can do that helps me blow off steam without feeling like a predator.

Hell, maybe I should just train for an Ironman triathlon at this point. If Meredith continues living here, I could probably win the damn thing.

When I make it back to the farmhouse thirty minutes later, I’m sweaty and breathing hard, but no less worked up than I was

before my run. *Shit*. My coping mechanisms are starting to lose effectiveness. I'll have to get creative, maybe consider a cold bath or—

My thoughts freeze when I pull open the door and find Meredith in my living room, pacing. I figured she'd have gone to sleep by now. The movie probably ended a few minutes after I left.

She whips her attention to me and wrings out her hands.

"You're still here," I say, deciding that's the safest thing that could possibly come out of my mouth at this moment.

She steps toward me, drops her hands, turns, fidgets with her ponytail, and then turns back to me.

"Okay, I've been thinking..."

Her eyes are wide with worry. Her teeth nibble on her bottom lip. I've never seen her look so nervous, not even back when she used to be scared of Alfred.

"About what?" I ask this while standing very still, hand propped up on the doorframe.

"You find me attractive, right? Like as a woman?"

I blink. Blink, blink, blink.

Is this a trick? A trap?

I'm her employer, her confidant.

"Umm...sure?"

She frowns, and a deep crease settles between her eyebrows.

"Women usually hope for a little more enthusiasm."

"Were you?" *The fewer words, the better*, I think to myself. I'll use one more. "Hoping?"

"Well yeah, because I find you..."—she waves her hand up and down my body and then clears her throat—"very good-looking."

"Uh-huh."

"And we're both available."

“I’m aware.”

“And I think we should kiss.”

Gulp.

“And break lamps.”

Her euphemism makes me smile, but then reality catches up with me.

“Believe me, I want to break thousands of lamps with you, but you just got out of a bad relationship.”

“Right. So did you.”

“I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

“Noble, but unnecessary.”

“Also, you work for me.”

“True, but irrelevant.”

“It could make our relationship really complicated.”

“Indeed, but it’s worth the risk.”

“And...well...”

I’m at the end of the line. I’ve run right out of excuses. She was supposed to agree with one of those and call this whole conversation off. She was supposed to nod and say, *Oh, you know what? I hadn’t thought of that. Well see ya! Then we’d shake hands and she’d get the hell out of my house.*

Instead she’s staring up at me with those big, hopeful blue eyes and she might as well be saying, *Let’s find the biggest, most breakable lamp in Texas.*

“Fuck.” I turn and wrench the front door open and step outside.

Don’t. Do. This.

I have to be better than this. I have to set the boundaries and hold to them. She doesn’t know what she’s asking for—she’s under the influence of heartbreak. I drag my hands down my face and clasp them behind my neck. I count to ten. I do some deep breathing. I try to listen to the angel sitting on my

shoulder. He should be there somewhere...ah, there he is, getting strangled by the devil from my other shoulder. Welp, there's my answer, folks. I yank the door back open and slam it closed behind me.

Our eyes lock and the fuse burns away, counting down the last few milliseconds before she and I collide. I have one thought before I reach for her: *if there have to be consequences, make them all worth it.*

Meredith runs straight for me and I meet her halfway. Her body crashes into mine as I lift her up and wrap her legs around my waist. I turn and haul her against the front door then hoist her a little higher. We're a fucking mess, like sex-crazed teenagers, moving too fast, disjointed and wild. I kiss her cheek and the side of her mouth. She threads her hands through my hair and tugs. My lips finally find hers and I am a dying man who's found his salvation. Her hot mouth, her full lips, *her kiss*—the second our mouths connect, I know there's no going back now that I have her.

I show her how well we fit. Her breath is my breath. Her taste is my taste. I tilt my head and take the kiss even deeper, skimming my tongue over hers. Our hips roll together. She's so eager and receptive, wrapping her legs tighter so that even if I pulled us off the door, she wouldn't fall.

It's not hard to decide what to do with her when I've done nothing but play out scenarios in my head for a week. I lose track of time as we kiss. Days pass as I learn every inch of her impatient mouth. For so long, I keep her right there, careful not to press my luck. I want to rip her clothes off and fill her up, but my wants don't matter.

She's the first one to initiate more. Her hand skims down my neck and chest. She tugs my shirt up and then her hand is covering my bare abs. My stomach squeezes as she skims lower.

Her hands find my jeans.

She pops the button.

I growl into her mouth.

It's not my proudest moment.

Her pajama shorts ride up and her smooth thighs are completely exposed. Her fingers are still skimming back and forth along my jeans. She's turned on, just as alive with the tension exploding between us as I am.

My hand slips down between us. If she can venture south, so can I.

I skim along her taut stomach, the waistband of her shorts, inside her cotton panties. Then I find wet, hot heat.

Later, when someone asks me about the happiest moment of my life, I will think back to this, right now. I'll lie and say something PG-rated, but I'll know the truth.

I guide my middle finger into her and her legs drop to the ground. I need better access, more access. She doesn't move from that door though. Pinned is the way I like her. Between my body and the door, there's no end in sight. I pump in and out of her and sweep my tongue into her mouth. *This is what we've been waiting for*, I tell her with my touch. *This*.

My other hand is lonely, and that tank top she's wearing might as well be paper-thin. I can feel her chest quivering against mine. She's shaking, and it could be from nervousness, but I know better—it's adrenaline.

I can feel that she's not wearing a bra. *No. Damn. Bra.* Had I known that while we were watching the movie, I would have had her pinned to this door an hour ago. Now, I'm pissed I waited so long. I'm anxious and hungry. I don't bother taking her top off, just yank down the front of it until one of her soft breasts fills my palm. She shivers, like that little touch alone could bring her to an orgasm. I smirk against her mouth, memorizing the wordless cues her body shouts back at me. *So you're sensitive there?* I skim the pad of my thumb over the tip of her breast and she yanks my hair in response.

My other hand is still working wonders inside her wet panties. Poor Meredith, she really doesn't stand a chance.

My palm covers her breast, and I roll my hand up and down. I get the best reaction from her with a feather-soft touch in the

beginning, nothing too aggressive, just subtle teasing and torturing. I know from the way she's grinding her hips against me that I'm hitting the mark.

I break our kiss and tip my head down, replacing my hand with my mouth. My tongue teases her breast. Her head falls back against the door and her eyes flutter close. I do it again then wrap my lips around the flushed tip.

She releases a slow exhalation and I think maybe I should take this to the bedroom, but there are a lot of things in life I *should* do. I'm happy right where I am, coaxing and licking and seducing until her fingers dig into my shoulders, and she's promising me she's about to lose it.

I keep her right against the door even as I move on from her breast and continue farther south. She moans, annoyed with the loss of friction between her thighs, but then I'm on my knees and her eyes widen with wonder.

"Oh no," she says, in shock.

Oh yes.

From what I know of her husband, he probably never put her needs before his. I bet he never knelt like this and tugged these tiny little shorts to the side and stared up in awe. There's only a thin layer of cotton between me and my end goal.

"Jack," she whispers, unsure.

It feels like we're going fast, but there's no slowing down, no going steady. This moment has been weeks in the making. I've written a thesis in my head about the things I'd like to do to her body.

Our eyes lock and I see every unspoken word there, all the uncertainty and worry. I see that this isn't comfortable for her, to have me looking at her like this, but I won't back off unless she tells me to because I don't see regret in her gaze—I see need, hot and raw.

I brush my thumb up and down the center of her panties and she bucks her hips toward me. I try not to gloat. Still, a smirk forms all the same. I pin her hips against the door with my free hand and try again. This time, there's no reprieve from the

gentle strokes, the small circles I draw against the wet cotton. Her breathing quickens.

I could let her come just like that, with my fingers and my breath on her, but I want more. She wants more—*deserves* more.

I tug her pajama shorts and panties down until they fall to the floor and then lift one of her legs so her foot is propped on my shoulder. I have the perfect angle, right between her spread thighs.

“Oh my god. I don’t think...” She’s rambling, words slipping out between sharp inhales.

She tries to move her leg, to squeeze her thighs together and close herself off. I hold her steady and glance up. Her ponytail’s gone now. Her dark hair frames her face, softening her delicate features even more. She swallows and I drag my hand up her thigh slowly. I’m saying, *See how good this feels? See how much better it could feel?* I reach the groove of her hip and pause; it’s a question. Our eyes lock again, and I ask for her consent out loud. I need to hear it.

“Do you want me to keep going?”

There are no fancy words or pretty promises.

I could tell her things to ease her mind, things like the truth: I’ve never wanted anyone more than I want her.

But words have been used against her in the past, and maybe for her, talk is cheap. I have no way of knowing what that bastard said to her, what abuses he slung at her in moments like this to make her scared of letting me touch her. Even still, I know enough not to promise her things with words when I can use my body instead. I can prove to her that there are better guys in the world, guys who would sink to their knees and worship at her feet.

“Meredith.”

Her name comes out gritty and hard, pleading.

I know she’s uncomfortable. I know she’s thinking too much about the bare facts of what we’re doing, so I decide to

overload her brain, to give her a future to focus on so her past is the last thing on her mind.

I tug on her thigh, and she lets her leg fall open. I keep my gaze locked with hers as my hand covers her wetness. I brush up and down softly. It's a pace intended to torture. She rolls her hips and two of my fingers sink into her.

She closes her eyes for a moment then opens them. One word slips from her mouth, followed by another.

“Yes...please.”

It's all the urging I need. I rub soft circles while I kiss up the inside of her thigh. We both know where I'm headed, but she still loses her footing when my mouth finally gets there. The leg she's standing on buckles and I wrap my right hand around her thigh, holding her up. My other hand goes around her waist so I can press her hips against my mouth.

Her breathing grows labored as I bury my head between her thighs. My fingers pump in and out, quickening. She fists the top of my hair and arches her back as I suck and kiss and swirl my tongue in soft circles.

Her inhibitions are lost to the Texas wind.

Her focus is on my mouth and the climax building up inside her.

I drag my tongue up the length of her and our eyes lock.

She's a goner.

Her legs are shaking and she's watching me do this to her, watching me as I spread her thighs even wider and tug her down until my tongue sinks into her. My thumb starts rubbing circles against her wetness, and the combination is too intense for her to run from any longer.

Her eyes pinch closed as her thighs quiver. I can feel the waves of pleasure roll through her, feel her clench, and—*fuck*—it's the sexiest thing watching her come undone like that, *tasting* her as she falls apart.

I'm relentless, dragging out every drop of that orgasm I can get. She's still shaking from the aftereffects, so sensitive that

each drag of my tongue makes her hips buck. Only when I'm sure she's really finished do I smile and sit back on my knees.

She blink, blink, blinks.

“Where am I? *Who* am I?”

Her leg drops back to the ground, and she's standing there naked from the bottom down, her tank top askew. I'm still completely clothed, and we realize it at the same time. Her hands shoot up to fix her top and I help her step back into her underwear and shorts. Then I stand and smile.

“Wow.” Her eyes are glossy and her cheeks are flushed.

I smile and finger the strap of her tank top, righting it on her shoulder.

“Now what?” she asks, voice shaky.

“Now, I go shower.”

I'm still sweaty from my run.

“And me?”

She's so damn cute standing there, unsure of herself. I can't fathom how a woman as beautiful as she is still manages to have a self-conscious bone in her body. Then it hits me: of course she's uncertain and reserved.

It was the stuff he said to me...the things he called me.

I remember what she's lived through, what events led her to my doorstep, literally, and I decide we've done enough for tonight.

“Jack?” she asks, tilting her head to the side, studying me.

“Hm?”

“Are we gonna keep going?”

I smile and shake my head. “Not tonight. Not because I don't want to—I do—I just don't see the point in rushing things.”

She furrows her brows. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. You want to watch another movie? I just need to rinse off really quick.”

She laughs. “You think I’m capable of hanging out with you right now? I feel like I need to go smoke a cigarette, and I’ve never so much as even tried one.”

I laugh. “Do you want to stay the night?”

“Like in your guest room?”

“I was thinking my bed.”

Her eyes widen like that’s a crazy idea.

“I think I want to be in my own bed tonight.”

I take the hint.

“C’mon, why don’t I walk you home?”

Her smile lights up her whole face. “I think I can manage fifty feet.”

“I insist.”

She accepts my outstretched elbow and I lead the way outside.

“This is weird,” she announces.

“Yeah, kind of.”

She slices her gaze up to me. “Just so we’re on the same page, are we going to wake up tomorrow and pretend like this never happened or are we going to be cool about it and just reference it as the one time you went down on me against the front door?”

“Maybe somewhere in between?”

She laughs and tugs open the door to the shack.

We stand there looking at each other for a few long seconds. There’s not a proper send-off for this. A hug, a kiss, a handshake—they all feel wrong. She takes matters into her own hands, tips up on her toes, and plants a kiss right on my cheek before disappearing inside.

I’m left standing there for a few seconds before I shake my head and turn back for the farmhouse.

I don’t remember the last time I had such a hard time falling asleep. I lie awake in bed with a nervous tension in the pit of

my stomach I haven't felt since childhood. It reminds me of how I used to feel on Christmas Eve, jittery and excited, anxious for the next day to come. It keeps me awake half the night. It makes me regret not insisting Meredith sleep here with me. I want to know how she's feeling. I want to know if she's currently packing up everything she owns and hitchhiking out of town. I want to know when exactly I let my guard down enough to fall in love.

Meredith

The morning after the whole *JACK IS PULLING DOWN MY PANTIES AND I AM GOING TO HAVE AN HONEST-TO-GOD ORGASM AGAINST THIS DOOR* episode, I wake up early and life continues—and you’re not going to believe this—*normally*. I’m surprised by how easy it is to be in the same room as him. When I walk into the farmhouse to make breakfast, Jack greets me with a warm smile and a tip of his head, and I don’t even think for one second how he was face to face with my vagina just hours ago, not even once. It’s called maturity—you’ll find it defined in big books called dictionaries.

I walk to the pantry to retrieve pancake supplies with a confident, shoulders-back stride, and I blink, blink, blink the sleep out of my eyes. There’s more of it than usual this morning because I only managed about half of one minute of deep sleep last night. The rest of the eight hours was spent vigorously tossing and turning while simultaneously playing out every possible outcome for this morning in excruciating detail.

Fortunately, we seem to be living out outcome #145, in which I am still hopelessly infatuated with him and he is still seemingly into me. It’s the best possible scenario—well, other than outcome #509, in which Andrew gets hits by a bus, Jack is in love with me, oh, and I have a new job with 100% fewer toilets to scrub.

I’m not complaining though. This is amazing. Part of me wasn’t sure how he’d react to my presence in the kitchen this morning. Last night was a lot...like, I orgasmed *literally* before his very eyes. If that’s not intimacy, I don’t know what is. This morning, he could regret his actions. He could ask me to hand in my resignation, turn in my rubber cleaning gloves, and, in true Texas fashion, “get tuh goin”.

Instead, he leans against my shoulder while I pour pancake batter onto a hot skillet.

“How are you this morning?”

I blush so hot he gets a sunburn.

“Oh, yeah. Shit.” I accidentally over-pour and create one colossal pancake that covers the entire skillet. “Yup. I’m good.”

“I’ll take it—you know I like the big ones,” he says before he catches my eye and winks.

WINKS.

And it’s not one of those lecherous man-in-power winks; it’s a teasing quick one. Men who have callused hands and know how to fix a truck radiator should have to have a special license before going around winking at women.

“What are you two whispering about over there?” Edith demands.

I jump a mile in the air. “Edith! Where’d you come from?!”

She’s sipping coffee at the table. “I’ve been here since you walked in.”

I didn’t even see her—that’s how focused in on Jack I am. I walked right past Edith like she was a marble statue.

I laugh and sweat. “Ha ha ha, of course. You’re just looking so thin from all the yoga. Want a pancake?”

She eyes my skillet over the brim of her reading glasses, lips tugged in a thin, disapproving line. “Not if it’s gonna be like that.”

“I’ll make you a better one.”

She’s skeptical of my weirdness. I need to tone it down, but I’m scared she knows what we did in this house last night. I’m scared Alfred has ratted us out. He probably didn’t even need to. Hell, my butt cheeks probably left sweat marks on the door. I make a mental note to check just as soon as I finish with breakfast.

“Jack, what do you have goin’ on today?” Edith asks as he goes over to fill her coffee. He usually doesn’t wait on her like that, but I think he’s trying to throw her off our scent.

“Working for a good part of it. Might take you and Meredith into town later for dinner if y’all are up for it.”

A DATE!

A DATE *WITH* HIS GRANDMA! That’s basically skipping straight to meeting the family.

“That’d be fine, but it better not be someplace cheap,” Edith says. “If I’m fixing myself up nice, I want a steak.”

He agrees and turns to me, brow arched. “Meredith, you free?”

I stare into his brown eyes for so long I burn his pancake. Then, I carry it out back and toss it in the trash so it doesn’t stink up the kitchen.

“What’s with you today?” Edith asks when I walk back inside. “Do you have the flu? You look pale and red at the same time.”

I don’t even think that question merits a response, but I give her one anyway. “No, Edith, I don’t have the flu, but I’ll go take my temperature just in case. Yes, Jack, dinner would be fine, provided I don’t have the flu—which I don’t. Now will you two stop distracting me so I can actually make some decent pancakes?”

Jack holds up his hands in deference and says he’ll be out back throwing the ball for Alfred. Really, he’s just trying to get away from Edith. He knows if we’re together in a room with her long enough, she’ll catch on to us. She’s like a wily detective, good cop, bad cop, and grandma all wrapped up in one.

* * *

You'd think I wouldn't be one for keeping secrets. *Secrets, secrets are no fun unless you tell everyone*—yada yada. Whoever came up with that catchy little rhyme clearly never engaged in a sexy secret affair, because guess what? Keeping this secret from Edith is fun as shit, like when I take some coffee up to Jack's office later in the afternoon and just as I turn to leave, he catches hold of my elbow and pulls me down on his lap. The door is open. We could get caught. Edith could swat us in the heads with a rolled-up newspaper.

“How are you feeling about last night?”

“Good,” I reply dreamily.

He's staring at my mouth. “No regrets?”

Now I'm staring at his mouth too. “None.”

He wraps his hand around my neck and a little spark trails down my spine. I shiver and he pulls my face toward his. Then we make out like teenagers. We kiss until I'm fluent in the ways of the French. We kiss until my chest is constricting and my panties are wet, and then he releases me and I half hobble, half skip out of the room. I'm panting like one of those sled dogs that just finished lugging a lazy human across the Iditarod finish line. He tells me he's excited to take me to dinner and I tell him, “I too, am, uh, dinner excited.”

My lips are swollen. Edith asks me about it when I make it back to the living room after a quick 38-minute cool-down on the stairs.

I tell her I got stung by a bee.

“On your lips?” she asks, dubious.

“Yeah, it was weird—flew right in the kitchen window.” My voice wobbles. “Now if you'll excuse me, I've been meaning to read...”—I grab the first book within reach on the shelf beside me—“...this book...”—I look down at the cover—“*Advanced Husbandry Techniques*.”

She tosses her hands in the air and walks away. “Strange choice for light reading. You do know husbandry doesn't mean what you think it does, right? No book is gonna teach you how to land a decent man.”

Later that evening, I doll myself up and hop into the back seat of Jack's truck. Edith and Jack sit up front, and I'd just like to point out that of the two of us, I'm a much easier date than Edith is. She insists she's too hot, and then she's too cold. She snaps at Jack to drive faster then tells him he's taking the bends like a madman.

At the steakhouse, she demands to be seated in a booth and makes Jack and me sit on the same side because she "has baby-birthing hips." Jack reminds her that she gave birth nearly fifty years ago and she stares right at him as she orders the most expensive bottle of wine on the menu in retaliation. I have no choice but to drink some of it too. Smirk.

I don't think Edith picked a booth to intentionally make me sit closer to Jack, but if she did, she's a miracle worker. We're basically squashed together. His denim-clad thigh is pressed against mine. The booth isn't tiny, but then, neither is he. I'm stuck between him and the wall, and I'm not sure which one is more unyielding.

We shift and get settled then he stretches his arm along the back of the booth, behind my shoulders. If we were fourteen and at the movies, I'd consider this, like, fifth base. His hand is near my shoulder, which is riiiiight around the corner from my boob. His finger brushes the strap of my dress innocently. I try to focus on my menu, but my eyes are glazed over with visions of what I would be doing if we were alone right now. I want to climb into his lap and eat him for dinner.

"Jesus, don't they have steakhouses back in California?" Edith asks, grabbing my attention. "You look overwhelmed by the five choices."

I laugh like I'm trying it out for the first time.

Jack saves me. "Want to share something?"

"Yes," I say like that's the best idea I've ever heard.

We put our order in with the waitress who's a friend of Edith's. Edith takes it upon herself to invite her to our yoga session tomorrow, which, after a few weeks of Edith spreading the word, now includes more than 30 people on any given

weekend. Last week, we had 48. Pretty soon, I'm going to have to find a stadium to host it.

"Oh, and it's a five-dollar donation," Edith adds quickly.

Up until then, I've never charged anyone for the class. I'd never even considered charging for it.

Our waitress doesn't even bat an eyelash at the cost. When she walks away, I lean forward.

"Since when am I charging people?"

Edith sips her wine casually. "Since now. You're a good teacher and five bucks is nothing. I spend that much on a damn cup of coffee down at Starbusk."

"You mean Starbucks," I correct.

"S what I said, Starbusk."

Jack is watching us with an amused smile.

"What do you think?" I ask.

"I think if people are willing to pay for your time, then clearly your time has value."

I sit up straighter. *Yes, right. My time is valuable.*

"Okay, Edith, I'll have you ask for the donations tomorrow and we'll see how people respond. If everyone runs back to their trucks and peels out, I'll just go back to doing it for free."

Once that's settled, I turn to the basket of warm rolls in the center of the table. I'm slathering whipped butter onto every crusty bit I can find when I hear my name from a few yards away.

I jerk my gaze up and see Tucker making his way toward us. I haven't seen him since the wedding, but we've talked. He called the farmhouse the day after to see if I was doing okay since he wasn't able to take me home. Jack was out working, so I happened to answer the phone first.

I smile. "Hi Tucker, good to see you."

Edith barely greets him. I realize now that she never really wanted us together. She was using him as a pawn.

Jack scoots a tiny bit closer to me. At this rate, my face will end up squashed between the wall and his bicep. My lips will pucker out like a fish.

“How are you guys?” Tucker asks, looking at no one but me.

“We’re fine. Jack is treating us to a dinner date,” Edith answers.

She enunciates the final word extra hard.

Tucker notices Jack’s arm around my shoulder and frowns. “Meredith, I tried calling you the other day, but you know how fickle that Blue Stone phone can be.”

I glance at Jack, and he doesn’t even bother feigning remorse. In fact, his face is a mask of indifference. It’s like he doesn’t even know Tucker is standing there. I want to poke him in the ribs and tell him to play nice.

“Oh, um, yeah.” I glance back up at Tucker. “Sorry about that. What’d you need to tell me?”

He glances away from the table. “Well, we should probably talk about it in private. It’s about your divorce.”

He says the word divorce like it’s nasty and pus-filled.

I frown. “What about it?”

He rocks back on his heels, understanding that anything he needs to say, he’ll have to say in front of Edith and Jack. “I was just going to offer you my legal advice pro bono, if you need it.”

“Not necessary,” Jack cuts in. “We’ve already got it covered.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize.” His gaze cuts to me. “Well, regardless, if you need any help, Meredith, you know where to find me.”

When he walks away, the three of us sit in awkward silence. My roll is still buttered and untouched. It feels weird to stuff my face at a moment like this, though just to be clear, I could still easily put away four to five buttered rolls at this very second.

“Since when do I have my divorce covered?” I ask my roll.

Jack sighs and moves his arm from around my shoulders. “I called my lawyer the other day and asked him about our options.”

“‘Our’ options?”

He clears his throat. “Your options.”

Edith excuses herself to use the bathroom then I look up and see her take a seat at the bar. Let it be known, I’ve never met a person smarter than Edith.

“It’s not that I’m not grateful, I am, I just...” I sigh and drop the roll. No one is sadder about that than me. “It feels wrong to have you help me with this, like I’m just running from one guy to another, looking to you to solve my problems.”

His dark brows crease. “Do you really think that or do you feel like you *should* think that?”

Oh.

Well...good question.

“I don’t know.”

A not insignificant part of me is worried what other people will think.

“We aren’t talking about a rebound here,” Jack continues. “I’m talking about your future, about you rebuilding your life and accepting help freely given.”

The edge of my mouth curls up. “Is it freely given though?”

He rears back, almost offended by the question. Still, it bears asking. “Of course it’s freely given. When I asked you the other night if you wanted me and Edith to be your people, this was part of the deal. You can walk out of my life tomorrow. Quit working for me. Date Tucker. Go back to your husband, and I’ll still be your person if you need me. That’s how it works.”

Well damn.

I’m tearing up inside a steakhouse while an overwrought country song plays overhead. How cliché.

“I appreciate what you’re saying, I really do, but think about it from my perspective. You’re holding all the cards. You’ve given me a place to live and a place to work”—I drop my voice in case the people in the booth behind us are listening —“not to mention what happened last night. *That* introduces a whole other slew of complications.”

“So let’s uncomplicate it.”

Oh shit.

“Do you not want to repeat what we did last night?” I ask quietly.

If so, what was all that making out we did this afternoon for?

“I do.”

“Are you firing me?”

“No.”

“Are you kicking me out of the shack? Because now that it’s adorable and trendy, I really like living in it.”

He finds that amusing. “No, you can live in the *chic shack* as long as you want.”

“Well then how are we uncomplicating things?”

“I think I’m going to hire another housekeeper, maybe one with housekeeping experience.”

“Don’t you like the way I fold your underwear?”

He cracks up at that.

“I’m doing it because it’s a lot of work, and I think if you had some help, you’d have more time to focus on what your next step should be.”

“Next step.”

“Yes, like what Edith was saying about charging people for the yoga class. That’s a good idea.”

Interesting...

“Well if you’re going to phase me out, I’ll need severance, and if we’re going to keep doing that other thing, I’ll need hazard

pay.”

He moves his arm back around my shoulder. “I’ll consider it.”

“Also, the new housekeeper can give Alfred his baths. I’m never doing that again.”

He’s wearing a panty-dropping smile as he says, “He likes you.”

“He likes everyone.”

“Tell that to the door-to-door salesman he chased down the road the other day.”

We are flirting. We are openly flirting, and I need to focus.

I straighten up and return my attention to the table. “Right, but what about what you just told Tucker? About having my divorce under control?”

“We can call my guy in the morning. He’ll explain it better than I can, but basically a lot depends on whether or not you come to an uncontested agreement on the terms of the divorce.”

I nod. “I’ve already decided that’s what I want.”

“What about alimony? My lawyer says you could easily get two or three years of spousal support.”

My stomach twists into a knot. “No. I don’t want anything from him.”

“Don’t throw it away just to spite him.”

I turn and look him square in the eye. “Think about what I’ve done for the last eight weeks. Do you think I would have willingly scrubbed toilets if it wasn’t absolutely necessary? Do you think I would have survived in that dingy shack with no A/C if there was any other way forward? I would gladly give up all the money in the world in exchange for not having to deal with him any longer.”

He nods. “Good. That means the divorce will probably be done as soon as possible.”

I glance down at his lips, suddenly overwhelmed by the urge to lay one on him.

“This is the sexiest family law conversation I’ve ever had on a date.”

He smiles. “Want to change the subject?”

“Will you do that thing with your finger again? Where you play with my dress strap?”

“Oh, I didn’t realize I was doing that.”

Our gazes lock, and I think if Edith weren’t making her way back over to us, he’d lean down and kiss me. Maybe it’s better that she is here; this way we have to eat our steaks instead of each other.

“Oh, don’t mind me,” Edith says when she sits down. “I’m just an old lady who can’t hear a damn thing in this loud-ass restaurant.”

Meredith

We make it home late after dinner and Edith announces very loudly to anyone within earshot that she's going to bed.

"And you two better go on too. That's my secret to good health, you know—eight hours every night!"

Jack walks me back to my shack, which is odd considering his bedroom is in the exact opposite direction.

I'm thinking of ways to draw him into the shack for a little nightcap (*Ooh, I called my sex lawyer and he's about to serve you with a big subpoena*), when he tells me he has to head over to San Antonio for a day trip early in the morning.

He might as well have just told me he's going off to war with the way my body reacts to the information.

"Why?"

What I really want to ask is, *Do you have to?*

"I have meetings with a grocery distributor there. We've been working on getting Blue Stone wine into their stores. There are a lot of details to hammer out and I need to be there to help my project manager."

"When will you get back?"

"Sometime after dinner."

I should not be depressed by this, but I am.

"Are you going to start Christine-ing me?"

"Never," he says, squeezing my hand. "I'll bring you back a souvenir."

Now we're talking. I perk up immediately.

Then, he throws a cherry on top. "And maybe the day after, you and I can go out on a real date, just the two of us."

“Really? I don’t know...Edith makes a great third wheel, like when she talked about her bunions on the way home? I would have never brought that up on a first date, but I liked the sincerity.”

He laughs at my stupid joke, which means he’s definitely into me.

When we reach the shack, he turns me to face him and hooks his hands around my waist. His fingers barely dip past the hem of my jeans as he squeezes and tugs me toward him.

“So this is good night?”

I tilt my head back to look up at him. His head is framed by stars. Out here, you can see millions of them.

“Or?” I ask, like a shameless flirt.

“Or I could kiss you?”

He’s bending down before he’s even finished the question and the last word is whispered against my lips right before his mouth presses to mine. My insides liquefy. My arms link around his neck, partly because I want to keep him right where he is, and partly because he’s so tall, I sort of have to hoist myself up to reach his lips without straining my neck.

Just like against the front door and in his office, our kisses go straight from zero to sixty. If a scientist stuck an old-fashioned thermometer between us, the mercury would blast straight out of the top.

His hand skims along the side of my breast and my brain says, *Yes! Let’s do this, big boy!* but he pulls back and presses his forehead to mine.

“It’s just that my meeting is really, really early tomorrow morning, and I have to be on point.”

“That’s okay, we can have sex really quickly.”

He laughs. “I want us to go slow. After everything you’ve been through, I want to be careful.”

“I’m not fragile.” I pinch my forearm to prove my point. “Look, see? That didn’t even hurt.”

He soothes the patch of slightly red skin with his hand. I swoon.

“You could come with me tomorrow?” he continues, obviously noticing how sad I am that he’s leaving.

I smile. “You go. Make all the deals, shake a bunch of hands, sign contracts, kiss babies. I’ll be here, holding down the fort with Edith.”

He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath (like he’s gathering every ounce of resolve inside of him), and then he steps back and releases me.

“So then I’ll see you when I get back?” he asks. “It could be pretty late.”

“I’ll stay up.”

He seems happy about that, stealing one last kiss before he turns back for the farmhouse.

I watch him walk away and a very clear thought flashes in my head like a neon sign. I try to ignore it and it starts glowing even brighter, as if someone flipped a switch to max brightness. I bat the thought away and my brain says, *Nice try*, then adds exclamation marks. In the end, I have no choice but to acknowledge the intensely blazing thought:

I AM FALLING IN LOVE WITH JACK MCNIGHT!!!!!!!!!!

* * *

If you’re curious, one day is made up of 24 hours, which is 1,440 minutes, or 84,000 seconds. 86,000 seconds feels like too long to go without Jack. Sure, technically, I went twenty-eight years without him, but now I’m counting seconds. So far, he’s only been gone for 10,800 of them; I have a lot more seconds to live through before he walks through that front

door again. Fortunately, life sees fit to make those seconds as interesting as possible.

While I'm scrubbing the upstairs bathroom, an unfamiliar black SUV pulls up on the gravel drive. It catches my attention for two reasons: it's fancier than any car I've seen at Blue Stone Ranch, and it doesn't park over near the farm trucks. It pulls up right in front of the house. I push to stand and peer out of the bathroom window just in time to see the driver's side door open and a tall, well-dressed man step out.

My husband, Andrew, has finally decided to come to Texas.

I had a feeling this day would come. I knew he would eventually track me down and show his face. Andrew has built up a large ego in recent years, and I imagine me leaving in the middle of the night was quite a blow to it. He's either here to demand I come home or to seek some kind of retribution. Either way, he'll want some kind of apology from me. He loved nothing more than when I groveled at his feet, begging for his forgiveness and love.

I hate the woman he turned me into, and I refuse to revert back to that outdated facsimile of myself—the subordinate housewife, the woman who took his verbal abuse for years without saying a word. I've changed.

He's staring up at the farmhouse with his hands on his hips, a look of disgust contorting his classically handsome face. He spits in the dirt. I move away from the window and whip my rubber gloves off.

I'm surprised; I thought I'd be more nervous than I am. I feel the exact opposite: calm and resolute. I walk out of that bathroom and down the stairs without a moment's hesitation. I feel like if I unbuttoned my shirt, I'd find a spandex superhero uniform.

I might not have invited him to come, but I'm glad he's here. I'm glad, because it dawns on me that he probably still thinks I'm the same old Meredith, ready to tremble at the mere sight of him. For the first time in our marriage, he doesn't know who he's messing with.

When I make it downstairs, I call out for Edith, but I don't get a reply. I guess she must have gone into town. *Good*. I head for the front door. Andrew's still standing on the gravel drive, apparently waiting for me to make an appearance.

I wonder how different this meeting would be if Jack was here. I doubt he'd let me face Andrew on my own, but that's exactly what I'm doing. I'm facing my demon all by myself.

It feels better than I imagined it would, similar to how it felt to leave him that night.

The screen door slams behind me as I step outside.

"Morning, Andrew," I say with an insincere smile.

His piercing gaze snaps to me and I see rage there like I've never seen before. I bet he's pissed he had to come all the way out here to talk to me. He hates wasting time; busy, important men like him never have enough of it.

"Nice of you to make the trip. For a while, I didn't think you'd bother. How was your flight?" I asked.

My voice is a sugar-dipped cone with whipped cream and a cherry on top.

"Cut the shit, Meredith."

My smile holds steady. "Manners, Andrew. Remember, you're in the south now. But, if you'd like to cut to the chase, I have some bad news: I'm not going back to California with you."

He sneers at the suggestion. "You honestly think I still want you? Look at yourself. Jesus."

He's talking about my work clothes, my t-shirt and jean shorts. My hair, which he only ever saw styled and perfect, is in a high ponytail with an abundance of flyaways. I don't think he's seen my face without a pound of makeup in a few years.

"Well, you traveled an awful long way just to tell me I look like shit, though I do recall you always had a flair for the dramatic. What is it that you came to hear? That you ruined my life?"

He laughs acerbically. “Ruined your life?! *Ruin*—” He shakes his head and pivots on his foot, turning away and wiping his mouth before he jerks back around and points a finger straight at me. “I gave you more than you fucking deserved. You think you’re the only pretty thing worth something? You’re a dime a fucking dozen.”

His words roll off me like I’m wearing insult-repellant gear. “I’ve heard this all before, Andrew. Nothing left in your little bag of tricks?”

Something in him snaps at that. “What did you just say to me?”

My voice is louder when I continue, “You’ve said that same exact thing a million times.” I wave my hand in continuous circles. “I’m ‘a dime a dozen’. Well gather up your dimes, sweetie, and go collect your dozens, because I’m done giving a shit about what you think of me.”

I think he’s going to lose his mind. I’ve never talked to him like this, but he’s more cunning than that. He collects himself so quickly that for the first time all day, a shiver of fear runs down my spine.

“That’s good.” He smirks. “You’ve got a little backbone now, huh? You think you can leave me and make a new life for yourself? Your sister tells me you’re the housekeeper for the guy who lives here. You like cleaning toilets? Mopping floors? If I’d known you liked to be on your knees that much, I wouldn’t have paid all that money to have a maid.”

It’s strange to me that I ever found him attractive. Looking at him now, his sharp bone structure seems too severe—cruel, even.

“Are you whoring yourself out to him too?”

His words hit too close for comfort, but I force a bored expression.

“You almost sound jealous.”

He snorts and angles his head back to the black SUV. I didn’t see her before, but there’s a pretty blonde perched on the front seat watching our exchange. I wonder if she’s one of the girls

he slept with during our marriage or if she's new. Either way, I feel bad for her. *Piece of advice for ya: get out while you still can.*

Whatever motive inclined him to send those flowers and apologetic note is dead and buried. Her presence is confirmation that Andrew isn't here to drag me back home with him—that, and the manila envelope clutched in his right hand.

“What's in the envelope? More love letters?”

“Divorce papers.” He says it like it's supposed to wound me, so I'm careful not to appear too gleeful. I don't want him knowing how badly I want out of this marriage. “I figured you'd stay here for a few weeks and then come crawling home, but these weeks without you have been nice. I realized how glad I was to be rid of you. You really were a boring fuck there at the end. I'd like to try my hand with someone who's a little more appreciative of the life I give them.”

I assume he means the mail-order blonde in the SUV.

“Did you come all the way here so you could tell me you're glad to be done with me? You could have just mailed the papers.”

“I was curious to see your new life.” He nods toward the farmhouse. “You think this new guy will want you after he finds out what an ungrateful cunt you are?” He must see me wince because he laughs. “Don't tell me you have feelings for him?”

His laughter takes a turn for the sinister, and I want to say something, want to tell him to go to hell, but my words die on my lips.

“Jesus Christ, Meredith. You're pathetic.”

I reach my hand out and speak, but my voice is barely above a whisper. “Give me the papers and leave.”

He holds them against his chest, taunting me. “You should be on your knees thanking me. Do you even realize what I did? I couldn't wait to be rid of you, so I called in a few favors. If

you sign these and get them to my lawyer by Monday, he'll be able to expedite the process."

"How long?"

"Four weeks."

In California, it's supposed to take six months.

I wonder what kind of strings he had to pull to get rid of me that quickly, but honestly, I don't care. I'm so excited I want to rip the envelope out of his hands. I won't though. I don't want to get that close to him.

"I need to have a lawyer look over everything."

He smirks. "If you think you'll be able to squeeze another cent out of me, you're wrong. We were only married for five years. My lawyer confirmed that you have no leg to stand on. You left me. It looks bad, don't you think? I'm the dotting husband who's been reaching out to your sister and sending you flowers while you can't even bother to call me back. In fact, everyone we know has been lovingly referring to you as the gold-digging disappearing act. It has a nice ring to it."

Just then, his attention cuts behind me as the screen door slams open. I glance back to see Edith step out onto the front porch with a shotgun resting by her side.

"There a problem out here?"

"Who the fuck are you?" Andrew snaps. "I'm having a conversation with my wife."

Edith narrows her eyes and glances thoughtfully into the distance. "Now, see, that's not how we greet people here in Cedar Creek. Would you like to try that again?"

The door to the SUV opens and the blonde steps out. "Andrew! C'mon, this is stupid. Let's go."

"Get back in the car!" he snaps.

I glance to Edith and shake my head. She doesn't drop the shotgun, though I don't think she plans on using it. With Edith, though, you never really know.

“I’ll have my lawyer look at the papers and then I’ll sign,” I tell Andrew. “After that, you leave me the hell alone.”

He tosses the envelope in the gravel at his feet and dust puffs up around it.

Even in the end, he couldn’t act like a decent human being. It’s a shame. If he’d just walked over and handed the envelope to me nicely, maybe Edith wouldn’t have cocked the shotgun and fired.

A few pellets ping off a trashcan in the distance and Andrew cowers, hands covering his head.

“Are you fucking insane?!”

Edith reloads the shotgun. “Senility *is* exceedingly common at my age.”

His girlfriend slams the car door and cowers behind the dash.

Andrew jerks up, eyes blazing. “I’m calling the cops!”

Edith pumps the shotgun. “Good. I’ve got the number for the station if you need it. Petey’ll probably answer. You let him know Edith McKnight’s the one ’bout to fill your sorry ass full of birdshot.”

He curses under his breath and runs for the SUV like he’s concerned she’s going to open fire again. I’m not 100% sure she won’t.

He puts the SUV in reverse and hightails it down the gravel drive. I have no doubt he was serious about calling the cops.

“Think you’ll get in trouble?” I ask, slightly worried.

Edith levels me with a bored stare. “Welcome to Texas, darlin’.”

Jack

I'm having lunch in San Antonio with the heads of the grocery chain on Monday afternoon when I get a call from Cedar Creek's sheriff. I excuse myself and walk outside before answering.

"Pete, what's going on?"

"Jack, hey. I don't want to worry you, but I have an Andrew Wilchester down here at the police station wanting to press charges against Edith, spoutin' off about attempted murder."

It takes a second for the name to click, but when it does, I see red.

"Wait, wait—say that again. Andrew Wilchester is there now? In Cedar Creek?"

"Got him right outside in the waiting room. Won't leave until I issue a warrant for Edith's arrest. From the looks of it, he's chewing out one of my deputies at this very moment. Better him than me."

"What's Edith got to do with anything? Did something happen at the farmhouse?"

"Sounds like it, though I haven't been able to get the full story from him. He's real worked up, rambling on and on about how his lawyers are going to take Blue Stone for all it's worth after locking Edith away. I think he really expects me to march down there and put your grandma in handcuffs. Can you imagine? I think she'd have me cuffed before I got within ten feet of her."

He's not making any sense. Why would Edith need handcuffs?

"Pete, start from the beginning. What happened?"

"Andrew showed up wanting to talk to one of your employees—Meredith? Claimed he had some business with her."

Apparently Edith didn't like the look of him, because she may have, well, fired at him with a shotgun."

Of course she did.

"Did anyone get hurt? How's Meredith? And Edith?"

"Everyone's fine, which is why I'm not too worried about this guy causing trouble. I do have an obligation to investigate, so I had Martinez go down to the ranch to take statements. The way this Wilchester guy kept going on, I half figured Edith would blast on him too, but there she was rockin' on the porch, inviting him inside for some sweet tea and homemade cookies. He's still over there, gettin' fat."

"Good. Keep him there, please, until I get back into town."

"Should I be worried about this guy?"

"I don't know, but if Andrew's that worked up, I don't want him going back by the house. I'd rather have you keep an eye on him until he settles down."

"I can't hold him here, but I can stall him."

"I can probably make it to the station in an hour at the most."

"You don't think it's a better idea for you to head back to Blue Stone?"

"I just need five minutes with him."

He lowers his voice. "Now listen, I don't consider Edith to be a threat to public safety, and besides, she was defending her own property, but if you hit him inside the station, we'll have to book you."

"Then tell him to wait outside the station."

"Jack," he warns, but I'm already heading back inside to excuse myself from the rest of lunch.

* * *

That drive back to Cedar Creek is a blessing and a curse—a blessing because it gives me time to cool down from my initial rage that Andrew had the audacity to show up on my property unannounced, a curse because that calmness doesn't last long. I have time to rebuild my anger a dozen times over, right up until I whip my truck into a parking spot at the police station beside a fancy black SUV.

When I walk inside, Andrew's still there, pacing in the waiting room like a caged animal. He's shouting about the "damn hillbilly police force wasting his time" and I don't hesitate. I don't think of the consequences. I think of the night Meredith drunkenly opened up to me about the abuse she sustained over the years, the twisted manipulated hold this sick fuck had over her, and I march right up to him and sock him square in the face.

My punch is solid. I wouldn't be surprised if I broke bone.

I'm in a daze as he hits the ground, knocked out cold.

Police officers rush over and put me in handcuffs.

* * *

Pete finds me in the holding cell, my hands between my knees, my gaze on the floor.

"Goddammit, I told you not to touch him," he admonishes with an annoyed tone.

I peer up as he pulls a keychain from his belt buckle and unlocks the door.

"Coulda killed him, you idiot. Then you'd really be up shit creek."

"Is he pressing charges?"

"Obviously—you heard what kinda guy he is. Luckily, most of the witnesses saw it as a little slap. Misdemeanor assault, \$500

fine most likely.”

I nod. “I doubt that blonde with him will corroborate that version of the story. She saw what happened.”

“Oh, she left about an hour ago, sick of this guy’s bullshit, most likely. Officers overhead her shouting that she was going back to California without him. As far as I can tell, it’s your word against his.”

He slides the cell door open and I push to stand.

“Best \$500 I ever spent.”

“Yeah, well, it’ll also go on your record, so don’t make this vigilante thing a habit.”

“I didn’t plan on hitting him. I just wanted to talk.”

He chuckles under his breath and pats my shoulder. “That punch sure looked like it was worth a thousand words.”

I don’t see Andrew again as I leave the station, and that’s a good thing. That one punch felt pretty good; a second one would probably feel even better.

I had time to cool off in that holding cell, but now I’m more anxious than ever to see Meredith. I want to know why Andrew came to town and what he said to her. I want to know if he threatened her in any way. I won’t allow it. I’ll get a restraining order, a fence, a fucking private army stationed at the front of Blue Stone if that’s what it’ll take for her to never have to see him again.

I’m relieved when I pull up at home and see a black-and-white parked out front. Officer Martinez is inside playing a game of Scrabble with Meredith and Edith. True to Pete’s word, there’s sweet tea and a plate of cookies spread out on the table. Martinez looks damn comfortable sitting there, but as soon as he sees me step inside, he shoots to his feet.

I tip my head in thanks. “Good to see you, Connor.”

“Things, uh, settle down at the station?”

His gaze shifts to my bloody knuckles and I wonder if he got word about the incident.

“Everything’s fine.”

I glance to where Meredith is sitting, eyes wide with worry. Without a word, she stands and rounds the table, walking toward me in a daze. There’s an emotion in her eyes I’ve never seen as she steps right up to me and wraps her arms around my waist. I’m still standing frozen as her forehead hits my chest and she squeezes me tight. A chain reaction happens so suddenly, emotions firing off one after another: anger replaced by relief, worry replaced by love. I bend down and press a kiss to the top of her head as her shoulders shake. I wonder what kind of day she’s had, if she was scared when Andrew showed up like that. I wish I’d been here with her and feel guilty that I wasn’t. I whisper that against her ear and she shakes her head, but there are no words.

Edith and Martinez excuse themselves and I wrap my hand around her neck so I can tilt her head back and look at her face.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, gaze flitting back and forth between her eyes.

I finally realize she’s not crying...she’s laughing.

“You should have seen Edith with the shotgun.”

“Tell me what happened with Andrew. Why was he here?”

She huffs out a little exhale and smiles—*smiles!*

“He actually came to hand-deliver divorce papers.”

Hope explodes into my chest. “You’re kidding.”

She steps back to retrieve a stack of papers from the coffee table so she can hand them off to me.

“Nope. Apparently, he’s as eager to get rid of me as I am to get rid of him. He said he has a way to expedite the process once I get them signed.”

I start riffling through the papers quickly. I’ll need a little while to read them, and of course I’ll pass them along to my lawyer, but they’re real, honest-to-goodness divorce papers. She’s not kidding.

“Why’d Edith fire the shotgun then?”

A little chuckle escapes as she shakes her head at the memory.

“Oh, he was being an asshole. Edith had had enough and wanted to scare him a little.”

“By trying to kill him?”

She rolls her eyes. “Is that what he said happened? The shot wasn’t even close. She was aiming a couple yards off.”

I smile at Edith’s gumption. “Andrew was trying to get attempted murder charges drawn up. She could have spent the rest of her life in some dingy jail cell all because she couldn’t help herself.”

“Ain’t a jury in the land that would convict me!” Edith shouts from the kitchen. Apparently, she didn’t go too far when she left us alone. “That pansy boy hit the deck like he was in the middle of a war zone. Total wimp if you ask me—that’s why he had to pick on Meredith, made him feel better about himself!”

Meredith and I exchange a smile and then her expression turns thoughtful.

“Wait...” Meredith says, frowning. “How’d you find out about all this? Aren’t you supposed to be in San Antonio?”

“Sheriff called me, let me know what had happened. I rushed here as soon as I heard about it.”

Her eyes narrow on my rumpled clothes then her gaze falls to my bloody knuckles.

“You rushed straight here?” she asks, picking up my hand to inspect it.

Her bottom lip juts out as she examines the damage. It’s nothing.

“I might have made a quick stop at the police station first, but I did bring you the souvenir I promised.”

It’s one of those plastic police badges they pass out to kids on school field trips. It proclaims the wearer to be a Junior Deputy Sheriff. I’m pretty sure it’s legit.

“Welcome to the force.”

Her blue eyes whip up to me. She isn't impressed. “Jack!” she admonishes. “Please tell me you didn't do anything to Andrew.”

“All right,” I say, leaning down and kissing her cheek. “I didn't do anything.”

“Jack!” She groans as I head toward the kitchen. I need to clean my knuckles off.

Edith is in there, sitting at the table, sipping her tea.

Meredith tries to recruit her onto her team. “Your grandson bloodied his knuckles in a fight with Andrew!”

Edith seems barely interested.

“Technically, it wasn't a fight,” I say as I run my hand under cold water. “I punched him once and knocked him out.”

Now *that* elicits a smile from Edith.

Meredith points her finger at the two of us. “You two! I *swear!* Violence is not the answer—you can't just go around blasting shotguns and knocking people out.” She's pacing now, getting herself real worked up. “What if he presses charges? What if he gets the cops involved?!”

I remind her that the cops are already involved.

“What if you go to jail?!” Her eyes go extra wide then and her hand shoots to her mouth.

There's no talking her down. I tell her everything will work out the way it's supposed to, but she doesn't believe me until we get a call from the sheriff a few hours later informing us that Andrew is dropping all charges.

I put him on speaker and we all listen. Apparently, my lawyer came up with half a dozen charges to counter with, things like trespassing and disorderly conduct. He even went so far as to accuse Andrew of stalking and informed him that Meredith would be filing for a restraining order. Whether or not these charges would stick in a court doesn't matter. Whatever Andrew expected to find in Texas, I'm sure it didn't include

Edith and me. My suspicions are proved right when he leaves a heated voicemail for Meredith that night, informing her that he thinks they should behave like adults from this point forward.

“Sign the damn papers and let’s get this over with,” he implored, right before the voicemail cut off.

She drops the signed paperwork in the mail first thing Monday morning.

Meredith

In the end, I have to take money from Andrew. When they drew up the divorce papers, he and his lawyer worked out a figure that was deemed more than adequate compensation for our five-year marriage. If you're wondering, it was \$500,000. To Andrew, that's pennies. To me, that's half a million dollars. Half a million shirts I don't have to fold. Half a million plates I don't have to wash. Still, I would have turned the money down altogether, but my lawyer made it clear that the quickest way forward would be to agree to their terms and move on. If I wanted to decline the money, I'd have to draft a new set of documents and pay the requisite legal fees. I don't exactly have money to burn at the moment, so...fine, *whatever*. I'll take it.

I've thought a lot about what I'll do with the money, but it's obvious, really. The second it's deposited in my account, I'll be donating to three different women's shelters around Central Texas, the region I'm happy to call my new home. I know I could use the money to pad my savings account or buy a house or start a business, but it doesn't feel right—not only because I don't want Andrew's dirty money anywhere near me, but also because I don't need that money. Most women in these shelters have no one by their side. I know how that feels. I was there once not long ago, and if my money can help lighten their load even a little, I'm more than happy to send it their way. Also, in case you think I'm doing it for completely selfless reasons, I also get a kick out of the fact that Andrew's money is going to help these women. He'd hate it. He doesn't have a philanthropic bone in this body.

Anyway, the fact that I'm giving his money to those women makes me smile at least twice a day. If I didn't want to leave well enough alone, I'd ask the organizations to each build a new wing: The Andrew Wilchester Shelter for Women Escaping From Andrew Wilchester. Who knows, I still might.

It's not like his rage can hurt me anymore because—*cue confetti drop*—our divorce was finalized today.

I got a call from my lawyer at 1:35 PM and I sank down to the floor then wept like a little baby. It was totally unexpected. If someone had asked how I would react when I got that call, I would have assumed I'd pop some champagne, blast Beyoncé's "Single Ladies", and dance until I got a cramp in my side. Instead, I crumbled into a heap of tears and snot. It was like when Frodo finally dropped that damn ring into the fire after three long-ass books full of trouble for himself: *It's over. It's done.*

There was no way to pinpoint the exact source of my tears. It was relief, of course, but there were also conflicting, strange emotions like fear and anger and pity. I cried for the younger version of myself, the naive girl who fell in love with a monster. I cried for the fact that I'd wasted five good years in a manipulative marriage before I finally had the courage to leave. I cried because even though I want to be independent and in control of my future, a part of me is still scared I won't be able to do it. I also cried because I'm scared of the scars. I don't want this to harden my heart. I want to learn from my mistakes without swearing off love altogether. I want to make my own money and pave my own path without assuming that leaning on a partner makes me weak, stupid, or crippled.

Even after my ordeal, I still believe in the power of love, and maybe I owe that to Jack. I wonder if I'd still be so reluctant to shun love if I wasn't currently *in* love.

An objective observer would say it's too soon. They would purse lips and cross arms, admonishing me for even *considering* love at a time like this. They would declare that I should be single for exactly one year and one day and not a moment sooner, that I must take time for self-discovery (*Have you read Eat, Pray, Love?!*) before I even consider opening my heart to another man. If this were the 1850s, they would demand I wear mourning black out in public and shun all social engagements.

I get it. I really do. It would be great if life worked like that. How convenient would it be to meet someone special at the

exact right time it was deemed socially acceptable?

The truth is, life introduced me to Jack less than 24 hours after I left Andrew. Insane, I know, and sure, at the time, I didn't see him as a potential love interest. In fact, given the choice between lover and potential murderer, I would have put money on the latter.

But the great thing about my life is that it's *my* life, not their life. If *they* think I should let my heart turn to stone, that's okay. They can think that, but I'll be over here, accepting love at face value. It's simple if you don't think too hard. I want to love Jack, fiercely, naively, and just as strongly as if love had never burned me in the past, because the alternative? Turning into a miserable shrew? Yeah, hard pass on that.

* * *

Today is a big day, not just because my divorce is finalized, but because I'm going to see Helen. She and Brent returned from Europe earlier in the week and they're hosting a small dinner party to show off the renovations on their house. I've been nervous about it since she first invited me, planning and re-planning my outfit five different times. She and I have talked a bit over the last few weeks, but it's been surface-level bullshit, the stuff I hate. Tonight will be different. I wrote her a long letter, and I mean *long*. It's 10 pages, front and back. In it, I apologized for my mistakes and outlined exactly what I want for our future. I could vomit just thinking about it. It might seem strange. She's my sister, but we've never really *been* sisters. I want to give it a try. I'm basically handing her my heart and openly declaring that even though we each have plenty of reasons to be bitter, we deserve more than that. I want us to be close and confide in one another. I want her in my life from here on out.

I told Jack about the letter the other day.

“It’s ten pages.”

“Are you going to bind it in paperback or hardback?”

I shoved him. “It’s long because I had a lot to say!”

He laughed. Hopefully Helen doesn’t laugh.

I have my work cut out for me. Our relationship is damaged with a capital D. Andrew was a wedge between us, along with distance, deep-seated jealousy, and the ten-year age gap. Now, I’m going to be the glue—sticky, annoying, and resilient. She is going to love me because she has no other choice. That’s the plan.

Edith and I ride together to Helen’s house; Jack had to run over to the restaurant first so he’s meeting us there. I’m quiet in the car, cradling the letter on my lap. Edith asks me if I’m nervous and I reply with a noncommittal grunt. Truthfully, yes, I’m either nervous or my stomach has stopped working. I couldn’t manage food all day, and my hands are shaking. I tell Edith we should keep circling the block as we pull up out front.

“I grew up in the wake of the Depression—I’m not wasting gas,” she says before parking.

Edith isn’t an enabler, and that’s a good thing. She gives me the kick in the ass I need, both in the car and midway up the path when I turn back and tell her I left something at the farmhouse. She grabs ahold of my dress and tugs me all the way to the front door.

When it’s swept open, it’s like I’m seeing my sister for the first time in five years. Her light brown hair is trimmed short, just below her chin. Her simple wrap dress accentuates her curves and her glowing skin. I’m glad to see she looks happy.

I hold up the bouquet we picked up on the way—sunflowers. I remember she used to love them when she was younger, and I tell her so. She smiles.

“They’re still my favorite.”

I’m pleasantly surprised to see Daniel and Leanna along with a few other guests in the living room. Helen introduces me as

her baby sister, and maybe it's wishful thinking, but I think I can almost detect pride in her voice. After I wave to the room at large, I follow Helen into the kitchen.

"Can I help with anything?"

She's got her hands full finishing up dinner and I really hope she says yes, because this is so awkward and I have nothing to do with my hands. I can't keep wringing them out. I try crossing my arms, but then I seem tense. I prop one on my hip and try to act natural.

"Sure, can you put those flowers in water? There's a vase in that cabinet over there."

As I trim and arrange them, she tells me about Europe. She says it was the trip of a lifetime, but she and Brent are both happy to be back home.

"We walked a ton, but I still gained ten pounds. It's all those damn croissants! I think I ate six a day. Starting tomorrow, Brent and I are going on a diet."

"I think you look great. You have that post-travel glow. But, if you want, I have a few healthy recipes I've been making for Jack and Edith lately. I can write them down for you."

After we finish talking about her trip, we're silent for a few minutes as she puts me to work mixing up the salad ingredients. We have things to talk about. The letter is burning a hole in my purse and I know she knows about the divorce. I mentioned it the other day in a text.

"Have you heard from Andrew lately?" I ask.

"Didn't I tell you I blocked his number?"

She says it so casually that I don't think I hear her right.

"*What?*"

She glances over her shoulder. "Yeah. After Jack told me what happened when he came down to Texas, I blocked his ass."

Wow. Um, okay.

Talk about the end of an era.

I'm so shocked, I have nothing to say, so I apologize. "I'm sorry about...well, everything."

She sets down the spoon she was using to stir the pasta. "Please don't apologize, okay? I didn't want to get into this tonight, not with everyone here, but—" She breaks eye contact and glances away, taking a deep breath. "I was so wrong about...a lot actually." I hold stock-still as she continues. "This situation has been hard for me to navigate. I've always wanted the best for you, and I thought that meant staying with Andrew. You have to understand, Meredith"—her voice cracks—"I thought you were happy. I really did."

I'm around the island and pulling her into a hug before she can even finish.

"I know, I know. I'm sorry too. Had I not cut you out of my life, you would have known. You would have believed me." I pull back and try on a big smile. It feels tight and awkward. "Let's get coffee this week, yeah? You and me? I have a letter to give you, but I'll wait and give it to you then. I don't want to make you cry at your dinner party."

She laughs and shakes her head, drying her eyes with the back of her hand. "I swore I wouldn't cry when I saw you, but it just feels so strange to have you here in Cedar Creek. I still can't believe you're actually staying."

"I really like it here."

"I'm glad. I never imagined you and I would live this close to one another again."

After we pull ourselves together, we go back to prepping dinner and don't talk about anything too heavy. She tells me she's excited to go back to work on Monday.

"I know it seems weird, but I actually missed it."

I laugh. "Well Jack definitely missed you too. He's been counting down the days until you get back."

She smiles. "Honestly, I don't know how you do it. I work mainly from home and I go out to the ranch a couple times a week for meetings, but you live there! God, you must be so sick of him by the end of the day."

“Oh, umm...”

Yeah...Helen doesn't know about Jack and me, mostly because we've only been officially dating for a month, and also because I'm scared of what she'll say when she does find out. A part of me fears she'll be quick to judge me.

I even tried to strategize with Jack about this dinner party last night. I was lying with him on the couch while we pretended to watch TV. Really, we were making out with one ear perked for Edith's car. His hands were underneath my bra and mine were working on the zipper of his jeans. We've been like that lately—hot and heavy—and it's driving me crazy. Jack has kept us safely tucked away in the foreplay zone. No sex, because there's apparently no rush. He doesn't want to take advantage of me—OF ME! Is he kidding?! I'm about to march down to the barn to find some rope so I can tie him to my bed and take advantage *of him!* No amount of convincing on my part will work either. He has it in his head that he needs to work us up to that point slowly, *tortuously*. I am insistent. I look him square in the eyes and say plainly, “Jack, I want it.” The other day, I wrote it on a sticky note and slapped it on his computer screen: *SEX @ TONIGHT*. I even drew two anatomically correct stick figures in case he needed a visual. It didn't work.

Anyway, last night, I tried to talk to him about the dinner party in between kisses.

“Should we act like we aren't dating?”

“No.”

“Okay, but Helen doesn't know about us. Should we tone it down a little?”

As it is, our touchy-feely lovey-doveyness brings Edith to the brink of nausea at least once a day. I don't want to make Helen feel that way too.

“You're overthinking things.”

Men, *seriously*. I'm ‘overthinking things’? Doesn't he realize this is a fragile situation? Doesn't he realize I'm trying to

mend my relationship with Helen and we need to handle this with tact or everything could blow up in our face?

That's why when Helen says, "You must be so sick of him by the end of the day," my answer is, "Oh, umm..."

She doesn't even notice my fumbling, but now my nerves are stronger than ever. We can't do this. I can't date Jack. I'll just break it off with him and then I'll never have to tell Helen, and sure I really think I love him, but there are other fish in the sea and lots more cowboys where he came from. *Phew, glad that's settled.*

"Jack!" someone shouts in the living room, and the subject of all of my fantasies has just arrived. I can hear him greeting guests in the other room with that husky, deep voice, and my heart is a fluttering little mess. My hands are shaking so badly, I have to stop chopping carrots.

Helen smiles. "Oh, Jack's here!"

I keep my mouth zipped shut. The only reaction that won't give us away is a non-reaction.

When I don't move, she quirks a brow. "Aren't you going to go say hi?"

I reply like this: "Oh...hmm...um...yeah...ha!"

She looks at me like I've just suffered a stroke in her kitchen, and then Mr. Sexy Cowboy walks through the doorway and all my well-planned tact flies straight out the window because he's so handsome, my mouth waters.

"There you are," he says with a smile.

Helen glances between us like she's confused. I try for the same expression. *Yes, I know, Helen—why is he looking at me like he's seen my panties up close and personal? So strange!*

Jack isn't having it. He marches right up to me, bends down, and presses a kiss to my lips. My knees buckle a little. When he's made his point, he pulls back, wraps his hand around my waist, and turns us to face Helen.

"Helen, your sister was worried about telling you that we're dating, but you know I've always preferred to be direct."

Oh.

My.

God.

I drop my face into my hands.

“Wait...*what?!*” she exclaims.

What a fun way to die—of pure mortification, right in the middle of my sister’s newly remodeled kitchen.

“For how long?”

“Oh, I don’t know...a month?” Jack answers nonchalantly.

She doesn’t exactly sound upset, which gives me enough courage to glance up at her. Her hand is on her mouth and her eyes are welling up with some fluid that looks a lot like tears.

I cringe and rush toward her to grab her shoulders so she’s forced to listen to me. “I swear this is as unexpected to me as it is to you. I hated him when I first moved here!”

Jack nods. “It’s true. I was a real asshole. Also, she wasn’t exactly the ideal hire.”

“But then we sort of became friends?” I look to him for help. “Right? I don’t know.”

“No, it’s been more than that on my end for a while—since the rope swing.”

My mouth drops open. “Even then?”

He shrugs, all confident and unruffled by this obviously awkward conversation.

Wow. Okay.

Then, in the most shocking turn of events, Helen yanks a towel off the counter and rushes over to pop Jack’s bicep.

“Jack McKnight! I asked you to help my little sister get back on her own two feet, not to leg-sweep her into your damn bed!”

She winds up the towel again, but he’s learned his lesson and moves out of the way before she gets him again.

He holds up his hands in defense. “I did help her!”

“You better not be taking advantage of her,” she snaps with a protective tone.

I blush a dark red. “*Believe me*, he’s not.”

Jack grins at that, which only pisses Helen off more. She’s really going to bat for me, which is definitely a new thing. I like it.

It takes a bit more convincing before Helen will calm down and stop growling at him about dating “her baby sister”, but she does eventually come around. In fact, she tears up she’s so happy for us.

“You two—” she sniffles. “I can’t believe it. If you’d asked me before, I would have said it’d never work, but now that I see you together, it makes perfect sense.” She’s shaking her head. “Jesus! What else are you going to surprise me with?! You two aren’t engaged are you? *Oh my god*, am I going to be an aunt?!”

I don’t bother telling her it’s actually impossible for me to be pregnant at the moment. Instead, I laugh and shake my head. “I swear this is it. No more surprises.”

After that, the rest of the night is a whirlwind. Jack and I sit beside each other during dinner and though I’d like to crawl over and sit in his lap, I resist and am a very good dinner guest. I keep my hands to myself, even when, as Helen serves dessert and we’re all sipping coffee, Jack leans back and drops his arm on the back of my chair. I want to reach over and touch his thigh, but I don’t trust myself. My libido has a hair-pin trigger at this point. Sure, I’ve had orgasms, and don’t get me wrong, they’ve been W-O-N-D-E-R-F-U-L, but there’s something missing, something I want even more—something I’ve decided I’m finished waiting for.

Meredith

Neither one of us is talking on the drive home. The radio is playing softly in the background, and we'll be back home in fifteen minutes...fifteen minutes of quiet country roads. I look back over my shoulder and see one of his jackets in the back of the truck, probably forgotten from winter.

On our right, there's nothing but cornfields. On the left, rolling hills and oak trees.

"Does this land belong to Blue Stone?"

He nods. "It starts back near the edge of town and stretches this way a couple miles."

Good.

"Pull over up there, where the road cuts into the cornfield."

"Why?"

"I want to see something."

"A cornfield?"

Not exactly.

Despite the skepticism in his tone, he listens and pulls off the road. We dip between the rows of corn.

"Keep going." The road turns to dirt and there's nothing but stalks as far as the eye can see. We're at least a mile from the main road, not another soul in sight.

"This is good," I say, unbuckling my seatbelt and reaching into the back for his jacket.

He puts the truck in park and turns, a question in his eyes, but I don't give it time to surface. I hop out of the truck and round the back so I can lower the tailgate and climb up. Fortunately, it's empty and pretty clean—not that it would stop me if it wasn't.

Jack cuts the engine and steps out, leaving the door open.

He doesn't realize we'll be staying a while.

"Might want to close your door or that overhead light will kill your battery."

"Why don't you tell me what you have planned?"

I shake out his jacket and drop it on the bed of the truck. I set my phone down and Madonna's "Like a Virgin" plays softly from the speakers.

"Oh my god," he says, shaking his head.

"Haven't you figured it out by now?" I ask, stepping to the edge of the truck bed and leaning down to prop my hands on the ledge. I smirk and he steps right up so I can kiss him. His hand wraps around my neck and his fingers twine through my hair, keeping me bent there while he deepens the kiss.

His fingers massage my neck. His tongue skims against mine and my arms start shaking from the weight of holding myself up. I smile and break the kiss, pressing the back of my hand to my lips.

His eyes are alight with mischief, but he's still there on the ground. Maybe I'll need to do a bit more convincing.

I move to the first button on my sundress. There are five up top. Each one will reveal a little more of my pale cream bra—the same bra I wore the day we jumped off the rope swing.

"Y'know, I'm legally a single woman as of today."

His brow arches, but his eyes are on my fingers as I slowly tug each button free.

"That means your excuses have all run out."

He shakes his head and waves for me to get down. "Let me take you back to the farmhouse, to a bed."

"This is a bed—well, a truck bed. Are you worried someone'll see us?"

My taunt brings a little smirk to his lips. He wipes it away and glances down the road, contemplating something. I want to

know what he's thinking. I want to know how much more convincing it'll take before he climbs up here.

All five buttons are free and I push the strap of my dress down my shoulder.

He's watching me, mesmerized.

"*Meredith*," he warns.

"*Jack*."

His brown eyes implore me to get down, but I shake my head and offer up a sweet smile.

I've never stripped like this for a man, but it's exhilarating. I know he wants me as much as I want him. I know he's scared to hurt me, but I'm not as fragile as he thinks. In fact, I think I've proven pretty resilient these last couple months.

I push the second strap of my dress down, and—*oops*—the fabric falls to my waist. His eyes skim down, blazing a path across my bare skin. The humor is wiped clean. Now he's looking at me like a man who's a little bit angel and a whole lotta devil.

A summer breeze picks up strands of my hair and wraps me in a gentle warmth. Goose bumps bloom across my skin, and all the while, he stands there, watching me.

I tug the rest of my dress down and kick my shoes off with it. I'm standing there in my underwear, exposed and vulnerable. He could still force me to get down. He could drag me to the farmhouse and tuck me into bed, but I don't think he wants to wait any longer either. I think he's sick of being the responsible one.

With a groan and a tug of his hand through his hair, he turns and whips the truck door closed. The light cuts off and we're left under the stars. I blink, trying to force my eyes to adjust faster, but the loss of that sense heightens all the rest. I'm jumpy and nervous as he rounds the truck and hops on up.

"I hope you know what you're doing," he warns with a husky tone before his hands find my waist and he pulls me to face him.

My bare leg brushes against his denim-clad thigh and he squeezes, holding me tight. His chest crushes mine and I feel so small, so out of my league all of a sudden.

His head dips down and his breath hits my hair. I shiver even before he presses a kiss just below my ear.

“Have you ever had sex in the bed of a truck?” I ask, breathless.

He laughs. “I like to treat women a little better than that.”

“Oh yeah?”

He nuzzles against my ear. “I don’t think you realize how uncomfortable it’s going to be for you.”

I smirk and kiss his cheek. “Not if I’m on top.”

And I will be. Tonight, my fantasy is coming true.

We kiss like that, standing in the bed of his truck until I’m panting and writhing and acting like I’m going to spontaneously combust if he doesn’t fulfill my every want and need ASAP. My hands have done the heavy lifting, unbuttoning his jeans and yanking them off as fast as possible. His shirt is gone too, hanging limply on one of the cornstalks after I tossed it out of the truck bed impatiently.

He tugs me down to sit on his lap as his back rests against the cab of the truck. I straddle him and smile.

This is exactly what I wanted.

My bra is gone as quick as his shirt and then there’s the most blissful few seconds of skin on skin, soft breasts against hard muscle. We both sigh against each other and he winds his fingers in my hair, tilting my chin until my mouth is perfectly positioned for him. I want to keep kissing him until my lips stop working, until they’re so chapped that I can’t even talk, but I want something else even more. I roll my hips against him like the beginning of a lap dance.

There’s a deep groan from the base of his throat and it’s like I just sparked a match. I like that sound. I want to coax that sound out of him again and again.

It's just us in this field with nothing but time. I kiss my way down his chest and then stand.

He stares up at me, and his expression does all the talking, replacing all the hatred Andrew filled my head with. His expression is love, and need, and adoration. His eyes are smoldering as I gently push my underwear down and step out of them.

The moon is nearly full and bright enough that I'm pretty sure he can see every inch of me.

I smirk and point down. "Your turn."

He laughs. "Oh yeah? So I have to put my ass cheeks on cold metal? Interesting how that worked out."

"Oh!" I snap. "That's why I brought the jacket!"

I'd almost forgotten about it.

He stands and I situate the fabric. He tugs off his boxer briefs and my mouth waters. I fist my hands by my sides and do a nice, slow once-over of him. It's a lot to take in, like a *whole* lot. He chuckles under his breath and reaches for my hand, tugging me down onto him again. This time, though, he spins me around so my back hits his chest. It's a new angle, and now we're both facing out to where the starry sky meets the horizon.

"Lie back against me," he says, easing me toward him until my head rests against his shoulder. He cradles me there with one hand around my waist and the other tugging my thighs apart. My knees splay out like butterfly wings and then he traces soft circles up the inside of my thigh.

Suddenly I feel exposed. Suddenly I feel like we're out in the middle of nowhere and anyone could wander up at any second.

"Are you sure we're alone?"

He chuckles. "It's a little late for that, don't you think?"

Oh god, what have I done?

He kisses my cheek. "Relax."

The second half of that word coincides with his finger sliding inside me. My back arches and *can we get this man a slow clap because he really knows what he's doing*. He adds a second finger while his thumb skims little circles across my most sensitive area, the spot where all my hopes and dreams live. I wrap my hands around his neck and hold on for dear life. His other hand (the one not currently BLOWING MY MIND) wraps around my chest and palms my breast. Details hit me from every sense: warm, floral summer air, callused hands, hard muscle, smooth wetness. Any residual shyness has flown out the window. I'm splayed out on top of him like I'm on a pool float, basking in the summer sun, but this is better. I'm basking in Jack and I tell him that. He laughs and his chest rumbles and then his fingers start sliding faster.

I was ready for him as soon as we turned off the main road. I was even more ready for him after we started kissing in our underwear. Now—*now*, I'm a puddle, barely sentient. I'll come any second if he keeps moving his fingers, pumping them into me like that. My hands turn into tiny hooks as he drags his fingers out slowly and brushes soft circles. It's like he's giving me a preview of what's to come. My toes are already curling. I can feel the warning signs—those first delicious sparks—and then I realize I'm speaking. I'm begging him to stop. I know what it feels like to have him bring me to the brink of oblivion like this. It's so good—applause-worthy—but I will not be distracted from my end goal. I AM GOING TO HAVE SEX WITH THIS HOT COWBOY IN THE BED OF A PICKUP TRUCK LIKE IT'S MY CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT.

I tell him this, too, and now we're both laughing, but I'm not distracting him enough, because he's teasing my breast in a way that's making it hard to form complete sentences. I know what he's doing. He likes this position where he's in charge and I'm nothing but a gasping mess of want. He promises me he'll make me come again, but NO. I am done waiting. I push his hand away and spin around, reaching for his crumpled jeans.

“Please tell me you keep a condom in your wallet.”

If not, I'll fashion one out of something—a corn husk, perhaps woven grass.

My aim is to get his wallet from his back pocket, but I'm so impatient, I just end up pawing at his jeans like an animal who lacks opposable thumbs. We're laughing as he yanks them away from me and extracts the condom, tears it open, and rolls it on with such precision, such grace. He could go to the Olympics for condom application. It's obvious he's done this before, and I know I'm in for a treat. I'd rub my hands together like a little evil mastermind but they're currently occupied with his very tempting pectoral muscles.

I sit down on his lap and touch every surface I can get my hands on. Yes, I realize I'm so close to having him inside me. I can feel him beneath me, stiff and demanding, but now maybe I'm not in the same hurry I was a second ago. I have him right where I want him. All that hard, tan muscle is just sitting there waiting for me to touch it. That chest is just the tip of the iceberg. His shoulders are something else. I take hold of them and try to shake him. He doesn't budge. I move my hands down to his biceps and squeeze, trying to see if I can close my fist. I make it halfway around.

"It feels like you're trying to size up what part of me you want to eat first," he says with a lazy smile.

I smile wickedly, and then I bend down and sink my teeth into his shoulder, not hard, but he still reaches around and grips my ass. I yelp and release him. It's tit for tat.

I go back to my exploration. I'm charting unmapped territory, staking claims with tiny Meredith Avery flags. It's important to be thorough. I don't let a single inch escape my notice, not his tight abs or the hair that trails down, down, *down*. He's tan everywhere, warm everywhere, *hard* everywhere.

"Not in such a hurry now?" he teases, right before he skims his hands up from my ass and grips my hips. He uses his hold on me to drag me back and forth across his length, and I think one of my eyes starts to twitch. He's taunting me. He's wearing a devilish smirk I try to wipe away with a kiss, but that was a mistake, because now he's *still* dragging me back and forth

and he's kissing me senseless. He slides his tongue into my mouth and this isn't even foreplay anymore, this is the best sex I've ever had and we aren't even doing it yet. A ripple shoots up my spine, and I pat his shoulder like I'm tapping out of a fight.

"No...no more of that."

There are heavy, hot breaths in between each of my words.

This is falling apart. I'm falling apart. I was the one to initiate this little bone-a-rama. I was supposed to be the one rocking his world, but there's no more delaying. We are having sex right now, and if it kills me, then so be it. I lived a good life. Adios.

"I was going to do this sexy thing where I tease you until you're weeping with want," I admit.

"Oh yeah?" he taunts. "Go ahead."

I spin a little circle on his chest. It's the manliest thing I've ever seen, a broad plane with a sprinkling of dark hair.

"Ha ha. Yeah, right. I think I've lost feeling in half my body. My heart is only pumping blood to my nether regions."

"If it helps, I think you're sexy as hell."

My brow perks up. "That *does* help."

He grinds his very hard, very erect length against me. It's a sure sign that he's as turned on as I am. Maybe my plan didn't backfire as much as I thought it did?

With a burst of courage, I reach down and grip him in my hand. It's, *ahem*, bigger than I'm accustomed to, but hey, that's what they say about things in Texas.

This is happening. He reaches up to grip my hips in his hands, holding some of my weight for me. It makes it easier to push onto one foot and angle myself over him so that together, we can guide me down until he slides into me the first few inches. I hiss, surprised by the tight fit. I ease off a bit, but the second he's gone, I crave him again.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

It's sweet, the idea that if I wasn't okay, we'd stop. He could crack my pelvis and I would demand he keep going.

"Here," he says, moving my free hand to his shoulder at the same time he lifts some of my weight off him. Now I have a better angle and I can ease down onto him gentler this time, bit by bit so it's not painful. It's earth-shatteringly sexy, being filled up while he stares into my eyes, watching for any sign of pain or hesitation. I clench. He groans. I exhale, relax, and he slides deeper.

I'm not all the way on him, but for now, I'm at my limit. I sink down on my knees and wrap my hands around his neck, kissing him and showing him how insanely hot this is, how perfectly right it feels to be here with him.

He brushes my hair behind my shoulder then wraps his palm around my neck. My pulse jumps against his thumb. "How does it feel?"

I don't answer him. Instead, I lean back and smile. The look I'm going for: moonlit goddess of the fields. The look I'm probably nailing: escaped sex addict, armed and dangerous.

I decide to turn the tables.

"How do *you* feel?"

He looks at me like I'm simple. "Are you kidding?"

"I can back off—"

With lightning speed, his hands move to my waist and he tugs me off him a little before lifting his hips and filling me again. My reaction is a wonderfully sexy eyes-rolling-into-the-back-of-my-head move.

"Again," I demand like a spoiled toddler. "*Moremoremore.*"

He lifts me up then drags me back down. I arch my back and my loose hair brushes the base of my spine. I'm staring up at the sky when his lips brush against one of my breasts. I'd forgotten all about my breasts. I'd forgotten they even exist, how amazingly sensitive they feel as he brushes his tongue across them. *Hooookay there.* This cowboy just became a *cowman*.

He keeps moving me up and down, on and off him, doing the heavy lifting so I'm left with nothing to do but enjoy the sparks of pleasure building inside me. My nails bite into his shoulders. I'm probably leaving crescent moon-shaped divots, but I don't care, because my hips are relaxing and eventually, I slide down all the way onto him and his hip bones meet mine and now this is the point at which my brain can no longer translate simple messages. It exists solely to process his mouth on my breasts and his hand circling between my thighs and his hardness filling me up.

“Jack...*Jack*.”

I'm trying so hard to delay my orgasm, but it's like trying to prop up a house of cards in a tornado. We press our foreheads together and our lips barely touch. I can feel myself clench around him and my shoulders sag as a jolt of pleasure runs down my spine. Another shock follows right after, and there's no more holding off. I'm tipping, tipping, *tipping*... I want him to know what he's doing to me, how sufficiently he's shattering me from the inside out. I tell him, whispering single, choppy words against his lips as my orgasm wrecks me. I want to say more. I want to tell him I love him, but I won't because that's cliché and maybe he'll think I only love him when he's doing this to me, as if, for the rest of our lives, we'll have to bone 24/7 to keep the love alive. *I'll have a skinny almond milk latte—yes, YES!—and a blueberry scone—right there, harder!* But that couldn't be further from the truth. I loved him before this moment. I loved him at the wedding, when he was sitting all alone on that pew. I loved him when he slept on the floor of the shack, scared I might not make it through the night. I loved him when he kissed me right in front of Helen earlier, consequences be damned.

I could tell him that, but instead, I show him. My lips are on his throat and our chests are pressed together so tightly, you couldn't pry us apart if you tried. We're both damp now, sticky and hot. His fingers work their magic and he makes me come again and the second orgasm hits so quickly, I feel like he's cheating. He's memorized where I like to be touched, how I like to be touched. I tell him we're not playing by the same

rules and he laughs huskily. It's the richest, happiest sound and I want to hear it again, but I want him to come even more.

I lean back and sink onto my knees so I'm kneeling over him. I like this position, this moment where he looks like he's on the brink of insanity too. I leverage myself so I can move on and off of him. I'm doing the work now and I feel seriously sexy. His head tips back and he watches me with a lazy, arrogant smile. He exhales a shaky breath as I press my hands to his chest and keep going, clenching around him when his hips buck up into me. He's been patient, a hell of a lot more patient than me.

"I want to watch you unravel," I tell him. "I want to see what you look like—"

I don't even get my full sentence out. My words push him over the edge. His hands dig into my waist so hard it's almost painful and his eyes pinch close. I can feel his orgasm surge through him, powerful and all-consuming. He's gripping me like I could slip through his fingers at any moment, like he's scared to let me go. As his shakes start to subside, I kiss his cheek, his chin, his throat. I feel like I just won a competition I didn't realize we were having. Sure, he made me come twice, but I made him come hard, and that should count for something.

He thinks my logic is flawed.

He tells me we could keep going as his hand skims down between us and *OKAY, is he honestly trying to kill me?* Because I'm like Céline Dion, except my heart *can't* go on. I'm completely wrung dry. My knees are bruised from the bed of the truck.

"I need to hydrate and towel off. I need to sink into one of those giant ice baths athletes use after a hard workout."

He laughs and starts to uncoil me from my position on his lap. I protest.

"Let's sleep here."

"Not a good idea."

It's a great idea. I'm already half asleep on his chest right now. His shoulder makes a wonderful, albeit slightly stiff pillow.

I position his arm back around me. "Here, just hold still and don't move until I start to snore."

He doesn't listen and instead plops me onto the bed of his truck then tells me to hold up my arms. My dress is put right back on, sans bra and underwear. With the buttons undone, I feel seriously sleazy. One glance up at him proves that he likes the look a lot.

"If you keep looking at me like that, I'll maul you again," I promise.

We somehow make it out of the bed of his truck and back to the farmhouse. We tell each other to be quiet and to stop laughing as we make it up the stairs to his bedroom. We manage a shower together in which he does most of the cleaning and I do most of the slack-jawed, fully satisfied staring.

"Can we have sex in here?" I ask, painting a heart on his chest with my wet finger.

"Tomorrow."

"Okay, it's tomorrow." It *is* already past midnight.

"As soon as we wake up."

"What is that?" I ask. "Six hours?"

Too long, in my opinion. What's the least amount of sleep humans can subsist on?

"I'll need breakfast first," he points out. "For energy."

"*Fiiiine.*"

He presses a kiss to my cheek and cuts the water. I prove useless as he towels me off and gently pushes me toward his bed. I'm too happy and in love to sleep. Doesn't he feel it? The excitement in the air?

"Hey," I say once we're lying in bed together, face to face.

He smiles and there are adorable little crinkles around his eyes. He looks worn out. I should let him sleep.

“Never mind.”

His gaze drops to my lips, where I’m nibbling away as I consider something.

“What? Tell me,” he insists, dragging his hand beneath the covers to take hold of my hip.

“No. It’s nothing.”

I close my eyes and try to tell myself to go to sleep. One adorable fluffy sheep is counted off before he says my name.

“Zee-zee-zee-zee-zee, sleeping,” I insist.

“Tell me.”

He shakes my body.

“It’s not important.”

His finger hits my eyebrow and he tugs gently so my eyelid opens.

I laugh.

“I was just going to declare my love, but it can wait until morning.”

Then I close my eyes again because I’m too nervous to see what his face looks like right now. If he looks horrified, I will shrivel up and die.

“What a little chicken,” he says, scooting toward me.

I wink one eye open. “*Chicken?*”

“Yeah. What was that?”

I blink both eyes open now. “What do you mean?”

“‘I was going to declare my love’? That’s like saying ‘I’m sorry you were hurt’ instead of saying ‘I’m sorry.’ It doesn’t count.”

I poke his chest. “Hey! It took a lot of courage to say that much! I don’t hear *you* declaring your love.”

He chuckles and then plain as day, he says, “I love you.”

Damn. He said it so simply—didn’t even blink.

I’m the one tearing up, eyes misty with swoony emotion.

“Oh, okay. Zee-zee-zee-zee.”

He smiles and leans over to kiss me.

“See? *Chicken.*”

“I’m not a chicken!” I slap his chest playfully. “Look at what I’ve done in the last few months! I showed up on this ranch all on my own and demanded a job from the most arrogant devil I’ve ever met—that takes courage.”

“But now you can’t tell that same devil you love him?”

I press my face to the crook of his neck and say the words against his skin. He smells delicious, just like the body wash we used to rinse off. Maybe I’ll live here, right in this little, warm pocket between his head and his heart.

His hand brushes down my spine, soothing me as he speaks. “You don’t have to say it. It’s okay. I’ll wait until you’re ready.”

It should be easy to thwart his reverse psychology mumbo-jumbo, but it’s not. *He thinks I’m not ready to say it?!*

“Are you kidding?” I pick my head up and aim blue daggers at him. “I love you! I was going to say it first! You just leapfrogged me!”

“Let’s check the record.” He holds his finger up like he’s consulting imaginary referees. “Yup, I had the first official ‘I love you’.”

I roll over and climb on top of him to smother him to death.

He cups my butt.

“Hold still,” I groan, hands around his throat. “I’m trying to kill you.”

He laughs and it makes my entire body shake.

“Kiss me,” he says.

“Admit you’re wrong, and I’ll let you live.”

“Kiss me,” he says again. This time his brown eyes meet mine and I realize this is futile. He’s going to win every argument we ever have—there’s no competing with those eyes.

“Kiss me and I’ll let you let me live,” he promises.

My lips are within millimeters of his. “I’m the winner,” I whisper.

He smirks. “Don’t you feel like in some ways, we’re both winners?”

He laughs at his silly joke and I groan. He rolls us over, crushing me with his weight. We lock eyes and the laughter slowly dies. A heavy emotion settles over us and the mood shifts. We aren’t teasing anymore. We’re stripping each other bare and getting to the heart of what matters.

“I wasn’t sure I’d even want to love a man after Andrew,” I admit. “I loved him, he knew it, and he used that love against me.”

His brows furrow. “Are you scared of me taking advantage of you like he did?”

I think about that question for a little while then heave a resigned sigh.

“Does it make me seem foolish if I say no? If I just trust you completely?”

“Love is supposed to make us fools.”

“Oh yeah? What does that make you?”

He smiles and tips his head down to kiss me. “The biggest fool of them all.”

Epilogue

Jack

Today is the grand opening of Meredith's new business: a yoga studio in Cedar Creek town square. That's right, Meredith is bringing the ancient, south Asian practice of yoga to Tiny-town, Texas. She found studio space a year ago when we were walking along the square after dinner. She saw the FOR RENT sign in the window, squashed her face to the glass, and told me her grand vision.

"Front desk there, small studio on that side, and changing rooms in that back corner." She turned back to me, eyes gleaming. "JACK! IT'S FATE! Just this morning, Leanna rolled her yoga mat out onto some of Alfred's poop! We can't keep practicing in the middle of a field!"

She had her work cut out for her. The space used to belong to a clothing boutique, and Meredith had to completely overhaul it to transform it into a studio.

It's been hard work, long days that stretched into long nights. She wanted to be involved in every aspect of the business, partly because she couldn't afford to outsource anything, and partly because she was too stubborn to give up any amount of control to someone else. She's the sole owner, something I know she's proud of. I could have helped her with the initial capital, but she wouldn't budge on that issue. She scrimped, saved, and worked with Dotty on securing a small business loan. I hate that she's wasting money on interest payments, but there was no convincing her otherwise.

Some aspects of the business came easily: instead of charging a monthly fee, each of her yoga classes will be donation-based. That way there's no barrier to entry. "Yoga for the people!" as she likes to say.

Some aspects of the business took a little more thought, especially the name. She kept a journal with hundreds of

options. She went back and forth on a few favorites, and then one night, while we were lounging on the couch with Alfred at our feet, she turned to me and asked how Blue Stone Ranch got its name. I couldn't believe I'd never told her. I also couldn't believe how perfect the timing was. She needed to know the story, and after being together for three years, I had a question I needed to ask her.

In the late 1930s, my grandfather immigrated to the United States from England. He was sixteen, on his own, and dirt poor, but he was determined to make something of himself. Work on the railroad brought him to Central Texas. He liked it here, especially after having spent a few winters up north, and the heat never bothered him like the cold did.

One day, while he was working and laying new tracks, he accidentally dug up a blue topaz. They're common in this area, but this one was especially large and the color was unique enough that he knew he'd found something special enough to keep. He tucked it in his pocket and forgot about it until he was playing a game of poker later that night with a few guys from the railroad and a few local ranchers. He'd already used up what collateral he had when one rancher decided to up the ante, but he knew he was holding a winning hand. Then he remembered the stone in his pocket. He bet the blue topaz, won the game, and in the end, he walked away with a little bit of cash and a few acres of that rancher's land. It was hardly worth anything at the time. The soil was rough and infertile, which is why the rancher had bet it in a card game in the first place, but my grandfather saw its potential.

When it was time for his crew to move on to lay the next section of tracks, he quit working for the railroad and stayed in Central Texas. He had that land, but not much else. For two years, he cultivated it, trying to figure out a crop that could handle the clay-filled earth, eventually moving into raising cattle and acquiring more land. It was during those early years that my grandfather met Edith. She lived in the area with her family and he'd had his eye on her for months before he finally worked up the courage to ask her out on a date. Her parents weren't impressed by a poor immigrant farmer and

made their opinions known, but after only a few weeks of dating, Edith loved him just as fiercely as he loved her.

Three months after that first date, he still hadn't worked out how to make the land flourish. He had no money to buy her a ring, but he had that blue topaz, so that's what he used to ask Edith for her hand in marriage.

Edith wore that stone on her ring finger every day until she passed it down to me on my one-year anniversary with Meredith. I was ready to marry Meredith then, but I knew she needed more time. So, I gave it to her—two more years. Two more years of us building a life together on the ranch. Two more years of Meredith sinking roots into Cedar Creek. Two more years of that ring burning a hole in my pocket until one night while we lounged on the couch she asked me why Blue Stone Ranch was called Blue Stone Ranch. I told her the story and then I got down on one knee and asked her to marry me.

Two weeks later, she and I got married at the courthouse downtown. She didn't want to spend a year planning an extravagant day when all she wanted was to be my wife as soon as possible, so we agreed to elope. We planned on it being a small affair with Edith, Helen, and Brent acting as witnesses, but when we arrived, we were shocked to find that it was standing room only in the courtroom. Every ranch hand and employee from Blue Stone had crammed into the small space. Leanna and a few of the other women from Meredith's weekly yoga group had decorated the room with flowers. Meredith didn't walk down the aisle toward me; we walked hand in hand through a crowd of our closest family and friends toward the waiting judge. Meredith stood across from me in an altered version of Edith's wedding gown and we said I do in the shortest ceremony known to man. Everyone whooped and hollered and demanded a second kiss after the first. I dipped her low and she squealed with excitement.

Afterward, we celebrated in the park outside. Our friends have never fessed up as to who did what, but there were mismatched tables and chairs, flowers and decorations, and more alcohol and food than necessary. Every restaurant in the town had donated something so in the end we didn't have one

meal, we had half a dozen: barbecue, hamburgers, pasta, sandwiches, and salad. We had three different wedding cakes from three different bakeries and Meredith enjoyed smashing a bit of every single one in my face while our guests applauded a little too loudly.

Edith tells me Meredith has softened my image, says because she believed I was good and decent, everyone else started coming around to the idea too. Maybe it's true; I don't know. We've been married seven months and my ranch hands are still pretty scared of me.

"Can you believe this crowd?" Edith asks as I loop my truck onto Main Street and the Blue Stone Yoga sign comes into view.

"I don't think I'll be able to find parking."

"Check around back, see if there's a spot behind the studio."

I end up having to block Meredith in, but it shouldn't matter. She won't be leaving the yoga studio any time soon anyway. It's packed when we walk in. Everyone we know is here, even the guys who've never attempted yoga a day in their life. Sheriff Pete, Chris, Daniel—they're all here to support Meredith. She's turned the grand opening into an all-day event. There're yoga classes in the back studio, free smoothies and snacks circulate around the lobby, and a bounce-house is set up outside for the kids and kids at heart. Edith bee-lines straight for it.

"Tell Meredith I'll be inside later!"

It takes me too long to make my way back to Meredith. I get pulled in a million different directions, greeting everyone I pass. Finally, *finally*, I see her chatting with Helen, Dotty, and Leanna behind the front desk.

They're all oohing and aahing over her baby bump. I think I was happier than she was when it really became noticeable. Every morning for the last six months, she would turn sideways and ask me point blank, "If you didn't know me, would you think I look pregnant?" and every day until

recently, I would lie and exaggerate. “Oh yeah, definitely—watch where you point that big ol’ belly.”

She spots me approaching and her face lights up. She excuses herself from the group and meets me halfway, where I press my hand to her stomach and lean down to kiss her.

“How’s he doing?”

She beams. “Good. Moving like crazy! If you leave your hand there for a little while, you’ll feel him. I think he’s as excited about today as I am.”

I smile, and sure enough, a second later, I feel a little thump against my palm.

“There! He just did it again,” she says, eyes alight with wonder.

“He was giving his pop a high five.”

She laughs and tips up on her toes to kiss my cheek. “Are you staying for a while?”

I had some things I needed to do on the ranch earlier, which is why I’m arriving a little late. “Until you leave.”

She eyes my workout clothes. “Does that mean you’re going to take a class?”

I nod. Admittedly, yoga wasn’t my thing when Meredith and I first started dating, but she’s convinced me to come around. I still get my down dogs confused with my up dogs, but I’m a hell of a lot closer to touching my toes than I was a year ago.

“Are you teaching soon?”

She’s my favorite teacher, and not just because she’s my wife.

She checks the clock mounted on the wall behind the desk. “I have a pre-natal class in forty-five minutes.”

“All right, I’ll man the desk for that one.”

She grins. “Don’t worry, I’m teaching a flow class right after.”

We’re interrupted soon after that. Everyone wants to say hello and feel her bump and congratulate her on the grand opening. Cedar Creek has really shown up to support her. Every class is

full and Meredith is shocked by the turnout, though she shouldn't be.

The next few months are going to be tough for us. She'll have to take time off when Noah is born, but Edith and Helen have already volunteered to take shifts at the studio helping out as much as possible. On top of that, Meredith has trained a manager and four additional yoga instructors. She'll be able to tackle a lot of the day-to-day operations from home, and I'm not worried. I'll be taking time off too, and I can handle baby duty when she needs to come into the studio—I don't expect her to put her dreams on hold to raise our son. I fully expect that he'll end up growing up inside this studio. His first steps will probably take place on a mat somewhere in this lobby, and I'm okay with that. In fact, I wouldn't have it any other way.

It feels like we're right in the middle of the good part of life, the part you usually don't realize you're in until it's over. We have so much to look forward to that I keep wanting to jump ahead. I can't wait to be a father. I can't wait to raise Noah with Meredith. I can't wait to take him down to the creek and teach him how to do a backflip off the rope swing. I can't wait to see Meredith pregnant with our second child, and possibly a third if I can convince her it's a good idea. If I brought it up to her now while she's still pregnant with this first one, she'd probably sock me square in the jaw.

I'm not worried though. Wherever our path takes us, I know we'll always have each other. After all, I made that promise to her way back when she first came to the ranch. I told her if she wanted us, if she wanted to make a deal, Edith and I could be her people.

Even though I've been described as a devil by more than a few people, the name does have one redeeming quality: when you make a deal with me, you know I'll keep my word, forever.

About the Author

R.S. Grey is the USA Today bestselling author of over twenty novels, including seven #1 bestselling romantic comedies. She lives in Texas with her husband, daughter, and dog. Visit her at RSGrey.com or on Instagram: [@authorrsgrey](https://www.instagram.com/authorrsgrey).

Broken Miles

Claire Kingsley

Single-minded drive earned Roland Miles success—and cost him his first love. When his marriage to Zoe ended, he did the only thing he knew. He dove into work to put his heartbreak behind him.

Zoe Sutton's life hasn't exactly gone to plan. She certainly didn't plan on losing Roland or moving home to work for his family's winery. Four years after their divorce, she wonders if her chance at happily ever after is behind her.

After discovering his family might lose their land, Roland comes home to help sort out the mess. But between his brothers' antics, a baby sister who's all grown up, and a father keeping secrets, complicated isn't even the half of it.

And then there's Zoe.

He didn't come home looking for a second chance with her. But the more time they spend together, the more he realizes what they lost. What they could have again.

Because the truth is, they broke each other's hearts. And maybe they're the only ones who can put them back together.

Author's note: A stoic hero who's soft on the inside. A sassy heroine who doesn't take any sh*t. Messy family. Lots of shenanigans. Mattress burning bonfires. And a second chance at love with a big HEA.

Roland

All your shit's gone, and I'm just trying to figure out what the hell happened.

~Text from Roland, four years ago

They wanted a damn miracle. I looked over the email again, already formulating a strategy. What my boss was asking for was tough. But, as the saying went, that was why they paid me the big bucks. I was the youngest CFO in Dimension, Inc.'s history for a reason.

I was a goddamn miracle worker.

Glancing at the time, I had to do a double take. It was already after nine. I hadn't realized it was so late. But I worked late most nights, and it wasn't like there was anyone around to bitch at me about it. I didn't have plans with Farrah tonight; she was out of town. And even when we did have plans, she got it. She worked as much as I did, and she understood what it took to make it at this level. I never had to worry about that with her.

My cell buzzed, vibrating on the desk next to my laptop. Looking down, I winced. My parents' number. Their business number, to be specific. Which meant it could be either one of them calling. I didn't particularly want to take the call, but if I didn't answer, I'd have to call them back. Better to get it over with.

I picked up the phone and answered. "Yeah."

"Hey, it's Leo."

That was odd. My younger brother never called. An occasional text, maybe, but it wasn't like we were close. This probably meant bad news.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"You need to come out here."

“Why? What’s going on?”

“Mom and Dad are on the verge of losing the winery,” he said. “It’s a mess.”

I sat back in my chair and pinched the bridge of my nose. *You’ve got to be kidding me.* “What do you mean, lose the winery?”

“The business is in debt up to its eyeballs,” he said. “Dad’s been hiding shit. It’s bad.”

“What do you expect me to do about it?”

“Don’t be an asshole,” Leo said. “Do you think I would have called you if it wasn’t a big deal? This is serious. You need to come home.”

Fuck. Home? That was the last place I wanted to go.

“Now?” I asked. “I can’t just drop everything. I’m sure Dad will figure it out.”

“Roland,” Leo said, his tone sharp. “Dad’s the one who fucked everything up. He’s not going to fix it. We need you out here, man. If this is about Zoe...”

“It’s *not* about Zoe.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose again. Just thinking about Zoe gave me a headache. Why my mom had hired my ex-wife to work at the family winery was beyond me. Although, normally I didn’t give a shit. I was in San Francisco, almost a thousand miles from my hometown in central Washington. It’s not like it had any impact on my life if she worked there.

“Because we can, I don’t know, find ways to keep some distance between you two or whatever,” he said.

“I already said it isn’t about her. I’m an adult, I can be in the same room with Zoe.”

“Good,” he said. “Then get your ass home.”

“Leo—” I stopped because I heard the click of the call ending. I tossed my phone back onto my desk. “Fuck. Fuck you, Leo. And fuck you, Dad.”

I checked my calendar. Tomorrow was out, but if I flew out early on Thursday, I could get to the winery and finish up my day from there. I sent my assistant, Danielle, a text, telling her to book me a flight to Seattle and reserve a rental car.

My concentration was shot to shit. I wasn't going to get any more work done tonight. But it was late anyway. I closed my laptop, grabbed my things, and went home.

* * *

I'd bought my condo for the view. During the day, I could see all the way to the water. At night, the lights of the city twinkled in the darkness. It had cost me a shit-ton of money, but every night when I stood looking out the floor-to-ceiling windows, I knew it had been worth it.

I went to the kitchen and took a bottle of Glenlivet out of the liquor cabinet. Poured a glass and took a long swallow. It burned going down, spreading warmth through my chest.

Danielle texted me back with my flight details for Thursday. I blew out a long breath and took another drink of Scotch.

Home. I'd grown up in Echo Creek, a small town in the Cascade Mountains. Growing up on a winery sounded idyllic, but I'd been glad to leave it behind.

How long had it been since I'd been there? Eighteen months? More? That didn't sound right. But I hadn't gone back for the holidays last year. It probably had been that long.

I felt a twinge of guilt at that. It wasn't that I disliked my family. True, my dad and I butted heads, and my siblings liked to give me crap for having moved away. But I knew my mom would like it if I came home more often.

I was just so damn busy. It was hard to carve out the time for a trip that wasn't business related. And I'd have to endure the inevitable guilt trips. *Why don't you visit more often? Can't*

you stay longer? Don't you want to come back and join your brothers in the family business?

No, I fucking didn't. But none of them had ever understood why I hadn't fallen in line. Why I hadn't taken up my proper place at the winery.

I was made for bigger things than running a goddamn wine business in a small town out in central nowhere. There was no challenge to it. No risk. And the potential rewards—particularly financially—were much too low for me. Money wasn't everything, but honestly, it was most things. And I was good at making money. Great, even. I'd made my company a hell of a lot of money in the last several years.

I was respected here. People deferred to me. Trusted me with millions of dollars. I had my own office, an assistant, a penthouse condo with a priceless view. Enough money that I could have more or less anything I wanted.

I was living my dream, and I didn't understand why my family couldn't just be fucking happy for me. Why they had to harp on the fact that I wasn't there all the time. My brothers had stayed. My sister would probably wind up back home after college. They even had my ex-wife. What the hell did they need me for?

I took another sip of Scotch and wandered over to the window, wondering what my dad had done that had Leo so riled up. Leo and I rarely saw eye to eye. He wouldn't have called me over nothing. The big question was, did my dad know he'd done it? Were they expecting me to ride in with my MBA and save the day? Or was Leo going behind their backs to drag me into their mess?

I guess I was about to find out.

Thinking of home brought my thoughts back to Zoe. I went into the bedroom and set my drink down. With a glance over my shoulder—as if half-afraid someone would catch me—I pulled a small box down off a shelf in the closet.

There was only one thing inside. Zoe's wedding ring.

I'd found it sitting on the kitchen counter of our old apartment the day she'd left me. The rest of her things had been gone. Her side of the closet, empty. Her drawers in the bathroom, cleaned out. She hadn't taken much that had been ours—the things we'd accumulated together. I'd brought some of it to her later—the things I'd thought she'd want to keep—and given away the rest. But not her ring.

Keeping it was the stupidest thing. I didn't know why I still had it. It wasn't even very nice. We'd eloped when we were twenty—just a couple of poor college students. I'd saved for months to get it, and at the time, I'd been pretty damn proud of myself. Looking at it now, it was rather pathetic. Just a plain gold band with a tiny excuse for a diamond. Zoe had loved it when I'd given it to her—said she hadn't expected a ring at all.

But we'd been different people, then. Young. Rebellious and wild. Idiots, really. We'd thought teenage hormones had been the real thing. Maybe they had, in their own way. But that hadn't been enough.

It hurt to look at it, and I wondered why I did this to myself. I didn't pull it out very often. Once when I'd randomly remembered it was her birthday. Another time on what had been our anniversary. Occasionally, thoughts of her would creep into my mind and refuse to let go, and I'd find myself right here. Nursing a glass of Scotch and staring at the cheap piece of shit I couldn't bring myself to throw away.

I closed the box and put it back on the shelf. Maybe I'd get rid of it for good someday. A colleague of mine had proudly flushed his ex-wife's ring down a public toilet. Another guy I knew had taken his ring off and dropped it in a garbage can in a park near his office.

I didn't have my ring anymore. I'd lost it a few years after we'd gotten married. Zoe and I had been visiting my family for Christmas, and it had snowed. We'd been outside, embroiled in an impromptu snowball fight with my brothers. None of us had been dressed for the cold—no coats, hats, or gloves. Just a bunch of dumbass kids tossing snow at each other until our bare hands hurt. Back inside, I'd realized my ring had come off. We'd looked, but never found it.

It had been prophetic, in a way.

But I was past that now. Zoe and I hadn't worked out. She hadn't been happy, so she'd left. Moved back to Echo Creek. Started working for my parents. She was fine, and so was I.

In fact, I was more than fine. I was at the top of my game. Whether or not my family could appreciate it, my life was pretty fucking good.

I would do what I had to do. Spend a few days at home, look at their books, probably find a few errors. Argue with my dad. Talk shit with my brothers. Let my mom fuss over me a little. Then I'd be right back here, where I belonged.

Zoe

The stack of shit on my desk never seemed to get any smaller. I'd been downstairs for most of the morning, hauling out decorations for a wedding tomorrow. It was going to be indoors, which was good. Spring in the foothills was beautiful, but chilly. It was early April, and not very warm, even though the sun was out.

The couple I was working with were fucking adorable. Both in their sixties, both on second marriages. They'd waited a long time before deciding to marry again, and to see them look at each other, I knew they had a shot at forever.

People like them were my favorite part of my job. I handled more than weddings, and I certainly had my share of first-time nuptials. Those were lovely, too. But there was something special about those second-chancers. They reminded me that love could surprise anyone, and it was never too late for a happy ending.

I took a sip of coffee and winced. It had gone cold. Gross. Glancing down, I noticed a spot on my white t-shirt where I'd dripped some. I wondered if I'd been walking around in a dirty shirt all morning.

Oh well, fuck it. It was too late to worry about it now.

I put the traitor coffee down—I'd have to get more later—and dug around the mess on my desk for another shirt. There was one beneath a bent spiral notebook, so I tugged it out and gave it a look. No stains. Sniffed it. Smelled fine. I pulled off my offending t-shirt just as Cooper stuck his head in my office.

"Zo—what the fuck?" He turned around. "Zoe Marie Sutton, why are you getting naked in your office?"

"I'm not getting naked," I said, laughing at his attempt to call me by my full name. "I got something on my shirt so I'm changing. And my middle name is Elizabeth."

“Zoe Marie sounds better. And have you heard of doors?” he asked. “They do this amazing thing where they close so people don’t see you in your bra.”

“Who wouldn’t want to see me in my bra?” I pulled on the clean shirt. “I have great boobs.”

“True,” Cooper said. “You do have an excellent rack.”

I laughed. Technically, Cooper was my ex-brother-in-law. Also my boss’s son, and my co-worker. But mostly he was one of my favorite people on the planet. The little brother I’d never known I wanted.

“You can look now,” I said. “Although I don’t know why you’re being weird about it. You’ve seen me completely naked. More than once, if I recall.”

“Yeah, and it’s awkward every time you give me a goddamn boner.” He came in but didn’t sit in the chair on the other side of my desk. Cooper rarely sat down. “And I think I’ve only seen you naked once.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “There was that one time you walked in and—”

“Stop it, Zoe; I don’t need to be reminded.” He made a show of adjusting his dick. “Since technically we’re not related, I’m not immune your hotness. Even though I’m not the least bit sexually attracted to you.”

I smirked. “If you’re not sexually attracted to me, why is just the memory of my naked boobs giving you a chubby?”

“I’m a guy,” he said with a shrug. “Nice boobs equals hard-on.”

Cooper was way too cute for his own good. He did that messy-haired, ripped abs thing quite well. People never expected him to be the farmer in the Miles family. Although he looked like a pretty boy who ought to be posing in front of a camera—except for the dirt perpetually beneath his fingernails—he spent his days working in the fields. He took care of the vineyards like they were his babies.

Adorable as he was, I'd never seen Coop as anything other than a brother. And despite the way he joked about my boobs making him hard, he saw me the same way. We just had fun messing with each other, and sometimes our banter got a little raunchy. Another reason I loved him.

"Did you come up here to talk about my boobs, or...?" I asked.

"No," he said, and wrinkled his nose.

"What's going on?" I asked.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Well..."

"Just get it over with, Coop," I said.

"Fine. But I want you to know ahead of time, this is all Leo's fault. So if you're going to get feisty with anyone, go find him."

"Get feisty?" I asked. "Why would I get feisty with Leo?"

He grabbed the chair and tilted it backward, rocking it on its back legs. "Roland's coming home."

It took every bit of self-control I possessed not to let my face—or body—react to the sound of my ex-husband's name. But I was determined to remain unaffected, and the first step in achieving that was to show no emotion.

"Why?"

"I don't know the whole story," he said. "Leo said something about things being worse than he thought, and we need Roland to help us sort it out. I guess something's going on with Dad."

Cooper's parents, Lawrence and Shannon, owned Salishan Cellars, the winery where I worked as the events manager. I'd come back here to Echo Creek after I left Roland, and much to my surprise, Shannon had offered me a job. Considering her oldest son and I were getting a divorce, it had been unexpected. But I'd worked for them before Roland and I had moved to San Francisco, and Shannon had been thrilled to have me back after my personal life went nuclear.

I was grateful to the Miles family for not ostracizing me just because I was their son's ex. For a lot of people, working for their ex's family would be a nightmare. For me, it was a godsend. And it didn't really matter that Roland's family and I were still close—that I worked for them, saw them daily, and was good friends with all three of his siblings. It didn't matter because Roland was never here.

San Francisco wasn't all that far, but Roland might as well have lived on the other side of the planet. He never came home.

"I'm confused," I said.

"You and me both," he said. "Leo won't tell me what's going on, but he wouldn't have called Roland if it wasn't serious."

That was very true. Cooper and Leo didn't exactly get along with their older brother. Roland had always resented the family business, but Cooper and Leo loved it. They lived and breathed this place, and I didn't think they'd ever understood how Roland could just leave.

I took a deep breath. I didn't love the idea of Roland being here, but it wouldn't be the first time. He came home to visit occasionally, though it had probably been at least a year and a half since I'd last seen him. Sometimes I wondered if it was me that kept him away. But of course, even when we'd still been married, he'd never wanted to come home.

"Look, I don't hate him or anything. We can get along just fine."

"Yeah?" Cooper asked.

"Yep," I said. "Not a big deal. I'll be too busy to notice, anyway. I have a shit-ton going on."

"Good, because he just got here and he's downstairs." He dashed out of my office.

"Now?" I called after him. "Coop?"

Fan-fucking-tastic. I had eight billion things to do, but I had to go make nice with my ex-husband. Now, apparently.

I wasn't lying to Cooper. I didn't *hate* Roland. The man knew how to push my buttons better than anyone in existence. But I'd never hated him. Not even when I'd first left. And four years later, I still didn't.

However, I didn't exactly want to spend time with him either.

But I figured I should get it over with. He'd be here for a couple of days, at most, and I was sure he'd be busy with whatever Leo had called him here to do. He'd probably just be locked in an office with his parents, and I wouldn't have to see him more than once or twice.

I stood and tightened my messy excuse for a bun, then went downstairs to get the obligatory greeting out of the way.

The Big House, as we all called it, was just that. Big. It was the winery's showpiece, with the main lobby, tasting rooms, and our biggest indoor event venue downstairs. The second floor had a smaller event space, and several offices—mine; one for Jamie, who did the winery's marketing and helped me with events; and a couple that weren't being used.

Shannon and Lawrence both had offices in the building next door, which had been the original winery. The Miles family home was also on the winery property, though only Lawrence and Shannon lived there now. Cooper lived in town with his friend Chase, and Leo lived in one of the small guest houses on the property. Brynn, the youngest and only girl in the Miles clan, was going to college about half an hour away out in Tilikum.

I went down the wide staircase and paused when I caught sight of Roland. He stood in the lobby, leaning against the front desk. True to form, he was dressed in slacks and a button-down shirt with the sleeves cuffed, showing his forearms. His dark hair was a bit different and his stubble a little thicker—it was a good look on him. He had his phone out, which was not at all surprising. The guy was always working.

His attractiveness annoyed me. Mostly because I didn't want to see him as sexy anymore. I wanted to be indifferent to him. To be unaffected. Maybe time would take care of that eventually, but it hadn't happened yet. The first thought that

came to my mind was how good his arms looked with the sleeves of his shirt rolled up.

I rolled my eyes and continued downstairs. Fine, so Roland was attractive. Gorgeous, even. He was lean and muscular—I could tell he still worked out by the lines of his shoulders and chest. And those arms—god. Beautiful blue eyes. Thick dark hair. A few days' growth of stubble on his chiseled jaw.

It wasn't what was on the outside that was the problem. Never had been.

“Well, look who's here,” I said.

He looked up from his phone, a flicker of surprise crossing his features. “Oh, hi Zoe.”

We eyed each other for a moment.

“You have something on your shirt,” he said.

I stretched my shirt out and inspected it. He was right; there was a tan coffee splotch near the bottom. “Goddammit. I thought this one was clean.”

“Guess not,” he said. “How've you been?”

“Fine,” I said with a shrug. “Busy. You know, the usual. You?”

“Yeah, fine. Busy.” His phone buzzed in his hand and he looked at the screen. “Shit. I have to take this.”

I watched him walk outside, putting the phone to his ear. Heard his voice as he started to talk. Short, clipped words that I didn't process.

Well, that was anti-climactic.

With a scowl at no one in particular, I went back upstairs to my office. I guess I should have been glad I didn't have a contentious relationship with my ex. It was the same every time I saw him. A brief hello. Sometimes a few words, usually small talk. When our marriage had first ended, we'd had a few fights—mostly on the phone. But since then, there was just distance. A cool acceptance that this was how things were now.

It made me a bit sick to my stomach. I pulled at the hem of my shirt and rubbed my thumb across the coffee stain he'd noticed. Things felt awkward between us now, and I kind of hated it. There had been a time when Roland had been my best friend. The one I'd turned to when I was happy, or sad. The first person I told when I had good news. I'd once thought he was my soulmate. The person I was meant to spend the rest of my life with.

Now we were basically strangers.

How could that happen in just a few short years? We'd dated for three before getting married. And our ill-fated marriage had lasted another six. Almost a decade together, and what did it mean now?

Nothing to him, apparently.

That shouldn't have still hurt. After all, I was the one who'd left. I'd packed up my things and moved out. And I didn't regret my decision. Roland had cared about his career far more than he'd cared about me. I had become nothing more than an accessory. Someone to hang on his arm and look pretty at corporate events. When he hadn't needed me to play the part of the good wife in front of his colleagues, he'd barely remembered I existed. That had been no way to live.

I sighed and picked up my phone, flipping to my calendar. I had a client meeting in half an hour, so I needed to go home and change. It was one thing to run around in jeans and a dirty shirt when I was hauling twinkle lights and garlands out of storage, quite another when I was meeting with a client.

I'd simply have to push thoughts of Roland out of my mind. And hope he didn't stay in town long.

Roland

I ended the call—being away from the office was going to be such a pain in the ass—and put my phone back in my pocket. I wondered where Cooper had gone. Since arriving about fifteen minutes ago, I hadn't seen anyone else. I didn't expect to see Leo. He rarely came out of his cave. Cooper had met me when I first got to the Big House, but before I could ask where to find Mom and Dad—and what the hell was going on—he'd told me to wait and gone upstairs.

As soon as he'd come back, he'd rushed out the door again. A minute later, Zoe had appeared.

Seeing her had been fine. She'd been cordial, and so had I. No problem.

It had been weird to feel the urge to move closer and tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. Like an instinct I no longer needed but hadn't lost yet. And yeah, she looked good, even if she was wearing a stained shirt.

Of course, Zoe always looked good. She had blue eyes that contrasted with her brown hair. High cheekbones. Full lips. She cleaned up nice, when she tried. But there had always been something appealing about messy Zoe. That girl with careless hair and clothes that didn't match. Little tattoos on her wrists and a tiny stud in her nose.

I let out a breath and shook my head. No point in following *that* train of thought. It didn't matter how beautiful Zoe was. I wasn't here to see her, anyway.

Cooper reappeared. He was dressed in a faded Salishan Cellars t-shirt, worn-out jeans, and work boots. He adjusted his cheap sunglasses. "So, everything okay?"

I knew what he was really asking, but I wanted to ignore anything having to do with Zoe right now. "Other than the fact that I still have no idea what the fuck I'm doing here, yeah."

He nodded. “Cool. I don’t know what Leo’s doing. I guess we should go find Mom.”

“Is Dad around?” I asked.

“I think so,” Cooper said. “Haven’t seen him today, though.”

“Does he know I’m coming?”

“That’s a good question,” Cooper said.

I let out a sigh. Great. This should be fun.

We walked across to what was now known as the Little House. It had been the original winery until they built the Big House about ten years ago. Guests didn’t come here anymore, which was a good thing. The remodel had been half-finished for years. The former lobby was cluttered with construction materials, and big sheets of plastic covered one of the walls, which had been torn down to the studs.

I’d known when my dad had started work on the building that it was a bad idea. Mom had agreed, but Lawrence Miles had a tendency of doing what he wanted.

The second floor looked the same as it had last time I’d been here. Dad hadn’t done any demo up here, so the walls were intact. My mom, Shannon, was the head winemaker, so I wasn’t sure how much time she actually spent in her office, but that’s where we found her.

My mom had long dark hair streaked with silver and she always wore it in a ponytail. Fine lines around her eyes hinted that she was in her mid-fifties, but she didn’t look much older than forty. She was dressed in a plain black t-shirt and had a pair of dark-rimmed reading glasses perched on her nose.

“Hey, Mom,” Cooper said.

She looked up from her laptop and her eyes widened. “Roland?”

“Yeah, hi, Mom,” I said.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?” she asked, setting her glasses down. She stood and walked over to wrap me in a

hug. Her head only came up to my chest. I'd inherited my father's stature; Mom was tiny.

I glanced at Cooper and he shrugged. "It was last minute. Leo called me."

"Did he?"

"Yeah, he said something about the winery being in trouble?" I asked.

Mom sighed, and her shoulders slumped. Her skin was pale and I noticed faint circles beneath her eyes. "We've been having financial troubles for the last year. I think it's gotten worse, but you know how your father is."

I did know. He was tight-lipped and defensive. "Where is he? And where's Leo? I've texted him three times to tell him I'm here."

"I'm sure Leo's at home," Mom said.

That was probably true. He didn't come out unless he had to. But why wasn't he answering me?

"I can go check," Cooper said. I had a feeling he just wanted an excuse to go back outside. He didn't like being indoors.

"Look, I disrupted my entire week to come out here because Leo made it sound like there was an emergency," I said. "Was he messing with me, or are you really on the brink of losing the winery?"

Mom's mouth opened slightly, and Cooper made a strangled sound in his throat. "On the brink of... Leo said that?" she asked.

I brought out my phone and called Leo. He never answered, but I'd leave him a voicemail. I was sick of this already. It was the same old bullshit. No one talked to each other around here—at least not about anything important. They had no problem dissecting the details of my failed marriage over dinner, but sharing information about the family business? Not so much.

Leo's voicemail picked up. "Leo, where are you? I'm standing in Mom's office, she didn't know I was coming, and I have no idea where Dad is. Why am I—"

“Hey, Roland.”

I stopped mid-sentence at the sound of Leo’s voice behind me and ended the call. “I was just leaving you a message.”

“Sorry.”

Leo stood sideways, keeping the left side of his face and body tilted toward the hall outside Mom’s office. As a teenager, Leo had been a clean-cut, smooth-jawed football star. Now he wore a shaggy beard and long hair that draped over the sides of his face. He’d served in the Army, and during a tour in Afghanistan, he’d been caught in an explosion. He’d suffered burns down the entire left side of his body. He was lucky to be alive, but the scars were brutal.

He’d covered most of his left arm and leg with tattoos, but there wasn’t much he could do about his face. Even after several corrective surgeries, the lower part of his face was mangled on the left side.

“I’ll go find your dad,” Mom said. “I’ll meet you downstairs.”

I followed Leo and Cooper down to what had once been the main tasting room. Now it was set up like a farm-style version of a conference room. It had a long rustic table with matching chairs—probably all built by Ben, Salishan’s longtime groundskeeper and handyman. There were framed black and white pictures on one wall—vintage photos of my great-grandparents, who had founded the winery, and my grandparents, who had seen it grow from a tiny operation to something closer to what it was today.

My great-grandparents had bought the first plot of land and planted a vineyard, decades before most of the other wineries in this area had been built. They’d named it Salishan Cellars as a nod to the Native Americans who’d once lived here. Salishan was the name for the family of languages spoken in this region—languages that were almost extinct now.

Leo took a seat on one side of the table, at the end so he wouldn’t have anyone sitting on his left. Cooper paced, wandering up and down the length of the room. I sat, but

checked my email while we waited for my parents. God, I had so much to do. I hoped I could get this wrapped up quickly.

My dad's heavy footsteps heralded his entrance. Lawrence Miles was always in a hurry. It didn't seem to matter what he was doing—working, walking through a theme park on a family vacation, or coming downstairs for breakfast—he moved at the same frenetic pace.

Mom came in behind him. Dad's hair was peppered with gray, and he was thicker in the middle than I remembered. He stopped when he spotted me.

“Roland.”

“Hi, Dad,” I said.

“What are you doing here?” His gaze moved around the room, pausing on each of us. I could see his defenses going up. He thought we were here to gang up on him.

I supposed we were, although I still didn't know exactly why.

“I called him,” Leo said. “I know the truth, Dad. I had to do something.”

Dad crossed his arms. “What are you talking about?”

Leo sighed. “The bank is going to foreclose on us.”

For the space of a heartbeat, there was silence. Then the room erupted with voices, everyone trying to talk at once. Dad barked at Leo, Mom yelled at Dad. Cooper shouted, but it was impossible to tell who he was yelling at. Leo stood and pointed at Dad, saying something I couldn't hear over all the noise.

I slammed my hand down on the table with a loud crack. “Shut the hell up, all of you!”

Amazingly, they all went silent.

“Everyone, sit down,” I said. “If you want to yell at each other, do it over the dinner table. This is a business. Let's act like it.”

Leo lowered himself back into his seat, and Cooper took the chair next to me. Mom sat, but Dad stood next to the table. I

didn't bother pushing the issue. Had to pick my battles with Dad.

"Leo, why do you think the bank is ready to foreclose?" I asked.

"I went through Dad's office," he said.

"You what?" Dad asked, his voice filled with outrage.

I held up a hand. "Dad, hold on. Leo?"

"I talked to Chase recently," Leo said. Chase was Cooper's roommate and longtime best friend. He was also the mechanic who worked on the winery's machinery. "He didn't want to make it awkward for Coop, so he came to me. We owe him a lot of money. Apparently it's been months since we've paid him."

"What the shit?" Cooper asked.

"Watch your mouth, Cooper," Mom said.

"That's not the first time I've heard we weren't paying our bills," Leo said. "We all knew things were tight, but this is Chase. That's personal."

"Leo, you should have talked to Dad about it," Mom said.

"I did," Leo said. "He blew me off."

Cooper and Dad both started to talk, but I held up my hand again and glared at them both. "Wait."

"I was suspicious," Leo continued. "Like I said, I knew we were behind on other bills, too. I tried to ask where we stood, but..."

Leo trailed off, and I could guess what had happened. Dad had gotten angry, so Leo had dropped it—and apparently decided to find out the truth on his own.

"And the bank?" Mom asked.

"Threatening foreclosure," Leo said. "I don't have all the numbers, but we must owe a lot of money for it to have gone this far."

"Is that true?" Mom asked, turning to my dad.

“Yes, but I’m working on some things,” Dad said.

“How could you let it get this bad without telling me?” Mom asked.

It was a very good question. My brothers and I stayed quiet and waited to see if Dad would answer.

“I have it under control,” Dad said, grinding out the words through clenched teeth.

I forced myself to pause before I spoke. The younger me would have made a sarcastic remark, but it only would have sparked a pointless argument. I’d spent half my life arguing with my father. Right now, I didn’t need to be Roland the son, I needed to be Roland the businessman. The guy with solutions, who could make financial miracles happen. Because if the bank was threatening foreclosure, that’s what Salishan Cellars needed—a miracle.

“The first thing Salishan needs is stability,” I said. “Let me use my connections with the banks to take the edge off.”

“Roland—”

“Dad,” I said, cutting him off, my voice smooth and even, “you run things like usual while I stop the hemorrhaging. I can buy you some time.”

He cast a quick glance at Mom, then looked at me again and nodded.

“I’ll need a couple of days,” I said. “And I can take a look at the books to see what else I can do.”

“I don’t think so,” Dad said. “It’s one thing for you to call in a favor with the bank. It’s quite another to give you access to all our confidential financial information.”

“Lawrence,” Mom said, “he’s our son.”

“Our son who doesn’t work here,” Dad said.

Don’t react. This was business. I wasn’t going to let him make it personal. “I can put a bandage on the wound. But it’s only going to start bleeding again, and you’ll be right back here in six months.”

“Let him help,” Mom said. “We can’t lose this land, Lawrence. We *can’t*.”

I hated the fear in my mom’s voice. This place had been in her family for generations. Thankfully, my brothers held their tongues. If one of them started in again, they’d all wind up yelling, and we’d never get anywhere.

Come on, Dad. Do the right thing.

“Fine,” Dad said. “I’ll get you what you need tomorrow. I have too much to do this afternoon.”

I kept my face still despite the flare of annoyance. Tomorrow. That meant today was half wasted. “Okay.”

Dad’s eyes darted around to everyone again, and Leo met his gaze without flinching. I had to respect that. Standing up to our father had never been easy.

“I have to get going,” Dad said. Without another word, he walked out the door.

Leo got up and squeezed Mom’s shoulder before leaving. She touched his hand and thanked him. Cooper hugged her and kissed her forehead, then nodded to me.

Mom didn’t get up, so I waited while Cooper shut the door behind him.

“I can’t believe he didn’t tell me,” she said.

“He was hoping he could fix it and you wouldn’t have to know.” I didn’t particularly want to defend my dad, but that was probably the truth. “He doesn’t want you to worry about the business side of things.”

“I should worry about the business side of things,” she said. “I’ve always let him handle it, but I should be more involved.”

“Well, maybe now you can be,” I said. “This gives you a good reason.”

She nodded. “You can use one of the offices upstairs in the Big House while you’re here.”

“Sure, thanks.”

“Do you want to stay at the house with us?” she asked. “Or use one of the guest cottages?”

“I was just going to check into a hotel in town.”

She scowled at me. “Roland, you do not come home and stay at a hotel in town. Especially not when we have so many unused beds right here. You don’t have to stay at the house, but at least use the Hummingbird Cottage. It’s all made up and ready.”

That was my mom for you. I was thirty-one years old, and she was still trying to mother me. The winery grounds had several guest houses, all with corny names like *Hummingbird Cottage*. My grandmother had insisted every building have a name, and the guest houses were decorated inside to match. They’d been built for paying guests, but Salishan had gotten out of the overnight hospitality business years ago. Now they were used for family and other guests who came to visit.

I didn’t really want to stay on the property, but if it would make my mom happy...

“Hummingbirds it is,” I said.

She smiled and put her hand over mine. “Thank you for coming. I’m glad you’re here.”

I cleared my throat to suppress the flare of emotion that stole through my chest. “Don’t worry, Mom. You guys aren’t going to lose the winery. I won’t let that happen.”

Her eyes shimmered with tears, but she swallowed them back and sat up straighter. “No, we’re not. I won’t let it happen, either. Let me know what I can do to help. Even if it’s just running interference between you and your dad.”

I nodded. Keeping space between me and my dad would be better for everyone.

But I wouldn’t be here for long. I kissed my mom, then went out to grab my stuff and take it over to the guest house. I needed to get set up in that empty office. I had a shit-ton of work to do.

Roland

A week. I'd been here an entire fucking week. I hadn't spent this much time in Echo Creek since I was married to Zoe.

God, why did I choose *her* as my metric? It couldn't have been *since I lived here*, or *since college*? I had to measure things in terms of my ex?

I didn't know why she was on my mind. I'd barely seen her.

Since I'd convinced Dad to let me dig in and help with the finances, I'd been spending most of my time in what Cooper was now calling *Roland's office*. I reminded him daily that it wasn't *my* office. I had an office, in a high-rise building in downtown San Francisco. With a great fucking view. And an assistant sitting at a desk outside my door who had been madly rearranging my schedule as my *quick trip home* stretched out indefinitely.

I was still doing my actual job, just from here. All I needed was wifi, and thanks to Leo, the internet here was reliable. But between conference calls, answering emails, and basically trying not to sabotage my career, I was buried in the disaster that was Salishan Cellars.

And Zoe? I didn't know where she was most of the time. I could hear her come and go. Her office was two doors down from where I was sitting. But when she was in there, she kept the door closed. And the rest of the time, she was out and about, doing her thing. Always busy.

Or maybe avoiding me.

I needed to quit thinking about her.

My phone buzzed, vibrating against the table. I pushed my laptop aside and checked. My brother.

Cooper: *Stop working. Come drink.*

Me: *Thanks, I'm good.*

Cooper: *Not acceptable. Get your ass down here.*

Me: *Where?*

Cooper: *Mountainside Tavern*

I stared at my phone, waffling between telling him no, and sucking it up and going down there. I had a lot of work to do, but if I didn't, he'd probably keep bugging me.

And there was a small part of me that was glad for the invite. Glad to be included, like I still belonged here.

Me: *Fine.*

I saved the files I'd been working on and closed my laptop. The time caught my eye. Was it really after ten? I hadn't realized it was so late. I guess I'd done enough for one day.

Cooper was indeed at Mountainside, in a booth with Chase. The winery had a serious cash flow problem, but I'd made sure Chase had been paid about a third of what they owed him. We'd get him the rest, it would just take a little time. But like Leo had said, this was Chase. It was personal.

Coop raised his beer to me, then glanced over his shoulder and waved to get the bartender's attention. "Good man. Come. Sit. Order a beer. Take a load off."

I took a seat across from Chase. His dark hair was slicked back, like he'd been wearing a baseball cap all day. Even though he was eight years out of high school and no longer playing school sports, he hadn't gone the way of a lot of the guys around here, who had beer guts before they were thirty. Like Cooper, Chase kept in good shape.

"Thanks again," Chase said. "For helping get shit under control."

"Yeah, no problem," I said. The bartender came to the table and I ordered a Mack and Jack's African Amber. "We'll get things squared away with you as soon as we can."

"This whole thing still pisses me off," Cooper said. "I was basically stiffing you. Such bullshit."

“It’s not like you sign the checks,” Chase said. “Are things really as bad as people are saying?”

“What people?” I asked.

Chase shrugged. “Word around town is that Salishan is pretty much screwed. On the brink of closing.”

“Hell no,” Cooper said. “The fucking bank will have to haul my cold dead corpse off that land before I’ll leave it.”

It was weird, but I realized the vehemence in Cooper’s voice wasn’t for show. He wasn’t exaggerating. I had a sudden vision of him standing at the entrance to the property with a double-barreled shotgun in his hands, guarding the family land. In some ways, Cooper had been born in the wrong era. He should have been a homesteader back in the Wild West.

“It’s not going to come to that,” I said.

“Don’t listen to those assholes, anyway,” Chase said. “Gossipy bitches.”

Things were bad. That was true enough. And after a week of trying to get a handle on things, I still didn’t know what they needed to do about it.

“No Leo tonight?” I asked.

Chase paused, his beer partway to his mouth, and Cooper cleared his throat.

“Uh, no,” Cooper said. “Leo doesn’t leave the property.”

He said that like I was an idiot for not knowing.

“He doesn’t go anywhere?”

“Nope,” Cooper said. “Hasn’t left once since he came home.”

“How is that possible?” I asked. “He’s been home for three years, hasn’t he?”

“Yeah, and he hasn’t left the property in three years,” Cooper said.

I could tell Cooper was getting annoyed with me, but this was freaking me out. “That can’t be right. How does he get

groceries, or go to the doctor? How did he get all his ink done?"

"He orders shit online," Cooper said. "And has people come to him. I'm telling you, Leo hasn't set one foot off Salishan land since he came home."

How did I not know that? "Shit," I said.

Chase's eyes widened, and he grabbed a baseball cap from the seat next to him, then shoved it on his head and pulled the brim low.

Cooper snort-laughed. "Dude, isn't that Shelly?"

"Shut the fuck up," Chase hissed.

"Wait, did you hit that?" Cooper asked. "When?"

Chase scowled. "A few weeks ago."

I glanced over at the bar. A pretty blonde wearing an off-the-shoulder red shirt and skin-tight jeans stood chatting with the bartender.

"She's cute," I said. "What's the problem?"

Chase hunkered down lower in the booth. "Nothing. It would just be better if she doesn't see me."

"So you're saying you don't want me to get her attention?" Cooper asked.

"You wouldn't dare," Chase said.

Cooper snickered.

"Look, I hooked up with her a few times, and it was cool," Chase said. "But I'm not into the whole relationship thing, so I called it off. She wasn't thrilled about that."

"We should see if she'll throw a drink in his face," Cooper said.

"Fuck you, dick," Chase said. "I just don't want to hurt her feelings or whatever."

"Admirable," Cooper said. "I'll let it stand."

The girl in red—Shelly, apparently—walked past our booth. Chase twisted in his seat and pretended like he'd dropped something. I couldn't help but laugh. Cooper and Chase had been like this since we were all kids. Always giving each other shit. Now they had well-earned reputations as Echo Creek's resident playboys. I kept wondering when they'd outgrow it, but they both seemed happy to keep living the single life. Maybe they just hadn't found the right girls to settle them down.

Movement caught my attention from the corner of my eye, and I glanced over. There was a couple sitting at the bar who hadn't been there a moment ago. I didn't know the guy, but I did a doubletake when I saw the girl. Was that Zoe?

“What's up?” Cooper asked. He leaned over me to look, then muttered *oh shit* under his breath. “Sorry, man. I didn't know she'd be here.”

“It's fine,” I said.

Chase raised his eyebrows at Cooper.

“Knock it off, assholes,” I said. “I've seen her around a bunch of times. It's not a big deal.”

I *had* seen her around, and it hadn't been a big deal. But it had just been *her*. Now she was with some guy? Who the fuck was he? Not that I gave a shit who she was with. I had no right to care.

But seriously, who was he?

“That's Van.” Cooper said.

Ah, hell, was it that obvious what I'd been thinking? “What?”

Cooper nodded toward the bar. “The guy with Zoe. His name is Van.”

What the fuck kind of name was *Van*? “I didn't ask.”

“Yeah, but you wanted to know,” Cooper said.

“I just didn't know Zoe was dating anyone,” I said, trying to sound casual. Because I was. I didn't care.

“She’s not really *dating* him,” Cooper said. “He’s just her boycycle.”

“Boycycle?” I asked.

“You know,” Cooper said. “They’re friends, but she takes him for a ride once in a while.”

That was weird. It didn’t sound like Zoe.

Chase laughed. “That’s not a thing. You made that up.”

“It’s definitely a thing,” Cooper said.

“If that’s a thing, I’m down to be someone’s boycycle.” Chase took another drink, then set his beer down. “Especially if she’s as hot as Zoe.”

“Knock it off, asshole,” Cooper said. “Zoe’s off limits.”

“I know,” Chase said. “I said *as hot as Zoe*. I didn’t say Zoe. Even you have to admit, Zoe is hot as fuck.”

“No shit,” Cooper said, and I shot him a glare. “What? It’s just the truth. Any man can see she’s hot.”

“I bet your spank bank is full of Zoe pics,” Chase said. “Do you take them at work when she isn’t looking?”

I leveled Chase with a stare. I was two seconds from hauling him outside and beating the shit out of him. Not that he couldn’t give me a run for my money. But I was mad enough, I didn’t fucking care.

“Chase, no,” Cooper said, shaking his head.

“Too far?” Chase asked.

“Definitely too far,” Cooper said.

I picked up my beer and took a long pull, deciding to ignore Chase, and willing myself to not look in Zoe’s direction. What the fuck did I care if she had a boyfriend? We’d been divorced for years. I’d moved on. I’d been dating Farrah for almost a year. She’d moved on, too. Perfectly normal.

But I was still fuming inside.

Cooper and Chase started talking about something else, but I was only half listening. Had Zoe noticed I was here? Was she

going to come over and say hi? Oh god, was she going to introduce me to her douchebag boyfriend?

It made me think about what it would be like to bring Farrah out here. Introduce her to my family. Show her the winery. What would happen when I introduced her to Zoe?

I could picture it. It would be awkward, but Zoe would be friendly. Hell, she'd probably even be happy for me. So why did a sick feeling spread in the pit of my stomach at the thought of introducing Farrah to my ex-wife?

I pulled out my phone and checked my messages. I'd texted Farrah to let her know I'd be out of town for a few days, but I couldn't remember if she'd replied. She hadn't. That wasn't too surprising. She was busy, and about the most low-maintenance woman I'd ever known. She didn't need to talk to me all the time—didn't need constant reassurance. We often went a week or more without speaking, but it was because we were both busy. She was as career-driven and focused as I was. It was why we worked.

For a second, I thought about texting her again to see if she was back in town. But I didn't know how long I'd be out here, so I didn't bother. I'd see her when I got back to San Francisco.

Which had to be soon. I couldn't be away from the office for too much longer. But there was still so much shit to do here. The winery's financial records were a mess. I was still trying to sort out who they owed money to, and the list kept growing.

"Quit thinking about work," Cooper said.

I blinked. "What?"

"You're babysitting your beer and thinking about work," Cooper said. "Lighten up. When did you turn into such a *suit*?"

"Whatever, farm boy," I said.

"Your insult game is a disgrace," Cooper said. "Seriously, I thought I raised you better than that. We need to get something other than half a beer in you, or I'm going to throw your ass out."

Cooper got up and went to the bar. He elbowed Zoe, and she punched him in the arm. While Cooper talked to the bartender—rubbing his arm where she'd hit him—Zoe glanced toward our booth. Our eyes met, and she nodded before turning back to whatever-the-fuck his name was.

And that was it. We were just two people who used to know each other. Nothing more.

Cooper brought back three shots of whiskey and slid them onto the table. I grabbed one and swallowed it, then snatched Cooper's before he could drink it. Downed that one, too.

Suddenly, I didn't want to be quite so sober anymore.

Zoe

It's not an ultimatum. It's too late for that. I made a choice.

~Text from Zoe, four years ago

Roland's presence in the bar made my back prickle. I faced forward on the stool, like drinking this beer was the most important thing I had going on tonight.

I was going to have Cooper's ass for this. It was bad enough that Roland was still here after a week—spending his days in an office two doors down from mine. Now he had to show up at *my* bar? With *my* friends?

Hell no, Cooper. Hell no.

Of course, I wouldn't ask Coop to choose between me and his own brother. But still. Did they have to come *here*?

Sitting here with Van, in front of Roland, felt oddly shitty. I couldn't sit still—constantly shifted on my stool, like I was doing something wrong.

Obviously, I wasn't. I'd bumped into Van at the store earlier, and he'd asked if I wanted to grab a beer. I didn't have other plans, so I figured, why not? It was just a beer. The fact that Van and I went to the bedroom rodeo sometimes didn't have anything to do with... well, anything. It certainly had nothing to do with Roland.

"You okay?" Van asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Sorry, I guess I'm just worn out. It's been a long week, and it's not even Friday yet."

"That sucks," he said.

It *had* been a long week, and not just because Roland was here. It felt like my to-do list was longer at the end of each day than at the beginning—like I added twice the number of things

I checked off. Plus, I'd had a vendor flake out on me, and a bridezilla bitch me out on the phone earlier.

I sipped my beer and listened to Van for a while, giving short replies so I wasn't being a total asshole to him. Van was a cool guy. He was fun to hang out with, at least.

He'd never been married, and never wanted to be. Didn't want a family. Liked his life the way it was. Despite my divorce, I was open to the possibility of trying again. In fact, I wanted that. I wanted to find the right man. Get married. Do it right this time. Van didn't, and he'd told me that when we'd met.

I'd appreciated his honesty and returned it. Said I liked him, but I didn't see us having a future together—and that I did want a future with someone.

We'd reached an understanding. Which in practice meant we hung out sometimes, and usually wound up in bed.

It worked. We had fun together, and a casual sexual relationship was fine. I'd dated a couple of men before Van, and they'd been cool guys, too. But those relationships hadn't gone anywhere. We'd had some fun, but there hadn't been a future in it for me, and I'd known it. I hadn't wanted to lead them on, so I'd ended things.

Which brought me back to sitting in a bar with Van, my ex-husband in a booth behind me.

"You seem out of it," Van said. He reached over and rubbed a few circles across my back. "You sure you're all right?"

"I'm sorry, was I not listening?"

He smiled. "Not really. You wanna get out of here?"

That meant, *do you want to go somewhere and have sex?* Usually, I would have said yes. A nice fuck was a good way to de-stress. But the thought of sleeping with Van left me with a weird feeling in my tummy. Not a happy *let's go have an orgasm* feeling. A shitty *you'll regret it if you do* feeling.

"I think I'm just going to call it an early night," I said. "Go home and get some sleep."

He hesitated, his hand still on my back, and I wondered if he was going to push.

“All right,” he said, dropping his hand. He gestured to my beer. “Do you want another, or are you done?”

“I’m done.”

He motioned for the bartender.

“You don’t have to buy my drink,” I said.

“It’s cool,” he said. “I think you got mine last time.”

That was probably true. We tended to alternate picking up the tab, more or less.

“Thanks.”

I put on my coat while he settled with the bartender. Roland was still in the booth with Cooper and Chase. They had a line of shot glasses in the middle of the table, and Roland had his buzzed face on. Eyelids a little droopy. Mouth relaxed with a hint of a smile.

For a second, I thought about going over to talk to them. It shouldn’t be a big deal. It was no secret I was good friends with Cooper. I hung out with him and Chase all the time.

And Roland was fun when he was buzzed. Or he had been, when we were younger. But thinking about drinking with Roland led to thinking about what we’d always done *after* drinking.

Sex. Lots of sex.

Crazy, freaky, out-of-control monkey sex.

And suddenly my fun zone was all lit up, like the memory of some drunken sexual encounters had flipped my arousal switch past *on* and straight to *overdrive*.

Okay, so calling them *drunken sexual encounters* was selling the whole thing short. Way short. Trashed or sober, Roland and I had been hot enough to melt steel.

I should have been able to admit that now—think about it and acknowledge it for what it was—without soaking my fucking

panties. Jesus.

Shooting a glare at Cooper for bringing Roland here, I pulled my hair out from the collar of my coat. I had a very uncomfortable throbbing between my legs, and it was all Roland's fault. He was throwing me off, making everything feel awkward. I should be dragging Van to his place—he lived closer—for a tension-relieving orgasm.

But all I could think about was how Roland's orgasms hadn't just been tension-relieving. They'd been fucking mind-blowing.

I shoved my hands in my coat pockets and followed Van to the door. Why was I letting Roland cockblock me like this? It wasn't like he cared. There was no ring on my finger. Those divorce papers were signed, sealed, and recorded. I could sleep with Van if I wanted to. I wasn't hurting anyone.

Just before leaving, I glanced over my shoulder. Roland was turned in his seat, looking right at me. Watching me leave the bar with another man.

The back of my throat burned, and I was a little worried I might vomit all over the sidewalk. How would I explain that? I'd puked on this sidewalk before, but only when I'd been stupid enough to do shots with Cooper and Chase. Or that one time when I'd been here with some girlfriends and we'd had all those margaritas. Tonight I'd had one beer, and I hadn't even finished it.

The cool air outside helped, but I was still all knotted up inside. Frustrated. Annoyed. Stupid cockblocking ex-husband. Stupid hot sex memories. Stupid raging hormones.

I said goodbye to Van—he still looked hopeful until I pulled out my keys—and drove home. I was cranky and uncomfortable, wondering what the hell was wrong with me.

* * *

Morning came all too soon, and I was *not* in the best mood. I hadn't slept well. Despite resorting to my battery-operated boyfriend, the self-indulgence hadn't been very satisfying. My mind kept wanting to show me scenes from my sordid sexual history with Roland. I didn't *want* to fantasize about my ex-husband in order to get off. It was weird and frustrating. I hadn't fantasized about him once since our relationship had ended—at least, not about having sex with him. I'd pictured hitting him over the head with something solid a few times, but not sex. But last night? Every image in my head had become him.

Something was very wrong with me.

I rooted around on my desk, looking for a pen. I really needed to spend some time cleaning this thing off, but it never seemed to make it to the top of my priority list. I found one—purple, not blue or black, but it would do—and proceeded to look for the notepad I'd had in my hand two seconds ago.

“Morning.”

I glanced up at Roland's voice, staunchly ignoring the way my heart skipped at the sight of him. He stood in the hall outside my half-open door, dressed in a button-down shirt and slacks. His hands were in his pockets, and he shifted closer.

“Hi,” I said.

“I'm surprised you're here already.”

I looked over at my computer screen, checking the time. It was eight-thirty. I was here by eight most mornings, although my schedule varied on days I had an event to manage.

“Why?” I asked. “I'm usually here at this time.”

He lifted one shoulder in a slight shrug. “You were out drinking last night.”

“Out drinking?” I asked. What was he talking about? I’d arrived at the bar after him and left before he did. “I had a beer. That wasn’t really *out drinking*. You were the one doing shots with the goofball boys.”

He winced a little, and I noticed he did look a little rough this morning. Not enough that most people would be able to tell, but I knew him. He needed a glass of ice water, a black coffee, and a greasy breakfast. In that order.

“Yeah, we had a few drinks,” he said. “But I went home alone and got a full night’s sleep.”

I spotted my notepad and opened it, flipping to a blank page so I could jot down a few things. I was about to reply with *So did I*, when I realized what he’d just said. *I went home alone and got a full night’s sleep.*

Was he giving me shit about leaving the bar with Van?

He still had his hands in his pockets, but there was fire in his eyes. He *was* giving me shit about Van. That was rich. I was sure he hadn’t been celibate since we’d broken up.

For a second, I thought about lying to him. Making some comment about being tired after a trip to pound-town last night. What can I say, I’m only human. But I didn’t.

“Yeah, I did too.”

“You... oh,” he said. “You went home alone?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes, I went home alone. Went to bed.” *Didn’t sleep because you cockblocked me out of a perfectly decent orgasm.*

He shifted his feet and his shoulders slumped—just a tiny movement, but I could tell I’d deflated whatever fight he’d been hoping to pick with me.

“I wasn’t trying to get in your business,” he said. “I just saw you leave the bar with...”

“Van,” I said.

His lip twitched in a hint of a smile. “Van? What kind of a name is that?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “What’s your girlfriend’s name?”

His face froze. I had no idea if he had a girlfriend—I didn’t really want to know—but judging by his expression, he did.

He cleared his throat. “Farrah.”

A hot spark of anger flared to life in the pit of my stomach. He’d stopped by my office at eight-fucking-thirty to give me a hard time about leaving a bar with another man, and he had a *girlfriend*? I could look past it if he’d just been pumping me for information—looking to satisfy his curiosity about my relationship status. But he’d been with Cooper and Chase last night. They would have filled him in.

“You can quit with the passive aggressive thing,” I said. “If you’d like to say something about my personal life or who I spend time with, just come out and say it.”

“I don’t have anything to say about your personal life,” he said.

“Right.” I stood up and slipped my phone in my back pocket. “That’s why you’ve been here for over a week and the first time you talk to me is after you see me leave a bar with someone.”

He opened his mouth like he was going to argue, but closed it and looked away. “I’ve talked to you. I’ve just been busy. So have you.”

Of course he had. Roland was *always* busy. It was still a lame excuse. But I didn’t want to argue with him.

“Yeah, I have been,” I said. “I’m sure you are, too.”

He nodded, meeting my eyes. For a heartbeat, my irritation at him melted away, and I just saw *him*. Roland. With his thick hair and sexy stubble. The guy I used to know.

The guy I used to be really fucking in love with.

“You have something on your shirt again,” he said.

I blinked and looked down. There was a tan splotch on my shirt, right across my left boob. “Fuck. This is a nice shirt, too.”

Roland grinned, and I shot him a glare. I was back to being annoyed. “Speaking of busy, I have a lot to do, so...”

His expression fell, his smile quickly replaced by his usual serious-and-distracted look. “Yeah, me too.”

He walked away, and I rolled my eyes. The nerve of that guy. God, why was he still here?

And once again, I needed a new damn shirt.

Roland

I went down the hallway to my office. No, wait... it wasn't *my* office. It was *an* office I was using. Temporarily.

Although I'd managed to buy some time with the bank, the winery's books were a mess. My dad was good at some things, but he'd started doing a lot of the accounting himself a few years back. He probably thought he could save money if their accountant had less to do, but the result was a fucking nightmare to deal with.

I wanted to consolidate their debt and lower their monthly overhead. Should have been easy, but with my dad's haphazard records, it was proving to be a lot of work. Plus, I still had my own job to do.

Zoe's door closed as I sat down at the desk. No doubt she'd closed it to keep me from bugging her. I didn't know what had possessed me to stop and talk to her. She was right, I hadn't tried to make conversation since I'd been here. Nothing more than a quick *hi* if I happened to see her, more out of politeness than anything.

But the image of her walking out of the bar with that guy was burned into my memory. Like a bad dream I couldn't shake, hours after waking up.

I knew I had no right to be bothered by it. But really, *that* guy? He had prick written all over him. And Cooper had said he wasn't even her boyfriend, just a guy she hooked up with sometimes. I didn't get it. Zoe wasn't the kind of girl to be some douchebag's fuck buddy. In fact, it would have bothered me less to see her with an actual boyfriend. At least that would have been good for her. Why was she wasting her time with someone who didn't give a shit about her?

My phone rang, and I was surprised to see Farrah's name on the screen. I still hadn't talked to her since I'd left San

Francisco.

“Hey,” I said. “Are you back in town?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Got in late last night. Are you in the office today?”

“No, I’m still in Echo Creek,” I said.

There was a muffled sound, like she was talking to someone else. She must have been in her office. “You’re where?”

“Echo Creek, Washington,” I said. “You know, the family winery. My brother called. They’re having financial trouble. I texted you.”

“Oh,” she said. “When will you be back?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I should have been back by now, but things are taking longer to sort out than I thought.”

More muffled talking. “Okay. No, put that on my desk, and yes reschedule my three o’clock. Sorry, I’m trying to get caught up. I lost yesterday to flight delays. I’m buried.”

Farrah’s schedule was always hectic. It was a toss-up which one of us spent more time at the office. “Yeah, it’s fine. How long are you in town?”

“Let me check.” She paused for a second. “I’m here until Wednesday morning, then I’m in New York for a week. After that I’m going straight to London.”

Damn. With all the work I still had to do here, I wouldn’t be back before she left again.

“What do you think about flying out here for a few days?” I asked. “I’m staying in one of the guest cottages. It’s kind of like being at a bed and breakfast. And obviously there’s no shortage of wine.”

“This weekend?” she asked. “God, Roland, you know I can’t do that. I’m too busy to take time off right now.”

I was hit by a surprising sting of disappointment. “Yeah, I know you’re busy. Things are just stressful out here. My dad has this place swimming in debt. The bank was—”

“Roland, hold on.”

I stopped mid-sentence and waited while I heard more muffled talking on her end.

“Sorry,” she said. “Why don’t you fly home for the weekend? We could at least do dinner.”

A quick trip home wasn’t a bad idea. I’d lose the travel time, which wasn’t ideal. If I could spend those hours dealing with the winery shit, I’d be able to go home for good that much sooner. But who knew when Farrah and I would have a chance to see each other again.

And maybe a couple of days away from this place would help me get my head back on straight. Spend a night in my own bed—or hers—to press the reset button. Then I could come back next week and finish up. Put a plan together for my dad and leave it at that.

“Yeah, I’ll see if I can get a flight tomorrow,” I said. “Can you do a late dinner? I’m not sure when I’ll get in.”

“Late is fine,” she said.

“Okay, I’ll see you then.”

She ended the call halfway through her hurried goodbye.

I tossed my phone on the desk, feeling oddly unsettled. Going home for a couple of days was fine. But it would have been nice if Farrah had been willing to give up some time for me. Was it just her schedule that led her to say no to coming out here, or did she not want the pressure of meeting my family? Although, I’d never met hers. Truthfully, I didn’t know much about them.

But I was probably being unreasonable. I’d started dating Farrah because we had similar lifestyles. That was why it worked. It wasn’t fair for me to suddenly expect her to be different just because I was dealing with family stuff.

I sent Danielle a text so she could book my flights and make a dinner reservation. I’d go home for a couple of days, spend a night with Farrah, and everything would be fine.

* * *

I glanced at the time. I'd come over to the office in the Big House early to get a few things done before I had to leave to catch my flight. I still had some time, but I wanted to get in a run before I left. Working as much as I did, I spent a lot of time at my desk. Getting in my workouts, no matter where I was, had to be a priority.

A low hum of noise downstairs greeted me as soon as I opened the office door. I wondered if it was a wedding, or something else. The winery's events schedule was booked solid, which was good for cash flow. They already had weddings scheduled well into next year. I had to give it to Zoe, she did a damn good job.

I went downstairs and when I got to the front, I held the door open for a guest. Right behind her came Zoe—a very frazzled Zoe.

Her hair was curled in soft waves, and her blouse was neatly tucked into her slacks. It wasn't her appearance that was disheveled, although a strand of hair fell across her forehead, and she aggressively swiped it away. It was her eyes. I could see the strain behind them. She was about to lose her shit.

She paused just inside the door, blinking at me like it had taken her a second to realize who she was looking at.

"Thanks," she said.

"Sure," I said. "Are you okay?"

She let out a long breath and glanced around the lobby. "Yes... No. This day is a fucking disaster."

"What's going on?" I asked. "Difficult bride?"

"No, it's not a wedding," she said. "Corporate retreat. But the caterer completely screwed me over. They brought the wrong

food, which is bad enough. But I have seventeen vegans with nothing to eat because everything contains animal products, even the salad that was not supposed to have goat cheese. And we ran out of the salad because it was all the twenty-four vegetarians had to eat. They forgot the bread, Roland. What kind of caterer forgets the bread? It's a good thing we're a fucking winery. If everyone in there wasn't rocking a wine buzz, I'd have a goddamn riot on my hands."

"What about the stuff from our kitchen?" I asked. The tasting rooms served food, but the winery always worked with outside caterers for larger events.

"Well, the kitchen would be better stocked if the last delivery hadn't been delayed due to some issue with our account," she said. "But it wouldn't have been enough anyway."

I had to stop myself from groaning. An issue with the account probably meant yet another vendor that hadn't been paid.

"Look, I'd love to stand here and fill you in on how extraordinarily shitty my day is, but I have to go figure out how to salvage this." She turned and started toward the back.

"Wait, Zoe."

She paused and glanced over her shoulder.

I pulled out my phone and glanced at the time. I could spare an hour if I skipped my run. "Would it help if I went to the store? If you text me a list, I can get whatever you need to fill in the gaps."

"Um..." She walked back toward me, slowly, like she was uncertain. "Yeah, actually that would help a lot."

"Okay." I held up my phone. "Text me while I'm en route."

"Right... I don't have your number," she said.

"It's the same."

She pulled out her phone. "Yeah, well, I deleted it. Can I have it again?"

Why did hearing her say she'd deleted my number feel like a kick in the balls? I couldn't remember the last time we'd

texted or talked on the phone. She didn't have a reason to keep my number. But it still bothered me.

I cleared my throat, trying to get rid of the feeling, and gave her my number.

"Thanks," she said. "I have to go make sure my client isn't planning to have me killed, but I'll text you in a minute."

I watched her hurry down the hall, then went out to my car and drove to the store. Her text came through just as I was pulling into the parking lot. Then another. And another. She'd sent me a long fucking list.

It took me a little while to find everything she needed. The lady at the bakery next door saved my ass—or Zoe's ass, at least. I explained the situation and she quickly packaged up enough bread to feed an army.

I texted Zoe to let her know I was on my way back. In addition to the bread, my car was full of cheeses, fruits and vegetables, a variety of butters and spreads, olives that had cost as much as a good steak, and three more bags of stuff I'd never even heard of.

She met me outside and we quickly unloaded through the side entrance into the kitchen. I went out to get the last of the bread. When I came back in, she was at the sink washing her hands, an apron tied around her waist.

"Can you slice?" she asked.

I glanced at the time. I'd be cutting it close if I didn't leave soon, but I could at least help Zoe slice bread. "Yeah, sure."

"Awesome." She tossed me an apron and nodded toward the sink. "Wash your hands. You remember where everything is?"

"I'll figure it out."

I washed up and put on the apron, then got to work on the bread. She pulled out bread boards and I lined up the slices in neat rows. I didn't know where the caterer had gone, but it was just the two of us in the big kitchen. Maybe she'd fired them while I was out.

By some sort of Zoe-magic, she turned the stuff I'd brought into platters of tidy finger food. She had me run upstairs to her office for note cards and a pen, which she used to label everything with *vegan* or *vegetarian*, and listed the ingredients.

"This is a start," she said, stepping back to eye our—well, mostly her—handiwork. "They'll go through this in about ten minutes, but better to tide them over. Then I can get another round of food going. Let's get this out there before they all die of starvation."

I hesitated, checking the time again. If I didn't leave now, I was going to miss my flight.

But I was looking at a two-hour drive just to get to the airport. Then ninety minutes of waiting, and a two-hour flight home. My return flight was tomorrow afternoon. I'd be in San Francisco for less than twenty-four hours. Then all the travel time to get back here. It would be nice to see Farrah, but that was a lot of travel for one dinner.

It wasn't really about Zoe. Now that I was looking at the timing, it just didn't make sense for me to go.

"Yeah, give me a second." I sent Farrah a text, letting her know I had to cancel. She traveled all the time, so I knew she'd understand. And we were both so busy, canceled plans were nothing new for us.

I grabbed two trays of food and followed Zoe. It reminded me of when I was a kid and my parents would rope me into helping when they were short-staffed. I'd learned how to serve wine before I'd learned to drive.

Her corporate crowd—I would have bet a thousand dollars they were a PR and marketing firm—applauded when we came in. She gave a little bow, playing it up. The mood in the room seemed considerably lighter as people dished up; food had a tendency to do that. I noticed a woman who looked like she might be in charge pull Zoe aside to thank her.

I stayed to help. We prepped, then brought out more food and wine. When she was satisfied that her clients had everything

they needed, we wandered back to the kitchen. The hum of conversation in the event room faded behind us.

We put a few things away, wrapping up the excess food and moving the dirty dishes to the sink. With her clients appeased, there was no rush. Things felt relaxed. Comfortable.

She leaned against a counter, a rag in her hands. “So... what have you been working on, all shut away in that office?”

“Going through Salishan’s finances,” I said. “I have a handle on some of it, but it’s taking time to get everything under control.”

“Cooper said the bank was threatening foreclosure.”

There was a slight hitch in her voice. She’d been worrying. “That was before I got here. They’re not going to foreclose.”

“That’s good to hear,” she said. “I know it’s not really my business, but I’d hate to see anything happen to this place.”

“Yeah, of course. I would too. I’ll get them back on track.” I rested my elbow on the counter. “It’s been frustrating, though. I’ve been going through their records and I keep wondering what the hell my dad was thinking.”

She shrugged, and I caught a slight eye roll. “Well, you aren’t the only one who wonders that.”

“It’s like he’s been investing in the wrong things,” I said. “After they built the Big House, they should have focused on saving for more capital investments. Equipment doesn’t last forever, and they have no plan for investing in new technologies. Everything is haphazard.”

“Yeah,” she said. “And there’s so much more competition these days. All these semi-retired people buying land and starting wineries. Even I remember when we were one of just a handful of wine producers around here. Now there are dozens.”

“Exactly,” I said. “They need to be able to adjust for that. Differentiate themselves in the marketplace. But that requires organization and planning. I don’t know what the fuck my dad’s been doing all these years.”

“I shouldn’t talk shit about your dad, but I don’t know what the fuck he’s been doing either,” she said with a little grin. “I don’t envy you the task of dealing with him.”

I shook my head. “Yeah, he’s... challenging. He always was.”

“He’s certainly no picnic,” she said. “You know, once last year I had to kick him out of the Big House because he was making a scene in front of guests.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I can laugh about it now, but it wasn’t funny at the time. He lost his temper about something and went off on the tasting room staff. I had a brunch in the other room and we could hear him yelling. I pulled him outside and told him to stop being a jackass in front of our guests.”

I raised my eyebrows. I wasn’t surprised Zoe had stood up to my father like that—she was feisty—but it couldn’t have been pleasant. “What did he do?”

She shrugged. “He was angry with me, but he walked away. He knew I was right, but it wasn’t like he was going to admit it.”

“No, I don’t think I’ve ever heard him admit he was wrong.”

“Not exactly his best quality,” she said. “I hope fixing all this stuff isn’t giving you too many headaches.”

“I’ll be all right.”

“Yeah, you will.” She put the rag on the counter. “I’m going to go check on things in the other room. They should be winding down.”

“Sure.”

Pausing for a second, I watched her go. It was nice to talk to someone about what I was doing here. I had a lot on my mind lately, and it was good to get some of it off my chest. Share my frustrations with someone who understood. Someone who cared.

I followed her out to see if she needed help wrapping up. The guests were all staying at the hotel next door—which was

good because it looked like barely a quarter of them were in any shape to drive. They left in small groups until finally the room was empty.

I brought an empty platter back to the kitchen, but I didn't see Zoe. The side door was open a crack, and I peeked outside.

She stood with her back against the building, a plastic cup dangling from her fingers.

"Looks like you pulled it off." I went out to stand beside her.

"Oh my god, what a day. I'm just glad it's over." She took a sip. "Thanks for your help, by the way."

"No problem," I said. "So let me guess. Tonight's agenda includes a hot bath and a stiff drink?"

"I already have the drink covered." She held out her cup, offering it to me.

I took it from her—whiskey—and enjoyed the burn as it went down my throat. I handed it back, and for a second our eyes met. Spending the afternoon with her had been fine. Pleasant, even. But standing with her here, in the cool evening air, I was hit with a potent mix of resentment and longing. A part of me wanted to pick a fight with her, while another part...

Another part wanted something else entirely.

That was messed up. I shouldn't be thinking about Zoe like that.

As if she could read my mind, she shifted away from me. Stood straight and tucked her hair behind her ear. "I need to finish up so I can go home."

"Do you need any more help?" I asked, knowing the best thing for me would be to walk away, not stay with her longer.

"No, I've got it." She met my eyes again. "Thanks. I'll see you around."

"Yeah."

She went in through the side door, and despite the piece of me that wanted to follow, I let her go.

Zoe

Sunday, I only had a small wedding to contend with. The ceremony and brunch reception went off without a hitch—catering included. It was a relief after Saturday’s shit show. My client had been understanding, but it sucked, having an event go south so badly. I was certainly never using that caterer again.

Thankfully Roland had jumped in to help. I’d been trying to find Shannon—or hell, even Cooper—to see if they’d run to the store for me. But neither of them had been around.

When Roland had offered, I’d almost said no. Because Roland. But it would have been stupid to refuse the help when I’d really needed it. And he’d come through for me like a champ. He’d even been nice to me.

I was off Monday and Tuesday, and I didn’t leave my house. It was glorious. Cooper texted to see if I wanted to catch a movie, but that would have required putting on pants. And a bra. So it was a definite no-go. But more than anything, I just needed a break. From work. From people.

From anyone whose last name was Miles.

I got in early on Wednesday, feeling refreshed. Not long after I arrived, while I was still yawning over my first cup of coffee, Roland passed my half-open door. He paused for a second, like he might stop. But he kept going, down the hall to the office he’d been using.

I rolled my eyes at the sharp sting of disappointment. So he hadn’t stopped to say good morning. So what? It wasn’t like we were friends.

And maybe that was what had been eating at me. We weren’t friends. I hated the feeling of distance between us. The awkwardness. It had dissipated on Saturday, although I’d been so focused on salvaging the event, I hadn’t had room to be

aloof toward him. I'd simply needed to get things done. But working side-by-side with him... well, it hadn't been bad. We'd both relaxed.

Although I hadn't allowed myself to admit it, I'd been hoping that lack of tension would have carried over to today. That maybe there was a version of reality where we could be friendly. Stop by each other's offices to say hi. Maybe rib each other a little bit. That would be better than feeling like he'd become a stranger.

However, I needed to remember who I was dealing with. He was going to help his parents, and roll on out of here back to his life in San Francisco. It wouldn't matter if we were friends or not because in a few days, he'd be gone. And who knew when I'd see him again.

I opened my calendar and sighed. My bridezilla was coming today for an in-person meeting. I was not looking forward to spending an afternoon with Miss Victoria Jones. And to make matters worse, I'd started my period. My lower back and hips ached something fierce.

When it came to the bridezilla, my only consolation was that she was marrying a man named Victor Cockburn. Not only was her husband-to-be's first name only two letters different from her own, his last name was *Cockburn*. Cock. Burn. It sounded like something he should see a doctor about.

So while Miss Victoria was micromanaging me to death, I amused myself by making up new versions of her impending last name. Burningcock. Cockdisease. Redcock. Cockrash. Not that I'd be anything less than totally professional on the outside. But what went on in my head was none of her business.

She was late—because of course she was—and she brought her maid-of-honor, Heather. They weren't related, but they looked, and dressed, so much alike, I had a hard time telling them apart. Big blond hair. Bright pink manicures. Leggings with tan Uggs. They were a couple of pumpkin spice nightmares. I plastered on a smile and led them to one of the meeting rooms upstairs.

“Can I get you ladies anything?” I asked.

“No, we’re doing a juice cleanse,” Victoria said.

I wondered how her bestie felt about that. Heather nodded, but her enthusiasm seemed forced.

“Water, then?” I asked.

“Is it filtered?” Victoria asked.

I opened the mini-fridge and pulled out two waters. “Bottled.”

Victoria put her giant wedding binder on the table and set her water next to it. We all took a seat, and Victoria flipped through the thick pages. She had magazine clippings, print-outs, notes—both handwritten and typed—samples, and who knew what else in that binder of hers. The first time she’d met with me, I’d asked her if she’d been working on the binder since she was little. I’d meant it as a friendly joke, but she’d looked at me with a straight face and said she’d started it when she was five.

Okay, then.

“So, I have some changes to the décor to make sure everything matches my vision.” Victoria flipped through a few more pages. “Here. I need it to look like this.”

I took a second to peruse the photos she’d laid out. Her ceremony was supposed to be outdoors, in our main garden area. The photos were all indoor venues.

“Why don’t you tell me which parts of this are the most important to you,” I said. “Because there’s a lot here we can replicate, but some won’t translate to an outdoor space.”

“This is what I want,” she said, gesturing to the entire page.

“Okay,” I said. “Well, these pictures have a lot of lights hanging from the ceiling to create that overhead twinkle effect. We don’t have a ceiling outside.”

“I’m sure you can figure something out,” she said. “Can’t you build a structure to drape the lights from?”

Build a structure? For fuck’s sake. Cocksting. Smokingcock. Victoria Cockpain. “I don’t think new trellises are in the

budget, I'm afraid."

She took a deep breath, like she was trying very hard to control herself. "How many more disappointments am I going to have this week?"

Heather made a sympathetic cooing noise. "Oh sweetie, I know, you're dealing with so much."

I was very practiced at keeping my thoughts from showing in my expression when I was with clients. So I kept my face carefully pleasant, even though my uterus was wreaking havoc on my lower half and my bridezilla's dramatics made me want to bang my head against the table.

I also knew it was usually best to keep quiet and let the bride realize I wasn't going to jump through hoops to appease her. I'd make her happy to the best of my ability, within the budget she—or in this case, her parents—had set. Outside of that, there wasn't anything I could do. I'd had to learn early to set boundaries with some of my brides, or they'd demand the moon and throw a tantrum when they realized it wouldn't fit through the door.

"Well, what can you do with lights outside?" Victoria asked with a roll of her eyes.

"We can light up the garden for you," I said. "We'll put twinkle lights in the trees and shrubs. And if you decide to use a trellis or arch for the ceremony, we can use lights on that, too."

"Well, that's better than nothing," she said.

Better than nothing. God, how did this girl find someone to fucking marry her? I felt sorry for Victor and his burning cock.

"All right, twinkle lights in the garden," I said.

The rest of the meeting was more of the same. About half her ideas were things that would work for an indoor wedding, and the other half were for outdoors. It was like she hadn't really decided on what she wanted. Or she'd just gone crazy on Pinterest and hadn't paid attention to the details—just pinned pretty pictures and brought them to me to demand I replicate them.

The more she talked, the more I thought it was probably the latter. Victoria wanted what she wanted, and that was that.

By the time we finished, my face hurt from keeping my expression neutral, and my cramps were reaching the point where all I wanted to do was curl up in a ball and cry. I walked Victoria and Heather out to the lobby and said a polite goodbye, then went upstairs to my office. I wished I could call it a day, but I had a group coming for a breakfast tomorrow. I needed to get the second tasting room rearranged.

After checking my email, I went down to the tasting room to make sure it would be ready for tomorrow's breakfast. The tables were all separated, and I started moving chairs out of the way so I could push them together.

Roland looked in. "Hey, need a hand with that?"

"Um, sure," I said. "I'm just putting the tables together."

He came in started scooting chairs back. I glanced at him, wondering what he was doing. At first, he'd barely acknowledged my existence. Now he was suddenly my helper? It wasn't that I didn't appreciate him lending a hand. I just wasn't sure why he was doing it.

We got the tables situated and put the chairs back in place. There were a few extras, so I pulled them off to the side of the room near the window.

"What's wrong?" he asked, breaking the silence.

I glanced over. "Nothing."

"Don't do that," he said.

"Do what?"

"That thing you do where you're hurt but you minimize it," he said.

"I'm not minimizing anything."

"The fuck you are," he said. "You keep wincing. What's wrong?"

I rolled my eyes. Well, if he really wanted to know... "I got my period. I have cramps. Happy now?"

He grunted, rubbing the back of his neck, and I figured that was the end of it. Saying *I got my period* had to be one of the top five ways to get a man to shut up.

“Sit down,” he said.

“What?”

“Sit.” He turned a chair around. “Backwards. Straddle it.”

I eyed him with suspicion. “Why?”

“Just do it.”

I sat, facing backward, my legs on either side. Roland pulled another chair close and sat behind me. He dug his thumbs into my lower back and started rubbing.

“Here?” He pressed his thumbs behind my hips.

“Yeah.”

Silently, he rubbed circles on my lower back, hitting just the right spot. God, that felt good. Really good. The aching tension melted away beneath his skilled hands.

He remembered.

He’d always rubbed my back like this when I had cramps. And he still knew exactly how to do it. Knew right where to put pressure—what would make me feel better.

Leaning forward against the chair, I let my body relax. I tried not to worry about the fact that this was Roland giving me a back rub. That maybe I should be a little more cautious about letting him touch me. None of this felt sexual, but it did feel... intimate. A reminder of our shared past. This was the kind of thing couples did—people who didn’t mind being raw and real around each other. Who left the bathroom door open and picked up each other’s dirty socks. Who’d been through the starry-eyed romance phase, and seen each other at their worst.

We’d been there, once. It seemed like such a long time ago.

He stopped rubbing. “There. Better?”

I realized my eyes had closed. I took a deep breath and opened them. “Yeah. Thank you.”

“Sure.”

Shannon poked her head in the door. “Oh, hi, Roland. Zoe, the front desk got a call asking about booking an anniversary party. They’re sending the woman’s contact information to you.”

I quickly stood and smoothed my hair down, feeling like we’d been caught doing something we shouldn’t. “Sure, I’ll call her back.”

“Thanks.” Her eyes moved from me to Roland, then back to me again.

“Is Dad in his office?” Roland asked.

“He should be,” she said.

“I need to talk to him.” Roland didn’t look at me before he walked past his mom and out the door.

Thankfully, Shannon just smiled and left, following Roland out. I didn’t want to answer questions about what we’d been doing in here. The answer, of course, was nothing. He’d stopped to help me move chairs, then given me a back rub. So what? That wasn’t significant.

Except it sort of was.

My cramps felt better, but there was another ache growing inside of me. An ache with two distinct sides. The side that longed for those hands to touch me again, and the side that was afraid to face the pain of what it would do to me if they did.

Roland

I left the tasting room, both annoyed and glad that my mom had interrupted. Rubbing Zoe's back had been like a reflex. I'd done it for her so many times before, I barely thought about it. Not until I was sitting right behind her with my hands on her back. It was crossing a line to touch her like that. I'd need to be more careful.

Pushing thoughts of Zoe out of my mind, I focused on the issue at hand. I'd sent my dad a preliminary plan to get the winery back on track. It lacked detail—there was a lot on the production side that I still needed to review—but it was a start.

I hadn't seen much of my dad since I'd been here. He was clearly avoiding me, which was just as well. We'd never had a great relationship, not even when I was a kid. Always arguing—bumping heads. He'd been critical of everything I did, later claiming he'd been hard on me to build my character. All it had really done was make me feel like nothing I did would ever be good enough for him.

Eventually, I'd stopped seeking his approval.

I found him in his office. “Hey, Dad. Have you looked over the draft plan I sent you?”

“Not yet,” he said, not looking up from his computer screen. “I'll get to it. Hotel reading.”

“Hotel?” I asked. “Are you going somewhere?”

“Yeah, I'm out of town for the next few days,” he said.

“You know, that's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about,” I said. “Your travel expenses are really high. That's one of the places you could cut back.”

He tapped his finger on his desk, finally looking at me. “That's tough. Travel is part of running this place. I can't really change that.”

“Well, something has to change,” I said. “I can’t make money appear out of nowhere. You have to cut your expenses, or dramatically increase your revenue. I have some ideas about that, too, but the expenses have to be addressed.”

“It’s not like I’m flying first class and staying in high-end hotels,” he said. “If we have to cut expenses, we should start looking at the rest of our overhead. Salaries, for starters.”

I took a deep breath. Why did business owners always want to start by cutting staff? “If you’re overstaffed, that’s one thing. But you don’t have that many employees. I don’t think that’s the problem. If you start laying people off, morale is going to suffer. And people are going to assume those rumors about Salishan are true.”

“What rumors?”

“Apparently people are saying Salishan is in trouble,” I said. “Although I guess they aren’t really rumors if they’re true.”

His face reddened, and the vein in his forehead stuck out. “What people? Who’s saying we’re in trouble?”

“People in town. Chase and Cooper mentioned it.”

“Damn it.” He scrubbed his hands through his salt-and-pepper hair and leaned back.

I didn’t understand why he was so upset. Since when did he care what people around town said? “A little town gossip is the least of your troubles.”

“Reputation is everything,” he said. “Especially in this day and age. What people say about a place can make or break it faster than you could imagine.”

“Sure, but we’re not talking about a scathing review in a wine magazine,” I said.

“Doesn’t matter.” He closed his laptop and stood. “I have to get moving or I’ll be late.”

“Dad, I really need you to review that draft,” I said. “And I have a lot more questions for you. There are some things in the books that don’t add up.”

He grabbed his things and draped his coat over his arm. “It will have to wait until I get back.”

I stepped aside as he brushed past me and out the door. I took another deep breath—I was doing that a lot lately—and clenched my fists, feeling my fingernails dig into my palms.

Why the fuck was I doing this? He didn’t want my help. He was going to fight me at every turn, either by opposing my suggestions or blowing them off. It was like he’d rather fail than admit I might be right.

Voices carried from outside his office. My mom was talking to him. I couldn’t make out what she said, but there was no mistaking the frustration in her voice. I heard a few sharp words from him, then his heavy footsteps walking away.

A moment later, Mom appeared in the doorway. Her hair was pulled back and her face was calm. But I knew her. She always tried to hide her stress from us kids. When I was younger, I hadn’t been able to see through her façade. I could now—could see the undercurrent of frustration just below the surface of her smile.

This was why I was here. For her.

“Hey, Mom.” I opened my arms and she stepped into my embrace.

She squeezed and patted my back. “I guess he’ll be back Friday.”

“Why does he travel so much?” I asked. He always had, my whole life. I’d never understood why running a winery caused him to be out of town so often.

“A lot of reasons,” she said. “Sometimes he visits other vineyards. We source some of our grapes elsewhere for more variety, and he likes to check up on their operations. He has meetings with our distributors. He likes to meet with people in person.”

“It’s expensive,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “Unfortunately, he doesn’t listen to me when it comes to the business.”

Another thing I'd never understood. My mom had grown up here. She'd lived and breathed this place her entire life, but Dad had always kept her out of the business side of things.

"Well, someone's going to have to start making him listen," I said.

She smiled at me, but it was a dispirited, tired smile. "Have I thanked you lately for being here?"

"You have." I put my arm around her shoulders and kissed her head. "I'm working on it."

The problem was, it was becoming increasingly clear that my dad was doing a shit job of running this place. He blamed everything from a dry season a few years ago to increased labor costs to changes in the economy. But from what I was seeing as I pored over the last ten years of financial records, the problem was him.

Bad decisions. Bad loans. Unfinished projects. Wasted resources. If this had been another business, I would have advised the board of directors to fire the CEO and get someone competent to run the company.

How was I supposed to tell my mom that she needed to fire my dad?

"I'm supposed to meet a friend for dinner," she said. "But the fridge at the house is full if you want to go over there and get yourself something."

She was such a mom, still trying to take care of me. "Thanks, Mom. I'll be fine."

"Okay," she said. "I'll see you later."

Mom left, and I walked back to the cottage. It was dinnertime, but I wasn't hungry. I had too much on my mind. My dad. The winery. I wanted to make sure they were secure before I went home, but it was so fucking complicated.

I sat down on the bed and pulled out my phone. Almost on a whim, I called Farrah.

"Hello?"

“Hey,” I said. “Did I catch you at a bad time? I know it’s late there.”

“I’m working, but I’m in my hotel room,” she said. “What’s going on?”

I paused, not sure what I wanted to say. It was odd, feeling like I needed to talk to her about everything. I dealt with stress at work all the time, but I never vented to her about it.

“Things are just a lot worse here than I thought they’d be,” I said.

“I thought Dimension was having a great year,” she said.

“No, I’m talking about my family’s winery,” I said.

“Oh, that,” she said. “Aren’t you finished with that already? Didn’t they just need a short-term loan or something?”

“That’s what I mean,” I said. “I thought it would be simple, but the books are a mess and—”

“Roland, hold on a second.”

The line went silent except for what sounded like the click of her fingernails on her keyboard.

“These numbers are bullshit,” she said, although I couldn’t tell if she was talking to me, or herself. “I’m going to have to get them to run them again.”

“Sounds like you’re busy,” I said.

“Yeah, I have to get this report done by tomorrow,” she said. “I’m back in town next week. Why don’t you text Gina and have her put you on my calendar.”

Text Gina? Was she serious? “I have to go through your assistant now?”

“Don’t be irritable,” she said.

“Farrah, I don’t even know when I’ll be back in San Francisco.”

“Why not?” she asked.

Had I been talking to myself this entire time? How many times had I told her where I was and what I was doing? “Do you

even know where I am right now?”

“I’m in New York, Roland,” she said. “You’re somewhere on the west coast. Does it matter?”

“You know, I’m dealing with somewhat of a crisis here, and I’m getting the sense that you don’t give a shit.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“I’ve told you what’s going on, more than once, but it’s like you haven’t heard a word.”

“I’m not sure what you expect from me,” she said. “My schedule is insane. You know that. I’m in New York, then London, and I don’t even know what’s on my calendar after that.”

“I know you travel a lot,” I said. “That’s not the point.”

“Then what is your point?”

I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees. That was a good question. What was my point? That I wanted her to be there for me when I was having a rough day? Farrah didn’t have a nurturing bone in her body.

But what the hell was I doing with someone who didn’t give two shits about what was happening in my life? At home, when all I did was work, it hadn’t mattered. Dating Farrah had been simple—uncomplicated. She didn’t need anything from me. Didn’t demand my attention, or complain when I worked late or canceled plans. I’d blown her off last weekend, and she hadn’t said a word.

But she didn’t have anything to give, either.

“Farrah, I’m sorry, but this isn’t going to work.” As soon as I said it, I realized how right I was. Our relationship had only seemed to work until now because it had never been tested. Now that it had, it was failing—hard.

“What are you saying?” she asked. “Are you ending things with me?”

“Yeah,” I said, realization settling over me, like I’d been living in the dark and someone just turned on a light. I could finally

see. “Look, you need someone who’s fine with being an afterthought. I really thought I was. But... I think I need more than that.”

“This is so out of the blue,” she said. “I thought we had an understanding.”

“We did. But you don’t have room in your life for someone who’s more than a diversion when you’re in town. If I walk away, what are you really losing? Someone to have dinner with a few times a month?”

She went quiet for a moment. I didn’t even hear her fingers clicking on her keyboard.

“I guess this is it, then,” she said, her voice subdued.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Goodbye, Roland.”

“Goodbye—”

Click.

I looked down at my phone screen for a long moment. I’d just broken up with my girlfriend, and all I felt was... nothing. No disappointment. Certainly no sadness or regret. Spending time with Farrah had been nice while it lasted, but I didn’t feel like I was losing anything by letting her go.

If that wasn’t a significant sign that I’d done the right thing, I didn’t know what was. And it stood out in sharp contrast to the way I’d felt when another relationship had ended.

God, I didn’t want to think about Zoe right now. I massaged my forehead, as if I could rub away my thoughts of her. But she was always there. Seeing her every day was messing with my head. Not just my head. Maybe it was shitty to admit it immediately after breaking up with Farrah, but it was messing with my dick, too.

Whenever I was around her, I noticed... everything. She looked amazing. Smelled fantastic. I’d had it bad for Zoe from the first time I laid eyes on her. We’d met in high school when her family had moved to Echo Creek, and she’d taken my

breath away. It was hard to push that into the background, even with our history. She was still sexy as fuck.

I needed to just admit it. I was attracted to her. Insanely attracted to her. Obviously acting on that wasn't an option. My relationship status had nothing to do with that being a bad idea. Zoe and I had been there, done that, and it didn't matter what my cock wanted. She wasn't mine anymore, and she never would be again.

And there was the shitty post-breakup knot in the pit of my stomach. But it wasn't for Farrah. It wasn't for the woman I'd spent the last year dating, nor the handful of women I'd had flings with before her. It was for the woman who should have been nothing but a memory by now. It had been four years. That should have been enough time to get over her.

But I wasn't sure if forever would be enough time to get over Zoe.

Zoe

Sometimes I think moving back here was a mistake. You're a thousand miles away, but you're everywhere.

~Text from Zoe, unsent

Friday evening, I finished work late. There was a small party at the Big House tomorrow, but Jamie was handling it. I was off for the next couple of days and looking forward to the break.

Downstairs, I found Brynn standing in the lobby. She was the youngest of the Miles kids, although she wasn't a kid anymore. She was a gorgeous twenty-year-old woman, with long brown hair and a banging body. It still surprised me to see her looking so grown up—probably because I'd known her since she was seven. She was ten years younger than me, so she'd been a little girl when I'd started dating Roland.

"Hey, Brynn," I said. "How's school?"

She shrugged. "It's okay."

"Are you home for the weekend?" I asked.

"Yeah, or maybe a little longer," she said. "I'm not sure."

Shannon came down the hall, adjusting her purse strap over her shoulder. "Ready, kiddo?"

"Yep," Brynn said.

Something was going on, but I couldn't put my finger on what. Shannon looked tense, although that was normal for her these days. But Brynn wasn't usually so subdued.

"We're going to dinner if you want to come," Shannon said.

"Oh, I don't want to interfere with mother-daughter time," I said.

"It's fine," Brynn said. "Come with us."

“All right,” I said. “If you’re sure.”

We went next door to the Echo Creek Lodge. Salishan had a great relationship with the large hotel. A lot of our guests stayed here if they came for more than a day. They also had a nice restaurant, with good food and a cozy ambiance.

The host seated us, and after looking over the menus, we ordered dinner. While we waited for our food, Shannon asked Brynn about school. Her grades were good, and she liked her classes. I still got the feeling something was wrong, but I didn’t ask. It might be something Brynn didn’t want to talk about in front of her mom. I resolved to get Brynn alone later, so I could ask her what was going on.

Our food came out and we started eating.

“Your brother is home,” Shannon said after the waitress had left.

“Yeah, Cooper texted me,” Brynn said. “He’s still here?”

Shannon nodded. “He’s been helping us with some financial issues.”

Brynn glanced at me. “Is that weird?”

“Of course not,” I said.

“Liar,” Brynn said.

“I’m not lying.” I was totally lying. “I barely see him. And when I do, we get along fine.”

Shannon eyed me, and I wondered what she was thinking. She knew me well enough; she could probably tell I was struggling with Roland being here.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Brynn said. “I see my ex on campus once in a while and it makes me throw up in my mouth a little.”

“It makes me sad,” Shannon said.

I paused with my fork halfway to my mouth.

“What makes you sad?” Brynn asked.

“Roland,” Shannon said.

I put my fork down. Shannon and I had talked about Roland, more than once. I'd told her why I'd left, and she'd been supportive and sympathetic. I hadn't burdened her with every detail, but I'd been honest, and she'd been receptive. But she'd also never really told me how she felt about it. Or him. And I'd never asked.

She took a deep breath. "Parenting when you have young children is tough. Babies don't sleep a lot, they poop out their diapers, make messes. Toddlers get into everything. Don't even get me started on what Cooper was like as a two-year-old. I'm surprised I didn't lose my mind. There are challenges at every stage. But nothing prepared me for being a parent of adults."

"Yeah, well, one of your adult children is Cooper," Brynn said. "Although I don't know if *adult* is the right term for him."

Shannon smiled. "I worry about all of you for different reasons. But Roland is... he's so much like your dad."

I bit the inside of my lip to keep from replying. I wanted to argue with her—to defend Roland. I'd never liked Lawrence very much and hearing her compare Roland to him raised my hackles. Although it wasn't my job to stick up for Roland anymore.

"Lawrence always worked too much," Shannon continued. "I think at first he felt like he had a lot to prove to my parents. He wanted to show he could take over the winery operations. But he always prioritized work over everything else. Even me."

Her comment hit way too close to home, and I swallowed hard.

"Roland has always felt like he had things to prove," Shannon said. "I'd hoped that the people he chose to have in his life would keep him on track. But unfortunately, that hasn't been the case."

"He's a dumbass," Brynn said.

"Brynn," Shannon said.

"He is," Brynn said. "It's not like we don't all know it. Just because he's my brother doesn't mean I have to like him, or

think he isn't an idiot when he is."

"You're going to be nice to him," Shannon said, pointing her finger at Brynn. "He hasn't been home in eighteen months, and now he's here, despite the fact that it's interfering with his work."

"That's the point," Brynn said. "He hasn't been here."

I fiddled with my hair, uncomfortable. It felt like this was a conversation I shouldn't be hearing.

I'd never wanted to make Roland's family take sides. I'd almost declined the job offer because I didn't want to come between them. But I'd realized later that Roland's family felt a bit like I did—like he'd chosen his career over them.

"I know, mothers are always willing to overlook things in their children," Shannon said. "That makes it easier for me to look past the last few years. But we need him right now, and he's here. I'm grateful for that." She met my eyes. "Even though I know it hasn't been easy on everyone."

I tucked my hair behind my ear. "It's really fine."

"How long is he going to be around?" Brynn asked.

"I don't know," Shannon said. "The winery's financial problems are apparently bigger than any of us thought."

"Mom, if you need me to move home, I can," Brynn said.

"Sweetie, no." Shannon covered Brynn's hand with her own. "College is important."

"I know, but I can commute," she said. "It's not that far. And I was thinking about it anyway because I need to find a new place to live."

"Why?" Shannon asked. "Did something happen with Carrie?"

Brynn's eyes shone with sudden tears, and she touched her fingers to her lips. She took a shaky breath. "I, um... I came home the other night and found Carrie with Austin."

"Oh, no," I said. Brynn had been dating Austin for about six months, and Carrie was her roommate. "Please tell me you mean you found them flirting in the kitchen or something."

Brynn shook her head. “Nope. On the couch. And they were...”

“Banging?” I asked.

Brynn nodded, and Shannon raised her eyebrow at me.

“What?” I asked. “We’re all adults here.”

“Honey, I am so sorry.” Shannon reached over and rubbed her back. “You know you can stay at home as long as you need.”

“Thanks,” Brynn said. She sniffed and swiped away the lone tear that had managed to break free from the corner of her eye. “I should have seen it coming. I knew they got along really well, but I figured I was just lucky that my boyfriend and my roommate didn’t fight. I guess it’s been going on for months and they never told me.”

“Oh my god, I will cut a bitch,” I said. “You need me to deal with this, Brynn, you just say the word. I’ll make them both regret being born.”

“Thanks, Zoe,” Brynn said. “I just don’t get it. How can people be so awful to someone they supposedly care about?”

“Unfortunately, the world is full of people like that,” Shannon said. “The trick is to find the good ones and keep them close.”

“Right now, I think I just want a dog,” Brynn said. “Dogs don’t cheat with supposed friends.”

“I can’t believe that asshole,” I said. “And Carrie? Girls who cheat with their friends’ boyfriends are the worst. You know, I should get you drunk tonight. Do this right.”

Shannon leveled me with her best mom expression. “She’s underage.”

“She’s twenty,” I said. “And she grew up in a winery. Somehow I don’t think she has virgin lips.”

“Nope,” Brynn said.

I raised my fist and she bumped it with hers.

“Adult children,” Shannon said with a roll of her eyes. “Someday you’ll both know.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not really going to get her drunk,” I said. As soon as Shannon glanced away, I mouthed *yes I am* at Brynn. Her little smile sealed the deal. I was definitely getting Brynn drunk tonight. Poor girl needed it.

The conversation turned to more mundane topics as we finished our dinner. Brynn talked about her plans to find a new apartment. She already had a lead on a cute studio close to campus. Shannon talked about a new red blend she was planning. I loved listening to Shannon talk about her work. It was fascinating, and she was so animated and passionate about it.

I tried to keep the conversation away from topics like Roland, or boyfriends, or workaholic husbands. When we finished, we walked back to Salishan. Shannon asked Brynn if she wanted to stay in the other guest cottage, and Brynn said she’d love to.

I said I was going to head home, but gave Brynn a quick wink, hoping Shannon didn’t see. We all said goodnight and went our separate ways, but I texted Brynn and told her to meet me at the kitchen entrance of the Big House in an hour.

* * *

Brynn was already waiting for me when I got to the Big House. The bottles in my grocery bag clinked against each other.

“Shh,” Brynn said, holding a finger to her lips. “I could hear you coming a mile away.”

“We’re fine,” I said. “No one’s around this late.”

“Are you sure we shouldn’t hang out in the Blackberry Cottage?” Brynn asked.

“With Roland right next door?” I asked. “Nope. Trespassing at work is preferable.”

Brynn laughed. “Okay, I get it.”

I found the right key and unlocked the kitchen door. We went inside, and I led her to the small tasting room. It had a long rectangular table with a leather upholstered bench seat along one side—a comfy place to sit and have a few drinks. I set down the grocery bags and pulled out my supplies.

“Normally I’m a whiskey girl, but a boyfriend cheating with your roommate calls for tequila,” I said, putting the bottle down. “But pace yourself with this stuff.”

“Yeah, I know,” Brynn said. “I’m twenty, not five.”

“I wouldn’t be feeding you tequila if you were five.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry,” Brynn said. “I’m just so used to being treated like a baby when I’m home.”

“Believe me, I know what that’s like.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” I poured us each a shot. “My brother is fifteen years older than I am. I’ll forever be a little kid to him.”

“I forgot about your brother,” she said. “Do you see him very often?”

“No,” I said. “He lives in Ohio, so there’s that. But he was so much older than me, I didn’t know him very well when I was growing up. He was off to college when I was three. He’d visit, and he was always nice to me. But we were never close.”

“Where are your parents these days?” she asked.

“They’ve been visiting him, actually,” I said. Several years ago, my parents had sold their house and bought an RV. Now they were spending their retirement traveling around the country. “I’m not sure where they’re headed next.”

“That’s pretty cool,” she said.

I handed Brynn her shot. “Yeah, it is. I’m happy for them.”

She held up her glass. “Thanks for this. It’s been one of the worst weeks of my life.”

I clinked my glass against hers and we swallowed. It burned going down. Brynn winced.

“Wow, that’s strong,” she said.

“You seem like you’re handling this whole thing really well,” I said. “I don’t know if I’d be as calm as you are if I found out my boyfriend was fucking my roommate.”

“I got the worst of it out of my system already,” she said. “I freaked out when I saw them. God, I barely remember it. I was crying and screaming at them. I think I threw things. Then I sobbed in bed for the next twenty-four hours or so. Finally, I decided they could both go fuck themselves. But I needed to get out of there for a while.”

I poured another shot. “Having your heart broken sucks.”

“Yeah it does,” she said, and we both drank. She winced again. “Holy shit.”

I got out the waters I’d brought. “Alternate with water. Serious drinking requires hydration.”

Brynn laughed. “Thanks. Speaking of broken hearts, are you okay, really?”

I slid my fingertip along the rim of my shot glass. “Yeah, I guess so. I want to be okay with him being around, but it’s complicated.”

“Why are men such idiots?” she asked.

“That’s a very good question.”

The more Brynn drank, the more she opened up about her breakup. He was only the second guy she’d ever dated. Her brothers had made it almost impossible for her to date in high school, so her first experiences in the—often shitty—world of dating had been in college. So far, her first boyfriend had seemed nice, but he’d broken up with her because he didn’t want to be tied down to one girl. And now she’d had a guy cheat on her.

I wanted to rip Austin’s dick off and feed it to him. And I wouldn’t have minded doing something equally terrible to her roommate. Some fucking friend she turned out to be.

We snacked on the stuff I'd brought—drinking made me crave salt, so I devoured a bag of potato chips—and drank more. It wasn't long before we were both cry-laughing at something, but neither of us could remember what. Which made us laugh harder.

“Zoe, what the hell are you doing?”

I looked over to the doorway and saw Ben, Salishan's groundskeeper and handyman. “Hey, Ben!”

His mouth turned up in a smile, and he shook his head. Ben was in his mid-fifties. A nice-looking guy—rugged and outdoorsy with smile lines around his eyes. Thick beard. Strong hands. For all I knew, he'd always worked here. He was just as much a fixture as any of the Miles family.

“I'm sure you're not here after hours providing alcohol to your boss's underage daughter,” he said.

I giggled and tried to stand up. Oh shit, I was really drunk. “No, course not.”

Brynn was sprawled out on the bench with one leg dangling over the side. “Ben. Hi, Ben. Benjamin. Ben. Benny. Benaroo.”

“Don't listen to her,” I said. “She's just had a day. I mean had a day. A bad one.”

He came over to the table and started cleaning up our mess. “Come on, girls. I think it's time to call it a night.”

Brynn mumbled something incoherent. Ben just shook his head again.

I put my head down on the table while he put the bottle and food wrappers back in the grocery bags. I must have fallen asleep for a second, because his hand on my shoulder startled me awake.

“What? Shit.”

“Come on, Zoe,” Ben said. I glanced up and he had Brynn in his arms, cradled like a baby. “Let's get her to bed, then I'll take you home.”

“Yeah.” I got up and steadied myself against the table. “Didn’t mean to so drunk. Get so drunk. Ben, you’re a superhero.”

He smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Just glad I was here late.”

I stumbled after Ben while he carried the half-conscious Brynn to the Blackberry Cottage. I’d probably had about two shots too many, but I wasn’t too worried about it. I’d regret it in the morning, but for now, I was happily numb.

“You know, Brynn is fun,” I said. “Brynn, this is more often. No. We should do this more often.”

“I don’t think Brynn will want to do this again for a while,” Ben said.

“What?” I asked, laughing. “She will. I’m super drink to fun with. Wait. Super fun to drink with.”

“I’m sure you are,” Ben said.

We stopped outside the cottage and Ben struggled to get his keys out while holding Brynn. I moved in to help, but the ground seemed to roll beneath my feet. I had the fleeting thought that I was about to land on my face when a pair of strong hands caught me.

“Whoa there, Zo.”

An arm slipped around my waist and I felt the warmth of a body next to mine. I looked up and blinked, my eyes feeling heavy. “Roland?”

“What the fuck, Zo?” he asked, but there was amusement in his tone. Or maybe I was so drunk, everything sounded funny.

I laughed. “Hey, Miles. Wanna have a drink with me?”

“It looks like you’ve had more than enough,” he said. “Thanks, Ben.”

“No problem,” Ben said. Somehow he’d gotten Brynn’s door open. “I’ll get her to bed. You want me to take Zoe home?”

“No, I’ve got her,” Roland said.

“Ben’s so nice,” I said, giggling. “Why is he so nice?”

“He’s a good guy,” Roland said. “Come on, Zo. Let’s go.”

Roland half-carried me to the cottage next to Brynn’s. My feet didn’t want to work right, my legs felt like jelly, and somehow it was all hilarious.

“Aren’t you taking me home?” I asked.

He opened the door and I shuffled in, still pressed against him for balance. “Nope. You woke me up, and I just want to go back to bed. You’ll have to crash here tonight.”

I laughed again, because in my tequila haze, something about that seemed incredibly funny.

Roland

I dragged a very drunk Zoe inside the cottage. She leaned against me with her arms wrapped around my waist, tripping over her own feet.

I'd been in bed when Zoe's voice from outside had woken me up. I'd come out to tell her to shut up, but found Ben carrying Brynn, with Zoe stumbling behind them. I hadn't even realized my sister was home. Luckily, I knew Ben would take care of Brynn—make sure she was safe tonight. Ben was one of the few people I'd trust with anything, my baby sister included.

"Let's go, drunkie," I said, nudging Zoe in. The scent of tequila mixed with the smell of her shampoo. It was oddly arousing, which made me think I really ought to take her home. But damn it, I was fucking tired. I wanted to go back to bed, not drive her drunk ass across town. I wasn't even sure where she lived.

And I kind of wanted to mess with her. She'd obviously gotten my sister drunk. I didn't need to know what had happened to know whose idea *that* had been.

"I'm not as drunk as you think," she said, then erupted with laughter. "*You're* drunk."

"Nope, I'm the sober one tonight," I said. "Come on, keep walking. We're almost there."

She lurched toward the kitchen. "You need a drink."

I grabbed her around the waist to keep her on her feet, then held her for a moment until she stopped struggling. Her body relaxed against me, but I didn't keep walking. Knowing I shouldn't, I kept my arms around her, just holding her. She felt good. Familiar.

"Uh-oh," she said. Her body convulsed, and she covered her mouth.

Instinctively, I pulled her into the bathroom and opened the toilet. She crumpled to the ground and for a second, I thought maybe she wasn't going to—

Then she did. I crouched down behind her and pulled her hair back. Waited while she emptied what looked like half a bottle of tequila into the toilet.

“Are you okay?” I asked when she finished. I helped her stand and get cleaned up.

“I'm good,” she said, but her eyes were half-closed. “I got this.”

I finished wiping her face with a wet washcloth. “Yeah, you've got everything under control, don't you?”

“Everyone is can't be so like you responsible,” she said. “Wait, no. Said that wrong. Everyone responsible... no. What was I saying?”

“That you need to go to bed.”

She laughed. “No I don't.”

“I think you do,” I said. “Come on, Zo.”

I led her into the bedroom and she collapsed onto the bed.

“Mm, soft,” she said, nuzzling her face into the comforter.

“Yeah, it's nice,” I said. “What were you doing with Brynn, anyway?”

“Drinking tequila.” She hiccupped.

“I can see that,” I said. “Why?”

“Cheater, cheater,” she said. “Fucking men.”

“What?”

“Her fucking boyfriend cheated,” she said. “Imma cut his balls off.”

Hearing that unleashed a wave of anger, pouring heat through my veins. *I* wanted to cut his balls off. “Are you serious?”

“Mm-hmm,” she said. “So drinks a few. No. Had a few drinks.”

“I’d say it was more than a few,” I said. “Is Brynn okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. “She’s a tough girl. But wait till Coop finds out.”

Cooper was going to lose his shit when he found out someone had hurt Brynn. We were all protective of her, but Cooper took it to an entirely different level.

“He’ll be pissed,” I said. “You’re not going to puke again, are you?”

She tapped her finger against her temple, like she was thinking hard about my question. God, she was ridiculous when she was drunk.

“Nope,” she said. “We should get pancakes. Remember the pancakes, Roland?”

“Yeah, I remember the pancakes,” I said.

The first time we’d gotten drunk together, we’d been high school seniors. Although, it was more accurate to say Zoe had gotten me drunk. I’d grown up around wine—alcohol hadn’t been much of a novelty for me. But tasting your mom’s latest cabernet and getting wasted with your crazy girlfriend on cheap whiskey were two very different experiences. We’d decided we needed pancakes at two in the morning and walked across town to a diner that was open all night. I still remembered those pancakes as being one of the best things I’d ever eaten.

Whiskey will do that to you when you’re seventeen.

She giggled, and I couldn’t help but smile. I hadn’t seen Zoe this drunk in a long time. There was no way she’d remember this tomorrow.

“Why you smiling?” she asked.

“Because you’re funny when you’re wasted,” I said. “And because you’re going to freak out when you wake up in the morning.”

“I will not.”

“Yeah, you will,” I said. “You’re in my bed, and I’m going to sleep next to you. When you wake up, you’re going to wonder how the hell you got here.”

“You can’t sleep with me,” she said.

“Yeah, well, I’m not moving you,” I said. “And I’m not sleeping on the couch. So you’re stuck with me.”

“Hmm,” she said, humming like she was deep in thought. Either that or she was on the brink of passing out. It was hard to tell. “Not freaking out in the morning.”

“You will,” I said. “You aren’t going to remember this conversation.”

She draped her arm over her forehead and groaned. “Yes, I will.”

“Nope,” I said. “I know you, Zo. You’re past the point of no return.”

“Why did I drink all that fuckin’ tequila?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

She rubbed her eyes. “Brynn needed me. This is whatcha do.”

Brynn needed her. Maybe she had. Zoe had been a part of my family for years—since Brynn was little. And here she was, years later, still with them. Still working for my parents. Hanging out with my brothers. Being a big sister to Brynn. She’d left me, but she hadn’t left them.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about that.

“I can’t sleep here,” she said, curling up and tucking her hands underneath my pillow. Her eyes drifted closed. “This is your bed.”

“I know it is,” I said. “That’s why it’s funny.”

“What if your girlfriend comes over?”

“She wouldn’t anyway, but she’s not my girlfriend anymore.”

“What?” Her eyes opened and focused on me. “What happened?”

“I broke things off,” I said.

“Why?”

For a second, Zoe looked awfully sober. Maybe she *would* remember this tomorrow. But then her eyes drifted closed and her head relaxed against the pillow. A few seconds later, she was asleep.

“Because I guess I need someone who cares,” I said. “And she never did.”

I laid down on my side, facing her. Pushed back a strand of hair that had fallen across her forehead. She was out cold—didn’t even flinch. I traced her cheek with the tips of my fingers, feeling her soft skin. Her lips parted, and her breath came out in a raspy snore. It made me smile again. She always snored when she passed out drunk, and always denied it later. I’d have to tease her about it tomorrow.

Of course, tomorrow she’d be sober, and there would still be this gulf between us.

Zoe

My stomach was raw, and my head hurt, but the warm body next to me felt so good, I didn't mind. I nestled in closer to his back, curling up against him. I had the vague sense that my hand was down the back of his underwear, my palm splayed across his tight ass. It almost made me giggle, but I didn't want to wake him. I never slept over with Van, but apparently I had last night. It wasn't like I was in love with the guy, but he was cuddly to sleep with. Who knew?

I took a deep breath, his scent flooding through me. God, he smelled great. Why had I never noticed how good he smelled? It was a heady masculine scent that lit up a deep primal part of my brain. Despite the fact that a raging hangover was rearing its ugly head, warmth spread through my core. I traced my nose along the back of his shoulder, breathing him in. It was too bad Van wasn't generally a snuggler. This was nice.

He shifted, making a low sound in his throat, and I froze. Wait. This wasn't Van. I hadn't even seen Van last night, let alone spent the night with him. Had I?

The previous evening came back to me. Drinking with Brynn. Way too much tequila. Ben picking her up and carrying her back to the guest cottage. And—

Oh my god. Roland.

I very carefully cracked one eye open. There was indeed a man sleeping next to me. He was in a t-shirt, his muscular back moving with his soft breathing. I was tucked so close, I was practically on top of him. One of my feet was wedged between his legs and yes, my hand was down the back of his underwear.

Oh fuck. Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck.

Why the fuck was I in bed with Roland? And why was I grabbing his ass?

Moving as slowly as I could so I wouldn't wake him—*oh my god please don't wake up and catch me with my hand in your pants*—I slid my hand out of his underwear. He didn't move. I carefully shifted my leg, then rolled onto my back, separating myself from him.

He stayed where he was, still apparently asleep. I let out a long breath. My head was killing me, and my stomach felt like something had died in there. I loved tequila, but I probably needed to admit I was too old for this shit.

And for the love of everything, why was I in bed with Roland?

We were in the Hummingbird Cottage, where he'd been staying. I could tell by the hummingbird curtains and the watercolor picture of a hummingbird on the wall. He must have brought me in here last night. But why? Brynn was staying in the cottage next door, so he must have come out when I was bringing Brynn home. Or, more accurately, when Ben was bringing Brynn home. I was pretty sure Ben had offered me a ride, so why hadn't Roland just let him take me home?

But he hadn't. My memory was spotty, but I could recall bits and pieces. Suddenly I remembered puking in his bathroom. God, I'd really had way too much to drink. But Roland had handled it. Held my hair, helped me clean up. Then put me to bed. With him.

I vaguely remembered him telling me it was going to be funny in the morning because I wouldn't remember how I got here. *Ass.*

I found myself suddenly wondering about his girlfriend. What would she think if she knew he'd slept in a bed with his ex-wife last night?

But wait. Hadn't he said something about her? Maybe I'd asked. But I remembered him telling me he didn't have a girlfriend anymore. He'd broken up with her. Did I remember that right?

Not that it mattered. He could be with anyone he wanted. He didn't owe me anything.

I needed to pee something fierce, but I really wanted to avoid the awkward morning conversation that was sure to happen when Roland woke up. I'd thank him later for helping me last night and letting me crash here. But if he never knew I'd been sleeping cuddled up next to him with my hand on his ass, that would be a very good thing.

And I was *not* going to think about how good it felt to sleep next to him. Absolutely fucking not.

I slipped out of bed—thankfully I was still fully dressed—and grabbed my shoes from beside the bed. Roland slept on as I tip-toed out of the bedroom. My purse was on the floor next to the front door, with my phone and keys inside. Good. I didn't have to go hunting for any of my stuff. I couldn't remember if I'd been wearing anything else besides my t-shirt and leggings—maybe a hoodie or cardigan. I didn't see anything lying around, so I crept out the front door, shutting it as quietly as I could.

The cool morning air felt good. I took a deep breath and let it clear my head a little. I still needed a vat of coffee and a greasy breakfast before I'd feel human, but fresh air had its merits.

I went next door to check on Brynn. Poor thing. I might have gone a little overboard last night. I wasn't sure how often she got shit-faced. I'd done it enough times to know exactly what to expect—and how to counteract the worst of it—but Brynn was young. It took some experience to handle a night of ill-advised tequila.

I knocked softly and waited. If she wasn't awake yet, I could check in with her later. "Hey, Brynn? Are you up, sweetie?"

"Yeah." Her voice was muffled through the door, but she sounded miserable. "Just a sec."

I ran my fingers through my tangled hair while I waited. God, I needed coffee. If she didn't have any, this was going to have to be a very short visit.

Brynn opened the door. She was dressed in an oversize Tilikum College sweatshirt and black leggings. Her hair was a

mess, she had makeup smudged beneath her eyes, and I had a feeling she'd spent some quality time praying to the porcelain god last night. But she still smiled.

"Morning, sunshine." I sniffed, detecting the scent of brewing coffee coming from her little kitchen. "Glad you're still alive."

She shook her head. "Barely. Want to come in for coffee?"

"Yes," I said, my voice vehement. "I think I'll die in the next five minutes if I don't get some."

"Same," she said. "It's just about done. Come on in, I'll get it."

I glanced toward Roland's cottage, slightly afraid I'd see him peeking out the front door, looking for me. But I didn't see any sign of him. I went in and shut the door behind me, then ran to the bathroom.

When I came out, I sat on the couch. Brynn brought me a mug of black coffee.

"Thanks," I said and took a sip. My stomach was still not happy with me, but I was pretty sure I could handle the coffee.

She sat down with her mug. "Sure. Although I can't decide if I love you or hate you right now."

"Sorry," I said. "But let's be honest, tequila and good choices don't exactly go together. And we had fun, right?"

"True, and yeah, we did," she said. "When should I try to eat?"

"How much did you puke last night?" I asked.

"A lot."

"You poor thing," I said. "I'm sorry. Drink some coffee and we'll go from there."

"It's fine," she said. "Maybe this is dumb, but I'm glad you didn't stop me last night. You're the only person around here who doesn't treat me like a child. It's kind of cool that you let me be stupid."

I smiled. "I guess... you're welcome? I don't know, sometimes I think I'm too old to be stupid like that anymore."

"You're not *old*," she said.

“I’m going to be thirty-one soon,” I said. “Maybe not *old*, but I can’t keep pretending my twenty-first birthday was just a few years ago.”

“Well, maybe you’re just living it up now because when you were twenty-one, you were already married and stuff.”

I took another sip. “I lived it up a lot then, too. I think you were just too little to notice.”

She laughed. “Even with Roland?”

“Especially with Roland,” I said.

“No way,” she said. “Roland is the world’s biggest stick-in-the-mud ever.”

“He wasn’t back then,” I said. “Have I really never told you any of the crazy shit we did?”

“No,” she said. “But I’ve always avoided asking you about Roland. I didn’t want to make it awkward. But you better tell me now. That’s your payment for this brutal hangover I’m suffering through.”

“Aw, poor baby Brynn,” I said, patting her cheek. “Let’s see, crazy stuff I did with Roland. Where do I even begin? When we were in high school, I got us fake IDs. We’d drive over to Tilikum and party with all the college kids at the bars.”

“That sounds fun,” she said. “What else?”

“The principal caught us making out under the bleachers one day when we were supposed to be in class,” I said. “We both got detention. To get back at him, we broke into his office and had sex on his desk during school hours. But at some point, my ass hit the intercom and turned it on, so the entire school heard us.”

“Holy shit, that was you?” Brynn asked. She clutched her head. “Ow, that hurts. But oh my god, Zoe, that was you and Roland? People were still talking about that when I went to high school there. It’s a school legend.”

I laughed. “Yeah, that was us.”

“I always swore it couldn’t be true,” she said. “Did you get caught?”

“No,” I said. “The intercom thing happened right as we were finishing. Then we escaped out the window.”

“That’s insane,” she said. “I can’t believe Roland would ever do that.”

“Oh, we had sex in all kinds of messed up places,” I said. “We’d been about to go at it under the bleachers when we got caught.”

“Where else?” she asked.

“Um... I don’t know, bathrooms, dressing rooms. The boys’ locker room during a football game. We broke into the Lodge once and did it in the hot tub. Probably about half the rooms in your parents’ house. They caught us once, but we were a little older, and they just pretended like they hadn’t seen anything.”

“Oh god, that’s mortifying,” she said.

I shrugged. “I guess. It didn’t really bother me back then. I don’t think I’d feel the same if your mom walked in on me now.”

“I would die,” she said. “I don’t even want my mom to know I’ve ever had sex.”

“I don’t blame you,” I said. “Although your mom is so awesome, you know she’d be cool about it. My mom, however... not so much. My poor mother had no idea what to do with me.”

Brynn laughed. “Well, if you were having sex on the principal’s desk, I can see why.”

“Yeah, my older brother was always this really mellow guy,” I said. “He never got in trouble. Then I came along. I was an oops baby, so my parents didn’t see me coming from the beginning. I’m surprised they survived my teenage years.”

“Did they like Roland?” she asked.

“Yeah, they loved him,” I said. “I think they hoped he’d calm me down. Which he kind of did, eventually. Or maybe I

calmed down on my own, I don't know. I'm surprised *your* parents still speak to me after all the trouble I got Roland into."

"My mom loves you," she said. "You're just one of her kids, now."

I looked down into my coffee and smiled. It was true. I'd always felt like Shannon had adopted me into their family. And my gratitude that it hadn't changed in the last four years was deeper than I could properly express.

"So, since we're sharing," Brynn said, "where did you sleep last night?"

I groaned. "Next door."

"You mean, next door with my brother?" she asked.

"Yep."

"On the couch, or in bed?" she asked.

"Nosy bitch," I said, elbowing her. "In bed. Dressed. He did it to fuck with me, but the joke's on him because I didn't wake up and flip out like he thought I would."

"Wait, Roland played a joke on you?" she asked. "I don't think that's actually my brother. He must be someone else who looks like him."

I laughed, but it made me sad to hear her say that. She didn't know Roland at all. Or maybe she did, and the Roland I'd known had been nothing but a phase.

"How's that coffee treating you?" I asked. "Ready to try food?"

"Maybe?"

I patted her leg. "Let's give it a shot. I know just the place."

Roland

Damn it, she was gone.

I'd gone to sleep looking forward to what'd she'd do this morning when she woke up with me. But she'd crept out while I was still asleep. I'd woken to the sound of her closing the front door. She'd been quiet—obviously trying to leave without waking me up—but I'd heard her.

Where did she have to go in such a hurry? It wasn't like I was some stranger. I hadn't taken her clothes off, just her shoes. She'd fucking puked in my bathroom while I held her hair, and she couldn't even stay to thank me?

I wondered if it had anything to do with her douchebag not-boyfriend.

I glanced at the time. It was odd to have slept so late. I was always up early, even on weekends. But I'd slept better than I had in a long time. I didn't want to think about why. It must have been having a warm body next to me. These guest cottages got cold at night.

I rolled over and caught a whiff of Zoe on my sheets. Instant erection. Fuck. I hated the way she still did that to me. I was not a horny teenager with no control over his dick. Those days were long over. As were my days of being turned on by Zoe.

Ex-wife, Roland. She's your ex-wife. Emphasis on the ex part.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand. A text from Cooper.

Cooper: *OMG so hungover. Need sustenance. Wanna come?*

Me: *Where?*

Cooper: *Ray's Diner*

Me: *That place is still open?*

Cooper: *Ya. Best breakfast ever.*

Cooper: *Come with me. Chase being a dick and won't.*

Cooper: *I need a breakfast buddy.*

I shook my head. A breakfast buddy? Was he twelve? Although Ray's Diner did have great breakfast, especially when you were hungover. Zoe and I had—

Nope. Didn't matter who I'd been there with in the past. But their breakfast did sound good, so I texted Cooper that I'd meet him there.

Coop looked rough when I got to the diner. He wore a pair of aviator sunglasses and his hair was messier than usual.

"You look awful," I said as I sat in the booth across from him.

"Shh. You don't have to yell."

"I'm not yelling," I said. "I'm talking in a normal voice."

"Oh my god, stop talking," Cooper said, touching his temples.

"Have too much fun last night?" I asked, practically whispering.

"You could say that," Cooper said. "That is the last time I play *Never Have I Ever* with hard liquor. But those assholes had it in for me. The game was rigged."

"How do you rig *Never Have I Ever*?" I asked.

"By asking questions they know I'll *have* to drink to. Every. Single. Fucking. Time."

"Who were you with?" I asked.

"Just some friends," he said. "No, wait. Ex-friends. Fuck those guys."

The waitress came to our table holding a glass coffee pot. She looked to be in her fifties, with smile lines around her eyes and gray roots showing in her bleached blond hair. She looked familiar, and I wondered if she was the same waitress who'd worked here ten years ago when I'd been more of a regular.

Cooper grinned up at her as she filled our coffee mugs.

"Hey, Jo," he said, whipping off his sunglasses. "You're looking especially beautiful this morning."

Jo grinned at him. “Thank you, sugarplum. You look like hell, but I’d still take you home with me.”

“Of course you would,” he said. “And it would be mind-blowing. We should really take our flirtation to the next level someday.”

“As if you could handle this much woman,” she said with a wink. “What can I get you, baby?”

“Jo, I feel like death warmed over and the only cure is your Sunday special,” he said.

“It’s not Sunday,” she said.

“Isn’t it? I lost track,” he said. “But please, Jo. If I ask really nice? What if I give you a back rub? It could be a sexy back rub. I’ll grind your ass while I do it. Trust me, it will be worth it. I give amazing back rubs.”

Jo appeared to be trying very hard to keep a straight face.

“Please, Jo,” Cooper said, sliding off the bench seat and dropping to his knees in front of her. “Do you want me to beg? I’m not too proud. I need what only you can give me.”

“Get up,” she said, a laugh finally escaping her lips. “One Sunday special.”

“You are a goddess,” Cooper said, getting back into the booth. “The sun rises and sets at your command, O gorgeous one.”

Jo rolled her eyes and looked at me. “Sunday special for you too, honey?”

“Sounds great,” I said, and she left to take our orders to the kitchen.

“Where’s Chase?” I asked.

Cooper slumped and slipped his glasses back on. “Home. He didn’t want to get up. I think his exact words were, *let me die in peace, you asshole.*”

The bell jingled as the door opened behind me. Cooper sat up straight and pulled his sunglasses off again, his face lighting up with a smile.

“Brynnness!”

I glanced over my shoulder. Our little sister Brynn came in, followed closely by Zoe. I should have known. They’d been drinking last night. Of course Zoe would have brought her here for a morning-after breakfast.

Zoe met my eyes and I regretted my decision to have her sleep at my place. Now it just felt awkward and weird. I should have let Ben take her home.

“Hey, Coop,” Brynn said. She looked as bad as Cooper.

“Brynnness, my baby sister,” he said. “Why didn’t you tell me you were in town?”

She rolled her eyes, hesitating at the booth behind us. I really hoped she and Zoe would sit there instead of with us.

“I only got here yesterday,” she said. “I was going to text you later. I’m just... not feeling great.”

Zoe slid into the booth. She was right behind me, but that was fine. Better than next to me. Or worse, across the table where I’d have to avoid looking at her.

“What’s the matter?” Cooper asked. “You sick?”

“Um, no.” Brynn sat with Zoe. “I’m fine, Coop. I just need some breakfast.”

Cooper’s eyebrows drew in and he glanced at me, then back at the girls. “What are you doing way over there? Come sit.”

“I love you, Coop, but you’re a little much for me this morning,” she said. “Let me eat first.”

He slumped in his seat again and crossed his arms.

“Quit pouting,” I said. “She’s fine.”

“My best friend won’t get out of bed to have breakfast with me,” he said. “And my baby sister doesn’t want to sit with me. This is the most depressing day ever.”

I didn’t blame Brynn for wanting to sit behind us. Cooper was a lot to handle, and Brynn must have felt like shit after her night with Zo.

Jo brought our breakfasts—two huge plates piled high with eggs, hash browns, French toast, sausage links, and bacon—and Cooper gushed at her again, promising to marry her when he decided to settle down. Thankfully, the food seemed to distract Cooper from his pouting.

I ate in silence for a while. There wasn't much need for me to talk—Cooper did enough of it by himself. He babbled between bites about everything—the winery, his vineyards, a movie he'd seen last week, the game of basketball he'd played with some friends. Apparently he *still had it*. I just nodded occasionally. I wasn't used to this much Cooper-time.

Brynn's voice behind me caught my attention. She was speaking softly, but I could still hear her.

"I just feel stupid, you know?" she said.

"Don't," Zoe said. "None of this is your fault. You need to get that through your head right now. Do *not* blame yourself for Austin being a douchebag."

"I know," Brynn said. "But how am I going to face everyone back at school? They're all going to know."

"Fuck them," Zoe said. "All of them. If they judge you because of this, they're shitty people and don't deserve your time."

I wasn't trying to listen, but Cooper had miraculously quieted down, so it was impossible not to hear them. Austin must have been the guy who cheated on Brynn. God, I hated the idea of her having a boyfriend at school. And one who cheated on her? The idea of it made my blood run hot.

No one deserved to be cheated on—ever—but Brynn was so young. How old was she, now? Nineteen? Twenty? She must have turned twenty on her last birthday. Holy shit, that's how old Zoe had been when we'd gotten married. Had we really been *that* young?

"Look," Zoe said, "obviously Austin was not the love of your life. Think of him as a learning experience. We all have them."

"Yeah, I guess," Brynn said.

Was that what I was to Zoe? A learning experience?

“You’re young,” Zoe said. “You should be having fun right now. There’s no need for serious. Go back to school and have a fling or something. Get that jackass out of your system.”

Have a fling? That was the advice Zoe had for my little sister?

I shifted in my seat so I was partially turned around. “A fling?”

Brynn raised her eyebrows, and Zoe glanced back at me.

“What about a fling?” Zoe asked.

“That’s what you’re telling her to do?” I asked.

“Why not?” Zoe asked. “She’s a twenty-year-old woman who just suffered a breakup. A fling is a great way to get over someone.”

“Breakup?” Cooper asked, as if he’d suddenly realized the rest of us were still here. “Brynnness, did someone break up with you?”

“Cooper, it’s fine,” she said. “Don’t.”

Cooper got up and slid into the booth next to Brynn, but I wasn’t paying attention to them.

“How is that good advice?” I asked Zoe.

She turned so she was facing me, her eyes blazing. “Excuse me?”

“It’s a fair question,” I said. “You’re telling an impressionable girl—who has always looked up to you like you’re a rock star—to go be some guy’s fuck buddy for a while?”

“Okay, first, you said *fuck buddy*, not me,” she said. “Second, she’s a woman, not a girl.”

Cooper’s voice rose. “Brynnness, I will beat the shit out of that sniveling little punk.”

“Cooper, stop,” Brynn said.

I ignored Cooper, my eyes still on Zoe. “Regardless, just because you have some guy who gets in your pants without any commitment doesn’t mean it’s a good idea for Brynn.”

“Is that what this is about?” she asked. “I’ve already told you, Van is none of your business.”

“No, who you sleep with is definitely none of my business,” I said. “We are in complete agreement there. But it is my business when you start putting shitty ideas in my sister’s head.”

“Seriously?” she asked. “You haven’t seen Brynn in a year and a half, and suddenly you think you get to worry about her?”

“She’s my fucking sister, Zoe.”

“And she’s not mine?” Zoe asked. “I’m not a Miles anymore, so I don’t get to be the one to help her through a crisis? That’s bullshit, Roland. You can’t waltz in here and act like you have all the answers when you don’t even give a shit.”

Her words stung—a lot. A hot ball of anger coiled in my gut.

“How the fuck would you know what I care about?” I asked. “This is my family. Of course I give a shit.”

“Could have fooled me,” she said.

What the hell had just happened? How did we go from my sister having a fling to Zoe throwing my relationship with my family in my face?

“This isn’t about me,” I said.

“I thought everything was about you,” she said.

“Why the fuck are we fighting about this?” I pulled out my wallet and tossed some money on the table. I needed to get out of here. “Don’t tell my sister to do stupid shit.”

“Um, the sister is right here and can probably decide for herself what is and isn’t stupid,” Brynn said.

I just grunted as I got up and slipped my wallet into my pocket. “You’re welcome for cleaning up your vomit last night.”

I didn’t wait for Zoe’s reply. Just stalked out the door, my heart pounding against my ribs.

Roland

Whatever. Forget it, I have to go to work.

~Text from Roland, four years ago

I spent the next week basically in seclusion. I went from the cottage to the office and back again. Ate when I needed to. Slept at night. And worked.

My CEO was fine with me telecommuting for a while, but I had at least three conference calls a day. I worked a full day for my real job, then turned my attention to Salishan. It kept me up late most nights, but at least I successfully avoided everyone.

Brynn went back to school. Or at least, I assumed she did. Her car wasn't outside anymore, and the guest cottage next door was once again empty. I caught glimpses of Cooper a few times, but he was busy with his own responsibilities. My mom tried to talk me into having dinner with her and Dad, but I made up an excuse. I didn't want to deal with him. Leo was even more of a recluse than I was. I tended to forget he was around, he so rarely came out.

And then there was Zoe.

She was around, all right. She had to be, because my fucking parents employed her. That had never bothered me before, but hearing her coming and going—her footsteps, her office door—left me constantly on edge. I didn't like fighting with her—I never had—but I didn't know why it mattered, now. Why I couldn't just do what I needed to do and quit thinking about her?

Besides, were we really *fighting*? That implied something that was ongoing. As it was, we'd argued, I'd gotten pissed, and I'd left. That meant it was over. It wasn't like we had a relationship to repair. I wasn't sleeping on the couch because my wife was mad at me.

No, I was sleeping on sheets that still smelled like her.

Fuck.

Friday night, the sun had gone down before I realized how late it was. I'd eaten a quick dinner at my desk earlier, but it felt like I looked up and suddenly it was ten-thirty.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and stretched my back. This chair was shit. If I'd known I'd be here for so long, I would have ordered a better one. At this point, it probably didn't matter. I was on the verge of just walking away from the whole place, anyway. Booking a flight back to San Francisco and leaving this mess to my father. I knew that would put my mom in a bad place, but my dad pushed back against every suggestion I made. I didn't know if I'd be able to help more than I already had.

Regardless, I was done for the day. I closed things down and headed outside.

I found Cooper leaning against his truck. He looked up at me and a shit-eating grin crossed his face.

"It emerges from its den," Cooper said, adopting a terrible Australian accent. "The corporate executive is rarely seen this early in the evening, preferring instead to remain hunched over a laptop until the wee hours of the morning."

"Hilarious," I said.

He laughed. "I know, I'm fucking hysterical. What are you up to tonight? Wait, never mind. I already know the answer. You're working."

"I was," I said. "You going out tonight? Or heading home?"

"Neither, man, I have shit to do." He pulled his phone out of his pocket and glanced at the screen before putting it back. "Just waiting to hear from Chase."

"What shit do you have to do on a Friday night?" I asked. "Especially with Chase? Picking up girls or something?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes, yeah. But we have a more important mission tonight."

“Mission?” I asked. “Does this have anything to do with Brynn’s boyfriend at school?”

“Nah,” he said. “Leo and I already took care of that.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing permanent,” he said, his voice casual. “Just fucked with him a little bit.”

I decided the less I knew about that, the better. “Then what are you doing tonight?”

“Why, do you want to help?”

“Help with what?”

He eyed me for a second, nodding slowly. “Yeah, you definitely want to help with this.”

“Are you going to tell me what we’re doing?”

“Nope.” He brought out his phone again and typed something.

I glanced back toward the Big House. Lights glowed in the windows and soft music drifted out from the back terrace. Zoe was probably in there somewhere, working a late event.

Cooper’s phone rang, and he put it up to his ear. “Yeah. Okay. Yep, Leo’s set. Fuck yeah, he did. I know, we should have. Oh shit, really? Oh my god, that’s perfect. Yeah, he’s coming with me. Just stay out of sight, we’ll be there in a few.”

“Was that Chase?” I asked after he hung up.

“Yep.” His eyes lit up with an intensity that made me very nervous. “Let’s go.”

“I’m going to regret this, aren’t I?” I asked.

He grinned. “Maybe. But I doubt it.”

Against my better judgment, I got in Cooper’s truck. We headed out of town on the highway. I thought about asking where we were going, but had a feeling he wouldn’t tell me. He turned up the music and drummed the steering wheel to the beat. Belted out the lyrics. Thankfully his voice wasn’t terrible.

We got to Tilikum about half an hour later, and he drove straight toward the college campus. When he pulled into the parking lot of a bar called the Rowdy Bear, I figured he'd been fucking with me. He *was* going out, probably just meeting Chase here. I had no idea why he hadn't said so up front. Or why we'd come all the way here for a drink when there were perfectly good bars in Echo Creek.

"So, your mission is drinking at a bar?" I asked as we got out.

"Nope," he said. "But we're going to act like it. So go in and order something. You're part of our cover."

"Your cover? Cooper, what the hell are you talking about?"

"You'll see," he said.

There was a hint of humor in his voice—a tone I was all too familiar with. He used to sound like that when he was pulling a prank on me or Leo.

Knowing I was probably about to be the butt of one of Coop's jokes, I followed him inside.

The place was packed. Every stool along the bar was taken, as were most of the booths and tables. The pool tables had games going, and small groups of people stood in knots around the room. Mostly a college crowd. It reminded me of late nights getting drunk on cheap well drinks with Zoe.

I tried to push that image out of my head. But it was tough to walk into a place like this on a busy Friday night and not think of her in a black tank top and jeans, her makeup a little smudged, her eyes glassy.

Chase appeared from somewhere in the crowd. "It's about time."

"We came right over," Cooper said. "What's going on in here?"

"Some girl's twenty-first birthday party," Chase said.

"Holy shit, are you serious?" Cooper looked wide-eyed toward the bar. "Fucking perfect."

Sure enough, there was a group of girls in clubbing outfits—sequined tube tops and halters, showing a lot of skin. Tight skirts. Stripper heels. Most of them had matching plastic crowns. But the birthday girl stood out, with a hot pink feather boa around her neck and a large crown with a sparkling *21* on the front.

I watched Cooper and Chase as they eyed the party. *This* was their mission? If Cooper had told me he was going to crash some college chick's birthday party, I definitely would have passed. And this seemed odd, even for them. They were twenty-six, so not *that* much older than these girls. But creeping on a bunch of drunk twenty-one-year-olds seemed kinda low. These girls were basically Brynn's age.

"Guys, there are better ways to meet girls," I said.

"No shit," Cooper said. "Hey, that table is open. I'll grab it before someone else does. Go get us beers."

I was about to argue, but Cooper and Chase pushed their way through the crowd toward the open table.

Whoops and hollers in high-pitched female voices came from the birthday party end of the bar, so I veered toward a clearer space. One of the bartenders—a petite girl with a red pixie cut and at least seven visible piercings—got my three beers, and I took them to the table.

"Did you get any good ones yet?" Chase asked.

I set the beers down and sat in the open chair. "Good what?"

"This one is pretty good," Cooper said, holding his phone out so Chase could look.

"Please tell me you aren't taking pictures of those girls," I said.

"Shit, no," Cooper said, rolling his eyes. "Come on, we have morals. A few at least. Those girls are like Brynn's age."

"Then what the fuck is going on?" I asked.

"Dude, he's gonna do a body shot off the birthday girl," Chase said.

“Oh my god, this is perfect.” Cooper raised his phone, keeping it low toward the table like he was just texting.

The birthday girl was indeed laid out on the bar, and some guy was sprinkling salt up her stomach. She pulled her shirt over her bra, and he sprinkled salt in the valley between her tits. He placed a lime wedge in her mouth, then turned and flashed a smile at her friends.

Holy shit. Was that Van?

He got up on the bar and knelt in front of her, then pushed her legs open and leaned down to lick up her belly. Her friends cheered as he stuck his face between her tits. When he came up smiling, someone handed him a shot glass and he tossed back the tequila. The girl’s legs were around his waist and he made a show of grinding her a few times while he took the lime wedge out of her mouth with his teeth. Then he spit the wedge on the floor and kissed her.

I was so fucking angry a haze of red tinged my vision. My jaw clenched tight and I balled my hands into fists. This piece of shit was sleeping with Zoe, but here he was literally dry-humping some girl on a goddamn bar.

He got down and took a dramatic bow while the party-goers cheered. The birthday girl was clearly drunk off her ass. Van and one of her friends had to help her down. She stumbled, and her skirt was hiked up so high it was practically a belt. Van grabbed a handful of her ass with one hand, pulled her hair back with the other, and planted a raunchy kiss on her already open mouth.

“Holy shit,” Chase said.

I’d been about to say the same thing, but Chase was laughing.

“What the fuck are you laughing about?” I asked. “Isn’t that the prick Zoe was with?”

“Yeah, exactly.” Chase turned to Cooper. “Did you get the whole thing?”

“Every second,” Cooper said.

“Should we stay and get more?” Chase asked. “Or do you think that’s enough?”

“I want to see where this goes,” Cooper said, his eyes still on the bar.

Wait, were they taking pictures of Van? “Are you guys trying to catch him cheating on her?”

“Basically,” Cooper said. “The problem is, they’re not exclusive, so what’s really cheating? Zoe knows he probably sleeps with other girls. But this? She is not going to be able to ignore this.”

“We got the fucker this time,” Chase said.

“I take it you guys don’t like this guy,” I said.

“No, I want to smash his fucking face in,” Cooper said.

Another one of the girls had her shirt pulled up to her chin and a plastic shot cup wedged between her tits. Van grabbed her boobs and squeezed while he took the cup between his teeth, then rocked his head backward to swallow the liquor.

“You didn’t say anything about hating him when we saw them last time,” I said.

Cooper typed something on his phone. “You didn’t ask.”

I took a deep breath to keep from smacking my brother upside the head. My eyes flicked to the bar. Van had one arm around the birthday girl—leaning on him was probably the only reason she was still standing—while he made out with her friend. He broke the kiss and turned to the birthday girl again. Shoved his tongue in her mouth with the second girl still hanging on his other arm. Cooper was recording the whole thing.

Why the fuck was Zoe giving this guy the time of day? She used to like to party, but not like this. Even if she had been single at twenty-one, she wouldn’t have let some guy slobber all over her while he grabbed some other girl’s tits.

“Jesus, is this what Zoe does on her nights off?” The image of that prick licking salt off her skin made me want to fly across the bar and break my beer over his face.

“No, he wouldn’t pull shit like this when Zoe is around,” Cooper said. “He acts like he’s not a total scumbag when he’s with her, so she doesn’t know.”

“Why the hell is she with him?” I asked.

Cooper shrugged. “I told you, she’s not *with him*. I guess that’s why she doesn’t worry about what he’s really like. I’ve been trying to tell her for months, but she just blows it off, like it doesn’t matter because she’s not in a relationship with him.”

“But she’s sleeping with him.”

“Yeah,” Cooper said. “Sometimes.”

That wasn’t Zoe. The wrongness of it screamed at me. “That’s fucked up. She deserves better than that.”

Cooper narrowed his eyes at me, like he wasn’t sure what to think of what I’d said. “Yeah, she does.”

“So why does she do it?”

“I guess he’s a good fuck,” Chase said.

My eyes landed on Chase and for the second time since I’d been back, I wanted to drag him outside and beat the shit out of him.

“Dude, no.” Cooper shook his head.

Chase winced. “Sorry.”

“Come on, Coop,” I said. “You know her as well as anyone. Zoe should not be some asshole’s side piece.”

“No, she shouldn’t,” Cooper said.

“But she’s dated, right?” I asked. “You know, since me. She’s been in an actual relationship?”

“Yeah,” Cooper said. “Twice.”

“What happened?” I asked.

He shrugged again, and that nonchalant attitude was seriously pissing me off. “I don’t know. She broke up with them.”

“Did she break it off, or did they?” I asked.

“Why does it matter?” Cooper asked.

“Because I want to know what the fuck happened to her.”

Cooper stared at me, his silence stretching out long enough to make me shift in my chair, uncomfortable.

“She got fucking divorced, man.” The usual lightness was gone from Cooper’s tone. “That’s what happened to her. And as for the details, here’s the thing: Zoe is my friend, and I love the shit out of her. So yeah, I know about the guys she dated and why they broke up. I know what she’s said about this thing with Van, and why she’s doing it. But I’m not going to tell you all her personal shit. If you want to know, go ask her.”

“Coop, he’s leaving with two of them,” Chase said.

“I don’t have a good angle,” Cooper said. “Can you get it?”

“Yeah.” Chase held up his phone and pretended to look at something on the screen while he took pictures of Van leaving the bar with two very drunk college girls. “Got it.”

“If you’re such good friends with her, why doesn’t she listen to you?” I asked. “Why is she still sleeping with that prick?”

Cooper’s brow creased, and he looked at me like I was crazy. “You were married to her. Are you telling me you don’t remember how stubborn she is? Besides, we’ve never caught him doing anything on this scale. Hitting on some girl, sure. But she wasn’t expecting him to be faithful, so that wasn’t enough.”

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “You planned this?”

“Yeah,” Cooper said. “Took us too long to come up with the idea, though. We should have done this months ago.”

“How did you know he’d be here?” I asked.

“We didn’t,” Cooper said. “Chase followed him.”

I was finally realizing what this was all about. They hated the guy Zoe was sleeping with, and they’d tried to get her to break things off with him, but she was being stubborn. No surprise there. So they had come up with a plan to catch him being especially douchey so they could show her.

Cooper patted my shoulder, like he could tell what I was thinking. “Makes sense now, doesn’t it? We are pretty fucking brilliant. And I told you you’d want to help us tonight.”

“What are you doing with the pictures?” I asked.

“And video,” Chase said. “You recorded the whole body shot, right?”

“Oh hell yeah.” Cooper tapped on his phone screen. “I’m sending it all to Leo.”

“What’s Leo going to do with it?” I asked.

“Put it online,” Cooper said.

“Why?” I asked. “Why not just show her?”

Cooper gave me another *you’re an idiot* look. “You’re supposed to be the smart one in the family. If I show her, I’d have to admit we did this, and that’s not going to happen. Then she might find out about the other shit we’ve pulled on him.”

“What other shit?” I asked.

Chase and Coop grinned at each other.

“Let’s see... there was the ten-gallon bucket of lube we shipped to the bar where he works—in his name, of course,” Cooper said. “We followed that with a shipment of condoms, size extra small.”

“We started a rumor that he does gay porn,” Chase said. “The gif Leo made is really convincing, but I don’t think Zoe ever saw it.”

“I’ve lost track of the number of times I’ve put gum under his car door handle,” Cooper said.

“We recruited the barista over at the coffee place in town,” Chase said. “I’m pretty sure she spits in his coffee every day.”

“Whenever he’s at the same bar as us, we buy some random guy a drink and have the bartender say it’s from him,” Cooper said. “He’s almost gotten his ass kicked like five times.”

“And one guy wanted to take him home,” Chase said. “I think that dude might have heard the gay porn rumors.”

“You two are children,” I said. “You realize that, right?”

They just shrugged.

“Anyway, Leo said he could get this shit up on Facebook and Instagram and stuff, and make sure Van is tagged or whatever,” Cooper said.

“Leo?”

“Oh my god, keep up,” Cooper said. “Yes, Leo. Don’t ask me how he can do it, because I don’t know, and I don’t ask him questions like that. It’s not my area. I just know that he said he could, and it won’t look like we were involved. In about five minutes, a video of Van sucking salt off that girl’s tits is going to be all over the Internet. Then we sit back and let things happen naturally.”

I had to give it to them, they’d come up with a decent plan. Especially if Leo could pull that off—although I didn’t want to know how. It sounded like it might be illegal.

Cooper finally took a sip of his beer. “Well, boys, I think our work here is done.” He turned to me. “Thanks for your help.”

“I didn’t do anything,” I said.

“You bought the beer.” Cooper lifted his phone and snapped a picture of me. “And now I have proof you were here, so don’t rat us out.”

I shook my head and took a drink. Ratting them out to Zoe was the last thing I was going to do. Were they complete juveniles? Yeah. Was I proud of them? Hell yeah. I wanted them to take this guy down. And it felt good to know Zoe had them on her side.

“I didn’t see a thing,” I said. “We were just out having a couple beers.”

We finished our drinks, and it wasn’t long before Cooper and Chase had gone to sit with a table full of girls. They each had one on their lap. They motioned for me to join them, but I shook my head. I had no interest in some random hook-up.

Mostly, I thought about Zoe. Wondering how soon she’d see the damning evidence. If I’d know when she did. Regardless

of what she'd said to me at breakfast last weekend, I did give a shit. About my family. About her. Just because things hadn't worked out between us didn't mean I couldn't care. I just didn't like seeing her with someone who could disrespect her like that. She deserved better.

She deserved better than either of us.

Zoe

Van opened the door just a few seconds after I knocked. He was shirtless, in just a pair of sweats, running a towel through his hair.

“Hey,” he said, looking me up and down. “You look hot.”

I glanced down at myself. I was wearing a slouchy t-shirt and a pair of skinny jeans. Casual and arguably cute, but I hadn’t been going for hot, necessarily. It felt like he was just making shit up.

“Come on in.” he said.

“Thanks.” I stepped across the threshold of his apartment and my back prickled. It was a weird sensation, almost like déjà vu. But I didn’t have the impression of repetition. More like foreboding.

I needed to calm my ass down, but I was wound up so tight, I felt like I might snap in half. I’d been on edge all week. Monday I’d been so fucking distracted, I’d almost missed an appointment with a client. Thankfully, I’d been wearing a stain-free shirt, and had been able to rush downstairs to meet them. But I hated feeling so unhinged.

The answer was simple. I’d take it out on Van.

Sexually, of course.

That was what he was good for, wasn’t it? He wasn’t a bad lay, and I usually got off. And I needed it bad. Like, *bad* bad. Like nothing I’d done to myself in the past few weeks had done nearly enough to relieve the pressure that built every day.

It was Roland, but I staunchly refused to believe it had anything to do with the way he looked in a button-down shirt, or how good he’d felt when I’d slept in his bed. It most definitely had nothing to do with the way he smelled, or the fact that sometimes if I played my cards right, I could dart out

into the hallway after he walked by and get a tiny whiff of him.

Not that I'd ever done that. I had way too much self-respect.

Okay, no I didn't.

But no, it was none of those things. It was the fact that his very presence at Salishan Cellars emitted a stream of negative energy so potent, I was in a constant state of stress. I could feel him through the walls. Sense every furrow of his brow. Every heavy sigh. He was brooding and grumpy and I barely saw him, but he was basically ruining my life.

Which was why I needed to have stupid, meaningless sex with a guy named Van.

Perfectly legit.

"You want a drink?" Van asked.

"That would be great." I very, very much wanted a drink. That would make all of this so much easier.

I put my purse down and sat on the edge of the couch while he went into the kitchen. His apartment wasn't big, but it was always immaculately clean. Almost oddly clean, for a guy. It was nothing like Cooper and Chase's place, which made you wonder if you should sit or just stand and hope you didn't touch anything. Even when it was clean, the goofball boys' house smelled like them. Like guys. It wasn't a gross smell, actually. It was a bit like guys' deodorant and maybe aftershave or their shampoo, mixed with a hint of that man smell that on some guys was fucking delicious.

Van's apartment always smelled like cleaning products. At first, I'd wondered if he was a germaphobe. But he didn't seem to wash his hands all the time or worry about wiping off tables or the bar top when we were out. At this point, I figured he just preferred to keep things clean.

I hadn't seen Van in a while. Not since we'd left the bar together in front of Roland—and I'd gone home alone. He'd texted me earlier to see if I wanted to come over—no pretense of anything but sex, he hadn't even asked me to meet him for drinks first—and I'd waffled for an hour before answering.

Why was I being so weird about his? I liked sex, and sex with Van was... well, it was fine. It didn't mean anything, and I wanted it that way. I didn't have feelings for him, and he didn't for me, and none of that was a problem. It was like I'd told Brynn. Sometimes having a fling was a great way to get over a broken heart.

Only my heart hadn't been broken last week. It had been years. What did I still have to get over?

Van came back with my drink, and I shook off that thought.

"Thanks," I said.

He nodded—more of a tip of his chin—and sat beside me. Close. Because why wouldn't he sit close? He'd texted me for a booty call, and I'd come over, so he had every reason to believe this little visit had a happy ending.

I took a generous swallow of the whiskey.

His phone dinged. He had this weird chime sound when he got messages and for no good reason, it always made my skin crawl. He picked it up off the coffee table and swiped the screen with his thumb, his drink perched on his bent knee.

I leaned back and waited. So he was just going to sit there looking at his phone? I took another drink.

His forehead creased, and he flicked his thumb up and down the screen. "What the hell?"

"What's going on?"

"Who put this shit on Facebook?" He stood and started pacing, still looking at his phone. "That crazy bitch."

"Why are you freaking out?" I dug my phone out of my purse and opened Facebook. I was friends with Van, so maybe I could see what had him so riled up.

After finding his profile, I scrolled down. There were a couple of status updates. A bathroom mirror selfie from earlier that made me cringe, even if he did have decent abs.

Noise blared from his phone and he jerked, like it surprised him. "A video? Who the fuck..."

I scrolled down more and came face to face with a photo of Van. Although he was kissing some girl, there was no doubt it was him. She was dressed in a shiny silver top and a skirt that was barely long enough to cover her ass. Hanging on his other side was another girl wearing a plastic crown and pink boa around her shoulders.

That wasn't the only photo.

A sick feeling spread through my stomach as I scrolled through the rest. Van kissing the pink boa girl. Taking a shot glass from between some girl's boobs with his teeth. Walking out the door with both girls, one on each arm.

"What the hell is this?" I asked.

I scrolled again, and a video started to play. Distorted crowd noise mixed with music in the background, and a guy leaned over a girl lying on the bar.

"Oh shit—Zoe, don't," Van said.

He lunged for me, but I stood up and moved a few steps away, my eyes glued to my phone screen. Even in the video's low light, I could tell the guy on the bar was Van. He leaned down and licked his way up the girl's stomach, then buried his face in her boobs. The taste of bile hit the back of my tongue as he took something out of her mouth and dry-humped her a few times.

"Are you fucking kidding me with this?" I asked. The car-wreck of a video wasn't over, but I tapped pause. I didn't want to see any more.

"It was just a party," he said.

"Did you or did you not do the world's raunchiest body shot off a drunk girl, and then leave with her and someone else?" I asked.

"It's not a big deal," he said. "We were all a little happy last night. Things got carried away."

"This was last night?" I asked, holding up my phone. "Where did you take those girls?"

"What does it matter?" he asked.

“You brought them here, didn’t you?” I asked. “Both of them. Less than twenty-four hours ago, you had two drunk girls here, in your apartment. And you called me to come over?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “I don’t need more recovery time or anything. I’ve got plenty to go around.”

“You think I’m worried your dick won’t work?” I asked.

“It’s not like you and I are a thing,” he said. “I thought we both understood that.”

“I know we’re not, but that doesn’t mean I’m cool with this,” I said. “These girls barely look old enough to drink.”

“It was her twenty-first birthday,” he said.

I stared at Van, the taste of bile returning with a vengeance. “Twenty-one? You’re thirty.”

“So?”

“Oh my god.” I put a hand to my forehead. “You honestly think this is okay?”

“Zoe, I had some fun last night. They had fun, too. That’s all it was. And that’s all this is,” he said, gesturing between us. “Is there a time limit I’m supposed to wait before we can hang out again if I’ve had someone else over? Do we really need a set of rules, here? Besides, it’s not like you’ve been available lately.”

“I have work,” I said. “And a life.”

“Right,” he said. “I’m sure it has nothing to do with your ex-husband being in town.”

“What?”

“Your ex shows up and suddenly you’re always busy,” he said. “I don’t know what you expected me to do. Wait for you?”

“Roland doesn’t have anything to do with... with anything,” I said.

“Sure.”

“Let me get this straight. My ex being in town somehow justifies all this.” I held up my phone again. The image was

frozen on him on top of the girl.

“Look, you’re cool to hang out with, and the sex is great,” he said. “And I have never given a shit about who else is fucking you. You want to bang your ex, go ahead. But don’t expect me to suddenly become a fucking priest while you’re getting boned by someone else. I’m in this for a good time, and if I don’t have it with you, I’ll have it with someone else. No big deal.”

“I’m not banging my ex,” I said. “God, Van. No one else is fucking me.”

“I’m just saying, I don’t care. And I don’t get why you do.”

Swallowing hard, I looked away. What had I expected? We’d established in the beginning that this was just sex. We hooked up when we both felt like it. Used a condom every time. That was it. What I’d agreed to. What I’d wanted.

But it had been easier to ignore the reality of him sleeping with other women when it wasn’t being thrown in my face.

“You know what, this isn’t working for me anymore,” I said.

“Zoe.” His tone was soothing, like he was talking to an angry child. “Don’t be like that. Sit down, have another drink. I’ll rub your back, and then...”

“Seriously? You fucked not one, but two girls in here last night, and you’re trying to coax me into staying?”

“I cleaned up,” he said.

“Oh god,” I said. “That’s why it always smells like bleach in here, isn’t it? You don’t want the women you bring home to smell each other.”

“No, I just have good fucking manners,” he said. “Of course I wash the sheets in between.”

The danger of me vomiting was growing by the second. Although maybe vomiting all over Van’s bleach-soaked apartment wasn’t a bad idea.

“I’m done,” I said. How exactly was I supposed to break up with someone I wasn’t really dating? “This thing with us is

over. Got that? Don't call me. Don't text. Take me off your hook-up list."

"Zoe—"

"Don't." I grabbed my purse and went for the door. "This was a mistake, and I'm done."

I left before he could argue. My stomach roiled with nausea and my heart beat uncomfortably hard. I hurried to my car and left, needing to put distance between me and Van's apartment.

What the fuck had I been thinking? That randomly having sex with some guy who didn't care about me was a good way to spend my life? That wasn't me. A few years ago, I wouldn't have even considered something like that. Sure, I loved sex, and one of the bummers of being single was not having any. But even when I was young, and my idea of an ideal Friday night was having sex where the danger of being caught was high, it still *meant* something to me. I'd never slept with just anyone.

Why had I compromised myself like that?

Because compromising myself was exactly what I'd done. I'd ignored what I really wanted. Settled for something so much less.

I stopped at a stop sign and sent Cooper a quick text, asking if he was home and I could come over. Some girls had their BFF to go to when they felt like shit. I had Coop and Chase. I just hoped they weren't out. I really needed them tonight.

Zoe

Cooper texted back to say they were home, so I went straight there. They lived across town from Van, closer to the winery. I parked and went up to the door.

Cooper answered. “Hey, there you are. What’s up?”

“Can I come in?” I asked. “I’ve had a shitty night.”

“Sure.” He held the door open and I went inside.

I tossed my stuff down on their table and flopped onto the couch.

“What’s going on?” Cooper asked. “No, wait, let me guess. How many tries do I get? How about five. Okay, first guess: You ran into Roland and he did something to piss you off.”

“No, nothing about Roland,” I said.

“Damn,” he said. “Are you sure? Because Roland is pretty good at pissing you off.”

“I’m sure,” I said. “I told Van I was done. I’d say I broke up with him, but it’s kind of hard to break up with a guy I was stupid enough to be sleeping with but not dating.”

“Zoe, you didn’t let me finish guessing. Wait.” His eyes widened. “Did you just say what I think you said?”

“I broke things off with Van?”

Cooper raised his arms overhead, like he was mimicking a ref calling a touchdown. “Yes. Oh my god, finally. Zoe-bowie, I have been waiting for this day. Fuck yes.”

“You’re very excited,” I said.

“I know,” he said, his eyes huge and wild. He turned to shout over his shoulder. “Chase, Zoe’s here and it’s go time. Where’s the box?”

“Hang on.” Chase’s voice came from his room. A few seconds later he stumbled out, pulling on a pair of sweats. “I think it’s in the closet by the door.”

“There’s a closet by the door?” Cooper asked, turning around. “Holy shit, there is. How did I not know that? This is an awesome place for a closet. I could have been putting my coat in here all this time and I didn’t even notice the door.”

Chase shrugged and pulled a dark blue shoebox out of the closet. He brought it over and handed it to me. “Here.”

“What’s this?” I was a little afraid to open it.

“It’s your break-up box,” Cooper said, sporting a big grin. “We put it together for when you broke up with Van.”

“What’s a break-up box?”

Cooper sat on the arm of the couch and tapped his leg. “Just some things we thought might help. Last time you broke up with a guy, you were sad. And I hate it when you’re sad. But let’s face it, Chase and I suck at this stuff. We figured we should be better prepared the next time. Obviously, there was a next time coming with Van. I won’t get into all the *I told you so* stuff, at least not tonight because your wounds are fresh and I’m way too nice of a guy to do that to you.”

“Wow, this is... really sweet. I think.” I slowly lifted the lid, slightly less afraid it contained a live spider, and took out the first thing. “Tissues. Makes sense, but I’m not going to cry over him.”

“Good, that douche doesn’t deserve it,” Cooper said. He took the little package of tissues and tossed them over his shoulder. “Fuck that. And if you did cry over him, I’d take these from you anyway because you’d be stupid to shed tears over someone so fucking unworthy.”

“Uh, Coop, tissues are good for other things, though,” Chase said.

“Which is why they aren’t in the garbage,” Cooper said. “They are quite handy to have around. If we ever went through a dry spell, I’d be buying this shit in bulk. Not that we ever go through dry spells. But shit, a dude can only go so long

without blowing his load before he's basically a danger to society. Whacking it is a public service, if you think about it."

I ignored Cooper's babble about masturbation and pulled out a small, flat package wrapped in plastic. "Microwave popcorn?"

"Movie theater butter," Chase said, puffing his chest out a little bit like he was proud of himself. "When you've had a shitty day, it's always good to have an easy snack."

"Okay," I said, putting it aside, and took out a torn wrapper. "Um, this is an empty bag of M&Ms."

"Damn it, Chase, did you eat her chocolate?" Cooper asked.

"Oh, yeah, I think I did," Chase said, eying the box. "I meant to replace it, but I guess I forgot."

"God, you're the worst," Cooper said. "You owe her chocolate now. Seriously, I can't take you anywhere."

I almost said that it was just M&Ms and they barely qualified as chocolate, but I decided against it. This was one of the sweetest things anyone had ever done for me. I didn't want to make them feel bad for their candy choice. "Okay, what else do we have? What's the lighter for?"

"That's to burn anything you have that's his," Cooper said. "That's a thing girls do, right? Just, you know, practice fire safety and stuff."

"I don't have any of his stuff. Thanks for the option, though." I took out two DVDs and held up the first one. "*Beauty and the Beast*? This is a Disney cartoon."

"Yep," Chase said. "Everyone knows Belle is the best princess. She's bangin' and she loves to read. And Beast is a badass, plus he gives her a library. He's the man."

I laughed and shook my head, holding up the second movie. "*Stepbrothers*?"

"That movie is hilarious," Cooper said. "There's no way you'll feel bad if you watch it."

"And those go with the popcorn," Chase said.

“Hey, good one,” Cooper said. “That almost makes up for the chocolate.”

“Thanks, man,” Chase said, grinning.

“What is this?” I asked, picking up a handwritten note on a scrap of paper. “Coupon good for one free orgasm, no strings attached. Love, Chase?”

“What?” Cooper snatched the paper out of my hand. “What the hell is this?”

“It’s a free orgasm coupon,” Chase said. “If she’s single, she might need one. Obviously, you can’t do that for her. And I’m amazing at it, so...”

Cooper closed his eyes and shook his head. “Chase, no.”

“What’s the big deal?” Chase asked. “I’d need like five minutes, and she doesn’t even need to get all the way naked.”

“Five minutes?” I asked. “I don’t know, Chase. That doesn’t sound like it would get the job done.”

Chase winked at me. “Trust me. I have that shit on lockdown.”

“Zoe is pretty much my sister,” Cooper said. “Hell, she’s like your sister too. You can’t offer her a free orgasm. You can’t offer her any kind of orgasm. To give her an orgasm, you’d have to touch her *there*. What’s wrong with you?”

“*Like* my sister is not the same as *being* my sister,” Chase said. “My dick doesn’t recognize your social restrictions.”

“Your dick will recognize my fucking fist,” Cooper said, balling up his hand and drawing his arm back.

“Okay, boys, no one is punching anyone in the dick,” I said. “Chase, thank you, but I’ll take a rain check on that free orgasm.”

“A rain check for never,” Cooper said.

Chase’s shoulders slumped, and he scowled. “I was just trying to help.”

I laughed. Oh my god, I loved these two. “Don’t worry about the orgasm situation. If I need to get off, I’m perfectly capable

of doing it myself.”

Cooper rolled his eyes. “For fuck’s sake, Zoe, don’t talk like that. You know I hate it when you give me a boner.”

Chase looked down at his crotch, then scowled at Cooper. “You ass, every time you announce that you have a boner, I lose mine.”

“What the fuck do you need a boner for right now anyway?” Cooper asked.

“Well, if you both have boners, maybe the two of you can service me together,” I said, although it was hard to get the words out because I was laughing so hard.

Cooper and Chase went silent and looked away from each other.

“What?” I asked. “Obviously I was kidding.”

Chase crossed his arms and his jaw hitched. Cooper kept his eyes on the wall.

“You guys, don’t be mad,” I said. “I was making a joke.”

“It’s not you,” Cooper said. “Don’t worry about it.”

Chase cleared his throat. “It’s just that one time we tried—”

“Chase,” Cooper snapped. “We do not speak of it. Ever.”

I glanced between the two of them. “Wait, do you mean you tried a threesome?”

Cooper stood and walked into the kitchen. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Some things are not all they’re cracked up to be,” Chase said. “It was a disaster.”

I opened my mouth to ask a question—because oh my god, I wanted to hear this story—but Cooper poked his head around the wall.

“We do not speak of it,” he said, enunciating each word. “Not even to you, Zoe-bowie. So don’t ask. And don’t think you can get Chase to talk. It won’t work, because he knows what will happen if he does.”

“What will happen?” Chase asked.

Cooper’s eyes narrowed, and he made a slow cutting motion across his throat. “I know where you sleep.”

Chase chuckled, but I wasn’t so sure Cooper was kidding.

He came back with three beers, one for each of us. “You ready to talk about this? Or should we just get drunk?”

“Talk about what?” I asked. “I told you what happened.”

Cooper took a deep breath and jumped onto the couch, landing with his legs stretched out. I scooted to the corner to give him room.

“Chase, have a seat, buddy. Shit’s about to get real,” Cooper said. Chase sat in a tattered armchair, and Coop’s eyes moved back to me. “I don’t mean what happened tonight. I mean the rest of it. You need to get this stuff out, or it’s going to eat you up inside. And I’m a really good listener because I’m an awesome friend. So talk.”

I stared at the beer bottle in my hand. He was right, I did need to talk. I just wasn’t sure I wanted to say out loud what was going through my mind.

“I was settling,” I said. “I didn’t want to think of it that way, but that’s what it was. I was settling for something less than I really want.”

“Why?” Cooper asked.

I hesitated for a second, thinking Cooper would keep talking. A one-word sentence wasn’t really his style. But he just kept his eyes intent on me.

“Because it was easy,” I said. “I didn’t have to worry about whether Van and I had a future because I already knew the answer was no. And with none of the uncertainty of a relationship, there was no risk either. If I didn’t give him anything, I couldn’t get hurt.”

“But?” Cooper asked.

“But if I’m sleeping with some guy, I’m not really available either,” I said. “So I was giving up the possibility of meeting

the right person in favor of something short-term and pointless.”

“Good girl,” Cooper said. “This is awesome. I feel like the wise teacher on a TV show who just helped a kid learn a valuable lesson.”

“Well, thank you, Mr. Miles,” I said.

He pointed his beer bottle at me. “You’re welcome. You know you’re my favorite, so anytime. But maybe quit being stupid and fucking dumbass pieces of shit. Seriously, Zoe, that pussy of yours is worth so much more. It’s a disgrace, if you think about it. I’m kind of grossed out that his dick ever touched you. Have some self-respect.”

I laughed and rolled my eyes.

“And don’t call me Mr. Miles,” Cooper said. “It makes me think you’re talking to my dad.”

I took a long pull from my beer, feeling better than I had in a while. Cooper and Chase might be goofballs, but they were *my* goofballs. And I loved knowing they had my back.

Roland

Cooper's text was vague—all it said was *bro it worked*—but I knew exactly what he meant. Zoe had seen the footage of that jackass piece of shit being a douche at the bar the other night. And she'd revoked her status as his booty call.

Monday morning, I saw her downstairs in the lobby, talking with a client. Her hair was up, and she was dressed in a blouse tucked into pants that made her legs look a mile long. And those heels—fuck. She smiled and laughed with the woman like they were old friends.

It was irritating that she was so damn beautiful.

She had that perfect mix of classy with an edge. Like she could throw down in the boardroom and drink you under the table afterward. Her look was a far cry from the metal and alt-rock t-shirts and ripped jeans she used to wear. But this grown-up version of Zoe suited her. Made me wonder when she'd gone from the fearless girl with a propensity for crazy stunts to the professional woman running the very lucrative events department of my parents' winery.

I'd begun to realize that Zoe was a large part of why Salishan Cellars was still in business. My mom was an incredible winemaker, and our products sold well. But the winery depended heavily on the income from events. Despite the other problems, the event spaces were booked year-round. Without that, they would have gone under a long time ago.

She glanced up at me as I stood watching her from the landing at the top of the stairs. Shit. I turned and walked down to my office, feeling like an idiot.

But also a little lighter, knowing that dumbass wasn't ever going to touch her again.

Not long after I got back to my office, Leo answered my text. I'd asked him if I could come talk to him about a few things

I'd found while going through Salishan's records. I had a bad feeling about something, and I wanted to go to him first. Cooper would overreact, and I didn't want to say anything to my mom before I was sure.

I hadn't talked to Leo much since I'd been here. That wasn't unusual. Leo kept to himself. He worked for the winery, handling all the tech aspects of the business, as well as being in charge of security. He had a lot of tech training and experience, so as long as it was something he could do from his place, he took care of it. In-person stuff wasn't Leo's style. Not anymore, at least.

I was worried about Leo. My brother had never been the life of the party—that was Cooper's job—but he'd been a typical guy. Had friends. Dated girls. I didn't know much about what had happened to him in the Army. His injuries were impossible to miss, but he had more than physical scars to contend with. Cooper had said Leo never left the winery grounds. It was hard to fathom. But not only did he never leave the winery, he didn't come out of his house often, either.

He lived in what had once been the largest guest cottage. People had stopped calling it the Evergreen Cottage and now referred to it as Leo's place. He paid rent to live there, which didn't surprise me. The last thing Leo would become was a freeloader.

I walked out to his place and knocked. His muffled reply through the door sounded like *come in*, so I went inside.

The blinds were all down, keeping the light dim. Instead of typical living room furniture, he had an office setup with a large desk and at least half a dozen monitors. He had a TV mounted on the wall, and the other side of the room was filled with gym equipment.

Leo was in a high-backed office chair playing a computer game. He glanced back at me—over his right shoulder, like always.

“Hey.”

“What is this?” I asked, gesturing to his desk. “Your command center?”

He shrugged, and his cat jumped up and walked across his keyboard.

“Damn it, Gigz. Get down.” Despite shooing her away, he pulled the cat into his lap and started absently petting her. “What’s going on?”

“How much do you know about Dad’s business trips?” I asked.

He rotated his chair partway around, still keeping the left side of his face in shadow. “Some. Why?”

“He’s leaving again,” I said. “He was just gone for a few days, and now he’s headed somewhere else. It seems like a lot of these trips he takes are last minute.”

“Yeah,” Leo said.

“And he’ll be gone longer than he says. Last time he said overnight, but he was gone for three days. Mom never says anything about it, though. I’d assume he calls to tell her when he’ll be back when plans change, but she told me the other day she doesn’t talk to him when he’s on the road. He claims he’s too busy.”

“Honestly, I’ve always assumed Mom and Dad aren’t happy and he just likes to be away,” he said.

I nodded. That much was obvious. “That’s probably true. But there’s something else going on. It’s like money is disappearing into thin air. And he’s gone all the time. No one is really running this place. A good portion of the problem is Dad not being here to manage things.”

“You get why I called you,” Leo said. “It’s been this way for years. The foreclosure letter was just the final straw.”

“Yeah, I get it,” I said. “I just can’t get over the feeling that I’m missing something.”

“Do you want me to find out where he goes?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “I mean, I can find out where he is.”

“Do I want to know how?” I asked.

“Probably not.”

I nodded. “Okay. Yeah, find out where he goes this week. I want to know what’s going on, and if it has anything to do with the way the bank accounts are bleeding out.”

“You got it,” he said, swiveling his chair back around to face his monitors.

“Thanks, Leo.”

* * *

I more or less forgot about putting Leo on my dad’s trail over the next few days. A disaster at work almost had me on a last-minute flight to San Francisco, but I was able to delay it a few days. I booked a flight home for Friday, which would give me time to wrap up more loose ends here.

With my dad gone so much, I was practically running the winery. He’d told me to stay out of things, but I’d started ignoring him and doing it anyway. I was streamlining the ordering and distribution channels. Working with Cooper to formulate output estimates based on the varieties of grapes he was currently growing. We had outdated contracts to revise, vendors we were still paying for services we didn’t need, and a long list of other issues Dad had been neglecting.

I still had moments when I wondered why I stayed. I could go home and get back to my life. Arguably, I’d done enough. But I still worried about their ability to keep things in the black, and I didn’t want to know what it would do to my mom to lose her family’s land.

And there was a challenge here. I was in my element when I was dealing with the winery. I understood the business inside and out. And my experience and education meant I understood how to make this business better. A lot better. I was making headway with things, and I had to admit, it was satisfying.

I told myself it was all about Salishan and my family. It had nothing to do with Zoe. Nothing to do with us both being single—completely single. Nothing to do with how I felt when I was around her.

Because, to be honest, I didn't know how to feel.

I was drawn to her, and yet frustrated that she was so deep under my skin. She was like a drug I couldn't quit. And I didn't know whether it was an addiction that would ultimately be my salvation, or my downfall.

Leo texted me partway through the day. I was on a call with my office in San Francisco, but a strange sense of dread hit me when I read his text afterward.

Leo: *You're going to want to see this.*

As I walked over to his place, I had a feeling I already knew what he was going to tell me. The folder filled with pictures and marked-up maps confirmed it.

Dad had a mistress.

The first few pictures I thumbed through could have been of Dad with a business contact or colleague. They were having a meal in a restaurant—a nice one. But the rest told a different story. There were photos of him walking with her, holding her hand. Kissing her. Ushering her into a car. Leading her into a four-star hotel.

Despite the fact that I wasn't surprised, it still made my stomach turn and my blood run hot with anger.

I tossed the pictures aside. "Do you think Mom knows?"

Leo pushed some of the paperwork around on the table. "If she does, she's been hiding it well."

"Why would she do that?" I asked. "Why would she let him get away with this shit?"

“To protect us,” Leo said. “And the winery. She’s always been like that. Even though we’re all adults, she still does it.”

“Fuck,” I said, pinching the bridge of my nose. “This is an absolute cluster.”

“What are you going to do?” Leo asked.

I almost snapped at him, asking why the hell this was my problem. I was supposed to be on a plane tomorrow, back to San Francisco. Why did I have to be the one to deal with this?

But if not me, who?

If I hugged my mom goodbye and told her I was sorry she’d just found out her husband was cheating, but I really had to get back to work... then what? She could kick him out. File for divorce. Cooper would be there to comfort her—he was better at it than I was. Leo would be here to quietly support her. She’d have Zoe. Brynn could stay with her for a while.

But who would make sure Salishan didn’t run itself into the ground?

Mom stood to lose more than her marriage. It was obvious that was already dead and gone. But without someone to run the winery—to oversee all the complexities of the business—they’d never survive. Salishan would die, and my mom would lose the place she loved.

Or worse, she’d take my dad back because she wanted him here for the business.

I took a deep breath. “I’m going to cancel my flight. Then I’m going to show all this to Mom. Cooper, too. And we’ll need to call Brynn. I’m not sweeping this under the rug. This has to come out and he has to be held accountable.”

I grabbed all the damning evidence and went in search of my mom.

She was over at the Big House, training the tasting room staff on the new wine selections. They all sat at the bar while she stood behind it, her face lit up as she described her new seasonal red blend. She poured them each a small glass so everyone could sample it for themselves. I took a seat at the

long table on the other side of the room and waited, the knot in my gut growing.

After she finished, the staff gradually filed out, leaving the two of us alone.

She smiled and brought out two fresh glasses, then poured. “Want to try it?”

“Of course.” I walked over to the bar and took a seat, putting the file folder on the bar top next to me.

My wine tasting habits were deeply ingrained. I inspected the color, noting the deep burgundy. Swirled it a little to see its viscosity. Then I brought it close to my nose and inhaled the rich aroma while Mom did the same.

“It’s called Poetic,” Mom said. “It’s a blend of Syrah, Malbec, and Petit Verdot.”

I took a sip. It began with a bright berry flavor, leading to a smooth mid-palate with hints of coffee. The finish had a pleasant spicy quality.

“This is excellent,” I said.

“Thank you,” she said. “It’s a limited release, but if customers enjoy it, I want to put it into the regular production schedule.”

“I think you should.” I took another sip, then put my glass down. “Mom, there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“I know you have to go home,” she said. “When do you leave?”

“No, that’s not it.” I slid the folder closer. God, how was I going to say this? “I think Dad’s having an affair.”

The color drained from her face, but otherwise, she kept perfectly still. Her eyes were on her glass. I hesitated, wondering if I should say more. Wishing I didn’t have to break this to her.

Angry at my fucking father.

“What do you know?” she asked, finally, her voice soft.

“He was with her in Tacoma this week,” I said. “There are photos.”

“How long?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I suspected something was going on and asked Leo to help.”

She nodded, slowly, but remained silent for a long moment. I waited.

“I should have known,” she said, finally.

The sick feeling in my stomach spread. “This isn’t your fault, Mom.”

“No, it isn’t,” she said, meeting my eyes. “But I’ve been ignoring the signs for years. We had you kids, and the business. I let him take over everything, and I’ve regretted it more times than I can count.”

She poured herself more wine, but instead of tossing it back, like she needed the rush of alcohol, she moved slowly with it. Brought it to her nose and inhaled. Took a careful sip. Closed her eyes as she swallowed. Like the flavors of her hard work helped calm her more than the alcohol itself.

“I don’t know what to do, Mom,” I said. “I don’t know what to say to you, or what to suggest.”

She met my eyes again. “This is too big for you to fix. You should go back to San Francisco. You’ve been away too long as it is.”

“I’m not leaving,” I said. “There’s no way I’m going home in the middle of this.”

“I can’t ask you to stay,” she said.

“You’re not. You didn’t ask me to come in the first place. It’s my decision. You have enough to cope with. Don’t start making yourself feel guilty over me.”

She laid her hand over mine and squeezed. “Thank you.”

“What are you going to do?”

She took another slow sip of wine, then set her glass gently on the bar. “I’m going to kick his sorry ass out.”

Zoe

This is stupid. Why are we so stupid? I'm drunk. Should delete.

~Text from Zoe, unsent

It had been a long day. My bridezilla's wedding was fast approaching, and her insanity kept growing. I'd fielded at least ten emails and text messages today alone. They were either questions I'd already answered—often more than once—or requests that made me want to tell her to go fuck herself and have her wedding somewhere else.

But I hadn't. I'd replied with courtesy and professionalism, all while calling her cock-themed names in my head. It hadn't helped very much.

I'd also overheard Roland telling Cooper that he had a flight home tomorrow. The wave of disappointment that had hit me was nothing short of ridiculous. Just because I was getting used to seeing Roland around all the time didn't mean I should *want* him to stay. It shouldn't matter to me if he came or went. It wasn't like it was a surprise. The only surprising thing in this entire situation was the fact that he'd been here as long as he had.

Actually, that wasn't true. The surprising thing was how much my stupid body wanted to get naked with him.

I blamed the tequila. If I hadn't spent the night sleeping in his bed, I wouldn't have been subjected to his stupidly delicious smell.

Every time I saw him, I had visions of him fucking me. Not memories. I had plenty of those to draw from, but this was different. This was *now*. And I did not know how to deal with it. My stupid hormones were driving me up the wall. It wasn't just the fact that it had been a while since I'd had anything between my legs that wasn't battery-operated. I'd been insanely attracted to Roland since we'd met so long ago, and

somehow our history—and all those goddamn feelings—weren't enough to keep me from *still* being insanely attracted to him.

I was an idiot, and it was good he was leaving. That's what I kept telling myself, anyway.

I closed my laptop and grabbed my things, ready to get out of here for the day. I just needed to leave a note for the front desk before I headed home.

Downstairs, all was quiet in the lobby. I went behind the front desk to leave my note, pasting the sticky note to the monitor.

The front door whooshed open and I glanced up. Lawrence stalked through the lobby without looking in my direction. He seemed angry, but it was hard to tell with him. He always looked like someone had spit in his food.

A few seconds later, Cooper pushed the front door open with his usual bravado. He paused to stomp his boots on the mat outside. I wondered how long it had taken Shannon to get him to do that. Probably twenty years—minimum.

His face broke into a wide smile when he saw me.

“Hey, Zoe-bowie,” he said. “You working late tonight? It's quiet in here if you are.”

“No, I'm on my way out.”

“Is my mom over here?” he asked.

“She was,” I said. “She was doing staff training earlier in the small tasting room. Your dad came in a second ago, so she's probably still back there.”

“Perfect. So how are you? Are your needs being met?” He started down the hall, still talking, so I followed. “We both know you did the right thing. But I recognize the situation you're now in, and believe me, I sympathize. If I ever had to go too long without getting laid, I'm sure it would send me down a spiral of incessant dick-wanking. Because, let's be honest, cranking the love pump gets the job done, but it's not an equivalent. I think it's about a two to one ratio, don't you?”

Before I could answer—sometimes it took a second to process everything Cooper said at any given time—he opened the door to the tasting room.

“Lawrence, I know you’re having an affair.”

Shannon’s voice hit me, and it felt like someone had kicked the air out of my lungs. Cooper froze next to me, and the room went horribly silent.

Shannon stood behind the counter, her face alarmingly calm, given what she’d just said. Roland stood nearby, his arms crossed, his eyes on his dad. Lawrence looked like he’d just walked into an ambush. His face was still, but a red flush crept across his skin and his eyes were wide.

I was not supposed to be here.

“Shannon, let’s go home and talk,” Lawrence said.

“No,” she said. “You’re going to tell me the truth, and you’re going to do it now.”

Lawrence glanced around the room. “We need to talk in private.”

“They’re our children,” Shannon said. “You did this to them, too.”

“But Zoe is—”

“Stop deflecting,” Shannon said. “Tell me what’s going on.”

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been so uncomfortable. I swallowed hard and risked a glance at Roland. His eyes flicked to me, his face unreadable. He couldn’t want me here to witness this. I wanted to shrink down and slink out of the room, hoping no one would notice. But Cooper slipped his hand in mine and squeezed. God, this was really happening.

“All right, fine,” Lawrence said. He widened his stance and crossed his arms—didn’t get much more defensive than that. “Yes, I was seeing someone.”

The anger that flashed in Shannon’s eyes sent a zing of fear through me. I’d never seen her look so angry, yet so disturbingly calm at the same time.

“Who is she?” Shannon asked. “And how long has this been going on?”

“Do we really have to do this here?” Lawrence asked.

“Yes, we do,” Shannon said. “Who is she and how long have you been seeing her?”

Lawrence sighed, but kept his defensive posture. “Her name is Kristen, and I met her six or seven months ago.”

“Is she the only one?” Shannon asked.

“Yes,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. His put-out attitude made me want to punch him in the face. I couldn’t imagine how Shannon was feeling. “Just her.”

“Have there been others?” Shannon asked.

Lawrence worked his jaw, and for a second, I thought he was going to refuse to answer. “Yes, there have. But, honey, I’m ending things with Kristen. It was a mistake on my part, but it’s over now. I know, I shouldn’t have. But I’m under a lot of pressure, and things here are so tense. I got carried away and let things go too far.”

“Was that supposed to be an apology?” Shannon asked.

“I’m just saying, I know I was wrong,” Lawrence said. “Let’s go home and talk privately so we can work this out. I’ll do whatever you want me to do. You can track my phone, read my emails. Whatever you need.”

Shannon’s brow knitted together, and she looked at Lawrence like he was either crazy, or very stupid. Maybe she was trying to decide which.

“Is that a joke?” she asked. “Because you cannot look at me after more than thirty years of marriage and four children and say you’re under pressure and things are tense, therefore you had a goddamn affair. That does not make it okay.”

“I realize that,” he said.

“No, I don’t think you do,” she said. “Those children and this business are the reason I’ve stood by you all these years. I didn’t want to break up our family, and I didn’t know who

would run things if you left. And that was the stupidest mistake I've ever made. I still don't know how I'm going to avoid losing Salishan. But I'm not letting this continue another second."

"Shannon—"

"No," she said, her voice cracking like a whip. "I don't want to hear your excuses. You betrayed me in the worst way imaginable. You betrayed your family—your children. And I'm not having it. You have thirty minutes to clear your things out of my house. I want you gone."

"I've been running this place for years," Lawrence said. "You can't just throw me out."

"Yes, she can," Roland said. His voice was low and dangerous, sending a chill up my spine.

"We need to talk about this," Lawrence said.

"Get out," Shannon said. "Now."

Cooper drew me closer and put an arm around my shoulders. I slipped mine around his waist and gave him a squeeze, hoping to offer what little comfort I could. I wondered how drunk I'd have to get him later to deal with this insanity. Roland's gaze was fixed on Lawrence, his face all hard lines. I had no doubt he'd drag his father out of here physically if he had to.

Lawrence's eyes swept around the room again, his jaw clenched. We all stayed silent. I could hardly breathe. Finally, Lawrence stomped out and down the hall. A second later, I heard the front door open and close.

Cooper let me go and rushed around the bar, scooping his mom into his arms. She rested her head against chest and hugged him. Roland let out a long breath and rubbed the back of his neck.

I almost wanted to cry. Or maybe follow Lawrence outside and kick the shit out of him. Shannon was a better person than me. If I'd have been in her shoes, I wouldn't have given him a chance to get his stuff. I'd have piled it in front of the house and had a big fucking bonfire.

Roland walked around the bar to join Cooper with his mom. They both spoke softly to her, murmuring that everything was going to be all right. Shannon's calm finally broke, and tears streamed down her cheeks.

I was once again overcome with the feeling that I shouldn't be here. I'd witnessed something horribly personal—the destruction of a family. It had hurt when I'd left Roland, but at least there hadn't been children involved. Even though they were adults, I knew this was going to be hard on the Miles kids. Shannon was right; their father had betrayed them all. Hell, even I felt betrayed, and he wasn't my dad. But I'd worked for him for years, and I loved this family like they were my own.

My heart ached for all of them.

Roland looked over at me, and I desperately wished I knew what he was thinking. Wished I knew what to do. Did he want me to leave? Stay and help? I wondered whether I should call Brynn. But they probably wanted to. She was their sister.

His eyes held mine for a long moment. I gave a subtle nod toward the door, indicating I was going to go. They needed to have their moment. Help their mom. Roland nodded in return, whether in acknowledgment that I should leave, or in thanks, I couldn't tell.

I slipped out the door, feeling sick to my stomach. Instead of leaving, I went upstairs to my office. I figured I'd stick around for a while in case any of them needed me. For what, I didn't know. There wasn't anything I could do. But it felt wrong to go home.

Plus, I knew I couldn't be trusted to see Lawrence and not cut off his balls. Best wait until I was sure he was gone before venturing outside.

I sank down into my chair and stared at my desk, not really seeing anything. Shannon was undoubtedly heading for a divorce, and it was going to change everything. Salishan could get along for a while without someone at the helm. Roland had already done a lot to get things on track again. But he was leaving tomorrow. And what was going to happen long term?

This place was Shannon's life. It was Leo and Cooper's life, too.

And mine, for that matter. But at the end of the day, I wasn't a Miles.

I lost track of time as I sat in my office, contemplating what had just happened. My phone buzzed, startling me. I had a text from Cooper.

Cooper: *You okay?*

Me: *Yeah, but are YOU?*

Cooper: *No. But I will be. Gonna head home in a few and blow off some steam.*

Me: *Where's your mom?*

Cooper: *Roland got her a room at the Lodge for tonight.*

Me: *Does Leo know?*

Cooper: *Yeah. He was monitoring the security feeds to make sure Dad left.*

Cooper: *I offered to come over so we could drink our faces off, but he said no.*

Cooper: *Told me to fuck off and go home.*

Cooper: *He's really very rude.*

Cooper: *But I don't think he means to be.*

Cooper: *We all have our own ways of coping.*

Me: *That's true. Did someone call Brynn?*

Cooper: *Mom did. She's on her way. Going to stay with Mom at the hotel.*

Me: *Good. Sounds like everyone is squared away.*

Cooper: *Mostly.*

Cooper: *See u tomorrow.*

Me: *What do you mean mostly?*

I waited, but Cooper didn't answer. I was glad he was going home to his best friend. I knew Chase would have his back. It

probably meant they'd get shit-faced tonight, but I couldn't blame them. That was probably what I was going to do when I got home.

But why had Cooper said *mostly*? Had he been talking about Roland?

I wasn't exactly the best person to offer Roland comfort. He was my ex-husband, after all. That had to be weird. We'd gotten divorced, and now his mom was facing the same thing. Albeit for very different reasons. Roland and I had always been faithful to each other. I hadn't even gone on a date until the divorce was final. I wasn't going to judge anyone else for dating while they were separated, or while a divorce was going through. But it hadn't felt right to me, so I'd waited.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that he was downstairs—alone. How I knew, I couldn't be sure. He could have left. It was that sense of him I always had, like his presence had an aura I could feel. He was down there, stewing. Probably with a headache.

I opened a drawer and fished out a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels. Yeah, I kept a bottle of whiskey in my desk at work. Walk a mile, then judge. I grabbed a couple of plastic cups out of a cabinet and went downstairs to find Roland.

Roland

I sat on a stool in the empty tasting room and pinched the bridge of my nose. All was quiet—I was pretty sure everyone else had gone home. Cooper had taken Mom over to the Lodge for the night. He'd been cracking jokes to make her smile, and of course it had worked. It had been a relief to see her relax, although I knew the worst had only just begun.

My head hurt, making it hard to think. Although considering my entire family had just imploded, the headache was the least of my problems.

I couldn't believe my fucking father. I'd known something wasn't right, and I couldn't help but wonder—if I'd been here, would this have come out sooner? How long had Mom ignored what she must have known to be true because she didn't think she had a choice?

That was no way to live.

“Hey, Roland.”

I looked up at Zoe's voice. She stood in the doorway, her head tilted. Her dark hair was down, falling in waves around her shoulders. One side of her white t-shirt was caught in the waistband of her jeans, like she'd started to tuck it in, but forgot what she was doing. When she wasn't managing an event, she always looked so damn careless.

I hated that I still loved that about her.

Seeing her stirred up a potent mix of feelings I didn't want to have right now. Hurt. Regret. Desire. I still craved her. It pissed me off, but tonight I was weak. The temptation of a few minutes alone with her was too much to resist.

“Hey.” I scooted the stool next to me away from the counter.
“Come on in.”

“I know there’s not much to say.” She had two plastic cups pinched between her fingers, and a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels dangled from her other hand. “Do you wanna drink about it instead?”

“Yeah, I could use a drink.”

“Figured.” She came in and set everything on the counter, then poured us each a generous measure of the amber liquid.

I slid my drink closer as she took a seat on the stool, facing me.

“Plastic cups?” I asked.

“I like to keep it classy,” she said with a smile. “Besides, do you want to wash dishes?”

“Fair point. Where’d you get the whiskey?”

She put the cap back on the bottle. “My office.”

“You keep whiskey in your office?”

She raised her eyebrows, like I’d asked a stupid question. “You know I work for your father, right?”

I raised the cup. “True.”

She raised hers in a toast, and we both took a swallow.

“So your flight back to San Francisco is tomorrow?” she asked.

“No,” I said and took another sip. “I canceled it.”

“You mean you’re staying?” she asked.

“Yeah. I can’t leave in the middle of this.”

She nodded slowly, and silence stretched out between us. I stared at my cup—had to keep my eyes on something other than her. Sitting this close, I could smell the lavender scent of her hair.

She was unraveling me, slowly but surely. I could feel it happening. Like she was gently unbuttoning the collar of a shirt that fit too tight. I could breathe when she was near, yet she still took my breath away.

I wanted to stay mad. Hide behind anger and pretend I didn't care about her. Keep that emotionless mask where it belonged so no one could get in. Especially Zoe. But my anger was crumbling, exposing the rawness on the inside. I didn't think I could stop it. And at this point, I wasn't sure I wanted to.

It would feel good to let go. So fucking good.

"I guess I should get home," she said.

She stood, and before I could stop myself, I stood and grabbed her hips. Her eyes met mine, deep pools of midnight blue, making my heart beat harder. I knew her eyes, just like I knew her voice. Her scent. The curves of her body. How to make her scream my name. I knew it all, and those eyes mirrored the lust that must have been shining in mine.

"You know this is a bad idea, right?" she asked, her voice quiet. But she shifted closer, so our bodies touched.

"Is it?" I asked. "Maybe we need this."

A hint of pink crept across her cheeks. "Just to get it out of our systems?"

"Exactly." I slid my hands around to her lower back and pressed her against me. Maybe this would work. Maybe I could fuck her out of my system, once and for all.

"Damn it, Roland," she said. "I hate you for being so fucking sexy."

Our mouths crashed together, and I tasted the whiskey on her tongue. She was achingly familiar. The way she leaned to the right as I kissed her. The way she held the back of my neck. Slid her hands through my hair. It took me back to a time when I could do this every day. When Zoe had been mine.

Fuck, I'd missed her so much.

The reality of that swept through me as I kissed her deeply. I had missed her. God, what the fuck was I going to do with that? Just being around her was opening me up—laying me bare. I couldn't hide from anything when I was with her.

Maybe she wasn't mine anymore, but for a little while, she would be.

I pulled her shirt up and she lifted her arms so I could take it off. I let it drop to the floor while she attacked the buttons on mine, our mouths still tangled—wet and messy. Her hands slid across my chest and shoulders, pushing my shirt open. Her thumb brushed my nipple ring and she gasped.

“Oh my god, you still have this?” She traced her finger along the dark silver piercing. Meeting my eyes, she grabbed it and tugged.

I grunted at the jolt of electricity that shot straight to my groin. She bit her lip, the corners of her mouth turning up in a wicked smile, and pulled again. Harder. A groan rumbled deep in my throat and I slid my thumb over the lacy fabric of her bra, feeling her nipple harden. I pinched it through the lace and gave it a light pull.

Her hand left my chest and went straight for my cock, squeezing me through my pants.

“Are we doing this here?” She squeezed again.

“Yeah.” My mind was clouded over with desire, but I was pretty sure we were alone. And this wouldn’t have been the riskiest place we’d ever fucked.

“Good,” she said.

We ripped the rest of our clothes off between hard kisses, full of aggression. Lips, tongues, teeth. She bit my lip and held it, but I fucking loved it when she did shit like that. When she let go, I grabbed her hair and pulled her head backwards, exposing her neck. Grazed my teeth up the skin of her throat.

She reached for my cock, but I grabbed her wrist, my other hand still fisted in her hair.

“Not yet,” I said low into her ear. “I want your taste in my mouth while I fuck you.”

She moaned and relaxed her arm against my grip, ceding control to me. I led her to the upholstered bench on the opposite wall and laid her down on the supple leather. Running my hands up her thighs, I pushed her legs open. “God, Zoe, your pussy is beautiful.”

I slid my tongue up each side of her slit, caressing the silky skin. She sighed my name as I teased her—as I licked and sucked with just enough pressure to make her tremble.

I groaned and lapped my tongue against her clit. Flicked it. Swirled my tongue around the soft nub while she writhed. Her back arched and she moaned. Clamping down on her, I sucked on her clit. She ran her fingers through my hair and her heels dug into my shoulders.

“Holy fuck, Roland.”

Hearing my name on her lips, in that low breathy voice, made my dick throb. I licked and sucked, and her grip on my hair tightened. Her hips rolled, and her breath came in short gasps—soft whimpers in time with my rhythm.

I reached up and pinched her nipple between my thumb and forefinger. She cried out and her whole body shuddered as I pulled on her hard peak.

The need to be inside her was almost more than I could bear. Her taste on my tongue and the sound of her cries were driving me insane. But I had to make her come like this.

I tugged on her nipple while my mouth worked her clit, knowing it would send her over the edge. She rewarded me with a loud moan and bucked her hips against my mouth while she came.

“Oh my god,” she said between breaths. She brushed her hair back from her face. “Now that was a fucking orgasm.”

I smiled and licked my lips. God, I loved the way she tasted. “You like that?”

“Yeah, but I’m still pissed at you.”

“For what?” I asked.

“For everything,” she said.

The challenge in her eyes was such a turn on. If I didn’t have her now, I was going to lose my mind.

“Fine, be mad,” I said. “But get on your fucking knees.”

She gave me that wicked smile again and turned over, getting on her hands and knees. I grabbed her hips and slid the tip of my cock up and down her slit.

“You better fuck me now,” she said.

I smacked her ass cheek with the palm of my hand, just hard enough to make it sting. She sucked in a quick breath and looked over her shoulder.

“Did you just spank me?”

In answer, I smacked her ass again.

She groaned, arching her back harder. “Again.”

Smack.

“Oh fuck, Roland. Again.”

I spanked her one more time before thrusting my cock inside her—hard.

Holding her hips tight, I stayed buried deep inside her. I closed my eyes, reveling in the feel of her pussy wrapped around my dick. God, she felt good. She always had. No one had ever felt better. Goddammit, that was true. No one had ever compared to Zoe. I didn’t know what I was going to do with that either.

Instead of dwelling on the growing ache in my chest, I tried to fuck the demons out of both of us.

I dug my fingers into her hips and drove into her. My cock slid in and out of her wetness, and our bodies slammed together with each thrust. I grunted, losing myself in the feel of her. In the taut muscles in her core, tightening around me. In the sound of her voice, rhythmic and sensual. In the swell of her hips and the lines of her back, her hair cascading around her bare shoulders.

God, this woman was sexy as fuck.

I thrust faster, pounding her with reckless abandon. Her cries grew frenzied. Desperate. So I gave her more, feeling her heat build. Her pussy clench. She started to come again...

And I came undone.

The force of my climax sucked the air from my lungs. My body stiffened and every nerve ending seemed to fire at once. The pressure in my groin unloaded in a hot rush of intensity. I thrust again and again as my cock pulsed inside her, my vision going dark. I held tight to her hips as she rocked her ass into me, pulling out the last spurts of come.

My chest rose and fell fast with my breath and a bead of sweat trickled down my temple, past my ear. Zoe shifted forward, letting my cock slide out of her. She stood and smoothed down her hair, her beautiful body glistening in the low light.

I wanted to pull her against me and hold her. Curl up on the bench and tuck her body next to mine. Stroke her hair. Come down off this high with her wrapped in my arms.

But she gave me a little smile and walked back to the counter to pick up her clothes. I watched her dress, the ache in my chest returning with a vengeance.

I felt like a dumbass for just staring at her, so I picked up my clothes and put them back on. I didn't understand the pain in the pit of my stomach. The emptiness that kept spreading through me. I'd had her. What the fuck else did I want?

Everything. I wanted everything.

She grabbed the bottle of whiskey and came to stand in front of me. Lifted up on her tip-toes to brush her lips against mine.

"Thanks," she said, her voice soft. "Have a good night."

Then she turned and walked away.

I watched her go, knowing I was screwed. Maybe that had gotten me out of *her* system, but she was deep in mine. Deeper than I'd let myself admit until now. Because beneath everything, I wasn't angry. I was hurt. Wounded and raw, and one ill-advised fuck had ripped me open again.

Zoe

“Ms. Sutton?”

I blinked, coming back to reality with a start. Oh my god, I was a mess this morning. My client sat across the little table from me, her eyebrows raised.

“Sorry,” I said. “What was that?”

She repeated her question and we discussed the options for her parents’ anniversary party. I wrote down everything she said, knowing nothing would stick in my brain. Usually my mind was on overdrive during a consultation. I’d already have the event half-planned by the time I got back to my office. Today I was just trying to survive.

Fortunately, this particular party was six months away, so I had time to make up for my lack of vision. I thanked her for coming and told her I’d be in touch soon.

Grateful my one and only client meeting was finished for the day, I trudged back up to my office. Still no Roland. He had plenty of reasons to be away from his office today. His parents had just split up. I hadn’t seen any of the Miles family this morning. They were probably together, working out the details of what they were going to do now that Lawrence was gone. It couldn’t be that Roland was avoiding me after last night.

God, last night. What the hell had I done?

I tossed my notebook on my desk and sank into my chair. Sleeping with Roland had not been my plan when I’d gone downstairs with a bottle of Jack. I’d just wanted to see if he needed to talk. Be a friend, maybe. But I was terrible at being *friends* with Roland. My behavior last night was proof of that.

It hadn’t been my idea—or at least, I hadn’t made the first move—but I certainly hadn’t stopped it, either.

Had it been a mistake? It hadn't felt like a mistake at the time. But who thinks they're making a terrible choice when they're in the midst of mind-blowing sex? Obviously not me.

My god, he'd felt good. It was like waking up and realizing I'd spent the last four years eating nothing but plain white bread, and here was a freaking gourmet meal. How had I forgotten how fucking amazing he was?

I remembered now. Oh my god, did I remember.

Thinking about him was not helping me get any work done. I blew out a long breath and smoothed down my hair. This was fine. Roland and I had always been good at sex. That had never been the issue. We'd obviously been dancing around our physical attraction to each other, and we'd indulged in it last night. After everything with his dad, Roland had probably needed to get it out of his system. Hopefully he'd gone home feeling better, and when we saw each other it wouldn't be awkward.

Because it certainly wasn't happening again.

Another deep breath. *Get your head together, Zoe. You have a job to do.*

A job that was more difficult to do without my phone, and I didn't see it anywhere. My desk was messy—as usual—so I rifled through things, looking for it. Where the hell had I put it?

Leo appeared in the doorway and I paused, surprised to see him.

"Hey," I said. "How is everyone this morning?"

"Mom's okay," he said. "Brynn's with her. They're going to the spa and Roland paid for a couple more nights in the hotel."

"Good," I said. "She needs a break."

"Yeah."

"What about you?" I asked. "How are you holding up?"

He shut the door behind him. "I'm fine."

"You sure?"

“Yeah,” he said. “We’ll manage. This will be better in the long run, even for Mom.”

“Especially for your mom,” I said.

He nodded and sank into the chair across my desk. “I actually didn’t come up here to talk to you about my parents.”

“Oh?” I asked, lifting a notebook to see if my phone was beneath it. “Then what’s up?”

“The Big House wasn’t empty last night,” he said.

I froze and kept my eyes on the desk. *Oh shit.* “Okay...”

“Yeah, so we need to talk.”

Oh god. Leo handled winery security, and I knew there were cameras on the property. Were there any inside the Big House? I couldn’t remember—almost didn’t want to know.

Squaring my shoulders, I sat up in my chair. It wasn’t like Roland and I had never been caught having sex. We both had an exhibitionist streak, and it had been worse when we were younger. A couple of horny teenagers who couldn’t keep their hands off each other, and who both got off on fucking in dangerous places, was a recipe for quite a few... interruptions.

“All right,” I said, brushing my hair back over my shoulder. “Were we on camera?”

“No,” he said. “The security cameras are outside. Ben was still here, and he heard something, so he called me.”

That was a relief. Although I felt bad about making things awkward for Ben.

“Okay, so what’s the issue?”

“First of all, gross,” he said. “I hope one of you cleaned up.”

I chewed on my lower lip. I certainly hadn’t. I’d walked out before I lost my mind and asked him to come home with me so we could do it again. And then maybe a third time. And then tied him to my bed and forced him to spend the night so I could fuck him again in the morning.

God, what was wrong with me?

Roland's dick, that's what was wrong with me. His great big magical fucking dick.

"I don't... Leo... Why are you making this weird?"

He sighed. "Because you need to be careful."

He had that right. I did need to be careful. Because no matter how hard I tried to pretend last night had just been sex—that I was so distracted today I could barely function simply because I'd had a good fuck—I was kidding myself. I'd felt something with him. An intimacy I didn't think existed anymore. That shit was dangerous.

But I didn't want Leo to know.

"It wasn't a big deal," I said. "We got carried away. Yesterday was rough, and sometimes a nice fuck is just the thing. We've done it before, so..."

Leo grunted.

"You don't need to worry about me," I said. "I'm a big girl. I can handle it."

"I'm not worried about you," he said. "I'm worried about my brother."

"Why? Trust me, he had no complaints last night."

"I could tell," he said with a roll of his eyes. "That's not what I mean. Do you really not see it?"

"Not see what?"

"The way he looks at you," he said.

Leo was freaking me out. He was looking at me straight on—not hiding his face at all. He didn't do that very often. It wasn't that seeing his scars bothered me—not in the least. They were a part of who he was now. But I wasn't used to this kind of scrutiny from him.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"Zoe, it's Roland," he said. "He's not some dude you can just call when you feel like getting laid."

“Excuse me?” I asked. “Last I checked, Roland and I are both adults. If we want to randomly have sex, there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Not my point.”

“Then what is your point?” I asked. “Because I think you’re insinuating that I talked Roland into sleeping with me last night. Newsflash, Leo, it wasn’t me. That was all Roland.”

“Okay, and why do you think he did that?” he asked.

I shrugged, keeping my face calm, but inside it was like a storm breaking. Why *had* Roland done that? It wasn’t the first time we’d been alone together since he’d been home. There had been other opportunities for us to fuck around. He’d had me drunk in his bed. I hadn’t given his reasons a lot of thought last night. I’d been too busy letting my lady parts think for me.

“Because he had a shitty day,” I said. “Because he knew it would feel good, and after everything that went down, he wanted to take out some aggression. Fuck if I know.”

Leo nodded slowly, but I couldn’t tell if he was agreeing with me. “Do you want to know what I think?”

“No.”

“Too bad,” he said. “I think you have no idea how much you hurt him when you left.”

My mouth dropped open. “What? How much I hurt *him*? That’s rich. He wasn’t hurt, Leo. He was pissed at me, but that’s not the same thing.”

“You honestly think that’s true?” he asked. “He didn’t get hurt?”

I slumped back in my chair. “Nobody wants to get divorced. It sucked for both of us.”

“If you think he walked away from your marriage without a single scar, you don’t know him very well,” he said. “He’s good at hiding them, but they’re there. Don’t pick at them when he’s weak.”

“God, Leo, what do you think I am? I’m not some heartless bitch.”

His expression softened. “I know you’re not. I think there’s just a lot about him you don’t see. Especially now. And I don’t want him getting hit from all sides. This thing with my dad is... I don’t think anyone’s surprised, but it’s brutal. Roland has a lot on his plate. So I’m just saying, be careful with him. Don’t assume he’s bulletproof. He’s not.”

Coming from anyone else, this conversation might have made me angry. But I knew Leo sometimes saw things no one else could see. And he wouldn’t have come to talk to me if he hadn’t thought it was important. Leo wasn’t like Cooper, who said whatever came to mind the second he thought it. Leo was cautious. He’d probably thought about it for a while before deciding to bring it up with me.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll be careful. It was a one-time thing, anyway. Stress relief, you know? I don’t have it in for Roland. I don’t want to hurt him.”

“I know, that’s why I came over.” He stood and put his hand on the doorknob.

“Do you guys need anything today?” I asked. “Your mom, or Cooper, or anyone?”

He shook his head. “Not so far. But someone will let you know if we do.”

“Please do,” I said. “Really. I don’t know what I can do, but... something.”

“Thanks, Zoe.”

He left, and I leaned back in my chair. It was weird to think of Roland being *hurt*. He’d never acted like I’d wounded him by leaving. The only thing I’d ever seen was anger, followed by detached indifference. He hadn’t cared very much. Or at least, that’s how it had seemed to me.

His apparent callousness over the end of our marriage had been the most painful part for me. We’d argued a few times, but after that, he’d been emotionless. Unconcerned. Like the

years we'd spent together hadn't meant very much, and he was fine with moving on. He'd made it look easy.

Had his air of disinterest been a way to hide his pain? That was a very uncomfortable thought.

It made me question some of the things that had happened between us. And it made me wonder, what did he see when he looked at me now? I'd always figured I was just a girl from his past. A mistake he'd made. If it weren't for the fact that I worked for his family, would he ever think of me at all?

But if I'd actually hurt him...

Maybe things hadn't been as one-sided as I'd thought. I hadn't just been hurt. I'd been devastated. Leaving Roland had been the hardest thing I'd ever done. But if he'd been hurt more deeply than I'd realized, things weren't so black and white.

And what had happened last night took on an entirely new meaning.

Roland

The day was already warm as I rode out with Cooper in the utility vehicle, heading to the south vineyard. A few puffy white clouds hung in the bright blue sky, almost as if they were resting against the peaks of the mountains. The hills around us were a rugged patchwork of brown and deep green, and the air was fresh. Almost sweet.

I hadn't been out here in years. We'd spent our childhoods in these fields, running through the rows of grape vines. Playing games, scraping our elbows and knees. Back then, I'd believed our vineyards were endless. That it wouldn't matter how far I walked, I'd never reach the end.

Cooper stopped and turned off the engine. He hadn't said much since we'd left the lower grounds. Silence with Cooper wasn't comfortable. It was unnatural. I was used to a constant stream of thoughts coming out of his mouth. I'd sought him out this morning because I was tired of being alone in my own head. I'd been up most of the night stewing over everything. My dad's affair. My mom. What was going to happen to my family.

And Zoe. God, everything with Zoe was an absolute mindfuck.

I'd been hoping Cooper could help distract me from the chaos of my thoughts, but so far, he seemed lost in his.

"What are we doing out here?" I asked.

He climbed out and put his hands on his hips, then closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Need to check on some things. The drone photos showed we might have some minor nutrient deficiencies. But I need to see it for myself to be sure."

"Drone photos?" I asked.

"Yeah, Leo has a drone license. He got one with a camera, so he flies it over the vineyards to take aerial photos. It's pretty

cool. I can see a lot from above. Growth patterns, signs of mildew or water stress. But there's no substitute for visiting my babies in person."

I got out and followed him as he walked down the rows of grape vines. He lifted leaves and checked on the bunches of grapes that were ripening. I watched him pinch and sniff. Tug on the vines. I wasn't sure what he was looking for. The agriculture side had never been my area, but Cooper had always loved these fields. He'd been glued to our grandfather's hip as a kid, making the rounds with him. Helping with plantings. Sneaking out during night harvests to help pick the grapes. Mom had often joked that Cooper had spent his childhood covered in so much dirt, he was destined to be a grower.

He took soil samples at various places, labeling his bags with a sharpie and putting them in his backpack. And although he wasn't saying much to me, he did talk to the grapevines. I'd forgotten he did that. It was oddly comforting to hear his low murmurs, speaking to the grapes like they were pets or small children. Our world had turned upside down, but if Cooper still talked to his grapes, maybe some things wouldn't ever change.

"You didn't make your flight," Cooper said out of the blue.

We were deep in the vineyard, the utility vehicle hidden behind several rows of vines.

"No, I canceled it," I said.

"Canceled?" he asked. "Or rescheduled? Because those are different things."

"Just canceled," I said. "Are you making conversation, or are you trying to figure out if I'm leaving?"

"The second one," he said. He knelt down and scooped another soil sample, then sealed the bag. "Because if you're leaving, we have to figure out what the fuck we're going to do."

"I'm not leaving yet."

He stood and looked me in the eyes, his face unusually serious. "I'm going to die here, you know."

"What?"

"I don't mean soon," he said. "I plan to be an old man telling inappropriate stories of my sexual conquests at family reunions. Except I'll still be smooth as fuck because I'll get distinguished as I age. I'll have a really cool hat and cane. It'll be my signature look, and the hot MILFs in town will come sit on my lap and giggle when I whisper dirty shit in their ears."

"That's... weird and very specific."

He shrugged. "I'm just saying, this is where I belong. I'm not leaving this land."

"I know, Coop. The thing between Mom and Dad doesn't mean we're going to lose the land. In fact, Dad being gone could make it easier for me to ensure we keep it."

One side of his mouth turned up in a smirk.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing." He turned and kept walking.

I followed as he moved down the row. "What was that look?"

"It's not a big deal," he said. "You just said *we*."

"We?"

"Yeah, *we*. You said the thing between Mom and Dad doesn't mean *we're* going to lose the land. You'll make sure *we* keep it. *We* means you too, brother."

I had said that, hadn't I? "Yeah, well, it's our family, right?"

"Yep," he said, grinning again.

"Did you talk to Mom today?"

"Not yet," he said. "I'll go see her later. Did you?"

"I called her," I said. "She seems like she's doing okay, considering. She's known something wasn't right for a long time, she just hadn't faced it."

“Yeah. But I don’t want to talk about Dad.” He cleared his throat and turned over a leaf to inspect the other side. “Everything looks really good out here. But the soil still needs to talk to me. What about you? Do you want to?”

“Do I want to what?” I asked. “Seriously, Coop, do people ever understand you on the first try?”

“Do you want to talk to me?” he asked. “I wasn’t going to bring it up, because I figured by now you would have. Do you know how hard it’s been to keep my mouth shut all morning? Jesus, I’m being as patient as I can, but you’re going to have to give a little, here. You need to put in the work, bro.”

“I understood less than half of that.”

“What’s going on with Zoe?” he asked. “And just so we’re clear, I know you guys banged in the tasting room last night.”

Ah, fuck. I groaned. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, Ben walked by and heard something, so he called Leo. Come on, man, you thought you could get away with that? I have to give it to you, I’ve never fucked a girl in the Big House. Although believe me, I’ve thought about it. If I had a sex bucket list, that would have to be on it. Hey, sex bucket list, that’s not a bad idea. Maybe I should write it down. Nah, I’ll remember. Anyway, what’s up with you two?”

I let out a breath. “I honestly don’t know.”

“Good answer,” he said. “I figured you’d say *nothing* and I’d have to pry it out of you. At least *I don’t know* means you can admit it’s something.”

Was it, though? It had certainly been something to me. I wasn’t so sure about her. She’d walked out like it hadn’t been a big deal. Like I was just another hook-up.

“I don’t know what it is,” I said. “Other than me being an idiot.”

“You *are* an idiot, but that’s not why.”

“Thanks, asshole,” I said.

Cooper grinned. “Just keeping it real, bro.”

“Is this the part where you remind me that Zoe is your friend and I better not hurt her?” I asked.

“Nah,” he said. “I mean, she is, and I don’t want her to get hurt. But Zoe’s a big girl.”

I laughed. “Interesting, coming from the guy responsible for recording what’s-his-name’s body shot video.”

“That was different,” Cooper said, his expression serious. “You’re kind of a dick sometimes, and you did fuck up your marriage to her pretty bad. But I know you care about her. Which is kind of fucking crazy, because I used to be convinced that you didn’t. I would have gone toe-to-toe with anyone who claimed you gave a shit. I did not see it.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

“You’ve surprised me,” he said. “I know you didn’t want to come home and bail us out. But you did. And I admit, I don’t know fuck-all about relationships. But anyone can see the way you look at her. Hell, we all see it. I think she’s the only one who doesn’t.”

He pulled a pair of shears from a loop on his tool belt and cut a few leaves, then gently slipped them into another bag.

“That’s enough of that shit, though,” he said. “Jesus, Roland, I knew you needed to get some stuff off your chest, but you don’t have to be a girl about it.”

“I’m pretty sure all I said was *I don’t know*, and *I’m an idiot*.”

“At least we agree,” he said. “And don’t forget, Zoe is my friend, and you better not hurt her. I don’t care if you are my brother, I’ll still punch you in the dick.”

“You just said—”

“Dick punch,” Cooper said, pointing at me. “Watch yourself.”

I shook my head. Trying to make sense out of Cooper was a lesson in futility.

We walked up a shallow slope, and Cooper stopped now and then to talk to his grapes. I followed along, still thinking about Zoe. About what I wanted.

The thing was, I knew exactly what I wanted. It was just so fucking crazy, I was having trouble facing it. How could I admit that what I really wanted was *her*? I didn't just want to sleep with her. This was so much more than that. Zoe was smart, fun, and beautiful. She was passionate and fiercely loyal.

I wondered how the fuck I ever let her go.

We'd crashed and burned pretty hard once. I didn't know if she'd ever give me another chance. But I'd realized something last night, and there was no point in trying to talk myself out of it. I still loved her.

I loved Zoe like crazy. I always had.

I didn't deserve a second chance, and I knew it. But if I didn't try, I'd spend the rest of my life miserable and alone. I'd never love anyone like I loved her. I knew that now. Zoe was it for me. If she didn't feel the same, I'd have to figure out how to live with it. But I knew one thing for sure: I wasn't going to let her walk out of my life again. Not without a fight.

Zoe

It would be nice if you would answer. Simple question. Did you get the paperwork or not? I need you to sign. I just want this to be fucking over with.

~Text from Zoe, four years ago

I stood outside the Hummingbird Cottage, my tummy twisted with nerves. My limbs were jittery, and I'd almost talked myself out of this twice. But I really needed to talk to Roland. The more time that went by, the more awkward things were going to get. I didn't know if he'd been out all day to avoid me, or because he'd been with his family. But I knew he was here now, and the sooner I got this over with, the better.

I knocked and heard a muffled *coming* from inside. The door opened, and I almost choked. Roland's hair was wet, his chest bare and glistening, and he was wearing nothing but a white towel wrapped around his waist.

"Oh, hey," he said. "Sorry, I assumed it was Cooper again."

I blinked a few times, my mouth partially open. "Coop... Cooper?"

"He keeps trying to talk me into going out with him and Chase tonight."

Talk, Zoe. Stop staring. "Oh, right. Yeah, Cooper can be a pain in the ass when he wants something."

"Yeah." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder and adjusted his grip on the towel. It hung low across his hips, revealing the trail of hair that went down below his belly-button. "Do you want to come in?"

God, did I ever. I wanted to lick the water off his abs. But I had to stop thinking like that. "Um, yeah, please."

I went inside, and he shut the door softly behind me. The deep breath I took to calm my raging hormones had the opposite

effect. I got a lungful of Roland, and he smelled like man heaven.

“I’ll be right back,” he said.

“Yes, clothes are good,” I said.

He paused, and the corners of his mouth turned up in the hint of a smile. A drop of water trailed down his broad chest and slid over the surface of his nipple ring.

I swallowed and tore my eyes away. Thankfully, he went into the bedroom, but I didn’t hear the door latch. I told myself, quite firmly, that I wasn’t going to look. It didn’t matter if he’d left the door open a crack on purpose or not. I wasn’t taking the bait.

Who was I kidding? Of course I peeked.

I caught a glimpse of him from behind as the towel dropped to the floor. He had dimples on his lower back, right above his ass. I wanted to run in there and smack those sexy ass cheeks. Maybe get him a little riled up so he’d spank me again.

Did I have no control over myself? I looked away and moved so the gap wasn’t in my line of sight. I was here to have a calm, rational, adult conversation with my ex-husband. I needed to remember that.

He came out in a black t-shirt and sweats. The way his clothes hugged his body was only slightly less distracting than seeing him half-naked. I’d told him last night that I hated him for being so sexy, and there was some truth to that. He was making it very hard to stay focused on what I’d come here to do.

“What’s up?” He sat on the couch and motioned for me to sit.

I sat next to him, careful to keep space between us. “I thought we should talk.”

“Yeah, we should.” He shifted so he was partially facing me and put his arm over the back of the couch.

I waited to see if he’d start talking first—he’d certainly started things last night—but he just looked at me, his blue eyes intense.

“Yesterday was pretty crazy,” I said. “I didn’t mean to be there when your mom and dad had it out.”

“I know,” he said. “It’s okay.”

“How’s your mom today?”

“She’s hanging in there,” he said.

“Good.” I glanced down at my hands. Why couldn’t I bring up last night? I’d never been shy about sex before. Why the hell was I acting like a blushing recently-deflowered virgin? “So, last night—”

“Was amazing,” he said.

“Yeah, it was, but...” *No, forget the part where it was amazing.* “I said it was a bad idea, and it—”

“Wasn’t a bad idea, and I’m glad it happened.” His eyes held mine captive, and he shifted closer.

I opened my mouth to reply, but paused, staring at him. “Wait, did you just say you’re glad it happened?”

“Absolutely.” He brushed a lock of hair off my shoulder, my neck tingling where his fingers touched me.

The way he was looking at me made my heart race. He wanted me. I could see the desire burning in his eyes. I wanted him, too. I wanted his body against mine. His mouth on my skin. I wanted to feel what I’d felt last night, even if it would only be fleeting. Because for the first time in a long time, I’d felt whole.

I leaned in and my eyes closed as his lips came to mine. He grabbed me with rough hands and pulled me into his lap, kissing me deeply. I was an addict, getting a long-awaited hit of my drug of choice. Intoxicated by the heady mix of familiarity and surprise.

His arms wrapped around me, holding me tight. He kissed me like I was oxygen. Like he needed me to survive. It was too much. This kiss was breaking me open, ruining me with its power. I couldn’t let that happen. This was just sex. Just two people indulging their desires. Giving in.

He held my thighs, straddled across his lap. I could feel his solid erection and I rubbed against him, smiling as he groaned into my mouth. This, I could handle. I needed to push this farther—get us naked. Stay in control. Raw lust would drown out all the other feelings I didn't want to have.

“Clothes off,” I said. “Now.”

He tore my shirt off and kissed me again, running his hands up my back to unfasten my bra. I let it fall down my arms, and he tossed it to the side. Then his mouth was on my nipple, his hands grabbing my ass. I started grinding against him, desperate for friction. He sucked my nipple while he palmed my other breast, sending jolts of sensation straight to my core.

I was dry-humping him like a cracked-out monkey in heat, but oh my god he knew how to play my body like an instrument. Laps of his tongue and pinches of his teeth on my nipples left me panting, my pussy hot. I needed him to fuck me, and I needed it now.

“Sex, Roland.” I couldn't focus enough to form full sentences. “Sex, now.”

His mouth moved higher, and he sucked on the skin at the base of my neck while he pinched my nipple between his thumb and forefinger. “Mm. Bedroom.”

“Fine.”

He took his time, playing with my nipple and lavishing kisses up my neck. It felt too good. I wanted hard and rough, not slow and deliberate.

I found the hem of his shirt and slipped my hand underneath. I knew what would get him going. Pinching the smooth metal of his nipple ring, I gave it a quick tug.

He grunted and bit down where my shoulder met my neck. That was more like it. His teeth pinched, but the twinge of pain was electric. I massaged his nipple with my thumb, then pulled again. His savage grunt reverberated through me and he nipped at my neck with his teeth.

He stood, lifting me easily with his hands gripping my ass. I held on, my arms around his neck, while he walked me the

short distance to the bedroom. He kicked the door shut with a bang and dumped me unceremoniously onto the bed.

I bit my lip as I watched him undress. He pulled off his shirt, revealing his muscular frame. I'd been with him when he got that nipple ring, and the tattoos on his shoulder and upper arm. I liked that he didn't have any new ones. It made me feel like all his ink still belonged to me.

He shoved his pants and underwear down, unleashing that goddamn magical dick. It was gorgeous. Some women didn't appreciate the visual beauty of a fabulous cock, but I sure did. And Roland's was a masterpiece. Thick and long, with a perfectly shaped head. A deep wine color, darker than the rest of his skin, especially when he was hard. Roland's dick was an absolute pussy destroyer, and I couldn't wait for him to ravage mine.

I slid the rest of my clothes off and scooted up the bed. He got on his knees in front of me and opened my legs, running his hands up and down my thighs.

"Condom?" he asked.

Since Roland, I'd always used a condom, even though I was on the pill. But we hadn't last night, and Roland had been in me bare plenty of times.

"I'm on the pill," I said. "Are you still safe?"

"I'm safe."

"Me too," I said. "We're good, then."

His hands caressed my thighs, his movements slow and deliberate. He licked his lips as his eyes swept over me, taking me in.

"You are so fucking beautiful," he said.

The emotion in his voice cut through me. I didn't want to dredge up old feelings. I just wanted him to fuck me senseless. Maybe the second time would be enough.

I curled my finger, beckoning him closer. "Come here."

His mouth hooked in a half-smile. "Not yet."

“What are you waiting for?”

“I need something from you first,” he said.

“What?” I asked. “Because if this is how you ask for oral sex now, you don’t have to be so dramatic about it. Just tell me you want to see your cock in my mouth and let’s do this.”

He shook his head. “That does sound amazing, but that’s not what I mean. I want you to agree to go out with me.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I want you to go out with me,” he said. “On a date.”

“A date?” I asked, and a tremor of fear tickled my spine, settling in the pit of my stomach. This was exactly what I didn’t want. I couldn’t *date* my ex-husband. Sleep with him a couple of times? Sure. Date him? That was crazy. “No.”

He narrowed his eyes. “No sex, then.”

“You’re serious?” I lifted onto my elbows. “You have me naked with my legs spread open in front of you. You’re telling me you’ll walk away from this?”

“It’s gonna hurt like a son of a bitch, but yes,” he said. “Or tell me you’ll go out with me, and I’ll fuck you any way you want me to.”

Hearing those words come out of his mouth made my pussy contract. God, I was wet and practically throbbing for him. “You are such an asshole.”

“I’m an asshole for wanting to take you out?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “We can’t date each other.”

“Why not?”

I flopped back down, my head hitting the pillow. His pillow. I was surrounded by his scent, staring at the hard lines of his gorgeous body. He moved his hands up and down my thighs again, his eyes intent on me. He wasn’t going to let this go.

“Do you really want to have this conversation, or do you want to get laid?”

“I told you what I want,” he said.

Fine. That's how he wanted it to be? I'd play his game, but I'd play dirty.

I slid my fingers lightly over my right nipple, indulging in a little smirk as Roland's eyes snapped to my chest. "No sex? Maybe I'll just have to do this myself, then."

"That's not going to work, Zo."

"Are you sure?" I traced my fingers down my stomach, reaching the soft skin between my legs. Roland watched as I rubbed along my slit and dipped my fingertips inside. "Mm, so wet. This would feel good."

The challenge in his eyes was such a turn-on. He grabbed his dick at the base and held it.

"You know you want this," I said, slipping my fingers inside again.

"I do," he said, his voice rough. "But I'll be fine without it."

"No you won't." I bit my lip as I swirled my fingers around my clit a few times. "But I will. I'll make myself come while you watch."

"You'd rather do that than let me buy you dinner?" he asked, his eyes glued to my stroking fingers.

"Maybe," I said.

He gave his cock a tug, but I knew him. He wasn't serious yet. I rubbed myself harder to show him I meant business.

"Come on, Zo." He squeezed his shaft and tugged again. I had to bite the inside of my lip. Damn it, that was his warm-up. He wasn't bluffing.

His hand slid up his thick length, and he had me mesmerized. My fingers went still as I watched him begin with rough jerks. He twisted his wrist with each stroke. God, I loved watching him touch himself. And the asshole fucking knew it.

"There's no way that's as good as this would be." I slid my fingers inside again.

He grunted and stroked faster. "It's not. But I'm watching you and it's pretty fucking good."

I needed pressure and I needed it now. I rubbed myself harder, but I wanted his cock. I wanted him inside me, stretching me open. Filling me.

“Dinner?” I asked.

He jerked his hand over his cock a few more times. “Dinner.”

“Oh my god, fine,” I said, pulling my fingers out. “Get over here and fuck me.”

He grinned, the smug bastard, and settled on top of me. Wasting no time, he captured my mouth in a deep kiss and thrust his cock inside.

I moaned with relief as his thickness filled me. Yes, this was what I needed. Just once more. The kissing was pushing it, but he was really fucking good at that too, so I didn’t stop him. I moved with his thrusts and held his muscular back, enjoying the way his body felt, melded with mine.

Hooking an arm around my waist, he flipped us over. I settled on top of him and shook my hair so it fell down my back. This was perfect. Being on top put me in control. I was going to ride his dick until he lost his fucking mind.

But he grabbed my hips, holding them tight, and kept me from moving too fast. His eyes held mine, deep and spellbinding. I squeezed my thighs to lift up, and slid down his cock, the friction pulsating through me. His brow furrowed and he groaned, but he wouldn’t break eye contact.

Placing my hands on his chest, I rode him as hard and fast as he’d let me—which wasn’t as hard and fast as I wanted. His eyes bored through me, penetrating my defenses.

My heart raced, and I felt a flush pass over my cheeks. He moved me faster, his control slipping. The groove between his eyebrows deepened and his grunts were low and primal. But still his eyes stayed locked with mine, refusing to let go.

His cock throbbed, and his jaw tightened. “You ready for this?”

I knew what he meant. He wasn’t just talking about his impending release. This was more than sex, and every bit of

me knew it.

And I was fucking terrified.

His grip on my hips softened, and before I could answer, he pressed his thumb against my clit. Rubbed me with quick strokes.

The orgasm swept through me like a rogue wave breaking over the sand—sudden and powerful. I leaned my head back and rode his dick hard while he thrust up into me, his hands back on my hips. He slammed upward, shoving his cock deep inside. The feel of his cock pulsing with the walls of my pussy clenching around him was insane. I dug my fingernails into his chest and he groaned, his voice deep. We came together, our timing perfect, both losing ourselves in the hot rush of passion.

Oh my god, there was nothing like a simultaneous orgasm. A lover who made sure you came was one thing. But one who could set you off at their whim was a fucking treasure.

My heart slowed down, and I started to come back to myself. Roland caressed my thighs, his large hands moving slowly across my hot skin. He had red marks on his chest where I'd clawed him. But those eyes were still fixed on my face, full of feeling and depth.

He used to look at me like that, before everything had gone to shit.

I felt intensely raw and vulnerable, and I didn't like it. Brushing my hair back, I moved off him and over to the edge of the bed.

He rolled to his side and reached out to touch my back. His voice was quiet and soothing. "Will you stay?"

I answered without looking at him. "I can't."

"Okay," he said, still caressing me with a light touch. "I understand."

A surge of emotion stormed inside me. This was not what I'd come here to do. Face the fact that we'd slept together and get things out in the open, yes. And deep down, I knew I'd planned to fuck him again. Once had not been enough.

But this? This was more than I could bear.

“I should go,” I said.

“Okay,” he said again, still in that soft voice. “Dinner tomorrow?”

“Sure.” I stood and gathered my clothes, keeping my back to him. If I saw his face, I’d break. I’d melt into a puddle of stupid feelings and climb in bed with him. Curl myself around him and drift in his warmth.

This was crazy. This man had hurt me. Deeply. I couldn’t risk letting him in again.

I dressed as quickly as I could and murmured something that sounded like goodbye, then got my ass out of there before I lost my mind.

But it wasn’t my mind I was at risk of losing. Not really. It was my heart. And I was afraid he already had it in his hands again.

Roland

It was funny to get a hit of nervousness as I walked up to Zoe's door. After all, it was Zo. I'd taken her out hundreds of times. We'd been to high school dances, out on dinner dates or out for drinks. Parties and bar crawls. Midnight picnics. Road trips.

But tonight was different.

Tonight was more important than any of those nights had been. I had to show her I was serious, but I needed to tread carefully. She didn't trust me, and I certainly didn't blame her. I had a long way to go before I could ask for her trust, let alone anything deeper. Like love.

I hadn't been surprised when she'd left last night. Disappointed, sure. But when I'd asked her to stay, I'd known she wouldn't. I'd seen the confusion and hurt in her eyes. I hated that I was responsible for that, and I was realizing that Zoe carried a lot more hurt than I'd ever known. Pain that I'd caused. It made me feel fucking awful, but I had no one to blame but myself.

I would have loved it if she'd have climbed back into bed with me. It might have given me a chance to heal some of the wounds we shared. But I needed to do this on Zoe's terms. Let her be in control. It meant risking a lot—risking everything, really. I had to open myself up to being hurt again so I could show her it was safe for her to do the same.

This wasn't natural for me. I was used to being in the position of strength. Dominance. It was why I was good at my job.

But Zoe wasn't a business deal.

I understood her. Sometimes I thought I knew her better than I knew myself. And I recognized that right now, she needed me to take it slow. As much as I wanted to tell her everything—how I couldn't stop thinking about her, how much I loved her

and wanted her back in my life—I couldn't yet. I had to show her, first.

She answered after I knocked, dressed in a black wrap shirt, tight dark jeans, and knee-high black boots. Her hair was down in waves, and I noticed the color was darker at the top, fading to almost blond at the tips.

“Hey, you look beautiful,” I said, resisting the urge to step in and kiss her. I couldn't get away with that yet. “Did you change your hair?”

“Oh, yeah, today,” she said, fingering a lock of hair. “I made the appointment a while ago.”

“It looks great.”

She touched her hair again, almost like she was self-conscious about it. “Thanks.”

I led her to my car and we drove out to the Rockhouse Grill. It was newer, and I'd chosen it specifically because it wasn't a place we'd used to frequent. I didn't want old memories interfering.

The host seated us, and we sat in silence, perusing the menus. I could tell Zoe was jittery. Truthfully, I was, too. Whatever was happening between us was on the edge of a blade. If we tipped too far to either side, we'd fall.

“How's your mom?” she asked.

“She's okay. I told her she could stay at the Lodge as long as she wants. I think she's worried about coming back to the house.” I was more than happy to pay for her room. She could stay there for the next year for all I cared. I knew all too well what it was like to come home to an empty house, the echoes of your spouse still there long after they'd left.

“Yeah, I'm sure she is,” she said. “So many memories. There must be good ones, too. Especially of all her kids. But still. Do you know where your dad went?”

“To his mistress,” I said, spitting out the word. I was so fucking angry with my father, I could barely talk about him without feeling my blood run hot with rage.

“Well, she’s an idiot,” Zoe said. “Especially if she knew he was married.”

“I think she did.”

“I’m so pissed for your mom,” she said. “She doesn’t deserve any of this shit.”

“Me too.” And I was. I was livid over what my dad had done to her.

The waitress came to take our orders. When she left, our conversation turned to Salishan. I told her about the things I’d been working on. I had a new ten-year financial plan that would reduce our debt faster and keep cash flow positive, even if we had a down year. Leo had ideas for expanding distribution to a wider area, as well as partnering with more local restaurants. Cooper and my mom were working closely together to plan for future crops and grape varieties, which would allow Mom to expand the wine selection.

Zoe talked about her ideas for recruiting events in the off-season. Winter-themed weddings, special deals for corporate retreats and other events that weren’t weather-dependent. Marketing campaigns that targeted the post-holiday slump in January and February, emphasizing the cozy atmosphere of the winery.

She visibly relaxed as we talked and ate. I loved hearing the passion in her voice when she talked about her work, and I found myself feeling grateful she’d come back here. I didn’t know what my family would have done without her.

“It sounds like you’re getting things turned around,” she said.

“We’re not on the brink of foreclosure, so that’s good,” I said. “But there’s a lot of capital investment that needs to happen, and I’m still not sure how to handle that. I’m thinking of bringing in an investor. I know a guy who might be interested. It could take Salishan to the next level. But I’m not sure how everyone else is going to feel about it.”

“That would be different,” she said. “But if it would be good in the long run, it might be the right thing. It would just have to be someone you trust.”

“Exactly.”

We finished our meals and sipped our wine—a Salishan Cellars chardonnay. Zoe put down her glass and her hand strayed to her hair. She did that when she was nervous, or not sure what to say.

“When do you have to go back to San Francisco?” she asked.

And there it was. My life in San Francisco was an enormous barrier between us. I wasn’t such an idiot that I thought I could ask her to come back with me. We’d been down that road, and it hadn’t ended well.

“I’ll have to take a trip down there soon,” I said. “But there’s too much to do here. I won’t stay long.”

She nodded slowly. “Okay.”

“I’ve been thinking about how to make things work long-term,” I said. “I’ll be honest, I’m not sure what the solution is yet. Maybe I’ll split my time between San Francisco and here, I don’t know.”

“So you’re not going to just leave,” she said.

“No.”

She met my eyes and her subtle smile lit me up inside. “That’s good to know.”

After dinner, I took her home. She looked at me with curiosity when I pulled up at her place. I knew this wasn’t what she’d expected. She was waiting for me to suggest she come home with me. But that wasn’t going to happen tonight.

I walked her up to her door, and she turned toward me.

“Thanks for dinner,” she said. “It was nice.”

“Thanks for coming,” I said.

“Well, you did coerce me,” she said. “But I’m glad.”

I moved closer and slid my hand around her waist, pulling her against me. Her mouth parted, and she started to say something, but I ran my thumb along her lower lip. It was soft, pliant against the pad of my thumb.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Getting ready to kiss you.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to,” I said. “And because we’re not having sex tonight.”

She tried to step back, but I held fast, keeping her pressed against me while my thumb traced her lip again.

“If you don’t want sex, why did you take me out?” she asked.

I loved the way her voice sounded breathy and halting, like she was having trouble concentrating on her words.

“I want more than sex.” I kissed the tip of her nose. “Don’t get me wrong, fucking you is amazing. But I need you to know that isn’t all I want.”

“Then what do you want?”

“You,” I said.

“Roland...”

I leaned in and pressed my mouth to hers. Slid my tongue along her lips. All softness. No teeth. No aggression. Just silky-smooth lips and sensitive skin. Tongues that tasted of wine. I kissed her deeply, drawing her close, letting my tongue caress hers. Her body relented, softening against me. I kissed her with everything I had, because I knew from now on, every time I kissed her could be the last.

Her eyes were hooded when I pulled away. I touched her cheek and brushed my lips against hers again.

“It’s okay,” I said. “You don’t have to decide anything right now. All I want is another date. Will you go out with me again?”

“That’s all?” she asked. “Just another date?”

“For now, yeah,” I said.

She took a deep breath and I touched her lips with my thumb again. I wanted to keep kissing those lips, but I couldn’t overwhelm her. I had to be careful.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll go out with you again.”

“I lied, I need one more thing.”

“Roland.”

I smiled and kissed her again, just a soft kiss on her lips. I couldn’t help it. “Just one more thing, I promise. I need to know there won’t be anyone else.”

“Are you tricking me into dating you?” she asked.

“I’m not tricking you,” I said. “I made you a compelling offer, which you accepted. Now I’m extending the offer further.”

“Always the businessman,” she said, her mouth twitching in a smile. “That goes for you too? No one else?”

“Never,” I said. There would never again be anyone but her.

She slid her hand around the back of my neck and drew me to her lips. Kissed me, soft and sweet. “Of course not. I would never do that to you.”

I pulled her to me and held her close, my chest suddenly tight. The way she’d initiated that kiss felt so good. It gave me hope.

“Do you want to come in?” she asked, softly into my ear.

I squeezed her and pulled back. “I really do, but I’m not going to tonight. I think it’s best if I go.”

She smiled and took my hand. Our fingers twined together, and she gave me that little smile again. “Okay. Goodnight, Roland.”

“Goodnight, Zoe.”

I let go and stepped away, the words *I love you* lying unspoken on my lips.

Zoe

Two more days. In forty-eight hours, Victoria Jones would be Victoria Cockburn, and my bridezilla client no longer. Assuming I survived. At this point, that was debatable.

She'd arrived this morning, appearing at the Big House even though we didn't have an appointment until tomorrow for her rehearsal. But she'd wanted to go over every detail, plus tour the grounds again. While we walked through the back gardens, she'd picked apart the decor choices and layout—all things she'd chosen weeks, if not months ago. By the time she left two hours later, the inside of my lip was raw from biting it and my palms had fingernail marks from clenching my fists.

Two days. I could handle Cocksmash for two more days.

The bulk of the setup would be done tomorrow, but we didn't have anything scheduled in the main garden between now and then. I decided to get some of the twinkle lights up. I didn't always do the decorating myself, but today I wanted to be outside—and alone for a while. Hanging strings of lights in the trees sounded like a great way to kill a couple of hours. It would give me time to think.

Considering I was dating my ex-husband, I certainly had a lot on my mind.

We'd been dating for weeks now. We saw each other at work. Kissed a lot. Went out to dinner, or for drinks. He'd even taken me to a musical at a local theater. We'd had a blast. Some days we spent hours simply talking. Catching up on work. On life. Everything.

And the sex. Oh god, the sex. It was better than it had ever been.

But despite how much fun we were having together, a current of uncertainty ran beneath everything. Where was this going? Technically, Roland still lived in San Francisco. He seemed to

be managing to do his job from here, although I knew it was a strain. But that couldn't last forever. He'd been here for two months. His boss had to insist he come back eventually. And there was no way I was moving to San Francisco to be with him. I liked the city fine, but there was a reason I'd left. I wasn't interested in a repeat of four years ago. Fuck that.

Why was now any different?

I was struggling to answer that question with something more concrete than *he seems different now*. But he did. He was. The Roland I'd left wouldn't have stayed in Echo Creek this long, no matter what had been happening. He wouldn't have discovered his dad's affair. He wouldn't have been here long enough to notice something was wrong. The Roland of four years ago would have shown up, thrown some money around, and left.

But he hadn't. He'd stayed.

He'd been coming out of his office earlier and having dinners with his mom. Hanging out with his brothers in the evenings or on weekends. Last week he'd gone to Tilikum to help Brynn pick up a bed for her new apartment.

All this from the guy who, four years ago, couldn't have been in the same room as his brothers for more than five minutes without fighting. Who'd barely remembered his little sister existed.

I was seeing the Roland I remembered from before San Francisco. From before he'd gotten so wrapped up in his work—in career advancement, promotions, moving up, making money, impressing the bosses. He'd measured his happiness and worth based on his job title and salary. Nothing had mattered more. Not even me.

The Roland I saw now cared about more than money. He was concerned for his family, and their business. Spending time with the people he loved instead of working fourteen-hour days. I'd seen him smile, and even laugh. His father had dropped one of the biggest bombshells of his life, and even that hadn't driven him to bury himself in his work.

But would it last? Was this the real Roland, and the workaholic I'd been married to had been a phase? A product of poor judgment and misplaced priorities? Or was he simply reverting to remembered behaviors since he was here, and the moment he set foot in San Francisco, he'd go right back to being the guy who'd do anything to further his career, even at the expense of his marriage?

I didn't know.

We'd reconnected in a way I couldn't deny. On a level that went so much deeper than physical. He'd told me more than once now that he wanted me. At first that had been easy to brush aside—assume he meant he wanted to sleep with me. But that wasn't what he'd been saying.

He wanted to give us another chance. And despite how great the last few weeks had been, I was pretty fucking scared.

I was risking a lot by letting him in again. I'd given my heart to him once, and he'd tossed it aside. Was I crazy? Could a relationship like ours really have a second chance? We hadn't just dated and broken up. We'd gotten *married*, and then *divorced*. That was serious shit.

Times like this, I wished I had a better relationship with my mom. It would have been nice to be able to call her and tell her what was going on. Ask for her advice. I loved my mom, but we weren't close. We never had been. She'd always looked at me like she wasn't quite sure where I'd come from. And her advice about Roland would probably consist of *You have a good head on your shoulders, you'll figure it out*. She meant well, but I think she was perpetually confused when it came to me.

I stood on a ladder, propped up against a plum tree, and finished hanging a third strand of twinkle lights. I figured one more on this tree would do the trick.

“Hey, up there.”

I looked down to find Ben standing near the base of the ladder. He was dressed in his usual Salishan Cellars t-shirt, worn

jeans, and work boots. He was a good-looking guy, especially for his age, with a warm smile I'd always appreciated.

"Hey, Ben." I climbed down the ladder and brushed my hands together. "What's up?"

"Can I talk to you a minute?" he asked.

"Yeah, of course."

"What do you know about... the things that have been going on?" he asked, his voice halting, like he wasn't quite sure if we should talk about it.

The winery employees knew that Lawrence was gone, but the details had been kept vague. I think most people suspected the truth, but respected Shannon's privacy. They knew Lawrence had moved out and was no longer in charge.

If anyone else had asked, I would have hedged the question. But Ben wasn't just an employee. He'd been around since Roland and his siblings were kids.

"Roland found out his dad was having an affair," I said.

Ben's face went very still, but I could see the flash of anger in his eyes. "I see."

"Yeah, I know, it's awful," I said. "Shannon kicked him out."

"So Lawrence really is gone?" Ben asked.

I nodded. "He went to his mistress, apparently. If he had any hope of fixing this, I'm pretty sure that killed it. There's no way Shannon will take him back."

"I should beat the shit out of that sniveling little punk," he said under his breath.

I laughed. He'd reminded me of Cooper just then. "That I would love to see."

"Sorry," he said, scowling. "Didn't mean to say that out loud."

"It's fine. I don't blame you."

He blinked a few times, his eyes focusing on something in the distance.

“I wouldn’t worry about Salishan, though,” I said. “I’m not sure how things will shake out legally, but Roland isn’t worried. They’ve already talked to a lawyer.”

“Right.” Ben’s phone rang, and he jerked, like it had startled him. He brought it to his ear. “Yeah? Uh-oh. Do you need me to call Chase? Okay, good. Yeah, I’ll be right there.” He ended the call and slipped his phone in his back pocket.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“Bottling machine is down,” he said. “Chase is over there, but we were already a week behind on the bottling schedule. This isn’t good.”

Bottling had to be done on a precise schedule, based largely on the age of the wine. If they were already behind, this delay could be costly—something Salishan did not need right now.

Ben started for the work houses, and I followed. There probably wasn’t much I could do, but I figured I should see if I could help.

The work houses were a short walk from the Big House. While the Big House was Salishan’s public face, the work houses were where the real work of winemaking was done. This was where the grapes came in at harvest to be destemmed and crushed. The cellars housed enormous fermentation tanks, as well as the barrel cellars where wine was stored for aging. Another building was the bottling facility, with a complex series of machines that bottled, corked, labeled, and boxed the wines.

Inside the bottling room, Shannon was busy giving orders, directing people where to go and what to do. It looked like half the winery employees were here. I saw Chase on a ladder, hard at work on the machinery. Everyone else was busy diverting the flow of work to hand-bottle the wine.

It was good to see Shannon in her element. She looked good. Tough. I wasn’t sure how she was doing underneath it all, but I was proud of her for being here and taking charge.

Ben paused next to me. He seemed to be watching Shannon. She looked over at us and her mouth turned up in a smile. Ben

gave her a brief nod, then went over to help Chase.

I saw Roland talking to one of the employees.

“This doesn’t look good,” I said.

“It’s a nightmare,” he said. “This could not have come at a worse time.”

“Ben said we’re already behind schedule,” I said.

Roland nodded. “Apparently my dad was too busy with his mistress to make sure things were on time. This bottling should have happened last week.”

“Chase will get things up and running,” I said.

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “In the meantime, we’re going to hand-bottle as much as we can. There’s a shipment that needs to go out today, so we can’t wait.”

“Do you need me to help?” I asked.

“I definitely need you,” he said, then cleared his throat. “Need the help.”

“Get a room,” Cooper said, appearing out of nowhere. He draped an arm around my shoulders. “We have a shit-ton of work to do, so if you two could stop making goo-goo eyes at each other, that would be awesome.”

Roland scowled at him.

“Nice face,” Cooper said. “That’s a good look on you. But enough about me. This wine is not going to bottle itself. At least, not until Chase gets his ass in gear and fixes this mess. What do you think he’s doing up there?” He turned and cupped his hand over his mouth, pitching his voice to be heard across the building. “Chase! Dude, don’t fuck this up. The entire winery is counting on you, bro. But no pressure or anything.”

Chase flipped him off without looking over.

“Cooper, watch your mouth,” Shannon said.

He winced. “Oops, forgot Mom was in here.” He pointed at Chase. “Hey, he flipped me off. Aren’t you going to scold him,

too?”

Shannon shook her head, rolling her eyes.

“So unfair,” Cooper said. He squeezed my shoulders, then pointed at Roland. “Remember what I said. Dick punch.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be bottling?” Roland asked.

“Probably.” Cooper started toward the still conveyor belt where a group of people were busy siphoning wine into bottles. “Hey, you guys be careful with that. That’s the blood of my children. You better not spill a drop.”

I laughed, and Roland shook his head.

“He is so creepy when he talks like that,” he said.

“That’s Cooper for you,” I said. “So, how can I help?”

“I think everything is covered except labeling and boxing.”

Roland and I went to the end of the line where the full, corked bottles were being collected. Normally the bottling machine affixed the labels before placing the wine bottles in boxes. Hand-labeling was going to be tedious as hell, especially getting them on straight. But it needed to be done.

At first the task seemed impossible. I ripped four labels trying to peel them off their backing, and Roland couldn’t get his on the bottles straight. Once we got smart and got a system going, things moved faster. He peeled the labels and I stuck them on. Brynn came over and started boxing the finished bottles.

We worked for hours. After we finished the backlog, we washed up, donned gloves, and helped fill and cork more bottles. Then more labeling and boxing. Despite the challenging situation, the mood in the bottling room was upbeat. The entire Miles family was here—even Leo came out of hiding to help. The rest of the winery staff pitched in, too. There was a sense of camaraderie in coming together to face a crisis.

“Stand clear,” Chase called from somewhere deep in the machinery.

We all stood back. I held my breath. Suddenly, the conveyor belts started moving, the bottling machine roaring to life. A cheer rose up as we all clapped and celebrated.

Roland's eyes met mine, and he smiled. It was a smile I remembered so well. One I'd seen a thousand times. And it had never looked as beautiful as it did today.

Zoe

My feet ached after the long hours spent in the bottling room. Most of the staff had filtered out after Chase and Ben got the bottling machine operating again. Shannon was still here with Cooper and Leo, making sure things were working as they should, and finishing up the bottling run.

Shannon walked over and pulled me in for a hug. “Thanks for your help today.”

“Of course,” I said, hugging her back.

Roland walked over with Leo and Brynn. It was good to see Leo out here. He still tilted his face slightly—always trying to hide his scars—but I hadn’t seen him out and about this long in months.

Brynn pulled her hair down and started re-doing her ponytail. “I don’t know about you guys, but I want to go eat my weight in fried food and collapse into a coma.”

“I can help with the first part,” Shannon said. “How about The Lodge? I’m buying.”

“Yes,” Brynn said. “That sounds so good.”

Leo shook his head and mumbled something.

Shannon gave him a sympathetic smile. “I can send something over.”

“That’s okay,” Leo said. He stepped in and hugged his mom. “I’m fine. I’ll talk to you later.”

Shannon watched him go with concern in her eyes until Cooper tackle-hugged her from behind.

“Mother! Goddess of Salishan and giver of life. We have emerged victorious. I suggest we celebrate and indulge in the fruits of our labors.”

“Mom already said she’d buy dinner at the Lodge,” Brynn said.

Cooper stood behind Shannon, his arms still wrapped around her shoulders, and kissed her cheek. “That’s what I like to hear. I’m starving. Like I’m pretty sure if I don’t eat soon, I’m going to either fall over, or go into a hunger-induced rage and start tearing through the kitchen over in the Big House. If you want any cheese left for tastings tomorrow, you better feed me.”

Shannon patted his arm. “Okay, Cooper. Why don’t you go see if Chase wants to come.”

“Good plan.” He let go of her and whirled around. “Chase! Grub, man, let’s go!”

Ben came over, wiping his hands on a rag. “I think we’re all set for today. Need anything else?”

“I don’t think so,” Shannon said. “But why don’t you come to dinner with us?”

“I don’t want to intrude,” Ben said, looking down at the rag in his hands.

“You wouldn’t be intruding,” Shannon said. “Come on, Benjamin, I insist.”

Ben smiled, and I noticed a slight flush to his cheeks. It was warm in here, but I had a feeling that wasn’t why Ben looked a little red. “All right, when you say it like that.”

“Good,” Shannon said with a smile. She looked at Roland. “You coming?”

Roland hesitated, his eyes flicking to me. “You know, I’ll take a rain check.”

“You sure?” Shannon asked.

“Yeah,” he said, his eyes darting to me again. “I’m ready to call it a day.”

“Zoe?” Shannon asked, turning to me.

“Oh, um...” I blinked, trying not to look at Roland. I knew what he wanted, but we hadn’t exactly made our new

relationship public, even to his family. “Thank you, but not tonight.”

Shannon’s mouth twitched, like she was hiding a smile. Her eyes moved to Roland, then back to me—so quick, I almost didn’t catch her doing it. “Okay. Well, come on, kids, let’s go before Cooper turns into a hunger tornado.”

I hung back with Roland and watched them go.

“Is that Greek restaurant still around?” Roland asked.

“Sure is,” I said. “Same owners and everything.”

“Gyros?” he asked.

“Are you asking me to dinner?”

He turned toward me and laid his hand against my cheek. “Yes. I want to get dinner to go and bring it back to my place. Share a bottle of wine. Then I want to spend the rest of the night fucking you until we both collapse.”

A rush of heat hit me between the legs and my spine tingled. “That’s very straightforward.”

“I’m just being honest,” he said. “And I want you to stay. Spend the night with me.”

I took a deep breath, like I was about to jump into water and I wasn’t sure how deep it went. Staying the night with him was a boundary I’d kept in place until now. But I was ready to take the plunge. “Okay.”

We picked up dinner and brought it back to the guest cottage. Roland opened a bottle of cabernet—Salishan Cellars, of course. We stretched out on the couch, resting our tired feet while we ate. The food was good, and the wine was better. We talked and laughed, and before I knew it, the food was gone and the bottle almost empty.

“My feet are still killing me,” I said. “I think this is a sign that I’m too sedentary. If there was a zombie apocalypse, I’d die on the first day.”

“If the world goes to shit like that, head for Leo,” Roland said. “Every time I go over there, I half expect to find him coming

out of a secret underground lair.”

I laughed. “That wouldn’t surprise me. Do you think Leo is okay?”

“Not really,” he said. “But I think he could be worse.”

“Yeah, that’s probably true,” I said. “I’m glad he had his family to come home to.”

“So am I.” He rubbed his toes along the side of my foot. “You know what might feel good on those poor feet of yours?”

“What?”

“A bath,” he said. “This cottage has a two-person jetted tub.”

I set my wineglass down. “A hot bath? Yes, please.”

“I thought you might like that.”

Roland got up and went into the bathroom. The sound of water filling the tub drifted in. I was tired, but in a good way. Happy and satisfied. Relaxed from the meal, and the wine. Roland appeared again in the doorway and pulled his shirt over his head.

“Coming?”

I finished the last of my wine, then joined him in the bathroom. He was leaning over the tub, feeling the temperature of the water. Steam rose from the bath, already clouding the mirror.

He glanced back at me and grinned. “Better take those clothes off, Zo.”

I smiled and proceeded to undress. Took my time while Roland watched. My clothes dropped to the floor and I nibbled on my bottom lip as Roland’s eyes swept over me.

He took off the rest of his clothes and we climbed in the bath. The tub was large, giving us both plenty of space. I settled down in the hot water, facing him, and closed my eyes.

“Why have I never used this bathtub before?” I asked. “It’s been here this whole time, and I’ve never taken advantage.”

He picked up my foot and rubbed his thumbs across the bottom of my heel and across the arch. "I'm surprised. You love baths."

"I do."

Roland rubbed my foot for a while, then switched to the other one. Between the foot massage and the hot water, I was in danger of falling asleep.

"That feels amazing," I said.

"I love making you feel good."

My eyes were still closed, my head resting against the edge of the tub, but I heard Roland shift. The water lapped up my chest as he moved closer and pushed my legs apart so he could sit between them.

His fingers reached my center and I let my eyes flutter open. I watched as he touched me under the water, sliding his fingers along my soft skin. Brushing my clit with light strokes. My breath quickened at his touch, sparks of pleasure racing through me.

He slid two fingers inside me, and I moaned at the added pressure. I rocked my hips as he moved in and out, his fingers curling against my g-spot. He had me racing toward climax already, and we'd barely started.

Shifting again, he kept working my pussy hard and leaned in to clamp his mouth around my nipple. His teeth pinched my hard peak, and I cried out. Fuck, that felt good.

"Other side," I breathed, barely able to get the words out.

He took my other breast in his mouth and sucked. I pinched my nipple between my thumb and forefinger and rocked my hips against his hand. He bit me gently, the twinge of pain shooting straight to my core. My pussy clenched around his fingers and I came hard, leaning my head back and gasping.

Leaning over me, he brought his mouth to mine, his kiss hungry. I grabbed his cock and tugged, earning a deep grunt.

"Hand or mouth?" I asked, stroking his hard length.

“Fuck, Zoe,” he said. “Mouth.”

We switched places, ignoring the water that sloshed everywhere. He sat on the edge of the tub and I knelt between his legs, licking my lips at the sight of his wet dick.

I took the base in my hand and held him with a firm grip. Lavished the tip with wet kisses and laps of my tongue. He was hard as steel as I plunged down on him. His strong thighs contracted, and his abs flexed. I worked his cock in and out of my mouth, stroking the base as I went. He grabbed my hair, guiding me, and I picked up the pace. His hips thrust, and the intensity built. I nudged his legs farther apart so I could cup his balls with my free hand, and he leaned his head back, groaning loudly.

With his hand fisted tight in my hair, he moved me up and down his cock. I stroked his shaft and tugged his balls. The sound of his growls and moans was making my pussy wet all over again. I fucking loved doing this to him. There was nothing like the sound of a man losing his mind with his dick in your mouth. Especially when it was Roland.

He'd said he loved making me feel good. It was intoxicating to do it to him.

“You good if I come?” he asked. His grip on my hair relaxed, giving me a chance to stop.

I didn't. I moaned around his cock, tugged his balls harder, and let his tip slide as far toward my throat as I could manage.

“Fuck,” he said, his voice rough, almost strangled. He grabbed my hair again and thrust into my mouth, his cock pulsing. I took his come as it hit the back of my throat, feeling triumphant. He finished, and I quickly swallowed while he caught his breath.

“God, Zo,” he said between breaths. “I'm fucking undone.”

He slid back down into the water and pulled me on top of him. I straddled his lap and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. His arms settled around me, holding me close, and he kissed my neck. Nuzzled the hollow below my ear.

“You know I still need to fuck you,” he said.

“Can you still do that?” I shifted my hips, rubbing my pussy against his cock.

“Give me a minute.”

It didn't take long for his cock to stiffen again. He reached between us and held the base, lifting it so I could slide down onto him.

I closed my eyes, reveling in the exquisite pleasure of his erection filling me. “You feel so good.”

He held my ass, his fingers kneading. “Baby, nothing feels as good as you.”

More water splashed out onto the floor as I slid up and down his thick cock. This angle was perfection, the ridge around his tip dragging through me, stimulating me in all the right places. I rubbed my clit against him every time I lowered down, and he thrust his hips, driving himself deeper.

We lost ourselves in the rhythm, our bodies in sync. Moaning, thrusting, grinding. He licked my nipples as they moved past his mouth. Gripped my ass with rough hands. Heat and tension built in my core, the pressure almost painful.

“Oh my god, Roland, I need to come again,” I said. “Please baby, make me come.”

He held me tighter and thrust hard. His cock throbbed inside me, the way it always did right before he came.

“Yes,” I breathed. “Just like that. Yes.”

Roland's brow furrowed, and he whimpered—a strangled sound in his throat, like if he didn't unleash on me now, he might not survive.

My pussy contracted, all my core muscles releasing at once. I threw my head back and moaned, letting the orgasm sweep me away. I rode him hard, feeling him burst inside me. We came apart at the seams, exploding into a thousand points of light.

Slowly, I came back to myself. I was draped over him, my head on his shoulder. He rubbed my back with soft strokes, his strong hands caressing my wet skin. The water level was

significantly lower than it had been, but we'd worry about that later.

I moved so I could look at him. He cupped my cheek and drew me in for a kiss, his mouth soft and warm. I climbed off him and he turned the water on, refilling the tub. When the water was high enough, he shut it off and slipped back into place.

I sat between his legs and leaned back, settling against his chest. He wrapped his arms around me and leaned his cheek against my head.

"Are we crazy?" I asked, my voice quiet.

Roland took a deep breath, his chest expanding against me. "Probably. But crazy was kind of always our thing."

"That's true."

We sat in silence for a few minutes, just breathing. Holding each other.

"Actually, I don't think we are," he said. "I think we were crazy before. And we'd be crazy to let this go now."

My throat felt thick and my eyes stung with tears—and I was *not* a crier. I took a trembling breath. "Maybe you're right."

"I know I'm right," he said. "I love you, Zoe."

I gripped his arms and squeezed, closing my eyes for a moment so the tears wouldn't fall. "I love you, too."

He held me tight, cradled in the warm water. We didn't say anything else. Tonight, we didn't need to.

Roland

I threw away the fucking sheets because no matter how many times I wash them, they still smell like you. And I just fucking can't.

~Text from Roland, unsent

Cooper, Leo, and Brynn were already at the house when I arrived. My great-grandparents had built the original farmhouse on this land. It was no longer standing, long ago replaced by a newer one. But the echoes of them were everywhere. In faded photographs on the wall. Great-grandma's teacups in the cupboard. An old quilt that hung on the wall.

My mom had been born in this house. My grandparents had raised her here, their only child. They'd built it to be a guest house, intending to expand the winery's hospitality side. As a result, it was huge. It had seven bedrooms, all with their own bathrooms, an enormous commercial-grade kitchen, and a dining room that could seat an army.

By the time my mom and dad were married, my grandparents had already abandoned their plans to expand the overnight accommodations at Salishan, and were living here. Although they didn't take paying customers, the numerous bedrooms were often filled with guests. And when my parents had gotten married, they'd moved in, taking over one side of the house for their own.

They'd raised the four of us here. We'd grown up among the grapevines, our lives revolving around planting and harvests, the way most kids' lives revolved around Christmas and the first day of summer break.

Our grandparents had died when we were all still kids, leaving the winery and all the land to my mom. By that time, my dad had been handling the business side for years, while my

grandparents took care of the vineyards and mentored my mom in the art of winemaking.

The winery had been a lot smaller back then. Ben had been around, but he had been one of only a handful of employees. My dad hadn't started all the expansions until about ten years ago, around the time Zoe and I got married. He'd built new cellars for increased production, started sourcing grapes from other wineries, and built the Big House to expand our guest offerings.

And of course, he'd expected me to work for him and eventually take over.

For a long time, I'd convinced myself I hated this place. This house where I'd grown up. Where my mom had spent her childhood before us. The land, the vineyards. All of it. I'd resented the pressure to conform. The expectations that had been foisted on me for my entire life.

That resentment was at the heart of every decision I'd made in the last ten years. The degree I chose. The jobs I took. Going to grad school to get my MBA. Moving to San Francisco. All of it had been designed to take me as far from Salishan as I could possibly get. I'd felt, with utter certainty and conviction, that I needed to make my own way. Carve my own path. That I'd been made for something greater.

As I stood looking up at the house my grandparents had built, with its thick wooden beams and smooth river rock, I realized how much I'd let that resentment poison me.

Which was exactly what my father had done.

He hadn't asked to become the head of a winery. He'd married my mom and fell into the role by default. As my grandparents had aged and needed more help, he'd taken on the additional responsibility.

I didn't know what my dad had wanted to do before he'd started working for the winery. What his hopes and dreams had been when he was a young man. But I could see, so clearly now, how much he'd let resentment rule his life. It had tainted everything he'd ever done. It had destroyed his

marriage. It could have ripped his entire family apart. The only thing saving us now was Mom. She'd always been our rock. Our stability. While Dad had come and gone, his temper leading the way, Mom had always been here. Safe, comforting.

We'd decided to do something for her. We couldn't erase our father from this house, but we could give her a fresh start.

I found my siblings inside, covering furniture with drop-cloths and taking pictures off the walls. The downstairs was getting fresh paint—colors Brynn had chosen. And we were moving my mom from the room she'd shared with my dad to a bedroom on the other side of the house. We'd paint that room as well, and I'd bought all new bedroom furniture. Mom didn't know yet, and I hoped she'd be happy with the surprise.

"Hey, sorry I'm late," I said. "I had to take a call."

"That's okay, we just got started," Brynn said. She was dressed in a pair of paint splattered overalls and a t-shirt, her hair up in a ponytail. "Can you help Cooper move bookshelves?"

"On it." I yanked Brynn's ponytail as I walked past, and she punched me in the arm.

"Hey, Brynncess," Cooper called from the other room. "Where am I supposed to put this stuff? If you're going to be in charge, you need to work on your leadership skills."

Brynn rolled her eyes. "Just move everything away from the wall so we can paint behind it. And don't forget later that you admitted I'm in charge."

"Whatever you say, baby sister," he said.

Cooper and I moved furniture while Leo and Brynn got started painting. Ben showed up to lend a hand, and Chase came over not long after. The new bedroom set arrived, and we hauled the old stuff out. Cooper convinced us to drag Mom's old bed frame and mattress out to the east field so we could make a bonfire out of it later. I tried to protest, but apparently I remained the only adult among my siblings. Even Leo voted bonfire. Zoe showed up after work, and she wasn't on my side either. But I should have guessed Zoe would be on Team Cooper, especially if a bonfire was involved.

The walls were too wet to move everything back in place before Mom got home, so it wasn't going to be a home-improvement-show-style reveal. We heard her car outside just as we got the last of the paint cans put away and the drop cloths moved.

"Come on, everyone line up," Brynn said, ushering us into the living room so we could greet Mom when she came in.

"We should hide behind the furniture and jump out at her," Cooper said.

"No, Cooper, quit it," Brynn said. "Just stand over here."

"You're no fun," Cooper said.

"Quit pouting," Brynn said. "You said I was in charge, remember?"

Cooper groaned and joined us. I stood in between Zoe and Ben, with Cooper and Chase on the other side of Zoe, and Brynn next to Ben.

Mom opened the door and paused, her mouth open in surprise. "Hey, kids. What's going on in here?"

"We have a surprise for you," Brynn said. "Look around. At the walls, I mean. Sorry about the furniture and stuff. We'll put it back when the walls dry."

Mom came in, shutting the door behind her, and looked around. "You painted?"

"Yeah," Brynn said. "It was Roland's idea."

"Really?" she asked, looking at me.

"Kind of," I said. "I just figured we could make this easier for you."

"This is amazing," she said, still taking slow steps through the room.

"Mom, you're killing my soul," Cooper said. "There's more to see, let's pick up the pace."

Cooper took her hand and dragged her through the house, pointing out the different colors in each room. Then he hauled

her upstairs to show her the redesigned bedroom, and we all followed. She stood in the doorway, her hand covering her mouth, and tears glistened in her eyes.

“I can’t believe you all did this.” She took a deep breath and swiped beneath her eyes. “It’s beautiful.”

“This was fun,” Cooper said. He clapped his hands once. “I’m going to go get that fire going.”

“I’ll get the gasoline,” Chase said.

Mom opened her mouth and lifted a hand, but they were down the stairs and out the door so fast, she didn’t get a chance to say anything.

“Did they say fire and gasoline?” Mom asked.

“Just pretend you didn’t hear,” Brynn said. “It’s easier that way.”

“I’ll go make sure they don’t light themselves on fire,” Ben said, and followed Cooper and Chase outside.

* * *

Half an hour later, they had indeed lit Mom’s old bed on fire—and a badass bonfire it turned out to be. Ben had helped them haul more old debris to build it up, and we’d dragged camping chairs out so we had places to sit. Zoe had a wedding at the winery tomorrow with a difficult client, so she’d gone home to get some sleep. The rest of us had wine in plastic wine cups while we sat in a circle around the tall blaze.

Mom sat next to me, sipping her chardonnay. “Thank you for all this.”

“It wasn’t just me,” I said.

“Yeah, but it wouldn’t have happened without you,” she said. “Well, I’m sure Cooper and Chase could have found a reason

to start a large, dangerous, and probably illegal fire without you. But the rest of it.”

“Sure.”

“Are you ready to talk about it yet?” she asked.

I glanced at her. The firelight glinted off the lines of her face. “Talk about what?”

“Zoe.”

I turned back to the fire. The truth was, I wasn’t ready to talk to her about Zoe. Everything still felt so tenuous and uncertain. I knew I loved her. I knew I wanted her back in my life—for good this time. But I had a lot of logistics to figure out before I’d know how I was going to make that happen.

“For now, can I just tell you that I still love her, and leave it at that?” I asked.

“Wow,” she said, her voice filled with surprise. “Yes, you can. I didn’t expect you to admit to that.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “Denial is a pretty powerful thing.”

“I understand if you don’t want to talk about everything,” she said. “But are you still going back to San Francisco?”

“Just for a week,” I said. I had a flight out tomorrow. Again. Maybe I’d actually go this time. “I was supposed to go back before, but... well, you know. Dad. I can’t keep putting it off or I’m going to get fired.”

“And then what?” she asked.

“I’m going to propose to my boss that I split my time between here and San Francisco,” I said. “I’ve been working remotely this long, obviously I can make it work. I can’t take on everything Dad was doing. I won’t have time. But I was thinking, if we hired someone to do some of it, I could steer the ship. Make sure the big picture stuff is on track. That way you can keep doing what you love, but someone you trust is taking care of the business side of things.”

“It sounds like you’ve really thought this through,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s not perfect, but I think we can make it work.”

“I’m sure we can,” she said. “The question is, do you want to make it work?”

I watched the flames licking up the sides of the mattress. “I want to make it work with Zoe. And I know going back to San Francisco full-time isn’t an option. This is the best of both worlds. I’ll be gone sometimes, but it shouldn’t be too bad.”

“Does this mean you’re asking me for a permanent job?”

“Yes, I guess that’s what I’m doing,” I said with a smile. “Mom, will you hire me?”

She reached over and squeezed my arm. “It’s about time.”

I laughed and took a sip of wine. Because what could I say? She was right.

Roland

It felt weird to pack my stuff, knowing tonight I'd be home in San Francisco. I wasn't in a great mood about it. I couldn't shake the feeling that it was too soon for me to be gone. I'd thought about asking Zoe to come with me, just for the week. But I knew she couldn't up and leave work with no notice. And bringing her to San Francisco might not be a good idea, anyway. Too many bad memories.

Even aside from Zoe, I had a lot on my mind. How to convince my boss to let me split my time. The logistics of living in two cities. Whether to pull the trigger on bringing in an investor for Salishan.

There was a knock at the door, so I dropped the shirt I'd been folding to go answer it.

"Hey, you," Zoe said when I opened the door. "I'm glad I caught you."

"You're up early." I held the door open so she could come in, then shut it behind her.

"Yeah, I figured I'd swing by before you left," she said. "Is that okay?"

"Of course." I drew her close and kissed her. "I'm glad I get to see you."

"Are you all packed?"

"Not really," I said, nodding toward the pile of clothes on the bed.

She laughed. "You're such a guy. I'll help."

We went into the bedroom and stood on opposite sides of the bed to fold clothes. She picked up a pair of slacks and smoothed them out while I went back to the shirt I'd dropped.

"So, you'll be gone a week?" she asked.

“I might have to stay a little longer,” I said. “I’m going to try to be back in a week, though.”

“Okay.” She set the pants down and sat on the edge of the bed. “You know, we haven’t really talked about what’s going on with us. Not much, at least. Or how it’s going to work. Are we going to do that?”

“Of course we are,” I said. “I’m sorry, Zoe, I’m just trying to figure everything out.”

“Sure, I get that,” she said. “But there’s a lot we still haven’t said. And now here you are, packing for San Francisco. You think you’ll be gone a week. But what if that turns into two? And then a month from now, you’re still saying you’ll be back, but you can’t yet.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I said. “A week. Ten days, tops.”

“And then what?”

“That’s part of what I have to deal with when I’m there,” I said. “But my plan is to split my time between here and San Francisco. I’m pretty sure my CEO will go for it. He works remotely about half the time, so there’s precedent for it.”

“What would that look like?” she asked. “You’re here for a week, and there for a week?”

“Something like that,” I said. “It might not be quite that regular. Maybe a week there. Two weeks here. A longer trip down there. Then a month here. That kind of thing.”

“And you’ll do both jobs?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

She took a shirt off the pile. “That seems like a lot.”

“I’ve been doing it since I got here,” I said.

“Sure, but it was never meant to be permanent,” she said. “You didn’t come here planning to stay.”

“I think I have a handle on what’s involved with both jobs. And I’m talking to my mom about hiring someone here to take on some of the things my dad was handling. It’ll be fine.”

“But what if it’s not?”

“What are you worried about?” I asked.

“I’m worried that you’re going to trade one life that’s too busy for me for another life that’s just as bad.”

“I wasn’t too busy for you,” I said.

Her lips parted, and she stared at me for a few seconds. “Yes, you were. You were always too busy for me.”

A flare of anger scorched through me. This was an argument we’d had more times than I could count. I took a deep breath before answering. “I wasn’t too busy for you. Yes, I was busy. I worked long hours. I’ve always worked a lot. I did even when we were first married. It wasn’t until we moved to San Francisco that it started bothering you.”

“I’m sorry, are you talking about me, or the other Zoe you were married to?” she asked. “It bothered me way before we moved.”

“Sure, you complained about it when I was in grad school, too,” I said. “But I was working full time and getting my MBA. Of course I was fucking busy.”

“I didn’t *complain*,” she said. “God, you make it sound like I was a nagging shrew. It was hard, but when you were in grad school it wasn’t a big deal. I figured it was temporary. Once you finished your degree, things would settle down. But that’s the problem. They didn’t. You went from spending all your time and energy on work and school, to spending all your time and energy on just work. You never had anything left for me.”

“Who do you think I was doing it for?” I asked.

“Um, yourself,” she said. “It certainly wasn’t for me.”

“I was doing it for us,” I said. Holy shit, what the fuck was she talking about? “I was building a life for us.”

“You were building a bank account,” she said. “That’s not the same thing.”

I dropped the shirt that I still hadn’t managed to fold. “What the fuck are we doing? Why are we fighting about this?”

“We have to do it some time,” she said. “We can’t keep pretending the past didn’t happen. We’ve been avoiding it since the first time you fucked me in the tasting room. We need to do this at some point.”

“I’m not avoiding anything,” I said. “I told you, I’m just trying to figure out how to make it all work.”

“So am I,” she said. “Look, it’s all well and good for us to get naked and go at each other like crazed rabbits, and then start spouting *I love yous*. Pretty easy to say in the aftermath of multiple orgasms. But we both know great sex isn’t enough. We were always good at that part. It was the rest of the whole marriage thing that got all fucked.”

“I’m well aware of our history,” I said. “But I don’t see how rehashing all that bullshit right before I have to leave to catch a flight is going to help.”

“I didn’t come over here to fight with you,” she said. “But it’s like there’s this huge *thing* we’re not acknowledging. That thing being the fact that we did this once, and it ended in a fucking divorce.”

“Who’s not acknowledging our divorce?” I asked. “Believe me, it’s not something I can forget.”

She stood, her face clouded with anger. “Really? Because if that’s true, you’ve had me fooled for the last four years.”

“Fooled about what?” I asked.

“That you gave a shit.”

I stared at her, my brow furrowed, the muscles in my back tightening with strain. “What?”

“You didn’t care,” she said. “Everything fell apart, and you just went to work.”

“What the fuck was I supposed to do?” I asked. “Quit my job? Chase you back here? You know what, I wish I would have come after you. But I didn’t. There’s nothing I can do about that now.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because you fucking gutted me,” I said. “My world collapsed, and I didn’t know how to handle it.”

“Your world didn’t change,” she said. “You just kept doing what you’d been doing. The only difference was you had to sleep alone. It’s not like you noticed me otherwise.”

“Do you really think all the shit between us is my fault?” I asked. “Because last time I checked, I didn’t do the leaving, sweetheart. You left me. I came home from work and all your shit was gone. That was it. No discussion. Just an empty fucking apartment and your goddamn wedding ring sitting on the counter.”

“I didn’t leave you, Roland,” she said. “You left me well before that happened. I was just the one who moved out.”

She walked out, slamming the front door behind her.

“Fuck.” I grabbed a pair of socks and threw them at the wall. They hit with a soft—and enormously unsatisfying—thud. But I stopped myself before I threw something harder—and breakable.

Couldn’t she see how hard I was trying? I was upending my life for her. I hadn’t even suggested we try living in San Francisco together. I didn’t want to go back to a relationship that had been broken any more than she did. I wanted her, and I wanted us to be whole.

I didn’t know what else she wanted from me.

My phone vibrated in my pocket and I pulled it out, hoping it was her. But it was Leo.

Leo: *Hey man. Have a second before you fly out?*

Me: *Gotta go in 10.*

Leo: *Swing by. Just need 2.*

Me: *Sure.*

I tossed the rest of my shit into my bag, not bothering to fold it, and brought it outside to my car. My *rental* car, to be precise. That reminded me—a car. I’d need to buy a second one to keep here. I mentally added it to my list, wondering if it

was even going to be necessary. Or if Zoe had just told me this wasn't worth it to her.

I got in the car and sent her a text.

I have to go, but I'll call you when I land.

She still hadn't answered by the time I got over to Leo's place. But I hadn't really expected her to.

Leo answered his door, his hair looking more unkempt than usual.

"You look like you've been up all night," I said.

He scowled and turned away. "I was."

I noticed a collection of soda cans and wrappers strewn around his desk. He usually kept his place meticulously clean. Gigz jumped up on the desk and an empty can clattered to the floor.

"Damn it, Gigz," he said.

"Why were you up all night?" I asked. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, just... a game thing," he said. "Never mind."

"All right, whatever," I said. "Did you need something? I have a flight."

"Yeah." He went over to his desk and picked up a plain white envelope. "Here."

"What's this?" I slipped my finger beneath the flap and ripped open the seal. There was no paper or letter inside. I opened it wider and dumped the contents into my palm.

A gold wedding band.

"I found it a while ago," he said. "It was out on the far side of the work houses."

I stared at the ring. It couldn't be.

"It's yours, isn't it?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said, although I knew full well that it was. "I didn't think I'd lost it out there. I thought it fell off in front of Mom's house."

"I don't think I was here when you lost it," he said.

“No, you weren’t,” I said. “It was Christmas, and it snowed. We threw a few snowballs, but we weren’t dressed for the cold. I didn’t have gloves on. I noticed it was gone after we went inside. But I must have lost it earlier than I’d thought.”

“Like I said, I found it out there,” he said.

I looked over at him. “And you kept it?”

He shrugged. “I thought about giving it back to you before, but I wasn’t sure if you’d want it.”

“But why did you keep it?”

“I just... had a feeling you might need it back someday.”

The ring wasn’t large, or thick. Like Zoe’s, it had simply been what we could afford when we were twenty. It had seemed prophetic when I’d lost it. I’d been in grad school, working crazy hours at my job and going to classes at night for my MBA. It had certainly heralded the downturn in our marriage.

Leo finding it, and giving it back now, left me with that same sense—that it meant something.

“Thanks,” I said, curling my hand around the ring. I slipped it in my pocket.

“Sure,” he said. “Now get out of here or you’ll miss your flight. And I’m going to fucking bed.”

I laughed. “Sounds good, man. Get some rest.”

Back in the car, I pulled the ring out again. It was the craziest thing. I’d never in a million years thought I’d see it again. I put it in my wallet, where it wouldn’t slip out. It wasn’t like I could wear it. Last I checked, I was still very much divorced. And as much as I wanted to repair the damage between me and Zoe, I wasn’t sure if I knew how.

I checked my phone. Still no answer from Zoe. I’d have to call her from San Francisco, and hope she answered. In the meantime, I had a flight to catch.

Zoe

I went on a date tonight. It was fucking weird. I know it's over and I didn't do anything wrong. But it still felt like it should have been you.

~Text from Zoe, unsent

It was not the first time I had a puking groom. But Victor Cockburn was going for a record.

I stood outside the bathroom while his best man slumped in a chair wearing a pair of sunglasses and rubbing his temples. At least I knew the reason for the groom's tender stomach wasn't viral. If I had to guess, I'd have said tequila. A good tequila was a beautiful thing, but I was pretty sure these guys had not been drinking *good* tequila last night. Probably cheap tequila, and a lot of it.

Kind of made me wonder if Cooper had been involved.

"You should have a cup of coffee," I said to the best man, Dirk. Victor Cockburn's best man was named *Dirk*. Despite the raging bridezilla that was Victoria, this wedding was turning out to be rather entertaining.

"I don't drink coffee," he said.

"You do now." I poured him a cup and added two packets of sugar and extra cream. "Here."

He took the cup and sipped.

I'd already given both Victor and Dirk a tall glass of water and a dose of ibuprofen. I pitied the tongue-lashing these guys were going to get when Victoria found out how hungover they were. Why guys didn't do the partying a few nights before the wedding, I had no idea. But it was amazing how often I had sick bridal parties after a night of heavy drinking.

"How are you doing in there, big guy?" I asked through the bathroom door.

Victor answered with a groan.

I glanced at the time. We had just under an hour. It would be tight, but as long as Victor's stomach decided to stop emptying for long enough to hold down some water, I'd be able to get him presentable by the time he had to stand up in front of his family and friends to get married.

Poor bastard.

My phone buzzed with a message from Jamie. She was working this wedding with me.

Jamie: *Bride wants an update on the groom's readiness*

Me: *Tell bride his tux looks great*

Jamie: *Puking?*

Me: *Yep. Bride status?*

Jamie: *Destroying Tokyo*

I sighed. I wasn't sure which of us had the harder job. Me, trying to get two overgrown frat boys ready in time for a very expensive wedding. Or Jamie, who had to field Cockring's last-second demands.

Heh. Cockring.

But at least I was busy. After fighting with Roland before he'd left, I wanted to be busy.

I felt bad for walking away like I had, especially since he had to leave. Now he'd be gone for a week—or two, or three, or who knew how long—and the last thing we'd done is fight. That was not how I'd wanted to leave things. I'd just been so frustrated, and I'd let that get the better of me.

I'd replied to his text that he'd call—just said *okay*. I didn't want to be an ass about it and not answer. But I didn't want to text or talk to him on the phone. I was hurt, and angry, and I wanted to yell at him. Or maybe have a good angry-fuck and then yell at him.

Things were always easier when Roland and I were naked.

I blew out a breath and tapped on the door again. “Ready to come out yet?”

Victor opened the door and I kept my face still. But the dude looked like shit. I had my work cut out for me.

“Okay, Vic—can I call you Vic?—you did a number on yourself,” I said. “But I’ve had worse. I’m not going to lie, this is probably going to be both the best, and worst, day of your life. I’ll do what I can, but you’re going to have to pull yourself together.”

He nodded and ran his hands through his hair.

“All right, Dirk over there is sipping coffee, and I think that should perk him up well enough to get through the wedding. But I can see you’re going to make me work for it. Luckily, this isn’t my first rodeo.” I straightened his tie, then handed him a glass of fizzing Alka-Seltzer. “Drink this and let me know when you’re ready for step two.”

We waited a few minutes to make sure he wasn’t going to puke up the Alka-Seltzer. Then I gave both men a glass of my emergency hangover smoothie. They looked at me like I was nuts. I couldn’t blame them, it was bright green.

“Kale, lemon, ginger, cucumber, and pineapple,” I said. “Trust me. This works. Finish this, have some more coffee, and then another glass of water. And I’ll remind you to pee before the ceremony starts, because you’ll definitely need to.”

I left Victor and Dirk to check on a few other details and when I came back, they both looked a little better. They had color in their cheeks, at least.

I took my bag of man supplies out of a cupboard and started pulling things out. Deodorant, shaving cream, razors, clippers for stray neck hairs. I also had bandages, breath mints, a sewing kit, a Tide stick, several extra ties—bow and regular in assorted colors—beef jerky and a few mini bottles of Jack Daniels for my grooms who needed a quick shot of liquid courage to calm their nerves. I found what I was looking for and tossed them each a packet of pretzels. “If you think you can keep them down, eat these too. The salt helps.”

“You keep all this stuff on hand?” Victor asked.

“I like to be prepared,” I said. “Trust me, you’re not the first groom I’ve had to revive from the dead.”

“You’re not going to tell Victoria, are you?” he asked.

I gave him a reassuring smile. “Not a word.”

“Thanks,” he said. “By the way, are you single? Dirk has a huge crush on you.”

“Hey,” Dirk said, shooting a glare at Victor.

I grinned at them. “That’s sweet, but I’m divorced and dating my ex-husband. You don’t want any of this drama.”

Victor laughed—he probably thought I was kidding—and I was relieved to see his smile looked fairly natural. He’d do okay in the wedding photos.

The wedding went off without a hitch. Or at least, without any hitches that I could have prevented. Dirk swayed on his feet during the ceremony, but thankfully he didn’t fall over. Victor held his shit together pretty well, although he did start to look a little green while he said his vows. Tequila or no tequila, I didn’t really blame him.

Victoria cried so much her mascara ran everywhere. Apparently she hadn’t taken my advice to wear waterproof. I passed her maid of honor a small packet of tissues as they walked to the reception area so she could get her cleaned up.

With the reception in full swing, my job was done. Jamie and a few other winery employees, as well as the caterer, would be here for the duration, but thankfully, I was free to go.

Instead of leaving for home, I wandered into the small tasting room and sat down at the bar. It was impossible not to think about the night I’d had a drink—and done other things—with Roland in here. That hadn’t been very long ago, all things considered, but so much had changed.

I thought about returning Roland’s call, but I wasn’t sure what to say. I needed time to let everything settle. Time to figure out what the hell I was doing. Hearing myself say it out loud—*I’m divorced and dating my ex-husband*—had been a little surreal.

It was probably good that he'd gone back to San Francisco for a while. It gave us some space. Things had been happening so fast. Just a month or so ago, I'd been wondering how much longer he'd be around—trying to suppress my physical attraction to him. Now I'd plunged head first into a relationship with a man I thought I'd left behind for good.

His words from earlier echoed in my memory. They'd been running through my head all day. *Because you fucking gutted me. My world collapsed, and I didn't know how to handle it.*

Leo'd told me Roland had been hurt when our marriage ended, but until I'd heard it from Roland, I hadn't really believed it. And now that I knew, I wasn't sure what to think. It called all my assumptions into question. And it made me wonder what role I'd played in the demise of our marriage.

It was easy to lay all the blame at Roland's feet. He'd been the one who'd worked too much. Who'd been so consumed with upping his pay grade that he'd completely lost touch with his wife.

But things like this weren't completely one-sided—not always, at least. Maybe *most* of the fault had been his, but I'd played a part. He'd seemed surprised to hear me say I'd felt like he didn't have time for me. It seemed so obvious, how could he not have known? But had I ever told him? We'd fought about his work schedule, plenty of times. But had I ever told him *why* it bothered me? Why I hadn't liked how much he was working, or how it had made me feel? Or had I assumed he should know better, and kept silent?

It was mostly the latter. Our arguments hadn't been productive discussions where either of us were being heard. More like yelling matches that had never solved anything. We'd fought about *things*, not the real issues behind them. Canceled dinner plans. Late nights at the office. But we'd never dealt with the real problems running beneath the surface.

I'd spent the last four years believing that our divorce hadn't affected Roland. And it had led me to the conclusion that I hadn't mattered to him. He'd chosen his career over his wife,

and from what I'd seen, he'd been perfectly content with his choice.

Now I knew that wasn't the case. He *had* been hurt, and I *had* meant something to him. I still did, and he wanted to give us another shot.

I did too. I really did. I wanted it more than anything. But I was afraid I was setting myself up for heartbreak. Leaving Roland had nearly broken me the first time. I didn't know how I'd survive something like that again.

"Hey, kiddo," Shannon said from the doorway.

"Hi."

She came in and sat next to me. "The wedding seems to be going well."

"I think so," I said. "The bride was difficult, and the groom and best man were so hungover, I wondered if they'd be able to stay upright for the ceremony. But it all seemed to work out."

"I'm sure you had something to do with that," she said.

"Just doing my job."

"And you're very good at it," she said. "We're lucky to have you."

"Thanks," I said. "Honestly, I feel like I'm the lucky one. All things considered."

Shannon smiled and reached out to squeeze my hand. "Zoe, can I be straightforward with you?"

The way she said that made me nervous, but I nodded. "Yeah, of course."

"You're going to wonder why I'm telling you this, but hang in there with me. I have a point." She shifted on her stool. "I stayed with Lawrence for as long as I did because I thought I had to. At first, it was because of the kids. Roland was born less than a year after we were married. Ten years later, I had four. And I wasn't just tied to him by our children. There was Salishan, too. I overlooked things I shouldn't have because I

was afraid of what would happen if I had to make it on my own.”

“That’s understandable,” I said.

“I suppose,” she said. “The problem is, I wasted a lot of time. And I was never really happy.”

“You’re right, I do wonder why you’re telling me this.”

She smiled. “I don’t want you and Roland to make the same mistake.”

Involuntarily, I shrunk back. Was she saying she didn’t want me to be with her son? She’d never seemed to harbor hard feelings against me over the divorce. But maybe she didn’t want Roland and me to reconnect.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You bring out the best in my son,” she said. “I’ve been seeing glimmers of him again—of the man I tried to raise him to be. And I know it’s because of you. I don’t know what’s happening between the two of you, and you don’t have to tell me. But my son loves you. And honey, if you love him back, don’t give up on that. I was unhappy for years. I don’t want any of my children to live the way I did. So, if you love him, find a way. Take the chance, and don’t let go.”

I took a deep breath. “Wow, thank you.”

She slid off her stool and held out her arms for me. I got down and stepped into her hug.

“No matter what happens, you’re still one of mine,” she said quietly. “You always will be.”

Tears stung my eyes, but I bit my lip to hold them back. I hated crying in front of people. “Thanks. But shut up.”

She pulled away and laughed. “I hope you don’t think I’m trying to meddle in your life. But I’ve been realizing lately that not speaking up has a way of becoming a very bad habit. I’m working on breaking it.”

“Good for you.” I took another deep breath and tucked my hair behind my ear. “Since we’re speaking up, thank you for

keeping me around even though I divorced your son.”

She smiled again, tears shining in her eyes. “Of course, honey. Besides, I always knew you’d bring him back to me.”

Roland

It was late by the time I got to my condo in San Francisco. It was a clear night, and the lights of the city shone through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The view really was amazing. The city. The water. It was gorgeous.

My house cleaner had kept her regular schedule, so the place was clean. She'd even emptied out the refrigerator before the food started going bad. Everything was as it should be.

I wandered into the bedroom and put my bag down. Usually coming home after being away felt good. Relaxing. But this didn't feel like home anymore. Nice as it was, there was no familiarity to it. I'd lived here for almost four years, but it was like the place wasn't mine.

Or maybe I was no longer the man who'd lived here.

I'd tried to call Zoe, but it had gone to voicemail. She'd replied with a text, saying she was working. I wished I knew how she was feeling tonight. Mad at me, sure. I could handle her being mad if I knew I'd be going back with a chance to make things right. But I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure about anything, except that I fucking loved her, and I didn't want to let her go.

I was tired, but too keyed up to sleep, so I went into the kitchen and pulled out a bottle of wine. It looked like something I'd probably picked up for a night when Farrah would be here. God, I hadn't thought about her even once since I'd broken things off with her. Had I really been dating her the last time I was here? It was only a couple of months ago. But it was hard to fathom, now. What had I seen in her? I didn't know, but it didn't matter anymore.

I poured a glass of wine and took it to the couch. Turned on the TV. The wine was expensive, but disappointing. My

mom's wines were rich and full-bodied, with hints of flavor that reminded me of home. This one was mediocre at best.

Which basically described everything about my life in San Francisco.

It hadn't seemed that way before. I'd thought everything was perfect. I had a great job, lots of money. Condo with a view. Nice car. What else did a man need?

But none of it had made me happy. I'd been smugly self-satisfied with my position in life. My resume looked great. But I'd been alone. There had been a void inside that I'd kept trying to fill with things. With power and money. With prestige and respect. But it had never worked. It was never enough.

I set my wine down and went back to the bedroom. In the closet, I found the box with Zoe's wedding ring. I pulled mine out of my wallet and added it to the box with hers. I stared at them for a long moment. The city lights shone through the windows of the dim bedroom, glinting off the gold.

Zoe was the only thing that had ever made me feel whole. When I was with her, the void inside me went away. She filled my empty spaces. With her, everything felt right. It didn't matter what kind of day I'd had. How many hours I'd worked, or what I'd left unfinished on my desk.

When we'd been married, I'd lost sight of that. Focused on the wrong things. I'd been so consumed with achieving and earning more, I'd forgotten what it was to be content. To be truly happy.

And I hadn't been happy since she'd left me. At least, not until I'd gone home.

As I stood in my two-million-dollar condo, staring at wedding rings that had probably cost two hundred, I realized something: This wasn't home. Neither was Salishan Cellars, or Echo Creek. Home wasn't my family's land, or my mom's house, or the town where I'd been raised.

Zoe was home.

She was home in every sense of the word. It wouldn't matter where we lived, or where I worked. I belonged with her.

I did want to step in and run Salishan. I was good at it—great, even—and despite years of telling myself otherwise, I enjoyed it. Being home had allowed me to reconnect with my family. Help my mom through a crisis. I'd realized how much I'd missed by being away. By letting resentment rule my life.

But I didn't resent Salishan. Not anymore. The only thing I resented was myself, for letting Zoe walk out of my life. I should have fought for her. I'd let her go, thinking there wasn't anything I could do. I'd been hurt, and masked it with anger. Let anger lead. Just like my father.

I was done with that. Done with letting resentment and anger permeate everything I did. Steal my chance at happiness. Zoe was my life, and she always had been. Regardless of everything else—my career, the winery, my family—I was going to find a way to make things work with Zoe. I couldn't let her go again.

So what the fuck was I doing here?

There wasn't anything for me in San Francisco. And if I stayed—if I kept my job here and split my time—I'd be just as busy as I'd ever been. Maybe more so. Zoe had been right to call me out on it. Just because I'd been juggling things for a while, didn't mean it would work long-term.

What would that life be like for her? She'd see me when I was in Echo Creek. But then I'd constantly have to leave her. The pressure to be here at least half the time would be huge. I wanted to believe I could find a way to make it work, but I kept coming back to the same question—why?

Why did I want to make this work? Because I was afraid to commit to one path or the other? I really wasn't. I knew I wanted Zoe, and if I had to go home swinging and fight to get her back, that was what I'd do. So why split my time at all? Why keep my life here? I didn't want it. I wanted her.

I felt like an idiot for not realizing it sooner. Maybe I had needed to be here again for it to sink in. See my old life in all its stark emptiness. Because I could see now how hollow it had been.

I grabbed my laptop and went back to the couch. Took a sip of the mediocre wine. I needed to spend a few days here—go into the office and take care of things. Work with my boss on a transition plan. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't up and walk away. I had responsibilities to see to. But I wasn't going to stay—not any longer than necessary.

If I was going to make things work with Zoe—and I was fucking determined to do just that—I knew what I had to do. I had to commit to a life with her. Make her my priority. That's where I'd screwed up the first time.

And I wasn't going to make the same mistake twice.

Zoe

With the Cockburn wedding out of the way—I hoped the Cocksuckers would be blissfully happy together and never book Salishan for an event again—I took a few much-needed days off. I hung out at home—sans pants—binging Netflix and drinking wine. And it was mostly pretty great.

But god, I missed Roland.

We texted back and forth some, but didn't talk about our argument. I hated leaving things unresolved, but it wasn't the kind of thing we could deal with by thumb typing on our phones. He told me he was taking care of business there, whatever that meant. I imagined him back in his element. Dressed for work, meeting with all the other important people at his company.

Uncertainty ate at me. I tried not to dwell on it, but unanswered questions hovered in the back of my mind. Was his plan going to work? Would his company let him split his time? What if they said no? What would he choose? I kept wondering if he was going to call and tell me he had to stay a few more weeks. And if that would turn into months. And if six months from now, I'd realize I'd been a fool to trust him again.

It made me retreat into myself. My answers to his texts were short. I felt like I needed to protect myself, guard what little of my heart I had left. He'd taken most of it with him and I wasn't sure if I was ever getting it back.

I went to work on Wednesday with a burst of motivation to clean my desk. It felt like it was time to start fresh. Get rid of all the stacks of crap I'd been holding onto, put things in their proper place, and enjoy a nice, clean workspace.

I spent my morning going through all the stuff I'd been telling myself I'd put away later. Later had to come eventually, and

for this girl, it was today. I scanned and filed invoices and contracts. Tossed old notebooks I didn't need anymore. Threw away the numerous to-do lists I'd completed and left strewn about my desk.

In the process, I found a coffee mug, a t-shirt that I'd somehow shoved in a drawer, two nail files, my favorite blue pen, and the phone case I'd thought I lost a few months ago.

It took a while to get through everything, but when I finished, I stood back and looked at my lovely, pristine, organized desk. I felt lighter, like I'd tossed out baggage I no longer needed to carry.

Cooper stopped by, and after a snarky remark about not realizing there had been a desk in this office, he took me to lunch. It was oddly relaxing to listen to his endless stream of chatter about the upcoming harvest. How he was routinely checking on his babies to see if they were ready. He was also taking a trip south soon to visit another large vineyard. We were sourcing a new variety of grapes this season, and he was like a little kid at Christmas over it.

After lunch, I went back to the Big House. The hum of voices came from the tasting rooms, but otherwise it was quiet. I started up the stairs and Roland came barreling down so fast, he almost crashed into me.

"Zoe," he said, grabbing my upper arms to keep me from falling. "Sorry. I was looking for you."

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "You're supposed to be in San Francisco."

"I know." He grabbed my hand and pulled me up the stairs after him. "Let's go upstairs."

I stumbled along behind as he led me into my office.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good," he said, shutting the door.

"When did you get back?"

"About five minutes ago," he said. "It's been killing me to be away. I had to take care of some things down there, but I

caught an early flight and drove straight here.”

I stepped away and looked at him, my head spinning. “Why?”

“Because we need to talk,” he said.

“Now?”

“Yes, now. We need to talk about what happened when we broke up. And what’s happening now. All of it.”

“Um...” I knew we needed to talk. There was so much to say. But now? “Here? Right this second? Maybe we should wait. Grab dinner later or something.”

“Do you have appointments this afternoon?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then we’re doing this now,” he said. “You were right, we need to get everything out in the open. Otherwise, all that shit from the past is going to fester and poison us both. I’m not going to let that happen, even if it means I have to take a beating now. I deserve it anyway. So I want you to tell me everything. Why you left me. What you’re feeling now. I want to hear it all.”

I crossed my arms. “You just want me to unload on you?”

“Yes,” he said, surprising me with the vehemence in his voice. “Hit me with everything you’ve got. We got fucking divorced, Zoe. And we never talked about it.”

“Okay,” I said and took a deep breath. God, where did I even begin? “I knew we were young when we fell in love the first time, and we were both going to change as we grew up. But you turned into someone I didn’t recognize. I felt like all you cared about was your job title and your salary. It wasn’t just that you worked a lot. You gave everything you had to your career. There wasn’t anything left. When you were home, which wasn’t all that often, you were tired and distant. You didn’t talk to me, or tell me what was going on with you. It was like watching you slowly turn to stone.”

He held eye contact while I spoke, never looking away. “What else?”

“I didn’t want money,” I said. “I didn’t care about the fancy apartment, or the car you bought me, or the credit card you gave me to use. And I’m still insulted that you thought I did. I was happier when we had nothing. When we were in college and we’d go through the couch cushions looking for enough change to go get a cheap beer. I don’t understand why you thought I ever wanted a life where I traded you for a bunch of stuff.”

“Okay,” he said, nodding. “Is it all right if I say something now?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t see it that way,” he said. “And honestly, it wasn’t ever about you. Although that was my first mistake. It should have been, because I would have realized how meaningless it all was. I told myself I was doing everything for us, but that was a lie. I was doing it for me. I thought I had something to prove—to my family, and my father. Mostly my father. Nothing I ever did was good enough for him. I thought if I could just achieve more, he’d have to admit he was proud of me. And money was how I measured that. But in the process, I completely lost sight of what actually mattered.”

“You were willing to throw our marriage out the window to prove something to your dad?” I asked.

“Like I said, I didn’t see it that way at the time,” he said. “And I’m telling you right now, I was wrong. Every choice I made, from going to grad school, to moving us to San Francisco, was based on resentment. I kept thinking I could get rid of all the bitterness I was carrying around if I just made it to the next level. Someday I’d achieve enough, and I wouldn’t have to feel that way anymore.

“But what I didn’t see was that I had everything I’d ever need right in front of me,” he continued. “I had you. What the fuck else mattered if I had you? You’re a fucking badass who can stand on your own no matter what life throws at you. I was angry with you back then because I thought you didn’t support me. But how the hell was I supporting you? I wasn’t. I wanted

you to be around when I had time for you, but I wasn't giving you anything in return. And that's fucked up, Zo."

"Yeah, it is."

"Do you want to know the worst part?" he asked. "I was turning into my goddamn father. And I was completely blind to it. The things he did were different—he took on running Salishan instead of trying to get away from it. And maybe that's why I didn't see it. I thought he was an asshole because he resented the winery. But he was an asshole because he expected my mom to be around for him when he needed her, and to stay out of his way when he didn't. What did he ever give her? He spent their whole fucking marriage acting like he was constantly sacrificing for her, but it was bullshit. She didn't need a husband who worked his ass off to keep her family's winery open. She needed a husband who stood by her side. And he never did. And there I was, working like a dog, thinking I had it all figured out, and I was doing the same fucking thing."

"You should have talked to me," I said. "You never told me how you felt about your dad. I've known you since we were seventeen, and this is the first time you've ever said that to me."

"I know," he said. "I should have. And I'm sorry. God, Zoe, I'm so sorry for those years when I left you alone. I hate that I did that to you."

I nodded and touched his hand, acknowledging his apology. "It wasn't all your fault. I didn't talk to you about how I was feeling, either. I got mad and picked fights with you. But arguing over things like you coming home late never addressed the real issues. I had all these doubts about whether you really cared about me, but I never told you. I should have."

"I want to believe it would have helped, but I don't know," he said. "I was a pretty big asshole."

I cracked a smile, although the emotion welling up from my chest made it hard to breathe. "The day I left you was the worst day of my life. I knew I was going to, but I was so mad.

Being angry is easier sometimes, you know? But that day, I loaded up my car and suddenly it was so real. It took me two days to drive back here from California, and I think I cried the whole time.”

“Oh fuck, Zoe.” He pulled me close and held me, running his hand over my hair. “Baby, I’m so sorry.”

“I didn’t leave expecting you to chase after me,” I said. “I wasn’t trying to make a statement so you’d change. But it still hurt when you didn’t even try. I felt like you didn’t care. I walked away, and I thought it meant nothing to you.”

His arms tightened around me and he kissed the top of my head.

“But then, before you left the other day, you told me I’d gutted you.” I was having a hard time getting the words out. “Roland, I didn’t know. If you were hurt, you never acted like it. You never told me.”

“I was hurt,” he said, his voice quiet. “Nothing has ever hurt more than the moment I came home and saw you were gone.”

I couldn’t stop the tears, so I let them come. “I didn’t want to hurt you. That wasn’t why.”

“I know,” he said. “You had to make a choice, and you chose to take care of yourself. Honestly, Zoe, you made the right call.”

“Why did you just let me go?” I asked.

“Because I was angry. Like you said, anger is easier. If I’d let my guard down and stopped being mad, I’d have had to admit I was hurt. Being hurt meant being vulnerable. I couldn’t face that. So I acted like I didn’t give a fuck, and I focused on work to keep you off my mind.”

I slid my arms around his waist and held him, wetting his shirt with my tears. “Where does this leave us now?”

He pulled back to look at me. “I’m not going back to San Francisco. I already gave my notice. It doesn’t matter what happens with my career, or the winery, or any of it. I just want you. No, it’s more than that. I *need* you. And I know you don’t

really need me. You were doing fine without me. But I wasn't. I was miserable. I love you and I'm never going to love anyone else. You're it for me, Zoe, and you always were. I just hope you'll decide you want to keep me around."

I touched his face. "You're staying?"

"I'm staying," he said. "That back-and-forth shit was never going to work. We'd end up where we were four years ago, and I'm not doing that to you again. You deserve better."

"You're wrong about one thing."

"What's that?"

"I do need you," I said.

He leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. Slid his fingers through my hair. He kissed me tenderly, his mouth soft and warm.

"So this is it?" I asked. "You're staying and we're... we're what? Going to date each other? Give this another shot?"

"No," he said.

"No?"

He smiled and reached into his pocket. "I don't want to date you, Zo. I don't need time to decide, or to see if this will work out."

He opened his hand and I stared at the two rings sitting in his palm.

"Oh my god," I said, my voice trembling. "Are those what I think they are?"

"Yes."

"Those are... but how did you...?"

"I kept yours," he said, his voice soft. "Leo found mine outside, if you can believe it. He held onto it for me."

I touched the two gold bands with the tip of my finger. I'd left my ring on the counter when I'd moved out of our apartment. "I always figured you threw this away."

“I couldn’t,” he said. “I had it in a box in my closet. I think deep down I knew I’d need it again someday. Or at least, I hoped I would.”

A single tear broke free from the corner of my eye and trailed down my cheek. “Are you saying we should get married again?”

He touched my chin and tilted my face up. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. I want you to be my wife. I know how badly I screwed things up before, and you can be damn sure I’m not going to do that again. Most people don’t get a second chance when they lose something as precious as you. I know how fucking lucky I am. If you need more time, I won’t push you. But I’m in, Zo. I’m yours.”

I started to laugh—because honestly, what else could I do? “You’re crazy, Roland Miles. You just proposed to your ex-wife.”

“About fucking time, don’t you think?” he asked. “So what do you say, Zo? Will you marry me again?”

I popped up onto my tip-toes, threw my arms around his neck, and kissed him—hard and deep. As I pulled away, I bit his lower lip and tugged, just enough to make him grunt.

“Hell yes, I’ll marry you again,” I said. “I fucking love you.”

“I fucking love you, too.”

He kissed me again, his hands sliding low to cup my ass. And I was very glad I’d cleaned off my desk, because the things he did to me in that office made it more than worth the effort.

Roland

I tightened the screws on the new office chair. The one that had been in here was shit, so I'd ordered a new one. I made sure the last screw was in, then gave the chair a spin. Looked good.

I'd moved into the office next to Zoe's. It was a little smaller than the one I'd been using, but I liked being right next to her. I'd suggested we knock out the wall and share a bigger space, but she'd vetoed that idea. At first I'd thought she didn't want to share an office because she wanted space from me. But she'd clarified that she tended to let her office get messy, and she knew I liked mine kept neat. She didn't want to give us something stupid to constantly fight over.

She had a point.

But the good news was, she was right next door. And I could pop over there anytime I needed to see her. Or touch her. Or kiss her.

Or fuck her on that messy-ass desk of hers. The door didn't lock, so we always ran the risk of being caught. But that had never stopped us before.

We hadn't gotten remarried yet, but Zoe was planning our wedding. We'd eloped the first time—just went to the courthouse and stood before a judge. This time, we wanted a real wedding. It would be small—nothing extravagant or complicated—but knowing Zoe, it was going to be beautiful. I didn't want to wait any longer than I had to, so she was arranging the details on short notice. But Zo had all the strings to pull, so throwing together a last-minute wedding was turning out to be pretty easy.

I glanced at the time. It was six. We were meeting my family downstairs and then heading over to the house to have dinner

with my mom. I closed my laptop, pocketed my phone, and went next door to grab Zoe.

She was typing, her eyes on her computer screen.

“Hey,” she said. “One second...”

I leaned against the door frame and waited while she finished.

“Okay,” she said. “Done. Contract sent. The wedding I’m booking is going to be small, but they have some serious money to throw around. It’s going to be really fun.”

“Sounds great,” I said. She came around her desk and I drew her in for a kiss. “Ready?”

“Yes, and I’m starving.”

Cooper and Brynn were downstairs in the lobby. Brynn looked exasperated. She stood with her arms crossed and seemed to be trying to get a word in, but Cooper was on a tirade. I had no idea what they were talking about, but I heard Coop say something like *you’re too young for that anyway*.

“Shut up,” Leo said. He sat in one of the leather chairs, resting his elbows on his knees. “Seriously, Cooper, you’re not her mother.”

“Traitor,” Cooper said. “Brynnness is your sister, too. You should be supporting me.”

“Okay, kids, quit your bickering,” Mom said as she came down the hall. She slid her arms into her jacket and adjusted the hood. “You’d think I would have stopped saying that after you all grew up.”

“That’s because Cooper never grew up,” Brynn said.

“Hey,” Cooper said. “I resent that.”

Brynn punched him in the arm.

The front door opened and a young woman with her blond hair pulled back in a ponytail came in. She wore a burgundy sweater with jeans and a pair of ivory low top sneakers.

“Hi,” Mom said. “I’m so sorry, but our tasting rooms are closed for the day.”

Cooper stepped forward and flashed the girl a grin. “That’s true, but I bet we could make an exception. Just this once. I’d be happy to take you back.”

I rolled my eyes and tried not to groan. *Seriously, Cooper?*

“Oh, no, actually...” She adjusted her handbag on her shoulder and glanced around. “I’m looking for Lawrence Miles.”

Mom’s forehead creased. “I’m sorry, he’s not here. I’m Shannon Miles. Is there something I can help you with?”

“You’re...” The woman swallowed hard and fidgeted with her bag. “Right, of course you are. Do you know when he’ll be back? It’s important.”

My back tensed with worry. Why was this girl looking for my dad? She couldn’t be much older than Brynn. I looked at her, a deep sense of dread stealing over me. Oh god, please don’t let this girl be another one of his...

“He doesn’t work here anymore,” Mom said, her voice steady. But I could see in her eyes that she’d had the same thought as me.

The girl’s shoulders slumped. I felt bad for her. She looked defeated. The rest of us stood in tense silence, and Zoe slipped her hand in mine.

“I see,” the girl said.

“What is this about?” Mom asked.

“He’s my father,” she said.

Forget hearing a pin drop, you could have heard a tuft of goose down settle on the shiny hardwood floor. The shocked silence was intense as everyone stared at her. The color drained from Mom’s face and Cooper looked like he might vomit. Brynn’s eyes were wide, and her mouth hung open. Even Leo gaped at her.

Zoe squeezed my hand and I heard her whisper *oh shit* under her breath.

“I’m sorry, did you just say Lawrence Miles is your father?” Mom asked.

The girl nodded. “Yes, and I really need to find him.”

The implication of what she’d just said hit me square in the chest. We already knew Dad had been unfaithful. But this girl had to be in her twenties. From what Leo had found out about Dad’s current mistress—girlfriend, now—she didn’t have any children. That meant this woman’s mother was someone else, and the affair had happened when we were all kids.

“Hey, Coop,” I said, and he jumped, like I’d startled him. “Why don’t you take Mom back to the house. Order pizza for everyone. Leo, maybe you and Brynn should go with her. Zoe and I will talk to... I’m sorry, what was your name?”

“Grace,” she said. “Grace Miles.”

I stepped closer to her and offered my hand, calm and businesslike. “Roland Miles.”

Her eyes widened as she took my hand and shook.

“Mom, I’ll figure out what’s going on,” I said.

My mom touched her hand to her mouth. “I’m sorry, I’m just a bit overwhelmed right now.”

Brynn took her hand. “Let’s go. Roland can talk to her.”

“I’m really sorry,” Grace said.

Mom’s face softened. “It’s okay. Whatever is going on, I’m sure none of it is your fault.”

Brynn and Cooper led Mom outside with Leo close behind. I glanced at Zoe. She raised her eyebrows and mouthed *what the fuck*. I shrugged and turned to Grace.

“All right, well... if Lawrence Miles is your dad, I guess that makes me your brother,” I said. “This is my fiancée, Zoe. The guy who looked like he was going to puke is Cooper, and the scruffy bearded guy is Leo. Brynn’s the baby. And that was our mom, Shannon.”

“I’m sorry to just show up here out of the blue and drop this bomb on you,” she said. “I wouldn’t have come if it wasn’t important. I thought I would find him here.”

“Why don’t we go sit,” Zoe said, tugging on my arm. “Grace, you can tell us what’s going on and we’ll see if we can help you.”

We led Grace to the first tasting room and took a seat at the table. I put my hand on Zoe’s leg, feeling comfort in her presence next to me. This was all kinds of fucked up, but it felt good to have her near.

“All right,” I said. “First of all, my dad—our dad, if what you’re telling me is true—isn’t here. My mom found out he was having an affair and she kicked him out. I’m guessing your mom isn’t Kristen who lives in Tacoma?”

“No,” Grace said. “My mom is Naomi Harris. She lives over in Tilikum. So do I, actually. That’s where I grew up, and I live there still.”

“Okay,” I said. “And why do you think Lawrence Miles is your father?”

Grace blinked. She seemed surprised by my question. “Well, because he is. It’s not like he’s just a name on my birth certificate.”

“You mean you know him?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “I haven’t seen him in a while, but of course I know him. He’s been around my whole life. Granted, he tended to come and go a lot, but I’ve always known who my dad is.”

Zoe had her phone out. She held up a picture of my mom and dad. “I’m sorry, but I just want to make sure. This is who you’re talking about?”

“Yes, that’s my dad. Here, I’ll show you.” Grace pulled her phone out of her bag and swiped the screen a few times, then held it up for us to see. The picture was clearly my father, standing with a younger-looking Grace.

“Yeah, that’s him,” I said.

“I guess this establishes that he was even more of a cheating bastard than we thought,” Zoe said, putting her phone away. I just grunted in reply. She was right.

“God, this is insane,” Grace said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t come here to break up a marriage, although I guess that already happened. I just need to find him.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because of my brother.”

Zoe grabbed my arm. “Oh for fuck’s sake, a brother? Sorry, I have officially lost the ability to watch my mouth. I’m almost afraid to ask, but how old is your brother?”

“He’s six,” Grace said.

“Oh my god,” Zoe said. “And you’re?”

“Twenty-three.”

Zoe clapped her hands over her face and took a deep breath. “Fuck me running. Are there more of you? How many fucking kids does he have?”

“It’s just us,” Grace said.

“Okay, Zo, calm down,” I said. “Is something wrong with your brother?”

“He’s okay now,” Grace said. “But he was really sick last winter. He had RSV, and then pneumonia. He was hospitalized twice. Dad used to send money every month to help my mom with the bills and everything, but about a year ago, he stopped. And then Elijah was in the hospital, and you wouldn’t believe what that costs. Even with insurance. My mom is having trouble paying for everything, and Dad disappeared, and I’m just done. I can’t sit around and watch her fall apart because she has to decide which bills to pay and which to let go another month. She works so hard, and she’s trying, but it’s just too much. And my asshole father fucking bailed.”

“Oh good, we can talk about what an asshole he is?” Zoe said. “I was afraid you liked him, and I needed to watch my mouth.”

I turned to Zoe. “Since when do you watch your mouth?”

“I am excellent at censoring my language,” she said. “Right now is a very bad example.”

“No, I’m not his biggest fan,” Grace said. “Neither is my mom. And, for the record, she never knew he was married. She still doesn’t. I didn’t exactly tell her I was looking for him.”

“So you’re trying to find him so he can give your mom money to help pay your brother’s medical bills,” I said.

“Exactly.”

I took a deep breath. My fucking father. It just kept getting worse. “All right, first things first. Don’t worry about the hospital bills. If you put me in touch with your mom, I’ll take care of them.”

Grace’s lips parted. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Trust me, it’s fine,” I said. “I’ll make sure your mom and your brother are taken care of, okay?”

Tears glistened in Grace’s eyes, and Zoe squeezed my arm.

Grace swiped a few tears from her cheeks. “I don’t even know what to say.”

“Really, it’s fine. But we still need to get a hold of Dad. I’m not letting him off the hook that easily.” I stood, pulling out my phone, and brought up his number. Hit call. And immediately got a message that the number wasn’t in service.

“What the fuck?”

“What’s wrong?” Zoe asked.

“His number doesn’t work.”

Zoe tapped her phone screen a few times. “His Facebook account is gone, too.”

“Son of a bitch,” I said. This was how he wanted to handle the split with my mom? By disappearing? “Look, I’ll get Leo to track him down. Grace, give me your number and we’ll figure this out. Then I need to go talk to the rest of my family.”

“I’ll go,” Grace said. “I don’t want to intrude.”

“We’ll call you soon to get together under better circumstances,” Zoe said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Once everyone gets over their shock, they’re going to want to meet you. And your brother.”

Grace smiled. “Thanks. I don’t know how to thank you enough for your help.”

We exchanged phone numbers and said our goodbyes. I felt strangely numb, although maybe it was just going to take time for everything to sink in. My father had hidden a second family from us for most of our lives, and they weren’t even that far away. Infidelity, I’d seen coming. But this? It was a lot to process.

Zoe and I locked up the Big House, then headed toward my mom’s place. She tucked her hand in my arm, and we walked slowly down the path.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, although I didn’t hide the hesitation in my voice. “I’m not sure what all this means, yet. Or how everyone else is going to feel about it.”

“It was good of you to help her like that,” she said.

“Well yeah,” I said. “I wasn’t going to send her off with nothing. Not when I have it to give.”

She leaned her head against my arm. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

I stopped and turned toward her. “Not really. I’m just trying to do what’s right.”

“Which is part of why you’re amazing,” she said.

“What’s the other part?”

“It could have something to do with your ability to give me mind-blowing orgasms,” she said.

I laughed. “Is that so?”

“Maybe.” She nibbled her lip. “Is it bad that I kind of want you to drag me around the other side of the tree over there and fuck my brains out?”

“Why would that be bad?” I asked.

It was her turn to laugh. “You just found out you have two half-siblings you never knew about and the rest of your family is waiting—probably impatiently—for you to come fill them in on what the hell is going on.”

I grabbed her wrist and was about to take her behind the tree—my family could wait a little longer—when Cooper opened the door and came out onto the front porch.

“There you are,” he said. “Jesus, you guys, we’re going nuts in here. Is she our sister? Please tell me she was looking for the wrong guy and I didn’t hit on my sister.”

“You definitely hit on your sister, Coop,” Zoe said.

Cooper groaned. “Oh my god.”

We walked up the steps and Zoe patted him on the shoulder.

“You’ll be fine,” she said. “Just don’t start thinking about whether any of the random chicks you’ve hooked up with over the years might have been girls you’re related to.”

“Aaaand now I’m celibate.” He turned around and went back inside, muttering something about never having sex again.

“You are truly evil,” I said.

Zoe laughed. “He’ll get over it. Besides, he kind of deserves it.”

“Good point.” I took her hand and she squeezed mine back.

“Are you ready to do this?” she asked.

“Not really,” I said.

She lifted my hand to her lips and kissed it. “Everyone will be fine.”

She was right. Although I didn’t know what this was going to mean for my family, I did know one thing. Zoe and I could face anything together. I turned her toward me and touched her face. Brought my lips to hers for a kiss. No matter what happened, I’d always be grateful for her. For this chance. For this woman who meant everything to me.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s go talk to them.”

Epilogue

Roland

“Cooper, why are you standing on the table?”

I looked up at my brother. He was wearing his suit jacket, but the top two buttons of his shirt were open, and his tie hung around his neck. He looked like a guy *after* a wedding, not like he was getting ready for one.

“I like the view from up here,” he said. “How weird would it be to be this tall? Can you imagine? If I was seven feet tall, how big do you think my dick would be? Do you think my junk would be proportionately larger? Or would it be the same and I’d be fucked because it looked so much smaller by comparison? How would you deal with that? A girl gets your pants off, expecting a huge dong, and it looks small because the rest of you is so fucking big. That would suck.”

“Can we shoot him with a tranquilizer dart?” Leo asked.

I thought about telling him to get down off the table, then decided I wasn’t going to try to be his mother. If he fell, he fell. Maybe if he hit his head, he’d calm the fuck down.

The three of us were in the groom’s dressing room, waiting for Jamie to tell us it was go time.

Things around here were still a mess. We hadn’t tracked down my asshole father. Leo was on it, but Dad had apparently anticipated we’d try to find him and taken steps to avoid it.

As if Dad’s affair wasn’t bad enough, we had siblings we’d never known. I’d made sure Grace’s mother had the money she needed to pay for her son’s medical bills. But none of us were sure how to move forward with them. So far, Grace had kept her distance, and I suspected it was partly to protect her family, as well as to avoid causing more stress for ours. It was complicated to say the least, but I knew we’d find a way to

come together and forge a relationship that worked for everyone involved. Eventually.

But today, all the stresses of running the winery, my shitty father, and secret families were far from my mind. Because I was marrying Zoe.

Her parents had flown in, as had her brother and his family. I'd seen her parents yesterday, briefly, and I couldn't decide whether or not they were happy Zoe and I were getting remarried. It was hard to tell with them. The Suttons were nice people, but not exactly expressive. Zoe was a riot of color and light compared to the rest of her family.

One of the many reasons I loved her.

My family, on the other hand, was definitely happy for us. My mom had teared up when we'd told her we would have a real wedding this time. Especially when we said it would be here, at Salishan. It wasn't going to be fancy. Just a short ceremony, followed by a wine and hors d'oeuvre reception. But I knew it meant a lot to her—to all of them—that we were including everyone.

Jamie poked her head in the door. "Time to go, gentlemen."

"Oh shit, now?" Cooper asked.

I took one last glance in the mirror to make sure my tie was straight. Smoothed down my jacket. "Let's do this."

Leo and I headed for the door. Cooper jumped down and somehow his shirt was buttoned and his tie perfect.

"How did you do that?" I asked.

Cooper grinned. "I'm that good."

I just shook my head.

We followed Jamie. I glanced around, looking for Zoe, but she wasn't out yet. I didn't care about the whole not seeing the bride before the wedding bullshit. This was our second marriage—to each other—so it wasn't like we were exactly traditional.

"Where's Zo?" I asked.

“She’ll be out in a minute,” Jamie said.

I was impatient to see her, but Jamie ushered us to the doors and suddenly I was walking up the aisle behind my brothers.

I got to the front, turned in front of our guests. And then, there she was.

Her hair was down—I loved it when she wore it down—and her dress. Holy shit. No demure white wedding gown for my woman. She wore a strapless red dress that hugged her curves in all the best ways. A slit up one side showed a hint of her thigh and she was killing me with those sexy white stilettos. Matching red lips begged me to kiss the fuck out of her.

Soon. Oh, so soon.

She held my eyes as she walked up the aisle, looking like a warrior goddess. It felt like she’d kicked the breath from my lungs. I was captivated. And so fucking grateful. Sometimes I still wondered if I was going to wake up back in San Francisco, miserable and alone, and realize this had all been a dream.

But it wasn’t. It was real. Zoe was mine. She always had been, I’d just been too stupid to see it for a while. Because sometimes the universe was a very beautiful place, I’d been given a second chance. And I was going to spend the rest of my life proving to her that I deserved it.

Our wedding was short. We didn’t need a lot of ceremony. We faced each other, her hands clasped in mine, and said our vows. Although I knew she wasn’t going to admit to it later, she teared up while I said mine. The rings we exchanged were the same rings we’d used the first time. I’d wanted to buy her a bigger one, but she’d been adamant that she didn’t want anything else. And now, as we slipped them onto each other’s fingers, I knew she was right. They represented everything we’d once had, and everything we’d been through to make it back to each other. They were perfect.

We sealed our union with a barely-appropriate-for-the-setting kiss. And just like that, we were married again, and everything was right with the world.

Afterward, we mingled with our guests and sipped wine. Zoe's smile was radiant. I couldn't stop looking at her. Touching her. Kissing her. I wanted to worship and devour every inch of her.

We stood near the bar and Zoe put her wine glass down. I brushed her hair out of the way and leaned in to kiss her neck, just below her ear.

"Mm, Roland, you better knock that off," she said.

I kissed her again, pressing my lips to her soft skin and tasting her with my tongue. "Or what?"

"Or we're going to make a scene."

"I think we should make a scene." I wasn't about to stop kissing her. "You're my wife again."

She laughed, a soft sound that made her throat vibrate against my mouth. "We could go. But we haven't had cake."

"Do you want cake?" I asked, speaking low into her ear. "Or do you want my cock?"

"I want both," she said. "Can't I have your cock, and eat my cake too?"

"Where?"

"Groom's dressing room."

I took her hand and pulled her out the door. She giggled softly as we ducked into the groom's dressing room and shut the door.

"The blinds are open," I said as I unfastened my belt. My dick was already hard, aching to be inside her.

"No one's out there," she said. "But we need to be fast."

"Leave the dress on."

I grabbed her hips and bent her over the table, then hiked her dress up. All that stood between me and the perfection of her hot pussy was a tiny black G-string. Hooking my finger beneath the fabric, I moved it to the side.

She looked at me over her shoulder. "Am I wet enough for you?"

“I better make sure.”

I crouched down, grabbed two handfuls of her delicious ass, and buried my face in her pussy. She moaned while I licked her up and down.

When she was good and wet, I stood and finished pulling my dick out of my pants.

She looked back at me again. “You better fuck me good, Miles.”

I smacked her ass cheek and she gasped.

“Did you just spank your wife?”

“Fuck yes, I did.” I spanked her again, because I loved the sound she made when I did. Then I grabbed my cock around the base and lined it up with her opening.

Groaning at the exquisiteness of her body, I slid inside her. She arched her back and pushed her ass against me. She wanted me to fuck her good, so I took hold of her hips and gave her everything she wanted.

I slammed into her a few times as she gripped the edge of the table. Behind me, I heard someone open the door, but I didn't give a fuck. There was a quiet expression of surprise, then the door clicked shut again. I probably should have locked it, but I didn't care about that either.

And I certainly didn't stop fucking my wife.

I gave it to her hard and fast, thrusting into her. She consumed me. I loved this woman with everything I had. She was strong, and brave, and beautiful, and I adored every inch of her.

I pulled out and spun her around, then helped her up onto the edge of the table. She wrapped her legs around my waist and I slid inside her again.

With her taste on my tongue, I kissed her deeply. She clung to me, and I held her tight while she moaned soft sounds of bliss into my mouth. I reached between us to stroke her clit and felt her come apart. Her head tilted back and she breathed my name, her pussy clenching tight around me.

One more thrust and I was done. My body went rigid as the tension in my groin unleashed. I came into her hard, my cock throbbing inside her.

She collapsed against me and I wrapped my arms around her. Held her and stroked her hair.

“Fuck, I love you so much,” I said.

Her voice was breathy and low. “I love you, too.”

After breathing against each other for a long moment, I pulled out and helped her clean up. We fixed our clothes, and she smoothed down her hair. Her cheeks were flushed, but there wasn't much we could do about that. And she looked sexy as fuck.

“Did someone almost come in?” she asked.

“I think so.”

She shook her head and gave a slight shrug. “Oh well. We're married, so fuck 'em.”

I grabbed her, pulling her against me, and kissed her hard. “I fucking love you, Zoe Miles.”

She laughed and nibbled on my bottom lip. “God, it feels good to hear you call me that again.”

“Good. Because you're mine. And you always will be.”

And that was the truth. Zoe was mine. She belonged to me, just like I belonged to her. She had all of me—every breath and beat of my heart. I loved her with everything I had to give. I'd spent too much time chasing the wrong things, never finding happiness. Now I had it, and I was going to do everything in my power to make her as happy as she made me.

Forever.

Want more Roland and Zoe? Download a FREE bonus epilogue for a peek into their happily ever after. bookhip.com/GSNZNG

The Miles Family continues with Brynn and Chase in *Forbidden Miles*. Binge read the rest of the complete Miles Family series here: <http://mybook.to/MilesFamilySeries>

Read on for a sneak peek of *Forbidden Miles*

About the Author

Claire Kingsley is an Amazon Top 5 bestselling author of sexy, heartfelt contemporary romance and romantic comedies. She writes books with sassy, quirky heroines, swoony heroes who love their women hard, panty-melting sexytimes, romantic happily ever afters, and lots of big feels.

She can't imagine life without coffee, her Kindle, or the sexy heroes who inhabit her imagination. She's living out her own happily ever after with her husband and three kids in the Pacific Northwest.

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For book news, sneak peeks, the popular Ask Cooper Miles advice column and more, sign up for Claire's newsletter: <http://www.clairekingsleybooks.com/sign-up/>

Forbidden Miles Sneak Peek

Chapter One

Chase

I was so screwed.

Shelly was all the way across the parking lot, but any second she'd look up and see me. I pulled my baseball cap down—like that was going to matter. She knew what my truck looked like.

The heat blasted against my legs and I had the window rolled down to let in the cool October air. It was late afternoon, but the temperature had already dropped. Fall was like that in Echo Creek, the town I lived in on the east side of the Cascade Mountains. The change of seasons stole its way into the air, turning hot summer days into cold fall nights without warning.

My stomach growled, and I checked my rear-view mirror again. How long could a girl stand outside her car before she finally got in? Wasn't she cold? I'd worked through lunch and I was fucking hungry. If this went on much longer, I'd have to suck it up and walk by her.

I wished I didn't feel the need to hide from her like a dumbass. But I'd screwed this up pretty badly and I was determined to stay out of Shelly's web of crazy.

Was I an asshole for calling her crazy? No, I assure you, I was not.

The cab of my truck was getting too hot, so I turned down the heat. Another car pulled into a spot and a couple of guys got out. Went inside Ray's Diner. Lucky bastards. Shelly was still standing outside her car, and even though she was busy texting, I wasn't fooled. She had a Chase-radar that would zero in on me the second I tried to walk by. It had been a long fucking day and the last thing I wanted was to deal with a Shelly episode. I just wanted some dinner.

I'd had a thing with Shelly earlier this year. She'd seemed like a nice enough girl. Pretty. Blond hair, blue eyes. We'd hooked up a few times, but I'd broken things off pretty quickly. I

usually did. Relationships were complicated, and I liked my life the way it was. Simple.

I made a good living as a heavy machinery mechanic. Lived with my best friend, Cooper. Coop was never going to settle down, and I probably wouldn't either. We worked hard, played hard. It was a good fucking life and I had no interest in changing anything.

Shelly? She'd wanted to change everything.

It was my fault for breaking the rules. Shelly had started texting me again after I'd broken up with her, and Coop had warned me. Crazy girls are fun sometimes, but you don't date them. Ever. It's rule number one.

And Shelly had turned out to be the queen of crazy.

What had started with a few texts had quickly become me dating her. It had felt like whiplash; I wasn't even sure how it had happened. One day I was answering her text, and next thing I knew, she was asking me to clear space in my closet for her shit.

She'd wanted me to text her before I left for work in the morning and call her on my way home at night. If I didn't let her know where I was and what I was doing, she'd flip out. I'd gone out for a few beers with Cooper one night and she'd accused me of cheating on her. The next day, she'd started talking about me meeting her parents, like she hadn't gone all psycho on me the night before.

And meet her fucking parents? Hell no.

My tolerance for her kind of drama was very low, so I'd put an end to it. And she hadn't taken it well. The angry phone calls and texts were one thing—not entirely unexpected. But I'd caught her driving by my apartment twice, and she'd tried to corner me at work. That was getting into psycho stalker territory. I wasn't much for confrontation, but I'd had to tell her, in no uncertain terms, that she needed to back off.

So far, she had. It had been a few weeks since I'd heard from her. But the last thing I needed was to run into her in a parking

lot and have her try to suck me into her vortex of insanity again.

So here I sat, my empty stomach gnawing at me, watching her in my rear-view mirror, hoping to god she was going to get in her car and leave.

This was why I kept things simple. Casual. No strings.

Finally, she put her phone away and got in her car. My stomach rumbled again, as if to express its displeasure over the delay. I waited until her car disappeared from sight, then went into Ray's.

Ray's Diner had been here for as long as I could remember. And Jo, the fifties-something waitress, had probably worked here since it had opened. She had bleached hair with gray roots and a warm smile that deepened the wrinkles around her eyes. Cooper flirted with her, hardcore—of course, Cooper flirted with anyone who had a vagina—but she'd always felt like more of a mom-type to me.

"Hi there, cutie," Jo said with a smile when I walked in. "Just you, or is your twin joining you?"

Jo knew Cooper and I weren't related, let alone twins. But a lot of people assumed we were brothers. I had mixed feelings about that. On the one hand, we did look alike. We were both tall, kept in shape. Dark hair. Cooper had blue eyes, whereas mine were gray. But I could see why people thought there was a resemblance. The fact that we were together more often than not, and had been since we were five, added to the brothers thing.

"Nope, just me," I said.

On the other hand, how many times had I wished I really was Coop's brother? That I was a Miles? I felt like an idiot for admitting it, even to myself, but it was the truth. I'd grown up wishing I was one of them. Sometimes the *twins* remark was a gut-punch reminder that I wasn't.

Jo seated me at a booth near the door. I glanced at the menu, more out of habit than anything.

"You need a second, or do you want the usual?" Jo asked.

“The usual.” I handed the menu back to her. My usual was a cranberry walnut salad with grilled chicken. Cooper loved to give me shit about what I ate, but I figured I needed to balance out all the beer. He could eat anything and stay toned, but he also never stopped moving. He probably burned a few thousand calories a day just fidgeting.

Jo brought me some water and I flipped through shit on my phone while I waited for my dinner. The diner was quiet. Just a few other tables were full. I had a view all the way to the back of the restaurant and I noticed a couple sitting in a booth tucked around near the restrooms. They were both on one side of the bench seat, snuggled up close. No food on their table—just drinks. But what caught my eye was the fact that they were totally making out back there.

Not that I was judging. Hell, I’d made out with girls in that back booth plenty of times. It was a good place for it. Hidden enough that you probably wouldn’t get in trouble, as long as you quit when Jo or one of the other waitresses walked by. But out in the open enough to make it fun.

The guy was leaning over the girl, so I couldn’t see much. Not that I was staring. But it was hard not to glance up a few times. That dude was definitely getting a blowjob later. Kinda wished I was getting a blowjob later, but I was still pretty gun-shy after Shelly. Wasn’t up for jumping into something with a girl right now—no matter how casual I kept it.

Jo brought two plates to their table. I couldn’t see the couple, but I assumed they’d quit the make-out session to get their dinner. My phone buzzed in my hand.

Cooper: *Where u at?*

Me: *Ray’s*

Cooper: *Done for the day?*

Me: *Yeah, u?*

Cooper: *Yep. Mom fed me. Leftovers?*

Me: *Always yes.*

Cooper: *Cool bro. See u at home.*

Dinner at Ray's or not, I never said no to leftovers from Mrs. Miles. Cooper's mom was an amazing cook.

Jo brought my salad, but before I could start eating, the couple at the back table caught my eye again. They were no longer sucking face—they were eating—but now I *was* staring. My fork hung over my plate, dangling from limp fingers. I didn't know the guy, but the girl? That was Brynn Miles.

Brynn was Cooper's younger sister—the baby of the family. She was almost six years younger than me and Cooper; I'd known her since she was born. She'd recently turned twenty-one, and she'd been off at college for the last couple of years. In fact, I'd thought she was still going to college, so I had no idea what she was doing here.

Of course, I didn't pay much attention to Brynn, so for all I knew, she was moving back. Or here for the weekend. Except, what day was it? It was a Tuesday, so shouldn't she have been in class? Or going to class tomorrow? Who the fuck was that guy she was with?

And why the hell did I care?

Brynn wasn't just the baby. She was Cooper's baby. Weird as it sounded, it was how he saw it. She had three older brothers, but Cooper was the alpha-brother when it came to Brynn. He'd made it his personal mission in life to take care of her. If I thought about it—which I didn't—Brynn probably didn't appreciate Cooper's interference in her life as much as Coop thought she should.

But that was the thing, I didn't think about it. I didn't think about Brynn. She was around, I knew she existed. But it was like there'd always been this barrier around her that I couldn't see through. Brynn was so forbidden, I'd subconsciously ignored her.

When we were kids, she'd just been an annoying little girl. As she grew up, it was like she'd faded from my vision. Like she was translucent—insubstantial. I didn't let myself see her because deep down, I knew she was the one girl on the planet I could never, ever touch. I'd instinctively created a shield

around her that I couldn't penetrate—couldn't see through. Even the temptation of her wasn't worth the risk.

But looking at her now, with some dude in the back of Ray's Diner, that shield shattered to pieces.

~END SNEAK PEEK~

[Forbidden Miles](#) is available now!

Always Only You

Chloe Liese

****ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY* TOP 10 ROMANCE NOVEL OF 2020***

Get ready for an emotional ride filled with laughter, longing, and a sweet slow-burn in this sports romance about love's power not in spite of difference, but because of it.

Ren

The moment I met her, I knew Frankie Zeferino was someone worth waiting for. Deadpan delivery, secret heart of gold, and a rare one-dimpled smile that makes my knees weak, Frankie has been forbidden since the day she and I became coworkers, meaning waiting has been the name of my game—besides, hockey, that is.

I'm a player on the team, she's on staff, and as long as we work together, dating is off-limits. But patience has always been my virtue. Frankie won't be here forever—she's headed for bigger, better things. I just hope that when she leaves the team and I tell her how I feel, she won't want to leave me behind, too.

Frankie

I've had a problem at work since the day Ren Bergman joined the team: a six foot three hunk of happy with a sunshine smile. I'm a grumbly grump and his ridiculously good nature drives me nuts, but even I can't entirely ignore that hot tamale of a ginger with icy eyes, the perfect playoff beard, and a body built for sin that he's annoyingly modest about.

Before I got wise, I would have tripped over myself to get a guy like Ren, but with my diagnosis, I've learned what I am to most people in my life—a problem, not a person. Now,

opening my heart to anyone, no matter how sweet, is the last thing I'm prepared to do.

Always Only You is an opposites-attract, forbidden love sports romance about a nerdy, late-blooming hockey star, and his tough cookie coworker who keeps both her soft side and her autism diagnosis to herself. Complete with a meddling secretary, tantric yoga torture, and a scorching slow burn, this standalone is the second in a series of novels about a Swedish-American family of five brothers, two sisters, and their wild adventures as they each find happily ever after.*

**This is an #OwnVoices story for its portrayal of autism by an autistic author.*

Copyright

Always Only You

A Bergman Brothers Novel (#2)

Chloe Liese

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Dedication

For the misfits.

You are wonderfully made. You belong.

Always.

“You want nothing but patience; or give it a more fascinating name: call it hope.”

— JANE AUSTEN, *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY*

Frankie

Playlist: “Better By Myself,” Hey Violet

Ren Bergman is too damn happy.

In the three years I’ve known him, I’ve seen him not smiling *twice*. Once, when he was unconscious on the ice, so I hardly think that counts, and the other time, when an extreme fan shoved her way through a crowd, yelling that she’d had his face tattooed on her lady bits because, and I quote: “A girl can dream.”

But for those two uncharacteristically grim moments, Ren has been nothing but a ray of sunshine since the moment I met him. And whereas I myself am a little storm cloud, I recognize that Ren’s Santa-on-uppers capacity for kindness makes my job easy.

As In-Game Social Media Coordinator for the Los Angeles Kings, I have my work cut out for me. Hockey players, you may have heard, are not always the most well-behaved humans. It inflates the ego, getting paid millions of dollars to play a game they love while tapping into their inner toddler. *Hit. Smash. Shove.*

With fortune comes fame and fawning females at their fingertips—those don’t help matters, either. Yes, I’m aware that’s a lot of “f” words. So, sue me, I like alliteration.

While the PR department has the delightful privilege of putting out public-image fires, I do the day-to-day groundwork of cultivating our team’s social media presence. Glued to the team, iPhone in hand, I make the guys accessible to fans by implementing PR-sanctioned hype—informal interviews, jokes, tame pranks, photo ops, gifs, even the occasional viral meme.

I also document informal charitable outings geared toward our most underrepresented fans. It's not in my exact job description, but I'm a big believer in breaking down stigma around differences we tend to ostracize, so I wormed my way into the process. I don't just want to make our hockey team more accessible to its fans, I want us to be a team that leads its fans in advancing accessibility itself.

That makes me sound sweet, doesn't it? But the truth is nobody on the team would call me that. In fact, my reputation is quite the opposite: Frank the Crank. And while this bad rap is formed on partial truths and ample misunderstandings, I've taken the moniker and run with it. In the end, it makes everyone's lives easier.

I do my job with resting bitch face. I'm blunt, all business. I like my routines, I focus on my work, and I sure as shit don't get close with the players. Yes, we get along for the most part. But you have to have boundaries when you're a woman in the near-constant company of two-dozen testosterone-soaked male athletes—athletes who know I'm in their corner, but who also know Frankie is a thundercloud you don't get too close to, unless you want to get zapped.

Just like rainclouds and sunshine share the sky, Ren and I work well together. Whenever PR has a killer concept and I come up with a social media home run—pardon my mixing sports metaphors—Ren is my man.

Campy skit in the locker room to raise money for the inner-city sports programs? There's Ren and his megawatt smile, delivering lines with effortless charm. Photoshoot for the local animal shelter's fundraiser? Ren's laughing as kitties claw up his massive shoulders and puppies whine for his attention, lapping his chin while he lavishes them with that wide, sunny grin.

Sometimes, it's practically stomach-turning. I still get queasy when I remember the time Ren sat with a young cancer patient. Turning white as a sheet, given his fear of needles, he told her the world's lamest knock-knock jokes while he donated blood and she had her bloodwork done. So they could be brave together.

Cue the collective female swoon.

I shouldn't complain. I shouldn't. Because, truly, the guy's a nonstop-scoring, smiling, six-foot-three hunk of happy, who makes my job much easier than it otherwise would be. But there's only so much sunshine that a grump like me can take. And for three years, Ren has been pushing my limit.

In the locker room, I scowl down at my phone, handling an asshole troll on the team's Twitter page, while I weave through the maze of half-naked men. I've seen it all a thousand times, and I could care less—

“*Oof*,” I grunt as my face connects with a bare, solid chest.

“Sorry, Frankie.” Strong hands steady me by my shoulders. It's the happy man himself, Ren Bergman. But this time, he's shirtless, which Ren never is. He's the most modest of the bunch.

I'm tallish, which places my gaze squarely in line with Ren's chiseled-from-stone pectoral muscles. And flat, dusky nipples, which tighten as the air chills his damp skin. I try to avert my eyes, but they have a mind of their own, drifting lower and lower to his six-, no eight-, no—dammit, his *a-lot-of*—pack.

My swallow is so loud it practically echoes in the room. “I-it's okay.”

Well, hello there, husky, sexed-up escort voice.

I clear my throat and tear my eyes away from his body. “No worries,” I tell him. “My fault.” Lifting my phone, I wiggle it side to side. “Serves me right for traipsing around, nose-deep in Twitter.”

Ren smiles which just spirals my mood even further south. The amount of dopamine that this guy's brain makes daily is probably my annual sum total.

Smoothing a hand over his playoff beard, he then brings it to the back of his neck and scratches, which I've learned over the past few years is his nervous tic. His bicep bunches, one rounded shoulder flexes, and I try not to stare at his massive lats, which give his upper body a powerful “V” shape, knitting themselves to his ribs, and a long, trim waist.

The visual feast results in a temporary short circuit, wiping my thoughts clean but for a two-word refrain.

Wowy. Muscles.

It must be because whereas the rest of the team are practically nudists, Ren always disappears for a shower and comes back rocking a fresh suit, crisp shirt, and tie. I've never seen this much Ren Bergman nakedness. Ever.

And I'm riveted.

"You're rather unclothed," I blurt.

He blushes and drops his hand to his side. "True." Leaning in, he lifts one eyebrow and says conspiratorially, "This *is* the locker room, you know."

I resist the fierce urge to tweak his nipple. "Don't sass me, Bergman. I wasn't finished." I take a step back because, holy hell, does that man smell good. Fresh soap and a warm spiciness chasing it. Something enticingly male. "You don't *normally* waltz around naked like—"

Kris streaks by bare-assed on a high-pitched shriek, whipping his towel playfully at Ren as he passes. I lift a hand in the doofus's direction. "Schar makes my point for me."

Ren's blush deepens as he glances away. "You're right. I don't normally traipse around like this. I just forgot something I needed."

"What did you forget? Your suit's right back there." I can see it from here, hanging near the showers. Smart man. Steamy air takes out the wrinkles.

Dammit, now I'm thinking about Ren taking steamy showers.

"Well, uh..." he says. "I forgot what goes *underneath* the suit."

"Oh."

My cheeks heat. Good grief. Of course. The guy forgot his boxers—*Ooh, or maybe briefs?* I need to stop thinking about this—and here I am holding him up like it's the Spanish Inquisition.

As if he can read my dirty thoughts, Ren pins me with those unnaturally intense eyes—catlike and pale as the ice he skates on. “I’ll just go get them, then...”

“Great idea.” I step to one side, as Ren goes the same way. We both laugh awkwardly. Then Ren tries for the other side, just as I do, too. “Jesus,” I mumble. So mortifying. Were the earth to open up and swallow me whole, this moment would be significantly improved.

“Here.” Ren’s hands land warm on my shoulders again, his touch gentle, unlike most of the guys on the team, who seem incapable of not knocking into me like they’re the Hulk. While I flinch before incoming contact with them, there’s something graceful and controlled about Ren.

“I’ll go this way,” he says. “You go that way.”

Like a revolving door, we finally manage to move past each other. Once Ren’s strolling away, I’d like to say I don’t glance over my shoulder to ogle the guy’s backside from the revealing contours of a locker room towel, but I’m not in the habit of lying.

“Fraaaaankie,” an obnoxious voice yells.

That’s Matt Maddox. Evil yin to Ren’s pure-goodness yang.

“Jesus, keep me strong,” I mutter.

In our little nature metaphor, in which I’m the thundercloud and Ren’s the sun, Matt’s the reeking sulfurous geyser that everyone runs away from. While Ren is warm and always gentlemanly, Matt is, in short, a natural disaster of grade-A douchery.

Matt crosses the locker room and closes in on me, not for the first time. Not by a long stretch.

Bracing myself for impact, I pocket my phone and prepare to mouth-breathe. I’m used to the stank of our locker room, but post-game, the guys smell extra ripe, and I have a sensitive sniffer. I gag in here regularly.

Slinging a stinky arm around me, Matt jars my whole body. I clench my jaw and try not to wince. “Where’s your phone?” he

says. “I think we need a selfie, Frank.”

I duck and shuffle backward, out of his reach. “And *I* think you need a shower. You do your job, Maddox. I’ll do mine.”

He rakes his sweat-soaked dark hair back from his face and sighs. “One of these days, I’m gonna crack you.”

“I’m a tough nut, champ.” Turning, I unearth my phone, swipe open to the camera and angle it over my head so it cuts out Matt and catches the guys behind me. Nobody’s in a state of extensive undress anymore—a few bare chests, most everyone almost done putting on their suits. Fans eat that shit for breakfast. “Smile, boys!”

They all whip their heads my way, plastering on dutiful grins as they say, “Cheese!”

I have them so well trained.

“Thank you.” Pocketing my phone, I head toward the exit. “Don’t forget, drinks—not in excess—and burgers at Louie’s. Uber if you plan on getting shitfaced anyway.”

On a chorus of “*Yes, Frankie*” echoing behind me, I shove open the door, buoyed by the satisfied purpose of a woman whose life is ordered and predictable. Just how I like it.

* * *

At Louie’s, I throw off my blazer and push up my sleeves in preparation for the meal I ordered. Suits and greasy bar food aren’t the best combination, but there’s never time to change after my post-game duties before we head out, so I’m stuck sporting my usual work outfit.

Like the rest of the staff and players, on game day, I wear a suit. The same one, every game. Black peplum blazer, matching ankle-cut dress slacks, and a white dress shirt with black buttons. My cropped slacks show off my Nike Cortez

sneakers in our signature black and silver, and my nails are of course painted their usual glossy black with silver shimmer on the middle finger, because it makes flipping people off extra festive. The whole look is very Wednesday Addams, with a similar and intended repelling effect. People leave me alone. Which is how I like it.

“Double cheeseburger,” Joe, our bartender, says.

“Thanks.” I nod and pull the plate my way.

Nice thing about Louie’s is they give our orders first preference—bunch of hungry jocks need food *stat* after a game—so not ten minutes after arriving, sleeves rolled up, grease drips down my wrists as I bite into my burger. I hold it over my plate and lean to trap my drink’s straw with my mouth, taking a long pull of root beer.

Louie’s is one of those hole-in-the-wall gems of an LA burger joint that feels fewer and further between with each passing, granola-crunching year. I swear, even just four years ago when I moved here, LA was still the land of the greasy burger and the world’s best street food. Now it’s all juice bars and whatever shit GOOP says will flatten your stomach.

As root beer fizzes happily in my belly, I extract a pickle from my sandwich and crunch on it. “Life’s too short to give up burgers.”

Willa grunts in agreement from her seat next to me. She’s dating Ren’s brother Ryder and they try to come down for a handful of games each season, so this isn’t the first time Willa and I have talked, but it is the first time we’ve bonded over the sad turn for the healthier that Southern-Californian food has taken. Or more accurately, I’ve been monologuing about it for five minutes straight while she grunts and eats and seems to agree with me. I tend to fixate on something, then talk longer than most people about it, which I’ve learned annoys people sometimes, bores them others, and every once in a while, manages to interest them similarly.

Unfortunately, I usually only recognize in retrospect when I’ve monologued. I swear, I’m not making that up. I cannot tell when it’s happening. Everyone knows the saying “time flies

when you're having fun," and that's the only way I can explain how my awareness works when I'm in a groove, talking about something that I like—I have no sense of how long it's been.

Because this isn't my first time around Willa, though, I know she and I are comfortable enough around each other that she'd shut me up or change the subject if she wanted to. We've only hung out a few times since, as a professional soccer player, she's pretty busy, but we've clicked at the handful of games she and Ryder have attended.

"Glorious burgers," she says thickly around a bite. "I could never let them go. I mean Coach would kill me for eating this, but goddamn, there is nothing better than a double cheeseburger after a long day. I don't care what my carbon footprint is. Kill that cow and get it in my belly."

Ryder leans away from his conversation adjacent to us and says to her, "I'll overlook that environmentally insensitive comment because you're a good kisser, Sunshine, and I cook plant-based for us eighty percent of the time."

Sheepishly, Willa smiles up at him. "Sometimes I wish those doodads around your ears didn't work *quite* so well, Ry."

Ryder uses cochlear implants, which I can barely see amid his thick blond hair. Like Ren, Ryder is a handsome guy. Short beard, bright green eyes, and Ren's cheekbones.

Willa and Ryder live up in Washington State, where Willa plays for Reign FC, and their place is nestled in the middle of the woods. To look at them, you can totally picture it. Ryder gives off an outdoorsy vibe with his plaid flannel shirt, faded jeans, and boots. Willa fits with him in her warm, practical clothes—a UCLA hoodie and ripped-up jeans, no makeup in sight to accentuate her big amber eyes and pouty lips. She has an incredible head of hair that's untamed waves and curls, no product, no styling. Just wilderness beauty.

Willa's as *au naturel* on the inside as she is on the outside, and that is my kind of person. The people I get along with typify a "what you see is what you get" mindset, and in that way, Willa's very like my two good friends in LA, Annie and Lo. Making friends doesn't come easily to me, but I feel like I'm

becoming friends with down-to-earth, cheeseburger-loving Willa Sutter.

Ryder grins at her, making Willa's smile widen. I drop my burger to my plate with a splat and drag a fry through ketchup. "Good grief. Just kiss already."

Ryder laughs. Planting his lips softly on Willa's temple, he then turns back to his conversation, a half circle of men made up of Ren, Rob our captain, François our goalie, and Lin, a promising rookie defender.

"Sorry about that." Willa's cheeks turn bright pink as she sips her lemonade. "We're still in that I-really-like-you-and-always-want-to-jump-your-bones phase."

I wave it away, fry in hand. "I'm the one who should apologize. My brain's an unfiltered place. Most of what it thinks tends to come barreling out of my mouth. I didn't mean to be rude. You're in love and happy. Nothing to be sorry for."

Willa smiles as she picks up her burger. "Thanks. I mean I used to find it gross when I saw people in public looking so in love. I always thought, 'Is it *that* hard to keep that kind of hanky-panky for home?'" She takes a big bite of burger and says around it, "Then I met Ryder and realized, yeah, with the right person, it's that hard."

My burger catches in my throat. What a terrifying possibility, to find yourself so attracted to someone you can't *help* but love them. I try to smile to show her I'm okay, but I'm incapable of an involuntarily grin. Every time I try, I end up giving the impression that I'm about to throw up.

Willa laughs. "You look like I just told you that's dog shit between your hamburger bun."

Bingo.

I finally clear my throat and stare down at my food. "I, uh..." My stance on relationships is hard to explain. And while I like Willa, it's not something I'm ready to get into with her.

She nudges me. "Hey, I'm just teasing you." Tipping her head, she stares at me for a long minute. "You're not a relationship gal?"

I shake my head, then take a bite of food. “No, I’m not. No knocks against them. They’re just not a good fit for me.”

“Yeah. I was very against them myself when I met the lumberjack.” She throws a thumb over her shoulder to the group of men where Ryder stands. Ren laughs at something he says, making Ryder laugh, too.

They’re nearly twins in profile, except that everything about Ren just screams at me to look at him. Unruly russet waves, long nose, and sharp cheekbones. That playoff beard he somehow keeps neat, so I can still see the hint of full lips that twist in wry amusement. His eyes crinkle when he laughs, and he has this habit of clutching his chest and bending over slightly, like someone’s capacity to amuse him goes straight to his heart.

So happy. So carefree. What’s it like to live like that? To be so unburdened?

I have no clue. In past relationships, *I’ve* been the burden. A set of issues to be handled, complications to be managed. Back home, people treated me like a problem, not a person. And so, I came to two conclusions. First, it was time to move away, and second, for the sake of protecting myself from repeating that humiliation, my heart is best left alone, safe under lock and key.

So I wear black. I don’t smile. I hide behind a heavy curtain of dark hair and a mile-long to-do list. I welcome the witch metaphors, walk around with a frown, and grunt in response whenever possible. I don’t make friends with the neighbors or attend team picnics. I stay safe in my solitude, cold and untouchable.

For damn good reason. I will not be treated how I was ever again.

Willa pats my hand gently, then pops a fry in her mouth. “Want to know what made me change my mind?”

I glance up at her. “No.”

That makes her laugh again. “Ah, Frankie. You’re a keeper. Rooney’s going to love you.”

“Rooney?”

“My best friend from college. She’s at Stanford now. Biomedical law.”

A rare feat for me, I manage to bite my tongue and not mention my own plans for law school. Yes, I sent my application to UCLA months ago. Yes, I obsessed and slaved over my application, and I’m practically positive it’s perfect. But I haven’t received my acceptance letter.

I keep my mouth shut and suck down some root beer.

“One of the Bergman brood will inevitably have a birthday soon,” Willa says. From what I can remember of what he’s said about his family, Ren has a daunting number of siblings, most of whom live nearby. He’s one of those rare athletes who got drafted by his hometown and never wants to leave it. Which, to this ex-New Yorker who deliberately moved cross-country, is mind-blowing.

“Ziggy, is it?” Willa stares up at the ceiling, going through some sort of mental calendar. “Yeah, I think Ziggy’s next. Once Ry and I got together, especially once we moved to Tacoma, Rooney started coming to all the Bergman family parties to have the most time to see me and catch up. She’s an extroverted only child, so she fell in love with the big family, and now she’s an honorary Bergman. Come to Ziggy’s party, and you’ll meet Rooney then.”

I choke on my soda. “Uh, I don’t know why I’d be there.”

Willa pats my back gently. “Because I just invited you. I need solidarity at these things, Frankie. All these Bergmans, Rooney, too—none of them are surly or maladapted enough. Not like you and me.”

“Thanks?”

“I need a kindred cantankerous spirit. Seriously, come next time. You and Ren are friends. His mom’s always nagging him to bring a lady. I bet he’d love to have you come along.”

There are so many stupefying components to what she just said, I’m coming up short of words. I blink away, shuffling my fries around my plate.

Willa picks up her food but pauses before she takes a bite. “Also, from one crotchety soul to another, should you ever find someone who makes you want to reconsider your stance on relationships, I’m here for you, okay? Just say the word.”

Frankie

Playlist: “How to Be a Heartbreaker,” MARINA

Before I have a chance to respond to Willa’s unsettling offer, Matt, The Master of Douchical Mischief, drops next to me at the bar. I can smell beer on him.

Reaching right over me, Matt offers Willa his hand. “You’re the soccer star. Renford’s sisler-in-law,” he slurs.

“Not quite. Just Willa.” Shaking his hand, she quickly releases it, then wipes her palm on her jeans beneath the bar.

Matt’s arm lands with a hard thud around my shoulders, nearly knocking me into my food. “Frank. Frank, Frank, Frank.” He sighs. “When are you gonna stop with the ice-queen act?”

I straighten and try to shrug off his arm, but he just locks it tighter. “Frank,” he says. “We both know there’s something here—”

“Matt. Get your arm off of me before I crush your nuts with the Elder Wand.”

The Elder Wand is what I named my cane.

Yeah, I’m twenty-six, and I use a cane. It looks like smoke glass, but instead it’s acrylic and totally badass. It’s also great for smacking dweebs like Maddox in the nuts.

Matt drops his arm and frowns. “I don’t get you. You’re so hot and cold.”

“No, I’m not, Matt. I run as consistently frigid as a high-end freezer. Don’t put this on me. Just because I’m a female who’s regularly in your vicinity and not fangirling over you like the many troubled souls who buy your jockstraps on eBay does not mean I secretly desire to screw you into next week.”

Matt frowns. “You don’t?”

“I don’t.”

“What the hell, Frank?” he yells. Loud enough that everyone in the private room we’re in stops talking for a second and glances over at us.

“Matt, I think you should order an Uber now.”

“I drove,” he growls, signaling Joe.

Seeing Matt call him, Joe walks toward us. When I catch his eye and gently shake my head, Joe stops, pivots, then turns back to continue washing glasses.

Matt curses under his breath. “Did you just shut me off, Frank?”

“Yes.” I turn and smile apologetically at Willa as I otherwise ignore Matt. Tipping my cup, I take a drink of root beer.

“Frank.” He grabs my wrist, which sends the root beer flying from my hand and landing with an ice-cold splatter all over my shirt.

I hiss at the shock of it. “Jesus, Maddox.”

Suddenly a large hand grabs the back of Matt’s shirt and wrenches him off the barstool so violently, he tumbles to the floor. Ren bends, sweeping up my blazer, which fell too, and immediately throws it over my shoulders. When he straightens, my mouth falls open.

Ren Bergman is *really* not smiling.

And not-smiling Ren Bergman is a whole new animal. No, *man*.

Move aside, Erik the Red. There’s a new enraged ginger Viking come to slay, and Lord help me, cinnamon sexpots are my weakness. I’ve been relying on the fluorescents we work under to dull Ren’s hair to burnished bronze. I tell myself every time I see him that he’s not actually a *ginger* god of ice hockey glory. He’s a brassy blond god of ice hockey glory. It helped. Marginally.

But now I have to face the facts: Ren's hair is the gorgeous copper of a fading sunset, and the anger radiating off of him is equally breathtaking.

I gape at him, Ren the Red, vengefully sexy, and command my jaw to snap shut. It's time to find my inner feminist. To bolster my walls. Ren throwing down on my behalf should not be affecting me like this. Especially given my history.

Archaic male demonstrations of protectiveness are not sexy.
Archaic male demonstrations of protectiveness are not sexy.
Archaic—

Dammit, this is sexy, and my body knows it. I can't deny it any more than I can deny my Harry Potter panties are now as wet as a rainy day at Hogwarts. Ren swivels his pale eyes, a stunning wintry blue gray, right on Maddox. They're cold fury as they glare at him, then return to me.

"Joey, a towel, please." His voice holds a tone of command I've heard Ren use on the ice countless times before, but never in any conversation involving me. My belly does a somersault as I watch a towel fly his way, before Ren immediately sets it in my hands. "Here."

"Th-thanks," I mutter stupidly, dabbing my shirtfront. I'm already shivering from this cold-as-balls wet shirt plastered to my skin.

Abruptly, Ren lurches toward the bar. I glance up and realize it's Matt who slammed into him.

"Maddox," I snap. "Stop!"

Ren shoves him off, spins, and deftly grabs Matt by the throat. "You fucking *torture* her. It's enough. Leave her alone."

Wow. Ren never swears. Well, not like that, at least not in public or with the team. Elizabethan oaths are more his speed. *Hugger-mugger. Malignancy. Canker-blossom.* He's subtle about it, muttering them under his breath, but I have exceptionally good hearing, and since I caught the first one, I'm always craning to listen when I'm around him, hoping I'll overhear another.

The worst part? He's good at it. Like, I have to feign a coughing jag every time he uses them, or I'd run the risk of laughing, maybe even smiling, and then my reputation as resident ice-queen hard-ass would be shot.

Ren's still throttling Matt. Perhaps it's time to intervene before our most valuable player gets himself benched for misconduct.

"The chivalry's unnecessary, Bergman," I tell him. Standing slowly off the stool, I swallow a groan as my hips scream in disapproval.

We don't like barstools, Frankie, my joints holler. You know this.

I wrap my hand around Ren's forearm and try to ignore the soft fiery hairs beneath, the powerful tendon and muscle flexing under my grip. "Please, Ren. He's drunk. It's pointless."

"Oh, there would be a point." Ren glares at Matt and shakes him by the windpipe. "He'd learn a lesson if I beat his ass."

"Hey now." Rob slides in.

I sigh in relief. "Where've you been?"

"I had to take a leak." Rob manages to pull Ren's hand away from Matt's throat. "Can't a guy piss and not come back to the kids trying to kill each other? Ren Bergman, resorting to violence. Never thought I'd see the day. I'm sure Maddox deserves whatever you were about to do, but let's handle this like adults."

Matt leers at him. "Bergman's just jealous."

I rub the pounding spot between my eyes. "*Jealous* would imply he has something to envy between us, Maddox." Or that Ren even cares who does or doesn't hit on me. Why would he?

"Now, Matthew." Rob cups his hand around Matt's neck and pulls him aside. "You're catching an Uber home. You're going to sober up. Then, tomorrow, at practice, you're going to apologize to Frankie."

Rob catches my eye and furrows his brow. The first few times he did it after I started working for the team, I thought he was

angry at me. That's because I suck at reading facial expressions.

How, you ask, does someone with that kind of interpersonal hang-up work in social media? She watches lots of sports interviews and sitcoms to memorize the context and meaning for as much human behavior as possible, that's how. But sometimes even that's not enough, and I find myself in the dark. That's when I simply have to ask. Which is what I had to do with Rob. Now I know that this particular expression is a nonverbal check-in.

"I'm okay," I tell him.

He nods and yanks Matt away. Ren's still glaring in their direction as they disappear down the back hall. When he turns and looks at me, pinning me with those icy eyes, a shiver rolls up my spine.

"Are you all right?" he asks quietly. His voice is deep, warm.

"I'm fine, Ren." Except for my soaked Harry Potter panties. And my shredded emotional boundaries, after seeing his pissed-off, fiery alter ego that's made forgotten corners of me blaze to life.

Leaning against the stool, I reach for my purse and signal to Joe that I want to square up. Ren's still watching me. I feel his gaze like sunshine, heating my skin. "You're staring at me."

Ren blinks away. "Sorry. I'm just...concerned."

"Concerned?"

"He grabbed you, spilled your drink all over you."

"Thanks." I sweep a hand down my drenched front. "I hadn't noticed."

Raking a hand through his hair in frustration, Ren tugs at the wavy ends. "He could have hurt you."

I slide my card across the bar toward Joe and stare at Ren. People normally assume that I'm helpless, let alone when a handsy, oversized drunk athlete throws himself my way. Here's Ren, referencing that physical vulnerability. This is when the usual embarrassment and anger should arrive.

But it doesn't come.

Because as Ren looks at me, as I process his words, I can't recall a single moment Ren's ever acted or spoken like he thinks I can't take care of myself. He's never hovered behind me like I'm going to take a tumble. He doesn't talk to me like I'm an invalid. Saying that Maddox could have hurt me isn't a reflection on my weakness. It's an indictment on Matt's misuse of his strength.

Ren's eyes lock on mine. My heart pounds against my ribs, and my throat dries up.

It's too much. I blink away, and when I glance back, Ren's gaze has finally shifted to my mouth. A jolt of heat sears my lips, slides down my throat, and lands, warm in my belly.

Someone's hand rests on my back, breaking the moment. I don't know Willa well enough to read her face, but thankfully she speaks before I'm left wondering any longer. "I was hoping you'd get to use the Elder Wand," she says. "You okay?"

"You're not the only one who's disappointed. That guy's overdue for a dick smacking." I thank Joe when he returns my card and receipt, which I sign with a flourish. "But, yeah, I'm okay. Just tired. I should head home."

Not that I'm sure how that's happening. Normally, I drive myself everywhere and burn through audiobooks to pass the staggering amount of time I spend in LA traffic. But my car's "check engine" light was on yesterday, so it's in the shop. Rob drove me to Louie's and would I'm sure gladly drive me home as well, but he's still handling Maddox, meaning I have to wait or catch a ride with someone else. I don't do late-night taxi rides alone.

"Frankie," Ren says. "Let me drive you."

I glance up at Ren and commence a Frankie-stare for the books. His eyes are luminous, gray as fog, the kind that blots out your world but for a few feet in front of you, that makes you question what's up or down. So many times, I've had the unsettling feeling I could get just as lost in them.

“Let him drive you,” Willa says. She smiles while threading her arms through her jacket. Ryder steps behind her and helps her get it up over her shoulders, giving her arms an affectionate squeeze as he plants a kiss on top of her head. A small, intimate gesture brimming with so much love, I feel like I just saw something I shouldn’t have.

“I may be a little rusty on my LA geography,” she says, “but Hawthorne’s on the way. We’re staying at Ren’s for the night, and he’s driving us, too. It’ll be a dance party in the new van.”

My attention snaps to Ren. “You bought a van?”

Ren’s cheeks redden, but he stands tall. “Heck, yes, I bought a van. There’s no shame in owning a Honda Odyssey.”

Willa clears her throat and grins, while Ryder’s shoulders shake with what sounds like laughter. He hides it behind a cough into his fist.

I recognize Ren’s posture as signifying defensiveness and immediately feel bad for opening my mouth. This happens sometimes. I ask a question, and people hear...*more* than a question. They hear criticism or judgment or teasing. I’ve given up trying to explain that my brain isn’t wired for that subtlety, that I couldn’t imply those kinds of layers of meaning if I wanted to, because one too many times, people haven’t believed me. They hear excuses, rather than context. So, I stopped trying, and told myself to quit caring when I’m misunderstood.

Now, only those closest to me are trusted with knowing the real reason Frankie has dubious success with sarcasm and picking up on jokes. Why she works resting bitch face and deadpan delivery, wears earplugs at the games, and is obsessively fascinated with Harry Potter, root beer gummies, NHL statistics, linguistics, knee socks, and only wearing gray scale clothing, among many other things...

Autism.

“Ooh!” Willa says. “I call dibs on the music.”

Ryder’s laugh-cough abruptly becomes a groan. “When Willa DJs, I wish my ear doodads didn’t work so well either—*oof*.”

Willa slugs him playfully in the stomach, then grasps his jaw and plants a firm kiss right on his mouth. “Asshole lumberjack. You’re just looking for a fight.”

He grins and wraps an arm around Willa as she drops back on her heels. “Maybe I am.”

They walk out ahead of us, waving goodnight to the rest of the team and their families. A balmy night breeze slips through the door as they head outside, and Ren steps close to me. Carefully, he unhooks my cane off the bar ledge and, bowing with a flourish, tips it toward me. “Your scepter, my liege.”

I feel a rare smile lift my cheeks. “I have heard rumors that you’re a closeted Shakespeare dork, Bergman.”

“They got it all wrong.” He straightens and smiles. “There’s nothing closeted about it.”

A surprised laugh spills out of me, and Ren’s grin widens, brighter than the California noontime sun. But for once, that sunshine smile doesn’t bother this grump one bit.

Ren

Playlist: “For the Time Being,” Erlend Øye

After walking Frankie to her door—complete with a reminder, in her deadpan delivery, that she’s a big girl who can make it from the car to her house—I hop back into the van. She locks herself into her canary-yellow bungalow on 133rd, and I see lights flicker on in the front room before her silhouette shortens as she walks deeper into the house.

Enjoying my super fancy rear-drive cameras, I pull out of Frankie’s driveway.

“Soooo.” Willa grins at me, batting her eyelashes. After Frankie vacated the shotgun seat of the van, Willa hugged her goodbye, hopped into it, and is now curled up, staring at me. Reaching for the volume dial, she turns down Busta Rhymes.

“Thank God,” Ryder mumbles from the backseat. He reattaches his implant transmitters and sits back on a sigh of relief.

“Renny Roo.” Willa leans closer. “We need to talk about Frankie.”

My hands death-grip the steering wheel. “What about her?”

“Uh, about how I *like* her. I want to keep her. I love her bone-dry humor, she knows *everything* possible about Harry Potter, including the latest horror that is its author’s Twitter drivel—”

“What did she do now?” Ryder asks from the backseat.

“Just showed that you can write a magical world brimming with complex, label-defying characters and still be a trans-exclusionary feminist disappointment.”

I sigh. “What’s wrong with people?”

Willa shrugs. “Who the fuck knows. Power corrupts. You’d think writing about it would have given her a little awareness.”

Ryder and I grunt in agreement.

“Back to Frankie,” Willa says. “Did you see how she demolished that burger at Louie’s? I want a woman in the family who destroys bar food like me. Freya’s too health-conscious, and Ziggy eats like a bird. So go back to that front door, find your inner Viking, throw her over your shoulder, and tell her she’s stuck with us.”

Willa and Ryder aren’t engaged, but it’s only a matter of time. She’s family now and is clearly making plans for in-laws down the line. Wiggling into a new position, she sets her feet on the dashboard and gives me a saucy grin.

I can’t afford to even indirectly acknowledge my interest in Frankie, because if I tell Willa, it’s telling the world, which is the last thing I want to do. I change the radio station, so we don’t miss bluegrass hour. “I don’t care how well-insured those feet are, Winnifred. Get them off my dash.”

Willa sighs and drops her feet. “Focus. Talk about Frankie.”

“I’m focusing. On the road.” Clicking on my right turn signal, I check my mirrors and turn off of Frankie’s street onto Hawthorne Boulevard.

“Dude,” Ryder huffs. “*Left* onto Hawthorne, then right onto Inglewood. It’s so much faster.”

I glare at him through the rearview mirror for a microsecond. “Will you ever not backseat drive?”

“Nope.” Willa grins over her shoulder at him. “When we first moved to Tacoma, we had so many fights because he was telling me my business from shotgun. Now I just let him drive and pretend he’s my chauffeur. It was that or dismember him.”

Ryder smirks. “I didn’t mind fighting in the car with you. It generally led to consequences I was more than happy to suffer.”

“Okay.” I throw up a hand. “This van is a G-rated space.”

That makes Willa snort-laugh. “I still can’t get over the fact that you bought a van.” She sighs happily. “It’s so you.”

“Between the guys on the team and Shakespeare Club, I’m always driving a handful of people somewhere. Plus, it has tons of room for my equipment—”

“And those babies you and Frankie are going to make.”

If I weren’t a freakishly coordinated athlete, I would have crashed the car.

“Willa,” Ryder says from the backseat. “Go easy on him.”

“*Easy*? I don’t know what that word means.” Poking my shoulder, Willa leans in. “So, tell me, how far do you two go back?”

“She started working for the Kings one year before me.”

“So, you’ve known her your entire professional career. Hm.” Willa narrows her eyes and strokes an invisible goatee. “Interesting.”

“Willa,” Ryder says warningly.

She makes a shooing motion at Ryder, as if he’s an annoying gnat, not a guy built like a linebacker who has no problem tickling her until she pees herself. “And have you or have you not refrained from dating since you signed with the Kings?” she prods me.

I studiously focus on the road. “Like most rookies, I’ve spent virtually every moment since I signed focused on my career.”

“But you’re not a rookie anymore.”

“Doesn’t mean I suddenly have time for romance.”

She scowls. “I don’t buy that. You got your kicks in college, didn’t you? You balanced the demands of Division I hockey, academics, and romance *then*.”

“I didn’t have a girlfriend in college.” Pressing a bunch of buttons without breaking my focus on the road, I finally find the one that lowers my window. Willa’s interrogation is making me sweat.

“That’s an evasion if I ever heard one. The point is you made time to date. Or, shall I say, for the benefit of your Renaissance romanticism, thou didst woo and court.”

I roll my eyes. “Forsooth, Wilhelmina, sometimes ‘I desire that we be better strangers.’”

Willa scrunches her nose. “Huh?” She works it out and smacks my chest. “Hey, that’s rude. And untrue. You love me. I’m your favorite almost-sister-in-law.”

“You’re my *only* almost-sister-in-law.”

“Renny Roo, I will not be distracted. You like her, don’t you? It’s why you haven’t dated anyone since you joined the team.”

I stare at the road. Why does it take this long to drive a few miles to Manhattan Beach?

Willa sighs dreamily. “Gah. It’s romantic as hell. You’re pining for her.”

Ryder pats my shoulder sympathetically from the backseat. I don’t expect him to chime in. He’s the quietest of all of us, and when Willa’s on a roll, there’s no stopping her, anyway.

“Willis.” I glance over at her as we wait at the red light on Sepulveda. “Frankie is incredibly serious about her work. I’ve known her for three years, and in that entire time, it’s been clear that I’m just one of the guys to her, a part of the job. A job with clear rules discouraging staff-player dating, at that.”

Willa stares at me as the light turns green, which saves me from meeting those intense amber eyes. “Interesting answer.” She sits back and opens her window, letting in a new gust of warm spring air.

“Why was that interesting?” Ryder asks.

Willa grins. “Because it really wasn’t an answer at all.”

Unlike most of my peers—and trust me, they hate me for this—playing professional hockey wasn't my childhood dream. I come from a big Swedish-American family of footballers, as Mom's side of the family says in Europe, or here in the US, soccer players.

Ryder, who's next in birth order after me, was playing for UCLA with deserved confidence he'd go pro after, but bacterial meningitis damaged his hearing and equilibrium so severely his freshman year, his career ended there. Freya played at UCLA, too, but hung up her cleats afterward, got her doctorate, and began practicing physical therapy. She didn't love soccer enough to make it her life, she said. Axel, my older brother, kept up with it through high school and still enjoys playing on a competitive co-ed league.

My two younger brothers, Viggo and Oliver, are both excellent, but only Oliver is playing college level, while Viggo decided not to go to college and now plays competitive rec like Axel. The baby in our family, Ziggy, is eons beyond her high school peers' skill level and plays for the U-20 Women's National Team. She's determined to be on the Women's Olympic Team one day, and if I doubted her ability—which I don't—just her persevering nature would convince me that she'll get there.

As for me, I played and liked soccer. I was good at it. But I never *loved* it. When I hit high school, I wasn't close with anyone on the soccer team, and while I excelled at goalie, my heart wasn't in it. I was a recent transplant from Washington State. I didn't fit in with the Cali boys, this gangly, dorky, six-foot ginger who liked poetry and live theater, who didn't feel comfortable talking about girls the way the other guys did, who hated the petty power games and awful way guys treated each other in the locker room and hallways.

During my sophomore year, at some party my parents were hosting, my dad's colleague took a look at me, apparently saw potential, and asked if I was interested in trying hockey. In his downtime, Dr. Evans coached a league of guys my age and said he'd give me personal lessons, see if I liked it.

There was grace and fluidity to hockey that I'd been missing in soccer, that unfurled inside me the moment I laced up a pair of skates and took to the ice. When I got that stick in my hand, the cool silence of a rink to myself, the puck in front of me, it was like I'd finally found my natural habitat. I came *alive* skating, playing hockey. I still do.

Every day I pinch myself that this is my job. That I get paid to play a game I love, to be a role model to little kids, and to contribute to my community. I also pinch myself that I get to see Frankie every day I work.

She's one of the first people I met when I signed. After meetings running through legalese and expectations and schedule and logistics, there was Frankie in the doorway, strutting in with a smoke-colored cane and fresh Nikes in the team's colors. Looking at her, I felt something slam inside my chest as air rushed out of me, more brutal than any check against the boards.

She sat down across from me, explaining what I'd need to do to cultivate my social media presence, how to tweet and post on Instagram, how to engage, how to complement what she did during practices and games.

My favorite moment was when she gave me a critical once-over and said, "I apologize in advance that I have to say this, but if you post a dick pic on any social media platform or send one to any woman's inbox, when I'm through with you, you won't have a dick to *pic* anymore. Get my meaning?"

She was courteous and entirely professional after that, like she hadn't just threatened to castrate me, albeit for good reason. I remember trying to listen to what she was saying while struggling not to stare at her mouth. I still struggle with that.

The door to the treatment room swings open, followed by a familiar, "Ren Zenzero." *ZENZehrrro* is how Frankie says it.

My head snaps up from the massage table. I have no idea why she calls me that. I know it sounds Italian, and I've almost googled it a dozen times, but I'm kind of scared to find out what it means. I just know when she uses the word, it rolls off her tongue in a way that makes my whole body tighten, the

hair on my neck and arms stands on end. It sounds effortless and emphatic, only further evidence that Frankie is very much Italian, as if her name wasn't a dead giveaway.

Francesca Zeferino. Though if you call her anything other than Frank or Frankie, she'll twist your nipple until you burst into tears. Her hair is a sheet of coffee-colored silk that falls halfway down her back. She has forever golden skin that glows like she's lit from within, big hazel eyes, thick dark lashes, rosy lips, and a ridiculously deep dimple in her left cheek.

Frankie stops at the side of the massage table, lifts her cane, and smacks my ass with it.

"Ow!" I yelp.

John, one of our trainers, is used to Frankie's authoritarian approach with players. He lifts his hands and backs away. "Just holler when she's done beating you."

I stare up at Frankie. "What the heck was that for?"

She scowls. "Your Shakespeare reading club is attending *en masse* tomorrow. I did not know about this."

My stomach drops. That was not supposed to get out. A furious blush crawls up my throat to my cheeks. This is one of the disadvantages of having reddish hair. Dad and Ziggy, as the fellow gingers in the family, empathize. You can't hide your emotions to save your life—you wear them on your skin.

I swallow nervously and slowly sit up. "Who told you that?"

"That is irrelevant." Frankie leans on her cane and gives me a stern glare. "This was almost a *huge* missed opportunity. What were you thinking, keeping it from me? Do you know how many ideas I have? In the five minutes since I've known, I already—"

"Frankie." I lean forward, elbows on my knees. With her height, and because she's right next to the bench, we're eye to eye, our noses nearly touching.

For just a second, her eyes lock with mine, slivers of bronze and emerald disappearing as her pupils expand. She blinks,

takes a step back, and clears her throat. “What?”

“Frankie, that part of my world...it’s private.”

“Why?” She tips her head like I’m genuinely confusing her. Like she doesn’t understand the discrepancy most people would see between who I am here—former Rookie of the Year, alternate captain, Viking on ice—and the part of me that still nerds out on Shakespeare and poetry readings.

“I’m not ashamed of them or my interests, but some of those guys, they’re not into the camera and the spotlight. They’re dorks like me, who find any kind of undue attention too reminiscent of the kind of attention they got in the past.”

Frankie steps closer. “Zenzero, are you telling me that *you* were a nerd in high school? That you had dorky friends?”

“Yes.”

She gives me a rare smile, and the dimple pops out. God help me, not the dimple right now.

“Are you saying...” Her eyes search mine. “Are you serious? *You*? You were teased in high school? You were—”

“A misfit. Yeah. And not all of my Shakespeare Club necessarily moved out of that demographic. I don’t want to make them uncomfortable, okay?”

Frankie covers her mouth. “Okay.” It comes out muffled.

“Are you laughing at me?”

She shakes her head. “I’m dying of adorkableness.” At least that’s what I think she mumbles.

I don’t know whether to be offended or amused. “Frankie, how long have you known me? Do I not have *weirdsmobile* written across my forehead?”

She snorts behind her hand. Another shake of her head.

“Wow. For your job relying entirely on social astuteness, you missed the signs big-time.”

That makes her stop laughing. Her hand falls away. “Sometimes...” She swallows and twists her fingers around a

necklace she nearly always wears. It has metal shapes and charms on it that she slips her fingers through, twists and rolls and spins. She does it often, like it soothes her.

“Sometimes I misread people,” she says quietly. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t laughing at you. It was a pleasant surprise. I thought the Shakespeare stuff was...an eccentricity. You telling me that this runs much deeper, I’ll respect that it’s private.”

She avoids my eyes, focuses on a piece of lint on her sleeve, and brushes it away.

There’s incongruence between her words and her appearance right now. She sounds fine, but she looks like I just yanked the rug out from underneath her. I feel simultaneously guilty and curious. What is she hiding?

I make to stand, but Frankie sets her hand on my chest and pushes me back with surprising strength. “Back to Shakespeare Club,” she says. “The dork years. I need details. I need so many details—”

“Frank the Crank.” Matt strolls into the treatment room and walks up to her, blatantly interrupting us and ignoring me. He sticks out his hand. “I’ve come to kiss ass and say sorry.”

Rage rolls through me. I still want to throttle him until his creepy brown eyes pop out of his head for what a jerk he was to her at Louie’s.

“Water under the bridge,” she tells him. Frankie takes his hand and flinches as he squeezes too hard.

Andy and Kris stroll in, breaking the tension of the moment. Matt releases her hand, just as Kris pulls the elastic on Matt’s shorts and releases it with a snap.

“Asshole!” Matt barks.

Kris ignores that and offers Frankie a gentle fist pound, which she meets. “Hey, Frankie.”

“Frank the Taaaank,” Andy calls.

Frankie smiles as they both race for the same massage table, like the over-competitive dweebs that they are. Kris trips Andy, but Andy brings him down with him. They both flip

over each other across the stretching mat and land on twin groans.

Lifting her phone, Frankie snaps a picture, then grins down at it and sighs. “You guys really do make my job easy.”

“Frankie.” The door into the trainers’ room bangs open again, revealing Millie, one of the admins who works part-time in the corporate office, part-time here at the front desk. She’s a spry seventy-five, a voracious reader, and she officially joined Shakespeare Club last year. “You gotta move your car, toots. They’re paving.”

“What?” Frankie groans. And that sound... It goes straight to my groin.

I clear my throat and have to recall a particularly traumatizing memory involving Viggo, Oliver, and a Costco-sized jar of mayonnaise to stop my body from further responding. “I’ll move it for you, Frankie.”

“Nah.” She’s halfway to the door, when she turns and points her cane at me in the air. “I’m not done with you, Bergman. I want answers.”

I give her an innocent smile. “Sure thing.”

Grumbling, she leaves, passing Millie, who holds open the door and crooks a finger at me. I follow in Frankie’s wake, stopping when Frankie turns the corner and I’m close enough for Millie to whisper, “Club meeting is still on for next week?”

“No, the following week. Two weeks from now.”

She smiles and adjusts her glasses. “Oh, okay. Good thing I asked. Now, I’ll admit, this is my first time reading *As You Like it*, and I’m a little confused. Everybody’s in love, but nobody’s together, and they’re all hiding something.”

“That’s Shakespeare’s version of romantic comedy. It will all be clear in the end.”

Her laugh is soft and wispy. “Fair enough. But—” She pulls out a few pages and unfolds them. “Can you help me break down this dialogue? I’m worried I’m going to read it wrong...”

I take a few minutes to help Millie find the subtext in her lines, but we're interrupted when Tyler comes strolling our way. She pockets her script and is halfway out the door before she stops and spins to face me. "Say, maybe you should make sure Frankie's not having trouble with her car."

I frown. "Why would she have—" Suspicion dawns. "Mildred Sawyer. You did not tamper with Frankie's car."

"Who, me?" She grins and wiggles her eyebrows. "'Love goes by haps; Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps.'"

"You're getting Second Yeoman next script," I hiss as I breeze by her and jog toward the parking lot.

Mildred's cackle echoes down the hallway. Maybe I'll cast her as a witch instead.

I stumble outside, then freeze as I see Frankie sweating over her car. The hood is thrown open, her hair's up in a haphazard bun, and she has car grease on her cheek. I stand there stupidly, committing the image to memory.

"What?" She straightens and wipes her hands with a rag that's draped over the headlight. "Never seen a woman fix her car?"

I swallow. "Sorry. I was...That is..." Walking closer, I peer down at the crazy puzzle of wires and parts. "What's wrong?"

"Loose spark plug. Easy fix. Just making sure nothing else is off. First my 'check engine' light, now this. Some punk is enjoying fucking with my car."

I'm going to throttle a seventy-five-year-old. Mildred obviously doesn't know Frankie very well. I could have told her tampering this trivially was a waste. Frankie's the most fiercely independent person I know—of course she can troubleshoot her car's basic issues.

A loud noise from nearby makes both of us glance up. The asphalt machine rattles, a slew of construction workers waiting at the edge of the parking lot.

"Well," Frankie says as she drops the hood, "thanks for coming to the rescue, but I managed to save myself."

"I never doubted it, Frankie."

She squints up at me, shielding her eyes from the sun. “Here.” I grunt as her fist connects with my stomach, her blazer balled up in her grip. “Take this inside for me, will you? I’ve got to move the car already, and I’m sweating my ass off.”

Throwing open her car door, Frankie flicks off the pavers when they whistle at her and peels away toward the alternate parking lot.

Frankie

Playlist: “The Love Club,” Lorde

My whole life, I’ve either been a puzzle or predicament. As a girl, I was obsessed with routines, anxious, and prone to emotional outbursts. I screamed when clothes were put on me and slept terribly. I had one best friend, and I wanted her all to myself. I hated noisy spaces and cried every week at Mass when they used incense.

As a tween, I’d get so absorbed in reading stories that I forgot to eat all day, talked about books I loved incessantly, cried when they ended, and exhaustively read all fan fic there was. I flipped my shit when my older sister, Gabby, chewed too loudly, when my pants had static cling, when Ma deviated from the meal plan, and when something I left in one place wasn’t there when I went to find it.

Sometimes, I drove my family nuts. Confused Ma, irritated Nonna, and frustrated Gabby. But Daddy always got me. He’d hold me tight and rock me in his arms. He gave me warm baths and asked Nonna to sew me loose, swingy dresses to wear over the only kind of leggings I could tolerate. Under Nonna’s firm matriarchal power, I was drilled to sit still, focus, listen, be polite. Social clues and unspoken messages whispered around me, too slippery and evasive to catch, so I turned to my peers, watching and mimicking their movements, gestures, sayings, and facial expressions. I played sports, was a good student. I did my best to pass as one of them.

And for a while, I did. I seemed like a typical kid—whatever the fuck that is—until depression and anxiety after my dad’s death threw me into a tailspin, obliterating the emotional reserves it took to fake normality.

I was thirteen when I was diagnosed with autism. The psychologist said I’d have been diagnosed sooner if not for my

fantastic ability to follow rules, copy behaviors, and pretend I was “normal.” Everyone hits a breaking point, the shrink said. It was only a matter of time before I’d have to stop pretending and get honest about my neurological difference.

In our traditional Italian Catholic household, dominated by Nonna’s skepticism for anything but prayer as a solution to all problems, it was a wonder I’d been brought for an evaluation at all. It’s a testament to how worn out my mother was that she defied Nonna’s insistence I was just a normal, albeit stubborn, handful. But my mom trusted her intuition, sneaking me to a number of appointments with the pediatric psychologist who eventually diagnosed me. I probably haven’t thanked her enough for that.

After diagnosis, I started therapy for managing my anxiety, dealing with deviations from my compulsions and obsession through emotional regulation, and coping with that sometimes depressing outside-looking-in feeling most autistics experience.

Then, as I hit puberty, a growing presence of aches and stiffness crept into my life. For my seventeenth birthday, I got another diagnosis: rheumatoid arthritis. Over the span of one summer, I went from a daily runner and highly active person to someone whose knees and hips were so stiff, I couldn’t get out of bed. A teenager whose hands couldn’t open water bottles or use can openers.

And that’s when I became a problem, not a person. Perhaps if it had just been autism *or* arthritis, I’d have been allowed to be an independent, empowered young woman. But with my mother’s fear and anxiety after my dad’s death, she easily tipped into oppressive, infantilizing hovering. Frankie was fragile, broken, and weak. It was suffocating.

No noisy places, Frankie doesn’t like them.

Not that ball game, those seats are too hard for her to walk to.

Frankie can’t be left alone. Who knows what would happen?

I was an impediment to fun activities and locations, a source of worry and exhaustion, a burden. Wet blanket. Party pooper.

Eeyore.

Until I moved away. My family got to have fun again. And I got a shot at proving to myself I was capable of living on my own, strong and safe and independent.

And I have proven myself, and then some. Even so, I can admit there are days my life is hard. Autism is a lifelong reality that you'll never quite catch the cues, follow the timing, see the world like a lot of people do. And sometimes that has isolating, frustrating, depressing reverberations.

And then there's rheumatoid arthritis, a bitch of an autoimmune disease for which there's no cure, only damage control. The sooner you slow chronic inflammation created by the body attacking itself, the better. Because I was quickly diagnosed, medication largely spared my joints permanent damage. But even with good medication and care, flare-ups happen.

Each time, each flare, my left hip hurts the worst, a favorite hub for my immune system's overenthusiasm. Three years ago, I developed enough chronic pain and weakness in the joint that a cane was necessary. My family fretted—shocker—that it was a sign of my frailty, being twenty-three and needing a cane.

But I embraced it. Perhaps because of my autistic brain and its analytical practicality, I didn't have *feelings* about the cane. I simply saw its functional advantage. It helped. I was steadier with it. My leg didn't give out. I didn't fall on my face. What the hell was bad about that?

Didn't hurt that I found a cane that made me feel like a badass Hogwarts witch, either. Do you know how much mileage you can get out of owning an ersatz wand and a stunning memory of charms and hexes? A lot, that's your answer.

No, life isn't always easy or pain-free, but I have a few friends who know and love the real me, and I've found comfort and stability with the Elder Wand. I also go to counseling, do physical therapy, ride my stationary bike, practice yoga, swim. I take my meds and find my discomfort and challenges survivable most of the time.

In short, I have my life managed for the most part. And when it feels less managed, when my immune system and autistic brain sabotage me, I have my trump card: cannabis, which provides a much-needed break from chronic pain and anxiety.

That's right. Sometimes, to cope with this wild ride that is my life, I get high. Sometimes, my guy Carter at the medical marijuana dispensary convinces me to try this new "perfect strain," and after I smoke up, I fly so high, I'm in the stratosphere, and that's when I know it's time for Frankie to go to bed. But first she must order Chinese. After sticking a pizza in the oven.

I'm so hungry. I just polished off the pizza and have moved on to inhaling gummies while I wait for my moo shoo pork, egg rolls, and wonton soup, when the doorbell rings. Pretty fast turnaround for the Chinese, but I'm not complaining. Slowly, I shuffle over to answer it.

Struggling with the bolt, I eventually manage to unlock the door. After I throw it open, I extend a hand to receive my Chinese feast when I realize who I'm seeing.

I knew I shouldn't have had that last hit on the doobie. I'm imagining things.

A mirage of Ren Bergman stands on my stoop, smiling as always, with a blazer thrown over his arm and a small paper-wrapped package in his hands. Tousled, half-wet hair. A sky-blue long-sleeved shirt that makes his eyes pop. Worn jeans and a pair of beat-up Nikes. Goddamn, the man can wear clothes.

His gaze quickly travels my body as a tomato-red blush stains his cheeks.

Ah, yes. There's reality, punching me in the face: *Attention, Frankie, you're in only a pair of boy short undies emblazoned with the Deathly Hallows, barely covered by an oversized Kings hoodie.*

I tug down the sweatshirt, wishing it was long enough to reach the tops of my neon green compression socks, which stop just

above my kneecaps. I wear them because they give my joints a sensory-friendly, pain-relieving squeeze.

My cheeks burn as heat more intense than any flare roars from my toes to the crown of my head. Just staring at Phantom Ren stirs a heavy ache low in my belly.

As I take stock of my raging-to-life libido and the less sexually appealing aspects of my outfit—which would be all of them—I begin to have a crisis of sorts. I am aroused by the sight of Ren Bergman. Again. First in the locker room, then at Louie’s, then in the training room today. And now, here, at my front door. I’ve always thought him striking—because duh, he is—but I just tried to ignore it. And now, it seems I can’t anymore. I saw an enticing side of him when he threw down with Matt, and now I can’t unsee it. I can’t stop thinking about it, honestly.

He’s not real. That’s what I need to focus on. The real Ren has no reason to be here, looking like sex on a cinnamon stick. Meaning it won’t hurt anything if I allow myself to ogle this figment of my high-as-a-kite imagination.

I stare at him, falling headlong into those wintry irises. I stare. And stare. And stare.

But like all fantasies, my indulgence in it has to end. Taking a deep breath, I slam the door on the mirage. Otherwise, I might get imaginatively carried away and invite Fictitious Ren in, then fantasize about undressing him with a ferocious need to know if the carpet matches the gorgeous ginger curtains.

And that, I simply can’t afford to do.

I’m not sure how long the door’s been closed. How long I’ve been panting for air, my back against its smooth surface as I wait for my body to cool off from my hallucinations. I am never smoking that weed again, seeing as it’s clearly laced with something else. Carter at the dispensary has some answering to do.

But then Ren’s voice dashes all hope that this is a drug-induced fantasy. “Frankie?”

I yelp, jumping away from the door as nimbly as I can.

“Y-yes?” I peer through the peephole.

Mary Mother of Jesus Riding on a Donkey, that hair. In moonlight, it’s the precise color of a faded copper penny.

I must have been a real asshole in a past life, because karma seems bent on punishing me this round. Namely, my inability to moderate myself with those prohibitively expensive root beer gummies that I can only buy from extortionist third-party sellers, and being a total freak for the ginger man-candy of this world, who are of course the most statistically rare of male species.

In retribution for whatever I did as some remorseless cat in a former life, cosmic forces placed the United States’ finest redhead specimen in my sphere and made him entirely off-limits. He’s a team member. I’m staff. Ren and I are forbidden. *Verboten. Impossibile. Interdit.* Not. Allowed. I can’t be attracted to a player on the team. I can’t even *think* about being attracted to him.

“Frankie.” Ren’s voice is muffled from the other side of the door. “Is everything okay?”

Clearing my throat, I wrench open the door again, quickly tugging down my hoodie in a hopeless effort to look dignified.

“Sorry about that. You surprised me.” Stepping back, I motion him in. “I was expecting Chinese food.”

His brow furrows. “Sorry to disappoint.”

“That’s okay. I just ate a whole pizza and pounded a bag of root beer gummies. I’m due for some GI rest.”

Leaning his shoulder against my doorjamb, Ren’s features shift to something warm, maybe amused. There’s that cheery, ain’t-nothin’-gonna-bring-me-down smile that drives me up the goddamn wall. Mostly because I wish I could replicate it. Then people might not think I’m such a grump when in reality I just can’t voluntarily make myself smile.

“You’re stoned, aren’t you?” he says.

“Excuse you.” I sniff indignantly. “I’m as sober as a nun.” As soon as I say it, I search my extensive memory for that simile

and come up empty. There's a good chance I just pulled it out of my ass. Damn.

Ren grins. "The nuns I know are notorious partiers."

There he is, rolling with it, being nice. Curse him, this unreasonably nice man.

"Guess you found the cool nuns, then," I tell him. "The ones I knew smacked my hands with rulers in grade school and made me stand in the corner for my *insolence*."

Ren's laugh is soft and warm. "You? Insolent?"

I turn toward the kitchen as I hear my dog Pazza start barking from the backyard, just in time to see her throw her paws up to the window.

When I glance over my shoulder, I notice Ren is where I left him, at the threshold. He seems hesitant to advance.

"That's just my dog out back. She's harmless...sort of. Well, not really. I was worried she'd maul the delivery guy, so she's outside."

Ren blanches.

"I'll keep her outside," I tell him, dropping onto my giant exercise ball with a groan. "I just need to sit, Zenzero. Come on. If you want to talk, here's where we're doing it."

Ren closes the door behind him and walks slowly through my living room, his eyes roaming the place curiously. His smile stays but he looks... Is it shy? Nervous? God, what I'd give to better read faces.

Gently, he sets down his arms' contents. First, a blazer, which I now recognize as mine. Then, the package he was holding. He slides it across the kitchen counter, pushing it my way. "Your jacket that you left behind," he says. "And a gift of thanks for letting the Shakespeare Club angle go."

I frown up at him. "You don't understand how much that hurt. We're the *LA Kings*. I had a skit in my head. Costumes and lines. So much material to work, ya know? *King Lear*. *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *Macbeth*. *Cymbeline*. *King John*. That's not even all of them..." My voice dies off as

I search Ren's enigmatic expression. "What? Have I shocked you with my categorical knowledge of Shakespeare?"

"A little bit." It comes out hoarse.

"Don't get too attached to the idea. I just know all the titles and some lines here and there that I had to memorize for a quiz back in college. I don't know much about most of them otherwise."

Ren clears his throat and shakes his head, snapping himself out of whatever that was. His easy smile is back as he pushes the package closer. "Right. Well, I didn't want to make it weird by giving it to you at work tomorrow, and I thought it would be even weirder if I mailed it to you. Plus, I had your jacket, so..."

Yanking the package my way, I tug warily at the string. Knots are the bane of the arthritic's existence. But the string unravels effortlessly.

I glance up at him and feel myself smile. "Thanks for avoiding the double knot."

He smiles bashfully and nods. My smile deepens as an unfamiliar warmth floods my chest. I pull the paper away, tearing it easily. A bundle of soft cotton drops onto the counter and I lift the fabric. "A dress shirt?"

Ren steps closer, flipping it over before he smooths it along the granite counter. I stare at his hands longer than is most likely "appropriate." But they're...beautiful. Long and faintly freckled. Upon closer inspection, they're also red at the knuckles, like he recently punched something.

"Maddox ruined your other one," he says. "And I was pretty sure it looked like this. Is it a good match?"

I stare at the shirt, processing what he's saying, my fingers sliding along the buttons. They're different. I can tell that immediately. I have four of the same shirts, pants, and blazers that I wear to all games, and while this shirt looks almost identical, I can feel its difference. I pull at the shirt gently and watch it snap apart.

“The buttons—” His voice cracks, and he clears his throat. “The buttons are adhered to a durable magnet. The panel around them holds the opposite magnetic pull and is reinforced so they can take a good tug.”

I normally leave my shirts buttoned but for the top two, so I can slip them over my head and not deal with buttoning them. Buttons are a bit hard for my hands—especially early in the day or late in the evening, when they’re at their stiffest. Despite the pains I take to ensure my clothes are comfortable, I never considered clothes could be *easier* while still allowing me to wear what I wanted.

“Ren, where did you...” My throat feels weird, thick with an emotion I can’t begin to name.

“My sister is a physical therapist, but she’s an overachiever who nerds out on adaptive everything, from clothing to kitchen utensils.” He shrugs. “She’s mentioned them before, said a shop in the Fashion District sold them.”

Peering up at Ren, I am so damn confused. Clearly, he’s aware of my challenges, to the point he bought something for me out of consideration. Yet there’s no trace of that stifling, demeaning claustrophobia I’ve felt with just about everyone else I know. In this moment with Ren, I just feel...seen. And I feel a terrible need to kiss him.

Damn weed. It’s all to blame.

Weed never makes you this horny.

Shut it, pothead brain. No more wisecracks.

“That’s really thoughtful of you.” Tentatively, I wrap my hand around his, squeeze it once, then release it, before I give in to the impulse to tug him my way and kiss him senseless. “Thank you.”

A furious blush crawls up Ren’s neck, past the playoff beard. It’s beyond sweet but so odd to see this side of him. Because the Ren I’ve seen the past three years is humble, yes, but confident, assertive, striking. Rookie of the Year. MVP. Thrown on all the magazine covers, voted for hottest this, sexiest that. The guys tease him about it, and he just shakes his

head and moves the conversation along. Ren's got it all, and he's always seemed pretty happy about it.

But then there's this other side I glimpse, that I'm seeing right now. When he blushes and does his nervous tic of scratching the back of his neck. Almost like he's uncertain of himself, not the confident guy who's taken the hockey world by storm.

"You're welcome," he says. "I hope it's not..." There it is. He scrubs the back of his neck. "I hope it's not crossing a line or anything."

"No, Ren. It's a very thoughtful gesture from a caring friend." Ren's eyes flicker with something I can't read. "I mean, I know we work together. But we're friends, aren't we?"

Aren't we?

"Definitely. Yep. Completely." He nods, shifting his weight.

Silence falls. I've learned how best to try to make small talk. I'm still not great at it, and I definitely don't *like* it, but I've memorized some ways to move through quiet gaps in conversation. I just don't feel like playing normal right now. I feel like being the real Frankie with what I'm starting to suspect is the real Ren. So, I let the idle hum of my fridge, the whisper of crickets outside my kitchen window serve as our soundtrack. I let myself stare at Ren how I probably shouldn't, while he gazes at my mouth with the kind of focus that I've only ever seen him devote to game tape.

The moment bursts like a bubble when the doorbell rings.

Breaking his stare, Ren glances toward the front door. "That's the Chinese?"

"Unless someone else from the team brought me magnetic-snap slacks."

He laughs quietly. "Right. I'll check it, if you want."

"Thanks, that would be great." When he turns away, I scramble for the joint I stubbed out earlier and furiously light up.

Frankie

Playlist: “Atlantis,” Bridgit Mendler

Watching him walk toward the door, I try really hard not to check out his ass, but you need to understand how hard that is. One, all hockey players have incredible butts. It’s a fact. Two, Ren has a *really* fantastic butt. It deserves to be immortalized in sculpture, a marble homage to the glory of the male backside.

I bounce on the exercise ball to lose my jitters, drag on the joint, feeling its acrid sweetness fill my lungs. That long hit mellows my racing thoughts enough to help me stop ogling Ren and get myself together. Jesus, I am a mess. I stub out the last of it and wave the air to clear the smell a little.

“Wow.” Ren reenters the kitchen, sets down the massive bag of food on the counter, and peers inside. If he’s perturbed by the cloud of secondhand marijuana he’s standing in, he doesn’t let on. “Feeling extra munchy tonight, are we?”

I tear open the bag and nearly drop the moo shoo pork. Ren catches it. Gently setting it down, he lifts the lid and sets it aside, glossing over the moment as he smiles at me.

“Can I get plates?” he asks. “Chopsticks?”

He rounds the counter before I’ve answered. A rush of self-consciousness pricks me. “Only if you join me.”

Ren freezes at the cabinet and looks over his shoulder. “Frankie, I don’t want to take your food.”

“Please share it with me, Ren.” I hold his eyes.

Don’t go there. Not you. Please don’t make me the poor creature you help and fuss over.

Ren’s pale eyes sparkle with his deepening smile. “Well, okay.” He pulls out plates and bowls, then shuts the cabinet

and makes himself at home, riffling through the drawers until he finds chopsticks and spoons. “But I call first dibs on the wonton soup.”

As he serves me first, I realize he was joking about getting first crack at the soup. Ren serves us equally with easy efficiency while chatting about nothing in particular. I hate being served normally, but this is friendly, comfortable. I don’t feel one bit coddled. He also sucks at chopsticks worse than I do, which helps my ego.

“You sure you don’t have joint problems, too?” I mumble around a mouthful of moo shoo.

Ren laughs and covers his mouth. “I beat the hell out of a punching bag before I came. My hands are useless right now.”

“Makes two of us.” I smile at him, and he smiles back. My focus shifts to his battered knuckles. “Any particular reason the punching bag earned such a beating?”

Ren pauses mid-chew, looking slightly caught off guard. “Um. No, not really. I just hit the bag to help keep my...temper in check.”

I frown at him. “You? A temper? This coming from the guy who has yet to brawl in his three years playing for the NHL, except for shoving a guy off of him when he tries to start something. The guy who hugs babies like *that’s* his job, not hockey. Who signs anything, *anytime* a fan asks. *You* have a temper?”

“I did almost ring Maddox’s neck the other night. Give me credit for that.”

“Eh.” I sip some wonton broth. “He’s had it coming. I’d be more worried about you if you *hadn’t* throttled him.”

“But you get my point. It’s not that I don’t have a temper, I’ve just figured out how to manage it. Lots of bag work. ‘I must be cruel to be kind.’”

I swallow my bite of moo shoo. “*Hamlet*.”

Ren pauses, and a smile makes his eyes crinkle handsomely. “So, she does know her Shakespeare.”

“I have a good memory. When I hear something, it sticks. But yes, I like *some* of Shakespeare’s plays. *Hamlet* is not one of them. That guy likes to hear himself talk way too much.”

“So does Maddox,” Ren mutters.

“I wouldn’t blame you for hating him.”

Ren taps his chopsticks against his plate and stares off in thought. “I don’t hate him. I hate *playing* with him. He has a terrible energy.”

“And here I thought he was just a dick.”

Ren laughs loudly—a deep, beautiful belly laugh.

“Wasn’t *that* funny,” I say self-consciously.

His laughter dies off. “I don’t think you realize how witty you are, Frankie.”

I glance down at my moo shoo and scooch it across my plate. “I think you need to get out a bit more, if you find *me* witty, Zenzero.”

He’s still looking at me when I peer up. Clearing my throat, I take a long drink of water. “You were saying, about Maddox? Before I made you aspirate a wonton.”

Ren blinks away finally. “He frustrates me. He should show you and every other person he crosses paths with a lot more respect. But Maddox is still the asshole jock that I’m sure he was in high school.”

“Which you weren’t.”

“No, I wasn’t. I was good at sports, but I was also the kid who got emotional in tenth grade English when our class read aloud *Romeo and Juliet*.”

I bite my lip so I don’t laugh. I think that’s insanely endearing and healthy, that Ren’s in touch with his soft side, but I know firsthand how hard it is to tell if someone’s laughing at you or with you. I don’t want to hurt his feelings.

In the past, I wouldn’t have thought anything could bring Ren down. I wouldn’t have worried about laughing. But in the past few days, Ren’s shown me that much more lies beneath that

chipper smile. All I ever knew him to be was this effortlessly upbeat, hunky, talented guy. The sun shone out of Ren's ass, the world was at his fingertips, and secretly, that level of happy-go-lucky perfection grated on me.

But what Ren's shown me is that inside this mature exterior of the pristine swan, there's a long-ago ugly duckling. A sweet, awkward dork who never really fit in, who *still* maybe doesn't feel like he fits in anywhere. And that means we have a metric shit ton more in common than I ever thought.

Not that commonality is important. For someone I'm not attracted to. Who I don't want to sleep with. At all. Ever.

I clear my throat and try to straighten my posture on the exercise ball. "So, having to rub shoulders with Maddox bothers you. The punching bag is how you deal with your frustration that the bullies are still at large."

Ren glances up from his food, looking surprised. "Among other things, yeah."

"Well, listen." I snap a fortune cookie in two and give him one half. "If it makes you feel any better, you got the last laugh. Matt's a mean-spirited prick. His reputation is shit, and I think we'll end up having to pay another team to take him. Then look at you, look where you are."

Ren accepts his fortune cookie. "I'm not sure what you mean."

I almost fire back a blunt remark about false modesty, but I'm stopped by this newfound knowledge he's given me: Ren honestly doesn't see himself how everyone else does. He isn't feigning humility or fishing for a compliment. He really means what he says when he expresses self-doubt. If anyone can empathize with seeing yourself one way and being perceived so dissonantly from that, it's this mostly invisibly ill, autistic woman right here.

A new crack forms in my heart. This is a travesty. No one this wonderful should feel so unsure of himself.

I toss the fortune cookie in my mouth and crunch. "Ren the Red. You're a twelve out of ten, inside and out. I bet the queue

of women waiting for you is longer than the line for the next Apple product.”

“Women I don’t know.” Focusing his attention on his cookie, Ren slips out the fortune paper and stares at it.

“Well, that’s why you get out, buddy. So they become women you *do* know. Problem is, you’re a saint. I’ve never even seen you with a woman. I’m aware puck bunnies aren’t your thing, but in the off-season, you let yourself have some fun, right? Now that you’re not a rookie anymore, your career’s totally on track, maybe you’re ready to look for someone who’s relationship material.”

“There’s someone.” His eyes dance across the fortune cookie paper. He folds and pockets it.

“And?” I press.

“And she’s unavailable for the time being. I’m also not sure she sees me that way.”

“Then she’s thick as a brick. Move on, dude, that’s her problem.”

He shakes his head. “It doesn’t work right now, but maybe one day it will. That unavailability won’t last forever. When it ends, I’ll work up the courage to tell her how I feel.”

“Does she know you’re waiting?”

Also, shit. What guy waits for a woman these days? Most men I’ve known do not have that kind of old-school courtship patience. They can’t even wait ten minutes in a Starbucks line for a mediocre latte.

He runs a hand over his beard. “No. And right now if I told her, it would put her in an awkward position, which isn’t fair to her. The timing’s just not good.”

“Well, welcome to working in professional athletics. The timing is never *good* for a relationship. Not until retirement. But, then again, as you know, some of the guys are blissfully paired off, at least until playoffs, when their partners are over an eighty-game season. I don’t mean to sound so cynical. If anyone could make it work, it would be you.”

Ren crunches his fortune cookie and stares at me curiously. “I can wait. I’ve waited this long. A few more years won’t kill me.”

“But you should have fun, Zenzero. Get your kicks. A guy like you shouldn’t be sitting on the shelf.”

“A guy like me?” A wry half smile tugs at his mouth. “What’s that mean?”

My high is slowly dissipating. I grope frantically on the counter for my root beer gummies and rip open a new bag. Tugging one between my teeth until it snaps, I chew and buy myself a minute. My unfiltered brain still wins out. “You know women drool over you.”

He stands, then clears our empty plates and bowls to the sink. “You’re not answering the question.”

I watch him run water in the double sink and add a splash of soap. The jerk is going to wash my dishes and prove the very point I’m about to make. “Dammit, Bergman, you’re the total package. You’re thoughtful, talented, handsome, and a true gentleman. You’re a prince of a man. Okay?”

Ren stops washing for a moment. Then he starts scrubbing again. I watch him rinse the plates and prop them on the rack to dry without saying a word. Finally, he turns and leans his hip against the counter, arms folded across his broad chest. “Do you think that? Or are you saying what you assume other people think?”

Of course, I think that. What woman in her right mind wouldn’t?

I tear another gummy with my teeth. “Does it matter?”

“Yes.” His jaw is set, those pale cat eyes locked with mine intensely.

Dread washes over me. God, I have to be horrifying him. Here I am, half baked. Barely clothed. And so far past the line of professional behavior.

“Ren, I—” I swallow nervously. “I’m sorry. That was an inappropriate direction I took us. I’m unfiltered to begin with

but the cannabis doesn't help. Please ignore everything I said."

Ren walks toward me, stopping at the counter where the gummies sit. Holding my eyes, he plucks one from the bag, sets it between his teeth, and tugs until it breaks clean in half. My eyes shift to his mouth.

Joseph in a Juniper Tree. Watching Ren tear a root beer gummy like a lion ripping open his prey just turned my knees to jelly. Thankfully, I'm already sitting. Well, bouncing, on the exercise ball. I'm one of those people who needs to be in perpetual motion.

"You still haven't answered me," he says, unsticking his jaw with a loud *pop*. "Wow, these are chewy. And for the record, we're not at work. It's not inappropriate at all."

I grab a fistful of gummies and shove them in my mouth. Hopefully, I'll choke and black out so we can forget about this mortifying corner I've backed us into.

"Oh, it's inappropriate," I say around my grotesque mouthful. "You're a player, I'm your social media manager, no matter where we are. I'm sitting here in my 'Boy Who Lived' panties, high on hashish, nagging you about your intimate life. It's so far past inappropriate, I almost want to fire myself."

Ren's face tightens with an expression I can't read. "You're not going to fire yourself, Frankie. You'll be at work tomorrow."

"I mean, you're right. But only because I like my insurance and the mild weather. I'll be there, on one condition: no more nice gestures like this, especially when I'm marijuana-ly impaired."

Ren's laugh is warm. It ripples along my skin, making the hairs on my arms and neck stand on end. Pushing off the counter, he sweeps up his keys, then smiles down at me, that easy, sunshiny Ren Bergman smile. "Goodnight, Frankie. See you tomorrow."

He's halfway down the hallway when I call, "Ren!"

In one smooth turn, he now faces me. "Yes?"

I tell my heart to stop trying to run out of my chest. “Thank you.”

Ren’s smile changes, his eyes dip to my mouth, like he’s waiting for me to say more. But it’s all I have. Finally, he says, “Of course.”

With one more fluid turn, Ren strolls away and pulls the door closed behind him. It’s only when I hear it click shut that I realize how weirdly easy that felt, having him here and how *uneasy* I feel now that he’s gone.

This is bad. Very, very bad.

Ren

Playlist: “Neighborhood #2,” Arcade Fire

“Bergman!” one of the guys yells from the kitchen. “I can’t find the honey mustard!”

I come in from the deck with another tray of grilled chicken. “I’m going to take a wild guess and assume you didn’t check the refrigerator.”

Lin frowns. “Why would I do that?”

Sliding the tray onto the range, I yank open the fridge and pull out a slew of condiments, including honey mustard, and shove them into his arms.

“Wow,” he says.

I pat his arm. “You wear your bachelorhood on your sleeve, my friend.”

Lin gives me a look. “Says the guy who doesn’t even *look* at women.”

“Please. It’s called subtlety. Unlike you, I’ve learned not to drool at them. And when it’s time to settle down, I’ll even know how to navigate my own kitchen.”

Spinning Lin, I shove him toward the table where all the food’s laid out and then survey the state of my home. It’s currently tipping the scales from quiet beachfront oasis to frat house. I shudder. Like my mom, I’m a neurotically tidy person. It’s one of the few things I share in common with most of my siblings, except for Freya and Viggo, who, like Dad, are unrepentant slob.

The entire team is here at my place after practice. I’m feeding them before we hop a flight later tonight to Minnesota and start our first stretch on the road for playoffs. Virtually all the guys live in Manhattan Beach, so it isn’t unusual to get

together here, *but* there's a specific reason for this gathering: superstition.

Two years ago, we barely clawed our way to the playoffs. Tensions were high, the guys were a nervous wreck, and Rob, our captain, for the first time turned to *me* for help. I'd recently been named alternate captain, which was a huge honor after just finishing my rookie season.

"I need a distraction for the guys," he said. "Not more pep talks or watching game tape. Help me get them out of their heads."

So, I did what he asked. I invited everyone over to my place for a night of distraction.

It was...not what they were expecting. There was no poker. No cornhole. No bro games. There were twenty-two printouts of the "rude mechanicals" scenes from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and a smorgasbord of Swedish food.

I'd been prepared for skepticism and awkward silence, because I'm me and I've encountered that plenty of times in my life. The guys were wary, until they started eating and then devouring food, and Rob asked me to explain what this was all about as he flipped through the pages, a grin tugging at his mouth.

"I know we're under pressure," I told the team. "But there's a reason we got where we are. We've been doing what we're supposed to, and we'll keep doing what we've done well. So tonight, we're just going to get out of our heads. A little distraction. Lightening up, laughing at ourselves."

The guys looked nervous as well as self-conscious when I assigned parts and explained the setting of both scenes in the play—the first scene, in which a half-dozen skilled tradesmen—the "rude mechanicals"—decide to enter a theater competition held by the king of Athens, and the second, in which they actually perform the tragedy, which is well beyond their understanding, with entirely comedic results.

I could tell they were apprehensive, but if any bit of Shakespeare was going to work for a newbie, it was this. Not four lines into reading, laughter began. Flubbed language, falsetto voices affected for females, bad English accents, and countless mispronunciations. The undeniably ridiculous physical comedy that unfolded as a bunch of athletes intuitively performed the scenes. The *aha* moments when they got the humor. It led to grown men crying, we were laughing so hard.

That night, everyone ate well, got their minds off the pressure, and left full and happy. Maybe even a little more comfortable with each other in a new way. And then we won our way straight to the Stanley Cup.

Thus, a ritual was born. Because hockey players are truly some of the most superstitious athletes you'll meet. If they took a crap backwards on a toilet before the night of their first hat trick, you better believe they'll be pulling that stunt before every game without even blinking.

We read Shakespeare before the first away playoff game that led to our first Cup in far too long. So, now, this is what we do before we hit the road for our first away playoff game: eat my mom's best Swedish recipes and read the "rude mechanicals" scenes.

"Moreaux." Andy pokes François. "Swap parts with me."

"Get fucked," François tells him. "Do you know how long I've been waiting to play Thisbe?"

Andy pouts. "Besides Halloween, Rude Mechanical Day is the one day of the year that I get to dress adventurously and not get crap for it."

Rob starts down the line of food, piling up his plate. "Not true. You dress *adventurously* regularly during the off-season, and none of us say a word. That bikini you wear on the beach belongs on a much less hairy ass."

"Hey." Andy glares at him. "It's a Speedo. And it's European. The ladies like it."

François snorts. “Trust me, Andrew. I am European, and both I and these *ladies* you speak of would prefer if you kept to your American swim trunks.”

“Okay, let’s eat,” I call to the stragglers outside and in the living room.

The guys descend on the table like hyenas on a carcass, quickly draining platters of food. They trickle into my living room, which is a wide-open space with a vaulted ceiling made cozy with built-in bookshelves, pale blue-green walls like the ocean outside, and an expansive dove-gray L-shaped sofa bracketed by mid-century end tables.

Throw in a couple of ivory oversized chairs and a huge wool rug in coordinating colors to absorb sound, and it’s my favorite room in the house, besides my bedroom. I had few feelings about the décor, so I let my brother Oliver pick everything out for me. He has a good eye and ended up putting together a space that I really like.

There’s plenty of room, and the guys are used to making themselves at home here, so they settle in tight on the couch and chairs, even cross-legged on the floor at the coffee table.

“Damn, you can cook, Bergman,” Rob mumbles around a bite of food.

I sit in the last open spot, which is next to him, and dig into my plate. “Thanks. I’m glad you like it.”

“Like it?” He chuckles. “I’d eat this over anything they serve at those fancy places Liz likes.” After a moment in which he demolishes a shrimp sandwich in three bites, he leans in a bit and drops his voice. “Speaking of Liz. I was wondering, would you mind giving me a cooking lesson or two? Once the season’s done, I want to make the wife a nice meal, start pulling my weight a bit more at home. I’m going to have my parents take the kids for a few days once this is over. Just to show her how much I appreciate her putting up with the insanity.”

I grin. “Sure. Anything you want to learn in particular?”

“Steak. Maybe mushroom risotto, too? She always gets that when we’re out.” He glances up at me and catches my smile. “What? You think it’s lame, don’t you?”

“No way. I think it’s exactly what a guy should do for his partner after a long stretch of her shouldering all the home responsibilities. I’d love to help out.”

Before Rob can respond, something crashes in the kitchen.

“Shit!” someone yells. “Rennnnn.”

I groan. “They’re like children.”

“They’re worse,” Rob says. “At least worse than mine.”

I stand on a sigh and shove a shrimp sandwich in my mouth. “I’m coming!”

* * *

“Hey.” I snatch Kris’s phone out of his hands and shove it in my pocket. “This is a phone-free zone. We agreed everyone does their best acting when they’re not worried about showing up on Twitter in a toga saying, ‘O dainty duck! O dear!’”

“It’s blackmail gold. No, platinum,” Kris whines, lunging unsuccessfully for my pocket which now holds his phone. “I *need* it, Ren.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “What are the rules of theater in this house?”

Kris pouts. “Respect the story’s intent. Make your fellow actors look good. Foster a safe space for performance.”

“Thank you.” I gesture to François. “Continue, please.”

“*Merci.*” François begins to bow but freezes halfway through and switches to a curtsy. True commitment to character, right there. This is the moment where Pyramus and Thisbe, two lovers meeting in the garden and separated by circumstance—

a *Romeo and Juliet* homage, no doubt—meet for a clandestine kiss.

“Right.” Tyler clears his throat and adjusts his helmet. He’s reading *Pyramus* this year. “O grim-look’d night! O night with hue so black! O night, which ever art when day is not! O night, O night! alack, alack, alack, I fear my Thisby’s promise is forgot! And thou, O wall’—” Tyler looks around. “Where’s the fucking wall?”

Andy bounds in. “He had to take a piss.”

François sighs.

Andy sweeps the blanket off of my couch, wraps it around his shoulders so it drapes nicely, and extends his arms. “There. Sorry.”

Tyler lifts his script and finds his place. “O sweet, O lovely wall, That stand’st between her father’s ground and mine! Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall, Show me thy chink’—”

Andy lifts his hand, joining his thumb and forefinger, then Tyler continues.

“—To blink through with mine eye! Thanks, courteous wall: Jove shield thee well for this! But what see I? No Thisby do I see.”

Tyler rolls up his script and whacks Andy over the head. Andy yelps.

“O wicked wall,” Tyler yells, “through whom I see no bliss! Cursed be thy stones for thus deceiving me!” he says, whacking Andy a few more times.

A roll of laughter travels the room. Some of the guys whistle and hoot as François saunters to the other side of Andy’s blanketed arm.

“Maddox.” Kris lobs a pillow at his head. “It’s your line, asshole.”

Matt slowly glances up from a magazine he’s been flipping through. “I’m sorry, where are we?”

Everyone groans.

“Why’d you give him Theseus?” Rob whispers from my right.

I shrug. “Trying to extend an olive branch. Obviously, a wasted effort.”

“I hope he gets traded,” Rob mutters. I keep my mouth shut, but Rob knows I feel the same way, and I’m not the only one. Nobody likes Maddox. He’s made enemies of all of us.

Kris stomps over to Matt. “I’ll read it if you won’t—”

“I’ll. Do it.” Matt glares up at him, then delivers in an underwhelming monotone, “The wall, methinks, being sensible, should curse again.”

A collective sigh of disappointment. I have to stifle a laugh. The guys get so into it now that we’re a few years in, they’re beside themselves when someone messes up. Tyler says Pyramus’s line, and then it’s François’s moment.

He delivers his lines in a French-accented, perfectly over-the-top falsetto, before Tyler puckers his lips near Andy’s hand, where his thumb and pointer create the chink. “O kiss me through the hole of this vile wall!”

François leans to purposefully misplace his kiss—his next line is supposed to be, “I kiss the wall’s hole, not your lips at all”—but before he can, Andy lowers his hand so that Tyler and François actually smash mouths.

An eruption of entertained *ooooohhs* echoes in the room. Tyler glares murder at Andy. François grabs Andy by the blanket around his neck, and before I can even step in to avoid disaster, François tackles him to the ground. Tyler jumps in, and soon, it’s a mosh pit of brawling, hyped-up hockey players.

“Guys!” I yell. Kris hurtles past me, flinging himself on top of the growing pile of bodies. I drop my head and sigh. “This is why we can’t have nice things.”

* * *

The plane ride is uncharacteristically sullen. Rob and I had a hell of a time pulling people apart. Most of them were just cranky after it, but a few of the guys came out the worse for wear. François hasn't stopped scowling, and Tyler, still horrified by the kiss, keeps rinsing his mouth with water, then spitting into an empty container. Andy has a somewhat-deserved black eye. Kris has a split lip—serves him right for jumping headlong into violence. Thankfully, hockey players don't draw much notice for looking beat up.

Rob's passed out in the seat next to me, snoring. I have *As You Like It* in hand because that's up next for Shakespeare Club, and it's a good distraction. I'm trying not to be entirely aware of Frankie, who sits across the aisle, flipping through her phone, with her laptop up and running as well.

Her hair's down, dark and smooth as melted bitter chocolate. She's in relatively casual clothes—black, slim pants, a fuzzy gray sweater that looks like a feather duster—Freya has one in ice blue, so I'm guessing they're *in* right now—and her sneakers, black and silver as always. Her cane rests between her legs, and she weaves her fingers through her necklace as she glances between screens.

My already weak resistance evaporates as I drop my book to the lap tray. “Plotting world domination?”

She peers up and locks eyes with me. A slow grin warms her face. “But of course.”

I feel a blush heating my cheeks. Thank God for the playoff beard somewhat hiding it. How can I be so calm on the ice, in press rooms, in front of everyone else, but I'm a blushing schoolboy when it comes to her?

“You're staring at me,” she says.

I blink rapidly. “Um. I. What?”

Frankie lifts a hand self-consciously to her face. “Do I have powdered sugar on my face or something?”

Earlier on the flight I had to studiously *not* observe Frankie eat a box of powdered mini donuts. I made sure I *didn't* watch her lick every single fingertip. And I definitely didn't put down my lap tray to cover a growing problem crushed against my fly after watching each long finger slip into her mouth, then slide out with an erotic *pop*.

I lean across the aisle, and don't you know, God's looking out for me. There's a smudge of powdery white right on her cheekbone. I wipe it away and fight the urge to lick my thumb clean. “Just there.”

Her smile deepens, making the dimple appear. “Thanks. Now, how about you tell me why everyone's acting like we're heading into arctic hell to get our asses handed to us.”

“Because we *are* heading into arctic hell, probably to get our asses handed to us.” Saint Paul, Minnesota, has a hell of a cold front tearing through it for early April, and the Wild aren't playing around this year. There's a fair chance we'll lose.

She lifts one dark, arched eyebrow. “Seriously, you're all so frowny. What happened? You guys disappeared after dry-land, then you show up like this. Don't think I haven't noticed that the past few years you all drop off the radar right before our first on-the-road playoff game.”

She taps her finger against her lips and narrows her eyes. Like always, her nails are painted glossy black. The thought of those claws scraping down my torso tightens everything low in my stomach. Never have I been so grateful for airplane lap trays.

“It's just a little ritual,” I finally manage. “It got out of hand this year.”

“Let me guess. Kris had something to do with it. Maybe Tyler.” She lowers her voice and leans closer, infusing the air with her perfume. “Definitely Andy.”

“Uh.” I swallow thickly, trying to think straight. It’s hard when I’m this close to her. Just her scent alone scrambles my brain, the clean whisper of evening air and orchid blossoms. For the longest time I couldn’t pinpoint what made Frankie smell so good. It drove me nuts. Until last summer, after putting away leftovers, watching the sun set from my parents’ kitchen window, when I smelled Frankie. A cool summer breeze blew past the night-scented orchids that my sister Ziggy had taken on in her loneliness as the last kid home. They were full and fragrant, their blossoms open. That was it, her soft perfume, exactly. If I closed my eyes, I’d have sworn she was standing beside me.

If only.

Frankie drops her finger from her mouth and leans back. “Hm. You’re good at hiding things, Bergman, I’ll give you that. But I’m going to get the truth out of you one of these days.”

She has no idea how likely that is. Or how nervous I am to hear what she’ll say when the truth finally does come out.

Frankie

Playlist: “New Rush,” Gin Wigmore

I didn't always know I wanted to work in professional sports, but I've always loved watching them. Some of my most treasured memories of my dad are sitting on his lap, watching the Mets on our tiny TV. We'd snuggle on the sofa in our Queens apartment that we shared with Nonna, and squint to try to spot the ball when Carlos Delgado sent it soaring across the field.

Gabby and Ma would watch from the cutout in the cabinetry over the sink as they cooked dinner, and we'd all yell at the screen. Nonna would say bad words in Italian that made Daddy clap his hands over my ears, and Ma would hoot in laughter.

Sports were integral to our family. Gabby and I played softball and basketball. We went to baseball games when we could afford it. But it wasn't until high school that I fell in love with hockey. Gabby's then boyfriend, now husband, Tony, was friends with one of the players' brothers and got us tickets to the Islanders. From that game on, I was obsessed. The game was grace and power, it was a dance of agility and grueling physical discipline.

That's when I knew that in some way, I always wanted hockey to be a part of my life. I went to school, got a degree in digital communication and media relations, went through the school's intern program and got placed with none other than the Islanders—yeah, I freaked out, too—then moved on to an entry-level PR assistant position with them after graduation.

But as I adjusted to the realities of life with arthritis, frigid northeastern weather became painful to contend with. When my dream job located in balmy SoCal fell at my feet, I snatched it up and moved cross-country. And even though

saying goodbye to Gabby and Tony, Ma and Nonna hurt like hell, I felt relief. I was no longer a burden or worry. I was a weekly phone call. A bi-annual visit to ensure we didn't feel totally estranged and to pester me about getting regular X-rays. A country between us, I became a person to them once more.

Since moving here, I've made two friends in LA, through water aerobics class and book club, Annie and Lorena. Other than that, my Kings family *is* my family. Their victories are my victories, and their losses are my losses.

Which is why before every game, I feel as close to shitting myself with nerves as all the guys probably do.

After another trip to the porcelain throne thanks to my anxious tummy, I head into one of the exercise rooms reserved for the visiting team. Everyone's in various states of physical activity, still in shirts, shorts, and sneakers, warming up their bodies.

"Frank the Tank!" Andy calls.

I salute him, then turn to Tyler who's doing lateral rotations with a medicine ball. "Johnson. Don't forget you're live on Instagram in half an hour."

Tyler grins. "Yes, ma'am."

"Schar." Kris looks up at me while completing hip circles. "Kindly stop engaging the trolls on Twitter. It accomplishes nothing, and Minnesotans hate you."

He nods.

"Good." I turn, take a step, then freeze because Jumping Jehoshaphat, Ren Bergman is doing T-stab push-ups.

Shirtless.

Let me help you picture this. You'll thank me, I promise. It's a push-up. Until he straightens his arms, and instead of dropping back down for another rep, he swings his arm up to the sky by rotating his waist. It looks like *trikonasana* for the yoga nerds out there. The key takeaway is, every muscle in that man's torso, back, shoulders, and arms ripples and knots as he dips, then swings up, dips, then swings up.

My eyes drag down his body, mesmerized by the rhythm of his hips lowering to hover above the floor, before they thrust upward. Thrust up, then down, thrust up, down.

I'm rooted to the floor, hypnotized. As I've said, I've only seen Ren shirtless a few times. Even while doing dry-land practice, he's always modest, consistently wearing shirts while exercising.

Today is apparently a day for glorious exceptions. "Lose a shirt, Zenzero?"

Ren freezes mid-push up, which doesn't help the state of affairs in my panties as his ridiculous triceps pop, along with every muscle in his back. Tonight, I'm wearing my lucky Hedwig boy shorts, meaning, as the Ren Effect takes place, this time it's Harry's beloved pet owl that gets caught in the rain.

Finally, Ren straightens and leaps to stand as effortlessly as a big jungle cat. Snatching a towel from nearby, he drags it down his face and chest, then turns and faces me. I startle when I get a look at him. His eyes are glassy, his cheeks pink. Stepping closer, I feel his forehead, before he quickly pulls away.

"You look like shit." I put the pieces together. "That's why you're shirtless. You're hot with a fever."

Ren glances over my shoulder at the other guys. I realize too late I wasn't discreet when I should have been. Another something I'm not stellar at: sensing during conversation when I should be subtle and *hush-hush*.

"I'm fine," he says quietly.

"You're not." When I reach for him again, he backs away.

"If I'm not, you shouldn't be touching me. I could get you sick."

"You won't get me sick." Concern knots my stomach. I want to cover him in cold washcloths, ply him with popsicles, and shove his ass into a hotel bed.

"Your meds, Frankie. They weaken your immune system."

“How do you know that?”

He blinks away. “I-it’s common knowledge.”

“No, it’s not.”

Ren shifts his weight and folds his arms. “Frankie. My dad’s a doctor. My older sister’s a physical therapist. One of my brothers is pre-med. I have to sit at family dinners and listen to them nerd out on anatomy and the latest therapies and pharmacopeia. I know that most RA treatments work by suppressing the immune system, meaning you can get sick easily.”

I stare at him, feeling my heart do a backflip in my chest again. Just like the other night when he gave me the shirt.

“Returning to my point.” Ren clears his throat and gives me a stern look. “You need to stay back. It’s bad enough that we were already in a plane together, you breathing my germs in that godawful recycled air—”

“I’m okay,” I tell him. “I take the world’s largest handful of vitamins every morning. I’m an obsessive hand-washer. I’ll be fine. But you. You look like shit warmed up. Tell Coach you’re out.”

He laughs dryly, moving even further away and lowering his voice. “You’re funny. I’m not out. Give me six to ten feet, Frankie. I’m serious. If I get you sick, I’m going to get cranky.”

“That’s not a disincentive, Bergman. I’d pay a lot to see you get cranky.”

He narrows those cat eyes at me.

“Fine,” I mutter. “But I’m going to sic Howard on you afterward.” Dr. Amy Howard is our head physician, who travels with us. She is zero bullshit, and I love her. If she decides Ren’s sick, she’ll have no problem benching his ass the next game.

“Don’t even think about it,” he says. “I’ll talk to her myself afterward, okay?”

I scowl at him. “Fine.”

* * *

For burning with a fever, Ren's a flipping machine. He already scored in the first period, and he looks poised to score another right as we start the second. I'm wandering my normal haunt near the bench, catching shots with my phone, tweeting, posting on Instagram, engaging in real time with fans and sharing their posts, but my eyes are on Ren, and the rest of the players of course, as much as possible.

Ren streaks after a Wild defender. Right when he could easily crush the guy against the board, Ren instead deftly swipes the puck free and slips past him with it glued to his stick. That's Ren in a nutshell. Classy. Strategic. Solid. Now, don't get me wrong, I've seen him knock the wind out of a guy against the boards. I've watched him throw a shoulder and shove back. But he never *seeks* violence. He never takes the ice like a man with something to prove. He just plays. Beautifully.

Of all the guys on the team, Ren's always held my respect the most. He's a good person, a dependable athlete, a natural but unassuming leader. Yes, he's annoyingly cheery and polite, but I now understand that's more a choice to protect his private life, to be a positive presence on the team, than some indicator of a carefree existence.

Since the evening involving one generous adaptive clothing gift and excessive amounts of marijuana, I've been spending a lot of time trying *not* to think about Ren. It's driving me crazy, but that's how I work. Ren showed me a new fascinating side of himself. And when I find something that fascinates me, it's hard for me not to devote inordinate time to it.

Except *it* is a *him*. And that's a problem.

Ren soars across the ice, weaving, dodging, that puck forever anchored to his stick. With his skates on, he's six foot six, his body powerful, but his grace rivals a figure skater. Deep in our

zone, he works the puck, feinting, teasing, dropping the biscuit, then flying around the net. Defenders swarm him, their sticks smacking against his, their bodies diving for checks against the board, but he evades them every time, like a cat slipping through the narrowest opening in a door. It shouldn't be possible. He shouldn't be so graceful. But he is.

Ren maintains possession of the puck even while double-teamed, then slips it central to Tyler. Tyler fakes a slapshot, passes it to Rob. Rob has a shit angle for a shot, but Ren swings back around the net just in time for Rob to pass it to him. Ren connects with the puck and curls it effortlessly inside the net.

“Goooooaaaaalllll!” the announcer shouts.

The buzzer sounds, the light glows red, and we're all standing, yelling victoriously. With my earplugs in to dull the roar around us, it's an oddly serene moment, watching fans explode, the swarm of players huddling in celebration. Ren, as always, just lifts his stick, chest bumps his teammates, and skates away. Calm and smiling as ever.

Matt's not far off on the bench, breathing heavily from his shift, glaring daggers at Ren and Rob. He glances over at me and gives me a stony head-to-toe scan, before he refocuses on the game.

After face-off and in possession of the puck, the Wild sail up the center, but Ren's racing with them, skating backward like it's nothing. My body hasn't moved that effortlessly in so long, but I can almost feel what it would be like, the rhythm as he transfers his weight and cuts across the ice. He's low, his stick swinging, and when he pokes for the puck, Ren manages to steal it off of the Wild's player again and break away into the attacking zone. Rob's trailing right behind him, which of course Ren knows. He pulls right, flicks it to Rob, then slips behind the defender. Rob feints right, then passes it left to Ren, who slap-shots it into the net.

The light beams red, the horn blows, and Rob wraps an arm around Ren's neck with a proud-papa smile on his face. I catch it on my phone and immediately tweet it.

My eyes traveling down the bench, I see Coach still isn't smiling, but his usual scowl is nowhere to be seen, which at this point I've learned means he's positively fucking blissed.

Ren crosses the center line and squares up, looking focused and relaxed, like a hat trick in the playoffs is just part of the job. His ruddy red-blond hair curls under his helmet, his beard shines copper behind his mask, and right before the puck drops, Ren glances over at me with those icy eyes and grins.

A flood of warmth pours through my body, cutting the chill that always seeps into my clothes when I'm in the rink.

None of that, Francesca. Don't make something of this that it isn't. He smiles at everyone.

But does he smile at them like *that*? A tiny, preposterous part of me hopes not.

I distract myself from those unsafe thoughts by tweeting the video of Ren's goal, with a quick caption and the relevant hashtags. When I glance up, Lin's working on clearing the puck and sends it flying up to Tyler. Tyler dumps it to Ren who charges down the center, dekes, then passes left to Kris. Number 27, who's been up Ren's ass the whole game is flying toward Ren from behind, and I have to swallow the impulse to yell, *Watch out!*

Lifting his stick, 27 deals a brutal hit to Ren from behind. Ren surges forward and smashes into the boards, his head connecting with the plexi and bouncing back, too loose and unanchored for my comfort. I gasp as he drops to the ice like a felled tree.

A good portion of the crowd boos as the whistle is blown. Coach and half the team are screaming, the noise dulled by my earplugs, as if in a faraway tunnel.

"Illegal hit!"

"Dangerous play!"

"Throw him out!"

Noise fades even further until I only hear my pulse. My nails dig into my palms as I stare at Ren's immobile body. Anxiety,

my old familiar friend, creeps up my spine, making my legs weak. I drop onto the end of the bench, my eyes glued to Ren.

My breath echoes in my ears. I use yoga breathing, long, slow inhales and exhales through my nose. The pound of my heart slows marginally, but my hands are shaking badly. I shove them between my knees and focus on my breathing some more.

He's okay. He'll be all right.

Anger chases anxiety, tearing through my system. I squeeze my phone, flagrantly ignoring my job for the moment. I don't want to tweet or reassure fans. I want to run out on that ice and punch 27 right in the face.

The ref's bent over Ren, who's out cold, his body splayed helplessly while his arm juts at an unnatural angle. Amy heads out on the ice and is soon hovering over him, too. He doesn't move. There's no sigh of relief or consciousness. Just ringing, frightening silence.

Then comes the thing I hate to see. The stretcher on wheels. EMTs shuffle out, quickly stabilizing Ren's neck while leaving his helmet on, and carefully transferring his massive body to the stretcher. Everyone stands in the arena and claps as he's wheeled out. As Amy passes by with him, I see his eyes are shut, his mouth slack. I wipe my nose and feel wetness on my cheeks. When I lick my lips, I taste salt.

Fucking fish sticks. I'm crying. I don't cry. Well, not often. Never publicly.

Andy pats my shoulder gently, and I rip out an earplug. "What?" I say sharply.

He's used to my prickly delivery, so he simply pats my shoulder once again and says, "Don't worry, Frankie. Ren's unbustable. He'll be fine."

I watch Ren's skates disappear from view as he's wheeled away. "I hope so."

I'll be the first one to admit that for the rest of the game, I do a rare shitty job at in-game social media. I'm distracted, my fingers slower than normal. I keep fucking up tweets, and my

pictures are shit. I use the wrong hashtags, and I can't stop glancing over my shoulder, hoping Amy comes out and ends my worry before I give myself an ulcer.

She doesn't.

Though I'm worried about Ren, this isn't my first season up close with professional hockey, and I know that in all likelihood, he's going to be okay. If something unthinkable happened, I'd know by now. I comfort myself with that bit of rationality as I focus on the post-game necessities. We won, though only because of the goals Ren gave us.

"Frankie," Rob calls from his side of the locker room.

I weave my way through the guys, careful not to catch my cane on a rogue skate lace or piece of clothing. When I get to Rob, I feel winded with anxiety. This has to be about Ren. At least I hope it is. "Yes?"

"He woke up," Rob says.

"Concussion?"

He sighs. "Seems so, yeah."

"Shit." That means Ren's out for the next few games, at least.

"Hurt his shoulder, too, but he's okay."

"His shoulder? Does he need surgery? Is he—"

"Hey. Take a breath. He's all right." Rob gently squeezes my arm. "See? Behind that grumpy front is a soft heart that cares about us."

I scowl at him. "Don't let word get around."

Rob grins. "Your secret's safe with me." When I make to turn away, Rob stops me. "I actually called you over because he asked for you."

"What?" Ren asked for *me*?

"Just go see him. Humor the guy. He's with Amy, and he's comically disoriented."

"That's not very reassuring."

He chuckles as he yanks off his jersey. “Come on. He’s always so well-behaved. Ren unfiltered is a rare treat. You should be thanking me.”

Grumbling, I stroll down the hall, take a few turns, and find my way. Ren’s propped up on an angled mattress, an IV, which I hope is just saline, in his arm. Amy’s chatting with Coach. They don’t notice when I walk in. But Ren does.

“Francesca.” He flashes a big, wide grin. Like a Loony Tunes big, wide grin. Holding up the arm that’s not bound in a sling, he waves.

Okay, then. There’s clearly something else in that IV drip.

“Francesca,” he says again, his eyes tracking me as I walk up to him. Nobody has the balls to call me by my full name. I made it very clear to everyone that my name is Frankie. But if anyone could get away with it, it’s concussed, delirious Ren. It helps that I have his full name to wield in retribution, too.

“Søren.” God, I love his name. It’s more Swedish than IKEA. Rather fun fact, his spelling is actually Danish. Being a bit of a foreign languages and linguistics lover—it’s a special interest of mine—I can tell you that \emptyset is not in the Swedish alphabet. On one of our many flights, Ren told me its spelling was debated extensively between his Swedish mother’s preference for Sören and his American father’s love of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard.

Obviously, no one’s wondering where Ren gets his dorkdom. Ren’s naming process involved an existentialist theologian and multilingual debate. Pretty sure my parents just pulled an Italian name out of a hat and threw it at me.

“Got yourself good and banged up, there, huh?” I ask.

His eyes dart over my face. “Uh-huh. But I didn’t piss myself, and I know my birthday, so Amy said I’ll be okay.”

At hearing her name, Amy breaks her conversation with Coach and smiles at Ren. “Oh, he’s in rare form right now. Had to give him Percocet for his shoulder.”

“No social media!” Coach warns.

I lift my hands, demonstrating my innocence. “Not a camera in sight, I promise.” I glance at Ren. “You needed a narcotic for a bruised shoulder?”

“Give him some credit,” Amy says gently. “It’s slightly separated, and that hurts like hell.” She leans in and grins. “He also passed out when I inserted his IV.”

“Wow, Judas.” He narrows his eyes at her, then turns back toward me. “Redheads have been scientifically proven to need higher doses of pain relief, Francesca. We’re sensitive.”

“I’m teasing you, Ren the Red. I can’t imagine how much it hurts. That check was dangerously late and high.”

Coach grunts in agreement as he swigs from his water bottle. “Absolute bullshit. Glad they threw him out.” Patting Ren’s good shoulder, he tosses his water bottle in the recycling bin. “Time to round up the boys. Take it easy, Bergman. You did good, as always.”

“Thanks, Coach.”

When the door bangs shut, Ren clasps my hand suddenly, fingers curling around it. “Francesca, pay attention. This is important.”

He’s like a kid right now. Wide-eyed and deeply sincere. I let myself stare at his features, knowing he probably won’t remember. His hand holding mine feels oddly familiar. It’s warm and heavy, the scrape of his callouses soothing my skin.

“You need a masky thing-a-ma-bob. I have a fever. And I keep touching you. And breathing near you. Dr. Amy!” he hollers.

“Ren.” She laughs. “Right here, buddy. What’s up?”

“This here Francesca is…” He frowns. “Ah, I can’t think of the word right now. But it means her medicine makes her body very friendly towards the germs. She needs something so she’s safe from my plague.”

Amy grins at me, then directs herself to Ren. “While that’s very considerate of you, I’m confident your fever isn’t due to anything plague related. When I was assessing you, I noticed

signs of a sinus infection. Remember, I told you I was going to give you some antibiotics?”

He stares at her. “I do not remember that.”

She pats his good arm. “That’s because you got your head knocked nicely. You told me you’d had a cold recently, and I told you it seems like you developed a secondary bacterial infection in your sinus cavity from it. That’s why you’re fevered.”

He squints at her one-eyed. “Can you maybe condense that to smaller words? I’m not following.”

“What I mean to say is,” she says gently, “that you aren’t contagious. You won’t get Frankie sick.”

“Oh, good.” Ren sighs and lets his eyes fall shut. “So, she can keep holding my hand, then, and I won’t give her the plague.”

“I should go anyway,” I tell him. “Time for you to sleep, Zenzero.” Slowly, I start to pull my hand away, but Ren clamps down on it, and his eyes pop open.

“That’s it. *That’s* what I wanted to ask you.” He tries to sit up and falls back, grimacing. “Forgot about that,” he groans.

“Easy. You know I’m always around. We can talk tomorrow.”

“No.” He stares at me seriously. “I need to know this. *What* does *zenzero* mean?”

A hot blush floods my cheeks. I clear my throat self-consciously. Amy’s loitering near the door on her phone, and she’s entirely within earshot. The last thing I need is her giving me shit for this. “Well, it’s silly,” I say, lowering my voice. “It’s just Italian nonsense.”

“Nonsense.” He frowns. “You call me *nonsense*?”

“Dammit, Bergman. No,” I whisper. “It means *ginger*, okay? Because you’re...” I wave my hand in the general vicinity of his face. “You’re a ginger. It’s cute.”

Ren’s smile is so bright, its voltage could power a city block. He cranes his head toward Amy. “Hear that, Dr. Amy? She thinks I’m cute.”

But before I can say a word in my defense, he shuts his eyes on a soft sigh, drifting off, his hand locked tight around mine.

Frankie

Playlist: “Undertow,” Lisa Hannigan

If Ren remembered our little narcotic-induced heart-to-heart, he didn't let on. Over breakfast at the hotel the next morning, he flashed me his standard, friendly smile, and then he treated me like he always does. Like a woman he works with. *Not* like a woman he called Francesca, whose hand he insisted on holding until he fell into a restless sleep.

Which I'm fine with. Honestly, it's easier that he doesn't remember. If he had remembered it, I could just picture his acute embarrassment, that furious blush, the remorse that would paint his apology, even though I found what he did amusing and oddly endearing.

Back on the plane home after losing game two, unfortunately—but unsurprisingly, since we played without Ren—I stick my nose in work and avoid talking to anyone. If I don't glue my eyes on my phone or laptop, they keep stupidly wandering across the plane to where Ren sits, leafing through a small paperback that I'm ninety-nine percent sure is Shakespeare, the dork.

Dammit. This is why lines can't be blurred, boundaries can't be crossed. Just a few nonstandard encounters with him and now every time I'm near Ren, weird sensations simmer beneath the surface of my skin. When I saw him yesterday at the game in his charcoal-gray suit and noticed it turned his eyes the color of rain-slicked slate—when I watched him talk with his teammates, giving them his entire focus and that wide-mouthed laugh—my stomach knotted furiously.

Just after I got seated on the plane, my breath caught when he strolled past me and left in his wake that familiar clean, spicy scent. It made my mouth water. It wasn't the first time it happened, but previously, I chalked it up to it being an

astonishingly nice scent. The guy has good taste in cologne. So what?

So what? So, this time, as I breathed him in, my body ached so fiercely in neglected places, I nearly slapped myself. And then I buckled down on work.

The flight hasn't been the smoothest, and it's hard to concentrate on work. Twice, when I glance up, I could swear Ren's eyes had just gone back to his book. And now, he busts me watching him. That pale, catlike gaze slides up from the page it's been tracking and locks with mine. My breath catches in my throat.

I blink away.

What *is* this?

Heartburn. That's it. I had that spicy tuna roll for dinner before we left. I rub my chest, trying to coax away this hot, tight, burning *something*. Ugh. No more tuna roll.

Dipping my head back to my computer, even after I'm forced to pack up for descent, I don't look up until our wheels touch down with bone-rattling bumpiness. Until I'm safe once again, grounded to earth and reality.

Player. Employee. And "never the twain shall meet."

Yeah. Ren's not the only literature dork around here.

I might not hardcore jam on Shakespeare like Søren, but I like my books. They're one of the most vital tools in my arsenal for navigating human behavior, to explore my feelings about the parts of life that most confuse me. Books help me feel a bit more connected to a world that often is hard to make sense of. Books are patient with me. They don't laugh at me instead of with me. They don't ask why I'm "always" frowning, or why I can't sit still. Books welcome me—weirdness and all—and take me exactly as I am.

After our rough landing, we deplane and head onto the bus back to Toyota Sports Center, our practice facility. Seated alone, I power on my phone, only to see Annie's text:

Worst timing ever, but I'm at the hospital. Can't tell if it's preterm labor or a false alarm. I'd tell Tim to leave me here and come get you, but I think he'd divorce me for it. I'm SO sorry. Can you call me when you land? I feel awful. I know you don't like Ubering this late at night.

Shit. I'm worried about Annie. And I'm worried about getting home. Because Annie's right. I find late-night rides alone in a taxi driven by a strange dude nerve-wracking.

Maybe it's the New Yorker in me, but I'm cautious about what situations I place myself in. I have pride, yes, and I don't like to be babied, but I am also a practical woman. I can acknowledge that my ability to defend myself is objectively less than a woman whose hands and feet move much more readily.

My car was acting weird before we left for St. Paul and had to go to the shop *again*, so Annie and Tim offered to pick me up when I got back. My other friend Lorena doesn't have a car, so I can't ask her to come instead. Which means, now that Annie's unable to get me, I'm screwed.

"Everything okay?"

I jump in my seat at the sound of Ren's voice and drop my phone. It lands with a sickening crack on the bus floor.

"*Zounds!*" Ren leans and picks it up.

"Did you just swear in Shakespeare—"

"Let's move on and pretend I didn't do that." Ren's cheeks are bright red. Sighing in relief when he turns it over, Ren hands me my phone, demonstrating the screen somehow survived the drop. "I'm sorry I startled you."

"That's okay." When I take my phone, our fingers brush, and a crack of electricity snaps through my skin. I yelp and pull away, a scowl tightening my mouth. I always look murderous when caught off guard because, while most people startle mildly when surprised, I jump out of my skin, adrenaline floods my system, and all I want to do is curl up into the fetal position. It's unsettling and embarrassing.

"You okay?" Ren asks.

“I’m fine.” I make a fist and release it. My hand’s trembling. “That didn’t hurt you?”

He shrugs. “I felt a jolt. But I was expecting it.”

Expecting it. What does that mean?

Ren’s eyes are on me, his mouth shifting from an easy grin to a frown of concern. “You don’t *look* okay. What’s up?”

I glance at my phone, staring at Annie’s text. “My ride home fell through. I’m a grouch when it comes to a change in plans, but it’s not a big deal. I’ll figure it out.”

“Let me give you a ride.” When he sees my uneasy look, he nudges my thigh gently. “You’ve already been in the minivan. You know how cool it is. How can you say no?”

His eyes hold mine, that easy, gentle smile in place. Something tells me getting in that van alone with Ren is asking for trouble. But weighed against a late-night Uber ride with a possibly cane-fetishizing murderer—laugh all you want, but it’s a statistical possibility and those aren’t chances I want to take, even when chances are slim—it’s not enough to deter me.

“All right,” I tell him. “Thanks.”

Ren’s smile widens, before he schools his expression. “Cool.” He picks up his book and doesn’t say another word.

When our bus rolls to a stop outside the practice facility, Ren stands and stretches. It sets his hips at my eye level and it’s too easy to picture him more than shirtless—pale skin, the shadow of hair arrowing down his stomach...

I glance away furiously as heat floods my cheeks. After fumbling with shoving my phone in my bag, I ease up from my seat, stifling a moan of discomfort. My joints practically creak as I straighten, a process that takes longer than it should. When I hike my bag onto my shoulder and stand fully, I notice Ren’s positioned himself slightly behind our row of seats, his arms braced on each side, sealing off the row until I’m clear.

Half the guys stand behind him, eyes on their phones, their small carry-on bags on their shoulders. They’re waiting.

“Sorry!” I call. “Granny Frankie’s slow moving.”

A bunch of variations of “*You’re good, Frankie*” travel the bus. Taking my time down those stupid steep steps off the bus, I make it out into the balmy California air waiting for us and draw in a long, deep breath.

Suddenly, weight leaves my shoulder. I gape as I watch Ren fluidly hoist my bag up his arm, as he hauls not only his equipment—yes, the man *insists* on carrying his own equipment and not letting the lowly assistants schlep his stuff—but also both of our suitcases, all with the use of one good arm.

“I’m feeling slightly useless,” I yell. “And you’re supposed to be careful of your shoulder.”

Ren grins back at me. “My shoulder’s fine. Besides, I’m antsy. I had to sit on my butt and watch a game. Just getting a little functional fitness in.”

Ignoring the option to drop off some of his stuff in the facility, Ren pulls out his keys, and the van’s trunk hatch opens with a chirp. After neatly loading our luggage, Ren steps to my side to open the door for me, waiting as I slide into the seat and buckle up. My laptop bag is set neatly at my feet before he closes my door and jogs over to his side.

Our practice facility is in El Segundo, a ten-minute drive west of my rented bungalow in Hawthorne, which is the opposite direction from Ren’s house in Manhattan Beach. I feel bad about making him go out of his way to take me home, but having a safe ride back is worth taking this bite of humble pie.

Before he pulls out, Ren turns on the radio and picks a station that’s quiet but strummy. Guitars, violins, maybe even a ukulele. The man’s voice is gentle and soft. It’s relaxing. I stifle a sigh as I settle into the soft leather of my seat and crack open my window, hoping it’ll wake me up a bit from this dreamy stupor his car’s putting me in.

“You can change the music, if you want.” Ren watches the road carefully, then crosses traffic.

“I like it. Thanks, though.”

He nods and focuses on the road. Ren looks absurdly right driving a minivan. I can just picture him years down the road, behind the wheel, a few more lines at the corners of his eyes, a wedding band claiming his left ring finger. Taking his kids to soccer practice, passing Goldfish bags and juice boxes to the backseat, singing loudly to Disney music on the stereo. And then, stupidly, I see myself in the exact seat I'm in, somehow belonging in that picture.

Honestly, Francesca.

Snapping my glance away, I focus out the window. After a long spate of comfortable quiet, I clear my throat and tell him, "Thanks again for the ride. Sorry to take you out of the way."

"It's no problem, Frankie. I'm always happy to give you a ride home." He takes the right off El Segundo Boulevard onto Inglewood.

Minutes later, we pull up to my house, and Ren unloads my stuff as I fish out my keys from my bag and walk up to the door. I slide my key into the deadbolt first, freezing when I turn and don't feel the bolt slide back. It's unlocked. I test the handle. That's unlocked too.

"What is it?" Ren sets my suitcase gently between us.

"My door..." It comes out hoarse and threadbare. "My door is open."

"Frankie." The urgency in Ren's voice makes my head snap up just in time to realize he's sweeping me up off my feet, holding my entire body easily in one arm—*holy shit*—and carrying my suitcase in the other.

I'm stashed in the van, Ren sprints around to the other side, and he drives quickly down the road, before parking and opening his phone. I watch his fingers dial 911.

"W-what are you doing?" I ask him.

Ren glances up at me as the phone rings. "Calling the police. Most violence related to burglaries happens during break-ins, when the homeowner walks in on the intruders. If someone's still in there—Hi, yes..."

I stare at Ren as he speaks calmly with that composed, even voice he uses on the ice, the one that he used after Maddox got drunk and stupid on me.

I always find it fascinating to watch people like Ren in action during a crisis. People whose stress response isn't shutting down their ability to function. Ren's the guy who thinks analytically and keeps his shit together when the world's burning. I'm the one who sinks to the floor and forgets how to breathe.

He tells them my address, explains the situation. I should be helping. Talking. Doing anything to take control of the situation. But instead, I sit there, staring down the road at my little rented bungalow that I've worked so hard to make feel like home. It's been broken into. Invaded.

A cold numbness sweeps through my body.

Ren's voice rushes over me, a warm breeze that pulls me from my frozen shock. "Frankie. Police are coming. It's going to be okay. Do you have your landlord's number?"

I nod. But I can't seem to move my hands to find my phone. Carefully, Ren bends and extracts my phone from my bag. "What his name?"

"Mike Williams," I whisper.

Ren dials, slowly opens his door and stands outside the van, his eyes glued on the bungalow. He leaves the window down so air comes in, so I can hear his conversation, if I were capable of following it. But slowly, a roar louder than the Pacific's waves eclipses my hearing. Tears prick my eyes.

There are these tiny moments when missing my dad is acute and unexpected. He died when I was twelve. I'm twenty-six. I've lived longer without him than with him, so why, so many years fatherless, do I feel like I would give anything right now to feel safe in his strong arms, to hear his gravelly voice comforting me?

Great. Now I'm crying. And I don't cry in front of others. Because since I moved to California and realized I had a chance to rewrite the script on how people saw the autistic girl

with a limp, Project Make Frankie Badass consists of an impenetrable, chilly front. Nowadays, I cry *privately*.

I cry into bowls of ice cream on the twenty-fourth through twenty-ninth days of my cycle. I cry watching those TV shows where they build homes for people in crisis. I cry when that humane shelter commercial comes up on the hotel TV every away game, because I miss my dog who's staying with Aunt Lorena while Mommy travels, and I want a houseful of cats, and my bungalow, which was affordable-ish, close to both the practice facility and the arena, was perfect but for one small thing—"no cats!"—so I can't be the cat lady I've always wanted to be and now my house doesn't even feel like it's safe and—

"Frankie." Ren rips open his door, dropping into the driver's seat while he lunges over the console and wraps me in his arms. "Hey. *Shhh*, it's okay. You're okay. We'll get it figured out."

Now I'm not just crying in public, I'm *sobbing*. In Ren Bergman's arms no less, getting snot and tears all over his nice suit and fisting that soft blue dress shirt as hard as my aching fingers will let me.

Have you ever started out crying for one thing and found yourself crying for so much more by the time you really get going? That's what happens to me sometimes. That's what happens now.

Crying because I miss feeling safe in my home already. Crying because I'm hurting, and I'm tired of hurting. Crying because when shit happens, I want my sister, my mom, my grandmother, and they're an entire country away. Crying because I need my dad, and he's not here, and he never again will be. Crying because I miss my dog. Crying because this break-in scares me and makes me feel vulnerable, and I work very hard not to feel that way.

"Frankie." Ren presses his cheek to the top of my head and holds me close. "Can you take a deep breath?"

I breathe in, then release a long shuddering exhale.

“Good,” he says softly. “And again?”

I take another slow, calming breath. And another. And another. Until my breathing is even, and my tears are only silent, sliding down my cheeks. At some point in my breakdown he started rubbing my back in a slow, soothing, circular motion. I sigh and lean into him.

“I called your landlord,” Ren says. “He’s going to talk with the police, make sure they get the place clear and safe again.” Ren’s hand slides up my back, then cups the nape of my neck. “Do you have any pets they need to keep an eye out for? Your dog, right?” he asks gently.

I burst an ugly sob against his chest. “Pazzaaaaa.”

Ren pulls back enough to cup my face in both hands and search my eyes. “Frankie, I can’t understand you.”

“Pazza, my dog.” I manage a long slow breath without crying. “She’s with Lo.”

“Your friend, Lorena?”

I frown. “Y-yes, Lorena. But how did you know?”

“You’ve mentioned her a bunch of times, Frankie.”

Pretty sure I might have mentioned her *once* but... Ren’s thumbs stroke my cheeks, making this dazed feeling wash over me. My breathing calms again and tears finally stop blurring my vision. “Pazza,” I whisper.

“Do you want to go to Lorena’s? You need somewhere to stay until they sort this out and you feel safe to come home.”

Lo has a new girlfriend, Mia. A new girlfriend that she’s mildly obsessed with, who recently took the cohabitation leap and moved into Lorena’s studio. I can’t stay at Lo’s. There’s nowhere to sleep and no privacy.

Then there’s Annie. Annie and Tim are expecting their first baby, and their second bedroom is now a nursery, not to mention, they’re at the hospital possibly preparing to bring home a premature baby. Sure, they have a couch, but I can’t sleep on couches because they’re hell for my joints.

Last time I slept on a couch was at a house party in college, and the next morning, I couldn't get out of it. I had to be helped upright by the guy I'd just finally given into dating. As soon as he got me standing, he made up some excuse about a Saturday study session he'd forgotten about. He'd never seen me have a bad day, and on my first one, it scared him off. On my slow walk home, I texted him we were over. Then I sat in the shower until the hot water ran out, soothing the aches in my joints as much as my heart.

"Um." I wipe my nose. "I think I'll just get a hotel tonight."

Ren frowns. "The hell you're sleeping in a hotel, Frankie. You just came home to a ransacked house. You need to be with friends."

"Søren." I scrub my face. He's right, and I don't want to admit it. I don't want to stay somewhere impersonal and be alone. But I don't have any other options. "You're being high-handed."

"Francesca. You're being stubborn."

I drop my hands. "I do not have a wide friendship circle. I have two friends, and neither of them have room for me."

Ren bends so our eyes meet. Holding my gaze, he sets out his hand, facing up. Without thinking, I slide my palm across his, swallowing a sigh at the heat of his skin. His fingers gently wrap around mine.

"You forgot about one more LA friend, and he has more room than he knows what to do with, Frankie." That bright Ren Bergman smile twinkles in the moonlight. "Me."

Ren

Playlist: “Sisyphus,” Andrew Bird

This is fine. It’s fine. I’m fine.

If I tell myself this enough, it’s going to be fine.

Frankie sits in the backseat, baby talking to her dog, Pazza, a Siberian Husky and Alaskan Malamute mix. She’s not crying anymore, which has significantly improved my ability to breathe properly and drive us safely to my place. Frankie crying made me feel like my heart was being cut out of my chest.

After talking with the cops, they confirmed a break-in and took inventory of what was stolen—her TV, her computer monitor that she connects to her laptop, emergency meds, most of her clothes, and a lot of pantry items. One small comfort was she kept all sensitive information in a secure safe, so the police were confident her identity wouldn’t be stolen.

With nothing left to do at the bungalow, I navigated us, per her request, to the In-N-Out drive-through, prepared to buy the franchise if necessary, whatever it took to put a smile on her face.

Two chocolate shakes, three large fries, and a Double-Double later, Frankie seemed tentatively comforted. But our trip to Lorena’s place in Echo Park, was the real fix. She hasn’t stopped smiling, cuddling Pazza, a massive black and white dog with keen gold eyes who stares at me in the rearview mirror, baring her teeth.

“Frankie?”

“Yes?” she singsongs right into the dog’s furry neck. “Who’s my good girl?”

Pazza finally breaks her glare long enough to turn and lick Frankie's face.

"Your Musky looks like she wants to eat me for dinner."

Frankie laughs softly. "This mix is called an Alusky, Søren."

I try to ignore how much I like hearing Frankie say my full name. I've healed from most wounds sustained in the tough teen years, but the brutal teasing I got for my name is like the last aching scar that just won't fade. *Nobody* calls me Søren, except Axel when he's looking for a fight.

When Frankie says my name, it sounds warm, and when I let my imagination get carried away, I'd even say affectionate.

I pull into my driveway. "An Alusky."

"Yes. And she doesn't eat big, tough, hockey players. She eats grain-free."

Throwing the car in park, I peer over my shoulder. "Well, I'm grain-free, too. This isn't comforting, to hear your wolf is paleo."

"She's not a wolf!" Pazza nuzzles Frankie, gently knocking her back on her seat. Immediately the dog whines and drops her head to her lap. "I'm okay, Pazza."

"Do we have everything she needs for now?"

Frankie smiles at me over the dog's head. "Yeah. Lo made her enough food to last a few days."

"You *make* her food?"

Frankie's eyes narrow. "Yes, Søren."

"Don't 'Søren' me, Francesca. It was a question."

"You repeated what I said."

"I was just surprised, Frankie. I'm not judging."

"Good," she says. "Because feeding your dog fresh food is proven to increase their health and longevity." Frankie kisses Pazza's head. "I want her around for as long as I can have her."

There's tenderness in Frankie's voice that I've never heard before. At work she's brisk and no nonsense. But just like when I surprised her the other night bringing her that shirt and ended up sharing her takeout, it's another side of Francesca Zeferino that makes me feel even more off-the-table feelings for her.

Which is disastrous. Super disastrous. I might not read romance novels as voraciously as Viggo, but I've picked up enough in my day to know that forbidden love is a messy trope, about as fraught a story line—besides love triangles and eff those—as it gets.

Exhibit A: *Romeo and Juliet*. Their love is forbidden, the timing is terrible, but they're so infatuated with each other, they throw caution to the wind. Impatient courtship, shotgun wedding, miscommunication, hotheaded tempers, violence, missed connections, it all ends in the star-crossed pair offing themselves.

Yep. Forbidden love is the one to avoid. Which means, of course, that I find myself in the thick of it. Typical life of Søren Bergman.

I step out of my car on a sigh, circle the van, then slide open the back-passenger door.

Frankie eases out of it, followed by her dog. "Pazza, sit," Frankie says.

Pazza drops to her haunches, tail wagging.

"Good girl. *Ben fatto. Brava,*" Frankie croons and scratches her ear. Her voice is low and cadent, like when she says *Zenzero*. It's ridiculously hot.

Glancing up at me, she frowns, her eyes tightening with concern as she searches my face. "Everything okay?" she asks.

"Yep. Everything's okay." *It's so not okay.* "You, uh, speak some Italian?"

"Oh. Pretty much fluent. My dad came over with my grandmother when he was five. So, I grew up speaking it with them. And I'm a bit of a polyglot. I love learning new languages."

Great. Just great. The woman who's about to be a guest in my house and for whom I harbor unrequited, inappropriately love-like feelings, also speaks a sexy Romance language.

The unbidden image of Frankie whispering Italian in my ear while her touch wanders my body practically blinds me as it soars across my mind, a fantasy with as little chance of a future as the dying star that bolts through the sky overhead.

I blink, shaking myself out of those thoughts. "That's... impressive."

"'Pazza' is Italian too," Frankie says cheerily, bending to kiss the dog's snout. "Well, her name is. Means *crazy*. Because she was absolutely nuts as a puppy—I'm talking psychotic. She was like the Energizer Bunny..." Frankie's eyes dance my way, and she frowns. "You sure you're okay, Ren? I guess this is a bit more than you bargained for when you offered me a ride home, huh?"

"Frankie, I'm glad to be able to have you here. Well, I mean I'm not glad your house was burgled." I sigh and scrub my face.

A smile tips her mouth. "I know what you mean," she says quietly.

"Right. Let's get inside." I take a step toward her, reaching for the heavy messenger bag weighing down her shoulder, but Frankie throws up her hands. "Wait, Ren! Pazza's territorial..." Her voice dies off as the dog approaches me, sniffs my hand, and drags her tongue right along my knuckles.

I stand still, watching Pazza nuzzle me, before she makes a soft whining noise. She glances up and holds my eyes, cocking her head to the side.

"She likes you," Frankie says quietly.

I break my gaze from Pazza and look over at Frankie. "Seems like a friendly dog. Doesn't she like everybody? Besides the delivery guy."

"Nope. She's cautious around everyone except Lo and Annie. She's okay with Tim, warming up to Mia."

“Well, then I’m honored.” I scratch Pazza’s other ear and smile at her. “That’s a nice club to be a part of.”

When I glance up, Frankie’s watching me curiously, a small smile tugging at her mouth until it morphs into a reluctant yawn.

“Come on, Francesca. Let’s get you and Pazza tucked in.”

* * *

I wake up to faint sunlight, early, like always. The house is quiet. No clatter of dog paws, no soft noises I might expect if Frankie was awake. Throwing on a pair of gym shorts and a T-shirt, I walk by the guest bedroom I set up for her. The door’s closed.

In the kitchen, I notice my Nespresso machine was used, and a solitary spoon sits by the sink in a small caramel puddle. Milk with coffee. Exactly how Frankie likes it. Cream, if it’s available, one sugar.

I sound like a creeper knowing that. But having unrequited feelings for a woman for over three years, with no appropriate opportunity to socialize outside of work without raising suspicion, you soak up every little detail you can when you’re together.

The faint noise of a dog barking comes from the shore. I follow the sound, opening the sliding doors onto the deck, and I’m greeted by a sight I wish I’d had the wherewithal to prepare for.

Frankie in yoga pants and another oversized sweatshirt. She stands barefoot down on the shore, tossing a ball for Pazza who bolts along the packed sand, then scoops it nimbly away from foamy waves curling toward her. Wind sweeps Frankie’s dark hair into inky ribbons that glow against the sunrise. The

sun creeps over the water's edge, bouncing off her cheekbones, the soft upturn of her nose.

Her smile is small, her thoughts seemingly far away.

There's rarely a smile warming Frankie's face. Most times her mouth is set in a hard line. The guys joke about it—Frank the Crank, they call her. But I've never seen her that way. She's serious. No bullshit. But often women feel they have to be like that to be respected in their work, to ensure men don't get ideas and cross boundaries.

Also, she has arthritis. She doesn't always seem to be uncomfortable, but I can tell when she's in pain, and it's not infrequent. I wouldn't exactly walk around smiling constantly if my body hurt like that.

Not that you'd believe inflammation riddles Frankie's joints as she whips the ball through the air in a fastball pitch. An involuntary whistle of appreciation leaves me, and her head whips my way, the portrait of surprised.

Then the weirdest thing happens. Her eyes crinkle. Her mouth tips into a wide smile. The dimple pops. And my heart nearly tumbles out of my chest. She looks...happy to see me.

I soak it up, greedy, starved. A look like that is once in a lifetime. Because Frankie does a lot of grunting hello. cursory, no-eye-contact waves. Of course, I know she respects me, that she trusts me to be a decent person as it pertains to our work, but this?

This is new. Rare. A knot of nerves tightens my stomach as I lift a hand tentatively.

She raises her thermos of coffee in response and yells, "Come on! I can't throw this ball forever!"

Jogging down across the sand, I take the ball from Pazza when she next bounds back with it. Then I throw it in a high arc through the air.

Frankie watches with narrowing eyes. "Show-off," she mutters into her thermos before she takes a sip.

"Says the woman with a mean softball pitch."

She glances up at me. “You saw that, did you?”

“I did. You been holding out on me, Zeferino?”

“Hardly.” She sips her coffee again. “I haven’t thrown a softball since junior year of high school, before...” Another sip of coffee. “It’s been a long time. And it hurts like hell. How I didn’t dislocate my elbow pitching like that, I’ll never know.”

When she returns, I give Pazza an affectionate pat to her side, then throw the ball for her again. “Well, it looks like you still have it.”

Frankie gives me a sidelong glance. Her cheeks pink a little, before her eyes dart away. “Thanks.”

Silence falls between us, but I don’t mind it. I grew up with chaos—a family of six siblings and two busy parents—and I know my way around it, how to yell loud enough to be heard, how to shove and tease and vie for attention. But two years into living in my house on the beach, this big house that I hope one day grows as full of lovable chaos as the one I grew up in, I’ve learned to enjoy quiet. So, I listen to the waves break on the shore. I watch the wind curl Frankie’s hair up into the air as sunrise breaks over the water. And it feels inexplicably right.

“Zenzero.”

I snap out of it. “I was staring. Sorry. You look good backlit by the sunrise—that is, I mean, that was a strictly platonic statement...” My voice fades as a blush burns my cheeks.

Frankie grins up at me. “Don’t worry. You’re still cute, even tripping over your words, Mr. Calm-Cool-and-Happy.”

I frown at her. “*That’s* how you see me?” Try *Crazed-Hot-and-Bothered*.

She shrugs and returns her focus to Pazza. “I’m starting to figure out there’s more to you than that sunshine smile.”

“And what’s that?”

Pazza comes barreling our way, and skids to a sandy halt at our feet as she drops the ball. Tipping her head, she glances

between the two of us, her tongue lolling happily out of her mouth.

Frankie sweeps up the ball from the sand and tosses it softly into the air, catching it as she walks by me. “A bashful, dorky, sweetheart. I pity the women of Los Angeles when this gets out, Ren.”

“Wait.” I scramble to catch up to Frankie, which isn’t hard. She moves slower in the morning. She’s also not using her cane, so she favors her left leg and walks carefully. “Frankie, just to be clear, I want my personal life to be just between me and friends.”

Frankie stops at the bottom of the steps up to my deck. “So, we’re friends, are we?”

“You said so the other night.”

She lifts an eyebrow. “True. But if my hazy weed memory serves me correctly, I made you impersonate a tomato when I said it.”

I scrub my neck. “You caught me off guard. I didn’t know you liked me enough to call me a friend.”

Frankie’s smile disappears. “What?”

“No, wait.” I swallow nervously. “That came out wrong. I-I need coffee. Let’s go inside, and I’ll try that again.”

Frankie leads the way, but Pazza stops, blocking my progress as she looks up and gives me an incredulous look.

“Trust me,” I mutter to the dog. “Ryder’s told me all about it. I’m the king of sticking my foot in my mouth.” Pazza huffs, then trots off ahead of me.

After Frankie hoses off Pazza’s paws and her feet, we settle into the kitchen. The sound of a dog lapping up her meal is the only noise in the room as Frankie stands at the island and grins at me over her coffee. I swallow a scalding gulp and try to formulate my thoughts. I’m so infuriatingly clumsy with my words around her.

Setting down my coffee, I narrow my eyes at her amused grin. “Enjoy watching me squirm?”

Frankie's grin deepens and out comes the dimple. "I can't lie, Zenzero, it's entertaining. You're usually so chill."

I turn my coffee mug slowly, clockwise. "I've learned things go better for me when that's what other people see."

"But that's not all there is, is it? What most people see is... incomplete."

My eyes lift and find hers. Her irises glitter, forest green dappled with gold, like sunlight peeking through a canopy of leaves. "Yes."

"Well," Frankie says as she sets down her coffee and clears her throat. "I very much empathize with that, Zenzero. Your secret is safe with me."

I tip my head, hoping she'll give me more. Instead she shifts on her feet and says, "While we're on the subject of privacy, I want you to consider how my staying with you looks. I need it to be very clear with the team that extenuating circumstances, and nothing else, led to me staying with you."

"Understood. I'll tell the guys so there are no rumors. Your place was broken into. I live close by. It was late. You crashed here. You'll be staying here until it's safe to move back. That okay?"

"Yes, that works." Slowly, she walks over to the sink and rinses out her mug, whistling to Pazza. "Except...do you mean that about staying here until the house is ready? Not that it will be long, just until the landlord fixes the little bit of damage, changes the locks, and insurance gets what they need."

"Of course, I mean it. And I imagine it might be a while before you feel comfortable going back home, even after they straighten everything out and it's secure again. So, just know that this place is yours for however long you want."

She seems to hesitate, biting her lip. "Thank you. On my side of things, I'll talk to Darlene, let her know our living situation. Just be open about it so it's not weird." Darlene's her boss. The head honcho for all our media and PR. "I'm going to hop in the shower, then."

Heat rushes through me. It's too easy to picture water sliding down her chest, furrowing between her thighs. I exhale roughly and tug my shirt, trying to cool myself off. "Shower. Sure. Great."

God, I'm hopeless.

Frankie gives me an amused smile. "Okay. I'll be ready at eight?"

"Sounds good." I throw back the remainder of my coffee, hoping its burning path down my throat distracts me. *Don't do it. Not anymore. Don't think about Frankie naked in the shower. Don't. Don't. Don't.*

The hot water kicks on, and I drop my head to the counter with a groan.

Too late.

Frankie

Playlist: “Go Wild,” Friedberg

Annie stares at me in disbelief. “Why am I just hearing about this?”

I shift in my seat at the outdoor café that’s our usual lunch spot. It’s a midway point between the practice facility, Annie’s research lab, and the campus where Lorena teaches. Ren and I have an afternoon PR gig at Children’s, and he offered to drive me after this lunch date with my friends.

As I hesitate to explain myself to Annie, I glance over at Ren, seated on the other side of the café. He takes a sip of his tea, book in hand. He’s hidden at a two-top tucked into a shady corner.

“I didn’t want to worry you,” I tell her. “You were possibly birthing a human last night. You’re in a delicate condition.”

Annie snorts. “Listen, I know we read that scintillating historical romance the other month in book club, but that phrase does not hold up. I’m not delicate. I’m pregnant. And it was indigestion, apparently. I can handle bad news without having a fit of the vapors. Call me next time your house gets broken into and ransacked.”

I meet Annie’s big moss-green eyes. She pushes her nerd glasses up her freckled button nose and frowns at me. “I’m serious,” she says.

I grasp her hand and squeeze. “I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you.” Annie stabs a chunk of chicken, lettuce, and tomato, then shoves it in her mouth. “Provided you come to water aerobics tonight.”

“Ugh, fine. I know I’ve been missing a lot, but playoffs schedule is brutal. I’ll be free to watercize my ass off

consistently once we're done."

"You two and your water aerobics." Lo shakes her head, then freezes mid-scrolling through her phone. "Hey, Frankie. Have you been on Twitter lately?"

I feel my color drain. I'm social-media savvy enough to know that lead never bodes well.

"Not since this morning. We did a live session Q and A in the locker room after practice for playoffs hype this morning, then I came here. Why?"

Lo slides her phone toward me. It's a paparazzi shot, taken right outside the practice facility, before Ren and I left to come here. His hand rests low on my back as he reaches for the car door. A tiny gesture as I caught my toe on uneven asphalt that felt so surprisingly *good*. Maybe it was because he didn't say anything. Just gently steadied me with that warm, solid hand as he opened my door.

Annie leans over to see Twitter unfurling with comments that have my stomach rolling. Pushing her glasses up her nose, she glances from Lo's phone to me. "Wow. Lots of women really don't like you already, huh?"

The comments unfold at alarming speed. Some are nice. Many are awful.

Ooh, I want her shoes.

Is that a cane?

Wow. I thought he was gay.

Lorena crunches on an ice cube from her tea and swears under her breath. "That right there is why we need feminism. To exorcise embedded patriarchy from our culture, women have got to stop internalizing toxic male practices like hierarchical aggression and then wielding them against each other."

Annie sits back in her seat and puts her plate on her round belly with a sigh. "While true, Lo, maybe what Frankie needs is less cultural critique and more practical insight right now."

Lo throws up her hands. "I'm in liberal arts academia. I'm the worst person to come to for anything practical."

Both of my friends turn to face me. Their heads tip in twin looks of concern. Sweet and tiny Annie, with her pragmatism and her big heart. Lo with those sharp mocha eyes and badass facial piercings that hide a sensitive, philosophical soul. They're as different on the outside as they are on the inside. And especially right now, I don't know what I'd do without them.

"It's all right." I shrug. "Nothing to be done, really. Just wait for the comments when they call me his pity fuck."

"Oop, one just rolled in," Annie mutters.

Lo and I swivel our gazes at her.

Annie turns bright red and sinks lower in her chair. "Sorry. Pregnancy brain. Can I have a pass for that?"

"One," Lo says sternly. She takes the phone back from Annie, scrolling through the comments. Her expression hardens, and she flips over her phone, setting it on the table so the screen is hidden. "I want to throat-punch those evil trolls."

"But you can't," I remind her. "So, let's move on, shall we?"

Lo stares at me for a long minute. She has a very disturbing ability to intuit my thoughts, so I blink away, avoiding eye contact as I take a long slow breath to quiet my pounding heart. I have experience with this, maybe not with it being directed so aggressively at *me*, but social media is a beast I handle capably every day.

It's not a big deal. People are assholes. I'm used to being judged for my appearance—the cane *and* my flat expression. What's a few hundred thousand people thinking the worst of me?

"So," Annie says, squeezing my hand affectionately. "When do you get your acceptance letter from UCLA?"

"That's not a sure thing," I remind her. "Who knows if I'll get accepted?"

Annie rolls her eyes. "Please. You'll get accepted. You are made to do sports law. Your admissions documents were perfection."

“It’s true,” Lo chimes in. “I edited them for you. I made sure of it.”

“We’ll see,” I mutter.

Annie pats my hand. “Let’s move on. I can see you getting upset talking about it.”

“It makes me anxious to think about it. I’d rather just forget I applied and be pleasantly surprised if I somehow manage to get in.”

“Fair enough,” Annie says. “How’s teaching, Lo?”

As Lo answers, my gaze wanders over to Ren, tucked into his circumspect corner. His book rests flat on a small two-top table, his water and tea neatly side by side.

“Frankie.” Lo’s voice startles me.

I glance back at her. “What?”

She flicks her lip piercing with her tongue and wiggles her eyebrows, making her brow piercings do a little dance. “See something you like?”

My cheeks heat. I twist my fingers in my necklace. “I was just staring into space.”

Lo quirks an eyebrow. I’ve learned this is code for *bullshit*.

Annie groans, oblivious to our exchange. “God. I’m sick of being pregnant.”

“Aren’t you due soon?” I ask her. “You look like my grandma’s bread when she leaves it out too long to proof.”

Lo chokes on her water.

Annie stares at me in disbelief. “Frankie. I have another month, at least.”

There’s one of my Why-did-you-open-your-mouth-and-state-the-obvious? moments for you. I grimace. “Sorry, Annie. I didn’t mean to be insulting. You’re just a tiny person with a tall guy’s baby in you. And—”

Lo clears her throat loudly and raises her eyebrows. If a stranger did that, I’d lose it on them, but I’ve built trust with

my friends and I don't find a little social direction here and there offensive or condescending. It's helpful, actually, and I've told them as much.

Annie picks up her fork, holding it poised over her salad. "I want to laugh without peeing myself. I want to drink beer again." Staring at the plate on her belly, Annie frowns at her food. "And I want to eat you. But I don't have room."

"Poor Annie." Lo gives Annie an empathic smile before biting into her tofu and bean burrito. "So, once you get into law school, Frankie, how much longer do you do this job? You going to take some time off? Because I want to plan something fun with you between this and the start of the semester."

"No, it's okay," Annie says. "I'll just be leaking breastmilk, wrecked from birthing Tim's monster baby. But please, plan a Napa trip without me."

Lo *tsks*. "I'm talking like a day at the spa and a movie in PJs. For *all* of us. New mama included."

Annie perks up and grins. "Okay. Keep planning, then."

I sip my root beer. "Depends on the playoffs. My thought is I'll give my two weeks' notice once we lose. I've saved up a little nest egg. I'd like to do some studying and otherwise take a few months off to just relax a bit until school starts."

"Good." Lo smiles, staring past my shoulder. "Any plans to *relax* with the hockey hottie?"

"Yeah, right," I mutter around a bite of pizza. "Banging Ren would be a high point in my life, if he's any bit as coordinated in bed as he is on the ice, but he's holding out for someone else."

My stomach sours saying that. I rub my belly and drink some water.

"Who is she?" Lo asks.

"Someone who's unavailable right now but who he's hopeful he can eventually pursue. I don't know the details, just that he's willing to wait for her."

Annie tips her head, glancing from Ren to me. “You have no clue who it is? He hasn’t told you, not even hinted?”

“Well, if he has, you know I don’t pick up on hints,” I remind her. “And no, I really have no clue.”

“Huh.” Lo stares past me, straight at Ren, her brow furrowed in thought.

I peer over my shoulder and look at Ren again as he turns the page in his book, then grins. My heart squeezes weirdly and I turn around. “What?” I ask the two of them.

“Lord help me,” Annie says. “He smiles while reading.”

Lo grins. “And he drinks herbal tea.”

“He’s *adorable*,” they say in unison.

“Shh!” I feel my cheeks turning bright red. “Seriously, stop, both of you.”

Lorena’s eyes scour Ren. “I don’t know, Frankie. I say give your two weeks’ notice, then jump his fine ass.”

Annie sighs wistfully. Her plate of food doesn’t even teeter, resting steadily on her round stomach. “Lo’s right. Go for it. You like him. You two get along.”

“Wow, what a compelling reason to throw myself at him,” I say drily. “By that criteria I should be asking out our waiter.”

Annie groans, locks eyes with Lorena, then glances back to me. “Frankie, he’s cute. And ridiculously nice.”

I give her a look. “You’ve met him once. He said hi to you and smiled. That’s it.”

“So?” she fires back. “His greeting was delightful and memorable. And you said you two consider each other friends. I’m just saying that I think Lo’s onto something.”

“Ladies. He’s not into me. He’s the epitome of polite and friendly, that’s it. Plus, we know Frankie’s not going down the love road.”

Annie’s small hand rests over mine. “We’ve discussed that guys are a bit of a blind spot for you.”

“And *you* say you’re not going down the love road,” Lo says with a quirk of her pierced eyebrow, “but we say, bullshit.”

I scowl at her.

Lo takes my other hand. “The man who is worthy of your love is not going to treat you how your family did. You’re a bright woman, Frankie, but you seem to need the reminder that interabled coupledness can be mutually intimate, empowering, and reciprocal—”

“Here we go,” I mutter.

“It’s time to move past that negative attitude toward it,” she continues blithely. “Talk about it with the therapist, please? It’s time to suit up for love. Because trust me, when love comes, you’re going to want to be ready. You haven’t felt those butterflies, that flip of your stomach, the sensation that your heart’s about to jump out of your chest. When you feel that, it changes everything.”

My pizza churns in my stomach. I’ve felt most of those things just looking at Ren. I keep that unsettling tidbit to myself.

“And just because a guy isn’t jumping your bones, doesn’t mean he doesn’t want to,” Annie adds. “In the absence of him seducing you, let’s consider the fact that Ren *does* exemplify important prerequisites for a solid boyfriend candidate.” She lifts her fingers and starts ticking them off. “He’s gentlemanly. He’s a ginger.”

Lo cackles. “Frankie’s such a freak for redheads.” I kick her under the table.

“He likes to read,” Annie continues. “He cares about his community. After this you’re going to go take video of him reading to sick children, for goodness’ sake!”

“Your point?” I shove a bite of pizza in my mouth and chew.

Annie blinks at me, owl-like through her glasses. “My point is he’s special. He’s sitting in a café, clearly not because he’s hungry, but because he’d rather deal with being ogled by an entire restaurant so he can carpool with you, rather than avoid this bullshit and meet you there. I think he’s not just a fantastic human. I think you mean something to him.”

“That’s...that’s... It’s a work thing.”

“You know in science,” Annie says, “the logical principle called Occam’s Razor.”

I eyeball her. “Yes?”

“Well, it says that we must accept, until we have reason otherwise, that the simplest explanation for your data is the most logical and thus likely one. It applies broadly, I think. To life. To feelings.”

“Annie. I’m not a scientist. Ren and I aren’t an experiment.”

“Well, you’re right of course.” She steals a slice of my pizza and takes a bite. “But this is the simple truth: you and Ren like each other and feel comfortable around each other. Don’t you?”

“Yes,” I grumble.

“So, explore it. I mean, if you want to. Which I think you seem to... Am I wrong?”

I stare down at my pizza and sigh. “No. I mean, I do like him.”

Like him. Okay, maybe I more than *like* him. But it’s just carnal, isn’t it? I’m so sexually attracted to that sweet cinnamon roll of a man, it’s crazy.

Annie leans in. “And you’re attracted to him?”

“Yes,” I admit. “But, I really don’t think he sees me that way, and we work together—”

Lorena claps her hands. “Hallelujah, she’s gonna get laid. Then maybe she won’t be so salty at book club.”

My pizza gets the brunt of my emotions. I bite down viciously and tear off another mouthful. “I wasn’t being salty. That book was trash. Nothing happened for, like, six hundred pages.”

Lorena sucks in a breath.

“What?” I follow her glance back toward Ren’s table and nearly choke on the pizza making my cheeks chipmunk full.

A woman hovers over him. She’s leaning her ass on Ren’s table, wrapping her arm around his chair. He leans back all the

way in his seat and scratches the back of his neck. He's nervous. Cornered.

Red tints my vision. "That puck bunny punk—"

"Whoa, lady," Lorena says. "What's this all about, Miss I-mean-I-guess-I-kind-of-like-him?"

I swallow my painfully massive bite of pizza and stare. "I'm just... He's my friend. He's shy. He hates attention like that."

"He's a big boy," Lorena purrs. "He doesn't need you to stick up for him. Unless you *want* to go clear up a few things with the woman who's clearly broadcasting her interest..."

I war with myself. Lorena's right. Ren is a grown man. He can take care of himself. But Ren usually doesn't when it comes to fans. He's always polite. *Too* polite.

Standing, I sweep up my cane and stroll across the café. Ren's eyes lift and lock with mine as I cross the room, a thrum of energy and purpose washing through me with each step. His gaze holds mine with a brazen intensity that weakens my knees and makes me glad I have something to lean on.

The woman's voice dies off when I stop at the table. Ren stands, making her release his chair and sit back on the table. His eyes dance between mine, a small smile playing at his lips.

"Hi," I say to the woman on an attempted smile. She rears back slightly, so I'm guessing my fake smile was a brilliant failure like always.

My stomach does a weird tumble as I lean on my cane and turn my attention to Ren. "Hey, Zenzero."

He swallows thickly. "Hi, Frankie."

"You must not have seen me when you came in." I nod toward my table where Annie and Lorena wave much too enthusiastically. "There's a fourth seat calling your name."

Ren's shoulders relax. He smiles as he sweeps up his book and leaves a fifty on the table. "Excuse me," he says to the woman on a polite nod, while stepping closer to me. "I have to get going."

We turn, and once again, Ren places his hand low on my back to indicate I should go ahead of him. It's just a fraction of a second before it falls away, but I swear my heart ran a marathon in that tiny space of time.

"Thanks," he says quietly. "I should get better at escaping that kind of situation."

I smile at him over my shoulder. "What's your usual tactic?"

"Making up an excuse for why I need to leave."

"Ah. And you didn't leave this time because..."

He stops in his tracks. "Because I was waiting for you. Of course, I didn't leave."

"You could have waited in your car, Ren." I spin so I can face him. "You didn't have to deal with that for my sake."

Ren's mouth quirks in the faintest grin. "What do you say you let me worry about how and where I wait for you, Francesca?"

"As you wish, Søren." I pinch his bicep teasingly. "Now help me finish off my pizza so we can make it to Children's, then get home. Before Pazza poops on that fancy couch of yours."

* * *

"Your friends are great," Ren says.

I scowl as I stare out the car window. "They're in the doghouse."

Next time I'm at water aerobics, I'm going to tell Annie that terrible vegetable joke she can never get over. She'll pee herself in the pool from hysterics—thank you, Annie's advanced pregnancy. Lorena's the worst offender, though. I'm sending a Chippendale dancer to her office hours. That'll teach her.

Ren laughs. “Frankie. You’re badass and cool. Your friends telling a few barely embarrassing, entirely hilarious stories only rounds out the picture.”

I grumble under my breath and shift in my seat, trying to find a comfortable position. Kind of hard when both of your hips hurt.

Ren grips the steering wheel at exactly ten and two o’clock, leaving two o’clock just long enough to adjust his rearview mirror at a red light. “You weren’t serious about Pazza pooping on the couch, were you?”

“No, I wasn’t. She’s crated for the day. I mean it’s been years since she chewed out of her crate and ripped up my entire living room furniture set.”

Ren makes a strangled noise and hazards a glance at me. “You’re messing with me, aren’t you?”

I grin. “You’re fun to tease, Zenzero. I can’t help it.”

“Trust me, I’ve heard that one before.”

Guilt hits me, settling heavy in my gut. Both because I’ve borne the brunt of missing a joke or tease too many times to count—happens a lot with a highly literal brain—and because he told me the other day that he was one of those kids for whom high school was pure misery. He’s probably been messed with enough for two lifetimes.

“Hey. I’m sorry.” I set a hand on his thigh, and Sweet St. Nicholas Stuck in the Chimney this man’s legs are granite hard. I yank my hand back like I burned it.

Ren clears his throat and accelerates as the light turns green. “You don’t need to apologize, Frankie.”

I feel like he’s holding something back, but I’m terrible at figuring out moments like these. These are the times when being autistic is frustrating and exhausting. Especially when people don’t know what you’re up against.

I don’t talk about autism at work. I mask, which is another way of saying, I do what I need to do in order to seem “normal,” which is why Ren and the guys only see Frank the

Crank, serious, no-smiles me. But sometimes I wish Ren knew. Because right now he doesn't understand how much I need him not to dance around the truth but give it to me straight. I can't see through those gauzy linguistic layers like so many can.

It nearly comes tumbling out of my mouth, but instead I shift in my seat again and change the subject.

"So...I have something to tell you." Might as well lower the boom now. "Paps got a picture of us leaving for lunch together. Twitter blew up. There might be minor conjecture that we're together."

Ren hits the brakes hard, lurching us forward. "I'm sorry, what?"

"It'll blow over, Zenzero." I grip the handle above the car door, just in case I'm in for another jolt.

A furious blush crawls up his neck and darkens his cheeks. "Oh."

"Oh?" I poke his shoulder. "You're going monosyllabic on me."

He starts sputtering, his cheeks darkening to raspberry red.

I try to ignore that stab to my pride. Is it *so* terrible to be temporarily linked to me this way?

"Ren. Relax. It'll die down on its own. And if you want it to go away faster, put yourself out there and go on some actual dates. Got yourself seen with another woman—"

"No," he says sharply. Taking a long slow exhale, Ren grips the steering wheel tight, then relaxes his fingers. "Sorry, that came out harsh. I'm flustered. What I meant to say was, I'm not interested in dating right now."

A weird surge of jealousy pricks me. Who *is* this woman he's waiting for, who has this deep claim on his heart?

"This woman better be worth it, Bergman."

His mouth is tight. He shakes his head. "I'm...it's not..." Sighing, he turns the van into the hospital parking garage and

nabs an accessible parking space. I pull out my parking sticker and hook it around his mirror.

“Will this impact your job?” he asks. “Do you want me to touch base with Darlene?”

I shake my head. “Don’t worry. I already emailed her to explain earlier. I’m just sorry you have to deal with people thinking you’re with me—”

“Frankie.”

I freeze mid-unbuckling. “Yes?”

Ren turns in his seat and locks eyes with me. “I’d be *flattered* if someone thought you were with me.”

My ears ring. A dull ache tightens my heart as every alarm goes off inside me.

Danger! Danger! You are catching feelings for Ren Bergman.

While living with him. And trying to keep my professional integrity intact. And keep my heart sealed off.

Shitty shit shitballs. Terrible, terrible timing, Francesca.

I throw open my car door, which I know will end this conversation, at least for now, because Ren is hell-bent on chivalry. He all but sprints to my side, holding open the door and offering me a hand, like he does every time we descend the travel bus and he’s ahead of me.

Not because he thinks I’m fragile or I can’t do it on my own, but because Ren should have been born two hundred years ago, when men stood as women entered a room, and courtship was stolen kisses in moonlit gardens.

“We’re not done with this conversation,” he says firmly.

I pat his shoulder reassuringly and stifle my grin. “Whatever you say, dear.”

Ren

Playlist: “Port of Call,” Beirut

I will not cry. I will not cry. I will not—

Carbuncles. I’m crying.

I’d ask whose idea it was for me to read *Wherever You Are, My Love Will Find You* to a group of toddler and preschool-aged patients, but I have no doubt it was Frankie’s doing.

She leans against the wall, with a smile that’s so dangerously beautiful, I’m worried my heart’s going to beat right out of my chest. At least I’m at a hospital. Someone could probably do something about that here.

“You okay, Mr. Ren?” My new little buddy, Arthur, smiles up at me and adjusts his glasses. He’s sitting close and rests his small hand on my arm.

“Yeah, Arthur. I’m okay. Sometimes I feel big feelings and they make me have tears.”

Arthur’s smile widens. “Me too. I cry when things hurt. And when I miss my family. Daddy told me that’s okay. He said mommies and sisters aren’t the only ones who cry. Brothers and daddies have tears, too.”

“That’s what my daddy told me when I was little, too.”

Arthur grins and leans in closer, poking the book. “Can you read more now?”

“Right.” Picking up the book, I clear my throat and blink away the wetness blurring my vision. “So hold your head high and don’t be afraid to march to the front of your own parade. If you’re still my small babe or you’re all the way grown, my promise to you is you’re never alone.”

I swallow another lump in my throat. Christ, these books. It doesn't help that half of these kids have parents who can only visit occasionally. California's a huge state, and this is a top hospital for childhood illnesses. A lot of these kids' parents have to work to pay for their child's treatment while living hours away. If anyone needs to be reminded that love doesn't fade when Mommy or Daddy leave for a while, it's these little ones.

I glare up at Frankie who's holding her phone with the concentration of one filming a video, biting her tongue square between her front teeth. She *always* does that, and it *always* stirs my body.

I'm starting to have a response that is beyond inappropriate for a children's hospital reading time, so I blink away and refocus on the book. After I finish reading, we make a craft, eat some healthy snacks, and I give hugs goodbye, promising Arthur I'll come by soon and say hello again.

Walking down the hallway, I notice Frankie's limp is a bit more pronounced, but I'll be damned if I say anything about it or offer to pull the van right up to the exit. She'll shove that wand of hers up my butt faster than I can open my mouth to say *sorry I asked*.

"Well, that was a home run," she says. "And I won the bet with Nicole in PR."

"What bet was that?"

She grins as we stop in front of the elevators and pushes the down button. "That you couldn't read that book with a dry eye."

"Wow. I made you some money with my soft side, Francesca. How nice to be used for profit." She shoves me, and bounces backward, since my body doesn't budge. I catch her by the elbow and steady her. "Easy."

Frankie peers up at me. Heat slides through my hand, as I hold her arm. She flexes her lean bicep underneath my grip and cocks an eyebrow. "Careful," she says. "Don't hurt yourself."

I give the muscle an experimental squeeze, narrowing my eyes in feigned concentration. “Impressive.”

Her smile fades as her gaze drifts to my mouth. And suddenly it doesn't feel like we're being playful. Not anymore.

The elevator door springs open, I drop my grip, and the moment is gone.

Once we're in the van, making our way down the 110 South toward Manhattan Beach, Frankie disappears into her phone, muttering to herself as she answers emails and checks in on social media platforms. Then she picks up her phone, working her way through voicemails. I steal every possible glance I can safely take and tell myself I can handle this. I can have the woman I'm crazy about in my home and keep myself together. I can—

“Ren!”

I tap the brakes, look around, assuming Frankie's seen something that I'm about to hit. “What? What is it?”

She drops her phone. “Sorry. I wanted to stop you before we pass Hawthorne. I just remembered I was hoping to go grab my mail.”

A sigh of relief leaves me. “Sure, Frankie, that's fine.”

We were just about to pass her neighborhood, so it's only minutes later that I'm pulling in front of her house. “Can I get it for you?” I ask.

Frankie opens her mouth. Closes it. Blinks rapidly. “Um. I was going to say I'm a big girl who can get her own mail from her recently broken into home, but now I'm feeling a little uneasy.”

Throwing open my door, I give her a smile. “I'll be right back.”

When I return to the van and set her mail in her lap, Frankie quickly riffles through it, stopping when she gets to one envelope. Her knuckles whiten as she grips it.

I should mind my own business. Peeling away my gaze, I focus on pulling out and heading home. Frankie stares at the

envelope until we're so close that my place is in sight.

Abruptly, she rips open the seal and yanks free a small pile of tri-folded papers. Pressing them open, her eyes dart frantically across the text, until a squeal erupts in the van.

"I got in!" she yells.

She got into what? I glance at the envelope's return address. UCLA School of Law.

Angels sing "Hallelujah Chorus" in my head. Frankie's going to law school. Which means Frankie isn't going to work for the Kings much longer.

Which means soon...Frankie will no longer be off-limits.

Parking the car, I stare ahead in a daze. A wave of belly-dropping fear hits me. Frankie's going to leave. The waiting game's over. Finally, I get to make my move. And suddenly, I realize I have no idea what that is.

"Congratulations," I manage hoarsely.

Turning toward me, her eyes glisten with unshed tears. It's the happiest I've ever seen her. "Ren, I'm sorry I'm freaking out. I just didn't think I'd get in."

Finally, I find my voice, and shift in my seat to face her. "You didn't think you'd get in? Frankie, of course you were going to get in. Are you doing sports law? You plan to be an agent?"

She smiles up at me, wiping her eyes. "Yeah."

Be mine, I want to say. Except, as much as I'd love to have someone as smart and tough negotiating my every contract, what I want from Frankie is so much more. I want her smiles. Her body. Her humor. Her undivided attention and sharp wit.

When I really let myself dream, I want her love.

I want Francesca Zeferino. She's been the ultimate goal. And now I finally have a clear shot.

"You'll be great Frankie," I tell her. "You should be proud."

The tiny space in the van grows almost claustrophobic. I'm drowning in her orchid perfume, hearing her soft, steady

breaths as she smiles at me, fairly glowing with happiness. Now that our possibility is before me, I'm confronted with the yawning gap between what we are and what I want us to be. I've been one of the guys to her for three years. I've held off, bit my tongue, waited. And waited. And waited.

But that doesn't mean I can't do this. After all, I've done it in the rink—bided my time, worked toward my goal until the right moment opened up, then acted on that patience with stunning accuracy. If I can do this in hockey, I can do it with Frankie.

Right?

* * *

"I can't see you, Axel." Tipping my laptop screen, I angle it so that my older brother can at least see *my* face.

"You don't need to see me," he drawls, half off-screen. Something bangs, and he curses under his breath. "I'm listening."

"Wow, thanks. I feel like a really high priority right now, Axelrod."

He freezes, then leans into the screen, a long middle finger right up close. "See that?"

I grin. "Thank you."

He sits on a sigh right in front of the screen and drags his fingers through his hair. "I stopped painting for you. Let the record show. How's that for prioritizing?"

Noise from inside my house makes me glance over my shoulder. Oliver and Viggo traipse through the kitchen and immediately begin to raid my cabinets, yanking food into their arms.

I jerk my thumb toward them and look back to Axel on the screen. “They don’t even say hi. Just ransack my pantry.”

He shrugs. “They’re animals. I think Mom was too tired by the time they were born to bring them to heel.”

Viggo and Oliver are as different as night and day but just as inextricably bound. Exactly twelve months apart, they’re often mistaken as twins, because now, fully grown, they’re the same height, the same lean build, the same pale eyes as me. Their only obvious physical difference is Viggo’s hair, which is rich brown like Axel’s, while Oliver’s is blond like Ryder’s.

“What’s this about?” Ax drums his fingers on his desk. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. Let’s wait for Ryder to dial in before I explain.”

“I would eventually like to go back to painting, by the way. I don’t have all night.”

My older brother is a particular and rigid personality. He’s not overtly affectionate, avoids being touched, is solitary and incredibly direct. Most of the time, his expression is serious, his delivery terse, but beneath that prickly exterior is a loving, loyal person. You just have to see past the standoffishness.

“I’m aware,” I tell him. “I won’t keep you. It’ll be brief. Once we’re all here.”

Ax laughs drily. “Us? Brief? It’s almost like you don’t know your own family.”

Viggo drags the sliding door shut behind him and Oliver as they step onto the deck. “Quite the criticism,” Viggo says, “coming from the guy who moved to Seattle and visits twice a year.”

“Traitor,” Oliver grumbles.

Ax scowls. “First of all, I’m down in sunny fucking LA at least ten times a year, okay? And you know how much I hate flying. Second, I’m an adult. I have my own life. It’s a foreign concept to you two man-cubs, but one day having a career and fending for yourselves won’t be an abstract concept. Then, you’ll understand.”

Viggo sits and rips open a bag of chips, as Oliver pops off the lid to a jar of salsa. “And somehow,” Oliver says, “we’ll manage to do it without abandoning our family.”

Ax’s face tightens. I turn and give Viggo and Oliver a look. “That’s harsh, and you know it. He didn’t abandon anybody. He moved to the place that makes him happiest.”

Viggo snorts as he dips a chip into the salsa and crunches. “Axel. Happy. Hah.”

Ax opens his mouth, looking both pissed and defensive. This little assembly is getting away from me.

“Okay.” I raise my hands. “Let’s table this conversation for another time.”

Ryder’s face flickers to life on the screen. “Sounds like I showed up at the right time.”

Oliver stops inhaling food long enough to wave hi to Ryder.

“Hey, Ry!” Viggo calls.

Ax leans in and squints. “Is that my brother or a yeti?”

Ryder flicks off Ax. “The beard isn’t going anywhere, no matter how much you hate it.”

“You were beardless the first twenty years of your life,” Ax says. “I just don’t see why people have to change things like that. It bothers me.”

Ryder snorts a laugh. “I’m so sorry to upset your routine by growing facial hair, but I like it.”

“Guys.” I clear my throat.

Ax starts arguing with Ryder. Viggo and Oliver are playing tug-of-war with the bag of beef jerky. No one is listening to me.

“Guys!”

Everyone freezes in a tableau titled *Guilty*.

Ryder and Ax both straighten in their seats on screen. Oliver lets Viggo have the beef jerky. Viggo rips open the bag and throws a hunk into Oliver’s lap. They both tug the meat

between their teeth, the simultaneous snap as it breaks the only other sound besides crashing waves along the shore.

“Thank you for joining the emergency meeting.” Clearing my throat again, I glance inside, making sure Frankie hasn’t come home early. She’s supposedly at water aerobics and said she’d be home late, muttering something about getting out of my hair. It was on the tip of my tongue, to tell her just how off the mark that is.

“Okay, so as everyone here knows, I’m a bit of a klutz when it comes to the ladies.” A chorus of snorts and suppressed laughter interrupts me but quickly dies away. They all school their faces.

“Proceed,” Axel says seriously.

“Right. Well, you guys remember Frankie, who I’ve mentioned. She’s our social media coordinator.”

Ryder wiggles his eyebrows. “Willa was riiiiight,” he singsongs. I give him a look. He only grins wider.

“I’m attracted to her,” I tell them. “I’d love to ask her out. I’ve wanted to since I met her, but Frankie and I can’t date right now, not while we work together.”

Ax gives the universal sign for *speed it up*.

“She’s quitting once we’re out of playoffs or after we win the Cup,” I press on. “She got into law school, and soon we won’t be coworkers. Which means, now’s my shot to ask her out. And I...I have no clue how to go about this. What do I say? And when? ‘Hey, Frankie. I’ve been pining for you for three years, secretly wishing I could date you, and now I can’? I sound creepy. Stalkerish.” I scrub my face. “Why is this so complicated?”

Ryder and Axel steeple their fingers in front of their mouths at the exact same time. Oliver crunches a chip thoughtfully while Viggo swallows his jerky, then finally says, “Do you know if *she’s* into you?”

“Well, I didn’t think so. But something she said the other night made me think maybe? At least maybe she’d be open to it?”

I tell them about our conversation over takeout at her place, and when I finish, they're all staring at me with these wide grins.

"What?" I ask.

Ryder slaps his hands together and rubs them in excitement. "Okay, we've got lots to work with here."

Oliver and Viggo start talking over each other, clamoring to share their two cents.

Axel holds up a hand, silencing everyone. "Before we form a plan of attack, I have to ask. Have you told us everything we need to know?"

"Well, I guess there's one part I forgot to mention. She's living with me temporarily."

Ryder's jaw drops. Axel's eyes widen. Viggo and Oliver blink at me in shock. And then all four of them explode with advice, frantically yelling over each other. I open up my phone's notepad. Make them take turns. Break up six different fights when they disagree on tactic.

As Ax predicted, it's anything but brief, and by the time I'm jotting down Axel's tenth point, while cross-referencing it to Ryder's somewhat conflicting advice, the noise of a car pulling in front of my house makes all of us freeze.

"*Dewberries!*" I hiss.

Oliver snorts. "Did you just say—"

"That's her!"

I slap the computer shut on Ryder and Axel. Oliver and Viggo stand, clumsily bumping fronts as they try to escape their chairs. They stumble over each other, down the stairs to the sand and around the side of the house just as Frankie walks into the kitchen. Her eyes travel to the deck, taking in the giant pile of food my brothers left on the table. She raises an eyebrow, but before I can so much as wave hello, she's gone, out of sight.

I stare after her, like a dumbstruck idiot, hearing all my brothers' thoughts ricocheting in my head, their voices warring

with each other about what I should do next. Anxiety and nerves tighten my stomach. What do I do? Which move is the right one to make?

Frankie tugs open the sliding door, and Pazza bounds out, sprinting toward the shore. She smiles up at me, starlight dancing over her skin.

My brothers' voices die away. The ocean breeze wraps around us. And the answer is crystal clear. "How about a moonlit stroll, Francesca?"

Her smile deepens as she slips her arm through mine, without saying a word. But it's all the answer I need.

Ren

Playlist: “Hallelujah,” Jake Shimabukuro

“I saw a Subaru out front.” Frankie jerks her head toward the house but keeps her eyes on Pazza dashing across the sand. “Neighbor’s car?”

I throw the ball for Pazza, then turn to look at Frankie.

So beautiful. No makeup, her hair slicked back in a bun from the pool, those soft lips she tugs between her teeth, dark lashes blinking slowly.

She leans in and drops her voice. “Maybe it’s the mystery lady’s car. She finally got wise and paid a visit.”

I can tell she’s mostly joking. She wouldn’t be down on the sand with me if she truly thought someone else was waiting for me in my home. But it’s so hard to know what to say when Frankie brings herself up without knowing it’s Frankie I’m always thinking and talking about.

The wind snaps between us and tugs a dark ribbon of hair across her face. Carefully, I slide my finger along her cheekbone and tuck that loose espresso strand tight behind her ear. I shouldn’t, but I can’t help myself. She leans, almost imperceptibly, into my touch. I let my fingers trace the shell of her ear, whisper lighter than a breeze down her neck, before I drop my hand.

“It was my brothers,” I manage hoarsely.

She frowns. “Your brothers? Where are they?”

“They left. Right when you got here. Trust me, you’re not ready to meet them. Not the man-cubs. You saw the carnage they left on the table.”

Her soft laugh and smile hit me, a double wave I wasn't braced for. I can count on one hand the times I've made Frankie laugh. It feels like a gift.

"Did you tell your family about UCLA?" I sweep up Pazza's ball, fake her out, then send it flying in the air.

"I did. I called them before water aerobics and told them. They were excited for me." Frankie clears her throat. "Oh, and I had a voicemail from my landlord. He said they're still fixing the damage done to the kitchen and my room, but after that it'll be ready. I should be able to get in by next week, after our games in Minnesota."

"Well...that's good."

Verbal brilliance, Bergman.

I'm a nervous wreck. There's so much I want to tell her and none of it will disentangle in my brain. I want to ask her to stay, even when that bungalow is safe to return to. I want to confess that I'm wild about her. I want to ask if she's even a little wild about me, too.

But the one thing all five Bergman brothers agreed on tonight was that I should wait to tell her how I feel.

The *when* was not a unanimous agreement between my brothers. While Axel and Oliver said to wait until she'd left the team, Ryder and Viggo voted not to wait that long, just until she's back in her own space again, at which point, if I told her and she didn't feel the same way, she at least wouldn't be stuck under my roof.

Just stuck working with you.

Frankie stares at me. I've noticed she does it sometimes, like she's not just looking *at* me, but as if she's trying to look *into* me.

"Is everything okay?" she asks.

I balk at that. "What do you mean?"

"I thought maybe you were angry. Your answer was short. And that usually translates to me as anger."

“Frankie, no.” I have to restrain myself from hugging her. I want to kiss her forehead and beg to know how I made her feel I was angry with her when I’m so far from it. “Why would you think that?”

Her gaze drifts to the waves breaking on the shore. “Reading people is tricky for me. Usually, I can’t tell by someone’s face how they’re feeling, not until I know them really well and I have lots of time to learn their expressions.” She turns and stares at me again, her brow furrowing seriously. “That’s because I’m autistic.”

Air rushes out of me. Frankie’s on the spectrum.

God, I’ve been thick. While I know it’s unique to each person, I’m familiar with autism’s complexity, the way it both hides and sneaks out. My youngest sister, Ziggy, who I’m close to, was diagnosed just a year ago. Axel hasn’t been diagnosed, but more and more since Ziggy’s diagnosis, I wonder why he hasn’t been. The point being, I’m well acquainted with the autism spectrum in people I’m close to. Why didn’t I recognize it in Frankie?

Stepping nearer, I tentatively thread my fingers through Frankie’s, bracing myself for her to pull away, to reject the gesture. But she doesn’t. Instead she slides her fingers tighter with mine. “Thank you for telling me, Frankie. For trusting me.”

She tips her head, lifting her eyes to meet mine. “I wish I’d told you sooner. But when I met you, you were just another player on the team. It didn’t seem necessary.”

One little word—*were*—but it makes hope soar through my body.

“Can I ask why you don’t tell others? Why you’re telling me now? If that’s personal, I understand.”

Frankie squeezes my hand, and I have to stifle the rough inhale it causes. Her palm’s soft and cool from the night air. It fits perfectly inside mine.

“I have a...a mask that I wear for work,” she answers. “I hide a lot of myself to do my job. Why tell people I’m autistic

when I act like I'm not?"

"Isn't that exhausting?" I remember that being Ziggy's refrain: *I'm so tired. So tired of pretending and still feeling like I suck at it. I feel invisible. Even to myself.*

"Yes." She smiles. "Thus, law school. Studying and negotiating the law, it's a strength to be fastidiously observant and detail-oriented, methodical, hyper-focused, literal, direct. Sometimes I worry what I'll do when I miss things interpersonally. I know law can get dirty and people can twist their words, but I'm not battling it out in a courtroom. I'll be reading fine print, negotiating contracts for clients I get to know well, so I think I'll do okay. I'll get to truly be myself."

"I'm happy for you, Frankie. You deserve to be yourself. At work. With friends. Anywhere."

She peers up at me, another one of her incisive stares. "Thank you."

Pazza barks and spins, chasing her tail. We glance over at her as quiet settles between us but for the incessant pound of the ocean nearby.

"You remember I have a small country's worth of siblings, right?"

Frankie wrinkles her nose, clearly confused. "Yes?"

"My little sister is on the spectrum. So, while everyone's unique, and I'm no expert, I love someone who's autistic. And I hope you know I'm a safe place for you to be you."

Frankie sniffs and wipes her nose. Blinks a few times and dabs her eyes with the heel of her hand, gripping her sweatshirt.

"You okay?"

"I'm not crying," she says immediately.

I squeeze her hand, rubbing my thumb in a gentle circle across her palm. "Of course not."

"It's windy," she says.

"Very windy."

When she glances up at me, she's smiling. And it's an arrow to the heart.

I want to kiss Frankie. Badly.

Not while she's your guest, with nowhere to go. Be patient. You've waited this long. Wait a little longer.

"You're staring at my mouth," she whispers.

"S-sorry." I try to blink away, but my gaze swivels right back to her, a compass set to true north.

"It's almost like you want to kiss me, Zenzero." She bites her lip, her eyes locked on my mouth, too.

I just stare at her, like an idiot. Pazza drops her slimy ball right on my foot, headbutts me, and barks. But I'm oblivious. All I see is Frankie, Frankie who's staring back at me, and it's like free-falling through time and space, lost in the vortex of her gaze.

It happens in slow motion, Frankie pressing on tiptoe, her fingers wrapping around my arms to brace herself. I suck in a breath as sparks shoot across my skin, and she leans into me. Her curves press against every hard plane of my body, her grip tightens. Before I know what's happening—

The sweetest lips brush mine. Her mouth is full and soft as it tastes my bottom lip and sucks gently. My inhale is shaky, my exhale a groan of relief. She slides her hands over my shoulders, up my neck, and weaves her fingers into my hair. Her touch is gentle but determined, warm and tender, as she presses faint kisses to the corners of my mouth.

I wrap an arm around her waist and tug her closer. Oh, God, her body. Long, strong, lean around her ribs, where I hold her, but soft where her breasts rub against my chest, where her hips curve into mine. Cupping her neck, I knead the tense muscles at the base of her skull. Frankie moans against my mouth, her lips parting, and the sound, I swear, it shakes the earth beneath my feet. I slide my other hand lower down her back and tuck her close, settling it at the tender curve of her spine.

How something I've dreamed of can so wildly exceed my imagination, I'll never know. I thought I knew what I could

expect, how sweet she'd taste, how warm and soft her lips would be. But my dreams are nothing to reality.

Her tongue teases mine, slow, steady swirls that coax mine to find hers. I tilt her head in my grip, slant my mouth to deepen the kiss. Rocking her against me, tangling my tongue with hers, the kiss becomes as rhythmic as the waves behind us. Slide, tease, retreat.

“Oh, shit.” She pulls away breathlessly, shaking hands covering her mouth. “Okay. Wow. Just...wow. Okay. Yep, I kissed you. I shouldn't have done that. Pazza!”

Pazza scrambles toward us across the sand as reality hits me. Frankie kissed me. *She* kissed *me*.

She likes you! At least enough to kiss you.

“Ren, I'm sorry,” she mutters, rubbing her forehead.

“Frankie, please don't apologi—”

“My yoga trainer's coming early in the morning, if that's still okay?”

Cheeks bright red, eyes down on the sand. Clearly, she wants to move on, which I have no idea what to make of. “Of course... What time? I'll join you.”

That seems to break her from the depths of her embarrassment. She rears back like I've surprised her and raises her eyebrows. “This isn't that newbie warm-up ‘yoga’ that the team does with Lars.”

“I'm aware, Francesca.”

“Don't ‘Francesca’ me, Søren.” Her features are guarded, as she backs away slowly. “Eight o'clock.”

I can't help but smile at her. “I'll be there. Goodnight, Frankie.”

She doesn't answer, only spins slowly toward the house. I stare after her, watching Frankie's form grow smaller as she walks carefully up the steps and goes inside, Pazza trotting alongside her.

She kissed me. She *kissed* me. And I kissed her back.

I pull out my phone and open the brothers' group text. They're not going to believe this.

* * *

I wake up tired, aching, and frustrated after a night of too little sleep and too many dreams involving Frankie and her maddeningly soft lips. Rolling over, I rub my eyes and look at the clock. I have to be reading it wrong. That, or I slept through my alarm.

The faint din of a voice other than Frankie's, followed by her laugh, confirms the latter. "*Barnacles!*"

I brush my teeth while hopping into sweats and tugging on a T-shirt. Quickly, I run my hands through my hair, smooth down my beard so it doesn't look too crazy, and jog down to my training room.

At the threshold, I freeze. There's a *man*. A man with very little attachment to clothing or, apparently, to having his hands for much longer. He's shirtless, wearing only biker shorts, gripping Frankie's hips while he stands right behind her in a highly suggestive position. It takes every feminist, evolved, twenty-first-century corner of me not to growl and throw him against the wall.

Caveman moment conquered, I stroll in. "Good morning. Sorry I'm late."

Frankie peers up from downward dog. "Good morning, Søren. This is Fabrizio."

"Fabi, you can call me." He extends his hand. I take it and indulge in squeezing a little harder than strictly necessary. Fabrizio doesn't seem to feel it, because he simply drops his hand back to Frankie's hip once I let go and focuses his gaze firmly on her beautiful backside.

She's wearing black leggings with a sheer panel zigzagging all the way up to her hip bone. Her toenails are painted black just like her fingernails, and her tank top is black and cropped, hugging her ribs. So much golden skin, so many muscles and perfect Frankie curves.

"Well, then," Fabrizio says. "Søren—"

"Ren," I correct him, strolling to the other side of the room and circling my arms, softly twisting my torso, waking up my body.

He bends his head in apology. "*Scusa*. Frankie called you that, I just assumed."

"It's okay. She does it to tease me."

Frankie glances up at Fabrizio and says something to him in Italian. He laughs and his hands slide down her thighs, grasping her kneecaps. He's bent and practically using her backside as his pillow.

"So, Fabrizio," I manage between clenched teeth. "How long have you been teaching Frankie?"

He smiles. I swear he knows he's taunting me. As he stands, he sets a hand low on Frankie's back and smooths it over her spine.

"Three years," he says on a grin. "Now, why don't we start with something basic to see where you are in your practice, Ren?"

Moving to the front of the room, Fabrizio starts a sun salutation. While I only practice basic yoga with our team's nutritionist and wellness coach, Lars, I'm familiar enough to follow Fabrizio's sequences, and I do them with ease.

I can feel Frankie's eyes on me, but every time I glance her way, she's watching Fabrizio, chatting with him in Italian, then translating what I'm suspicious is only part of it for me. After what feels like a bajillion *chaturangas*, then warrior variations that remind me how damn tight my groin is, her instructor straightens and eyes me up.

“Ren, you are modest, my friend.” Fabrizio turns to Frankie.
“He is good. You two do some poses together, sì?”

“Um.” Frankie glances up from child’s pose, her cheeks pink.

I roll onto my back and grin at her, feeling mildly vindictive about the half-naked, handsy Italian yoga instructor. Couldn’t be some crunchy, maternal type. No. Had to be a guy who looks like he’s a cover model on some cologne ad and who speaks her language. Literally.

It might be nice to see her squirm a bit. “What do you say, Frankie? Let’s do it.”

Frankie glares at me. Clenching her jaw, she turns and grimaces at Fabi. “Fine.”

“*Eccellente!*” He claps his hands.

Frankie’s scowling at me but I just give her a wider grin. There’s my grump I love to needle with a smile.

“Camel pose. *Ustrasana*,” he says. Frankie and I kneel at his direction, knees touching. Then, gripping each other’s forearms, we lean up and away into the pose. Our groins fuse with the position—my pelvis pressed into the soft hollow between her hips. Frankie’s breath hitches as I bite my cheek to stifle a groan. This is torture. I was half-mast when I woke up, but now there’s nothing remotely “half” about what’s inside my sweatpants.

“Breathe into the pose. Hearts open, chests to the sky,” Fabrizio says, before he steps away for his water.

All I can feel is Frankie. The warmth of her thighs and the welcoming give between her hip bones that my aching body fits perfectly. She shifts, a deliberate movement. A decadent swirl of her hips.

Sweet Jesus.

I try picturing that one time I walked in on Freya and Aiden making out when they were first dating—like *really* making out—because there is nothing more revolting than seeing your sister with her tongue down a guy’s throat, but not even that quells the heat surging through me. I’m a slave to the pound of

my pulse, the urgent need to be closer to Frankie, deep inside her, connected.

“Francesca,” I warn.

She cracks open one eye and smirks at me. “You got yourself into this mess, Søren. Before you accepted a couple’s pose you might have considered we’d be pretzel-ing each other’s intimate bits.”

I hiss when she does another shimmy. That’s it.

Gripping her forearms, I tilt my pelvis even deeper, sliding myself against the warmth between her thighs. Her eyes widen as she makes a tiny muffled noise.

“How ya doing, there, *fresterska*?”

“What did you call me?” she squeaks.

“You’re not the only one who speaks another language.” I roll my hips against hers and feel her nails dig into my forearm.

“Good.” Fabrizio comes back. “You have beautiful energy together.”

This guy’s senses must be dulled by all the patchouli he’s bathed in. There’s nothing beautiful about this. It’s pure, sexual, vindictive frustration.

“Now we end with one more pose that brings you together,” he says.

After releasing each other’s arms, we follow his direction to spin away and sit, back to back. My rotation involves a subtle adjustment in my sweatpants after that camel posing nonsense.

“Spinal twist.” Fabrizio leans over us, drawing us upright until our backs are flush against the other’s. I feel Frankie’s vertebrae, the poke of her shoulder blades, and catch the faintest wisp of her orchid perfume mingled with tantalizing sweat. “Now, both to your right. Your hand to the other’s leg, and lean into it, lengthening your spine.”

Frankie’s hand sits high and firm across my thigh. Mine grips above her knee, since my lumbar isn’t quite as flexible. It’s quiet but for our breathing.

“*Ujjayi* breath,” he says softly. “In through your nose, and out, like the waves beyond us.”

Our deep breaths sync, the rise and fall of our backs in tandem.

“At last.” Fabi sighs happily. “Peace is restored.”

Frankie

Playlist: “The Calculation,” Regina Spektor

“So.” Ren slides the milk my way along with a small crock of sugar. “Fabrizio, eh?”

I dump a heaping spoonful of sugar into my mug and stir, glowering at Ren. The empty ache between my thighs is entirely his fault. I haven’t been this sexually frustrated since I hit puberty. I know I shouldn’t have kissed him last night. I let my heart get carried away by his swoony sweetness, and I kissed him for it.

But I expressed regret. I made it clear it was an oopsie.

Why, then, did he have to get all flirtatious and corner us into doing tantric yoga this morning? Now I have to suffer his absurdly sexual presence all day, walking around with the lady version of blue balls. Just fucking great.

I take a slow breath that does nothing to cool me off, then sip my coffee. “I chose Fabi because I get to keep up on my Italian *and* stay limber.”

Ren mutters something into his coffee.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing.” He sets down his mug and gives me a look I can’t read. “Want some breakfast?”

“What’s on the menu?”

Ren backtracks to the fridge. I make a valiant but largely unsuccessful attempt not to stare at all the muscles made obvious by his sweat-soaked shirt stuck to his body. “Egg whites. Berries. Turkey bacon.”

“Yuck.”

He grins over his shoulder. “Welcome to hockey season diet, Francesca.”

“Don’t you need carbs? Little bit of fat? You burn insane calories playing.”

“I do.” He closes the fridge door with his hip, arms brimming with ingredients. “But they have to be the right ones. I make smoothies for that.”

Dumping his armful on the counter, he then begins chopping veggies. “I promise, it’s a surprisingly good omelet. I’ll add some cheese for you. We won’t tell Lars.”

I nab a freshly chopped piece of green pepper and crunch on it. Lars is the team dietician and wellness coach. “He’d kill me if he knew how I was influencing you. What do you think Lars eats? Besides wheatgrass smoothies. I think he has one percent body fat.”

“No clue. But I’d bet the minivan he hasn’t had a burger in a decade.” Ren tosses the onions and peppers into a pan that holds the tiniest drop of olive oil known to man. “It would explain why he’s so grumpy all the time.”

“Now, let’s not judge the grumps of the world. We have our reasons.”

Ren glances up and sets down his knife. “You’re not grumpy, Frankie. You’re just...”

I bite back a smile and steal a piece of cheddar. “I’m grumpy.”

“You’re *serious*.”

“You’re sweet, Zenzero. But I’m grumpy. It’s in everyone’s best interest. Keeps the boys in line and afraid of my hexes.”

Ren grins to himself while he lets the omelet bubble in the pan and blends us a berry smoothie. We eat quickly and in quiet, stealing spare glances while Pazza weaves between us, scarfing down whatever we drop.

When I take my last bite, Ren asks, “So. What’s the verdict on the egg-white omelet?”

I drop my fork and pat my belly. “Delicious. Saved by the cheddar.”

“Yeah.” He sweeps up my plate and stacks it onto his. “The cheese makes it edible. Otherwise it really does taste like cardboard.”

Sliding off my barstool, I take the last sip of my smoothie and set down the glass. “Thanks again for breakfast, Zenzero. Leave those dishes and I can do them after my shower?” My body’s stiff. I need a hot shower before I try to do something as dexterous as dishes this early. If I tried now, I’d end up dropping and cracking everything I tried to hold.

He waves his hand. “Takes two seconds. And you’re my guest.”

“Well, then at least let me whip up something good for breakfast tomorrow. I make a mean microwaved breakfast sandwich.”

With his laugh still echoing in the kitchen, I head for my guest room and hit the shower. I turn the water hot, letting it soothe my joints which limbered up at yoga but then slowly stiffened as my body cooled. Once I’m out of the shower, I wrap myself in a towel, then throw my hair up in another towel to make a turban. I do my routine—moisturizer, under-eye concealer, a little loose powder so I’m not shiny. Gabby used to try to cover me in makeup, but any more than this and I feel like I’m wearing a mask.

I wear enough masks as it is.

I’m just capping my vanilla lip balm when I hear Ren’s front door open and shut. Pazza’s in my room and starts barking like crazy. Unease prickles my skin.

“Ren?” I call.

No answer. Pulling open the bathroom door, I call Ren’s name again. Nothing.

Except for a faint rustling noise in the kitchen. Now I’m more curious than anything. Is Ren out of the shower already? Maybe he grabbed the newspaper. That would be why I heard the front door. It’s not like people break into multimillion-

dollar beachfront homes, slam the door behind them, and raid the kitchen.

Burglars raided your pantry.

Shit. They did, didn't they?

I have an overactive imagination. It's fed my anxiety many years now, but with counseling, I've learned to coach it, to help myself focus on rational explanations and calm the nervous, irrational beast inside. And, ya know, weed helps. But there's no weed in my system currently, only logical thought telling me everything is most likely fine.

Slowly, I walk toward the kitchen. When I clear the hallway and have a good view, no one's there. But then I realize the refrigerator's open.

Suddenly, a man pops up. I let out a bloodcurdling scream and stumble back into the hallway wall.

"Frankie!" Ren yells from deep in the house. I hear a door banging open, the pound of his footsteps.

The man grins at me as he shuts the fridge with his butt and shines an apple on his shirt. Which makes him seem much less threatening. Unless he's one of those smiling serial killers. Who eats a healthy snack first.

My terror starts to fade when I realize I recognize his eyes. They're Ren's eyes. Ren's cheekbones, his long nose, without the bump from being broken. This must be—

"Frankie." Ren collides with me, pulls me against his body, and spins so I'm shielded from the man. Glancing up, he locks eyes with the guy and mutters something that sounds remarkably close to *fustilarian*.

Exhaling heavily, Ren peers down at me. "Okay. You're okay." A gentle hug and I'm pulled closer. "It's just my brother. Are you all right?"

I nod. "I'm sorry I freaked. I heard someone come in, and I called you, and you didn't answer, so I went to see who it was, and he just popped up like a jack-in-the-box from the refrigerator, and I lost it."

His brother leans a hip against the counter. Crunching on the apple, he speaks around his bite. “Ren seems to have lost his manners, but then again I’d be a little addled too, if I had someone like you in my arms with only a towel between us.”

Ren and I gulp simultaneously. I realize now that he’s bare-chested, a towel slung low on his hips. Mine is knotted above my breasts, but all our movements have loosened it considerably.

“I’m Viggo,” he says.

Ren doesn’t seem to care about an introduction. “What are you doing here?” he asks sharply.

Viggo smiles and swallows his bite. “I brought the baked goods for your next Club meeting.”

“Baked goods?” I ask.

“Yes, ma’am,” Viggo says, “I’m a self-taught pastry chef.”

“He’s also enrolled in carpentry school,” Ren adds, “learning everything there is to know about bikes, and has taken up the fiddle. He has issues with commitment—”

“Attention,” Viggo corrects him on a wide grin and a wink.

Ren sighs heavily, and his hand skates over my back as he stares at his brother. I don’t even think he realizes he’s doing it, soothing me with his touch. “Baking is one of his many hobbies that I made the mistake of supporting.” Ren glares at him. “You know damn well it’s not tonight. I have a playoff game. Not that any of the Bergmans can be bothered with hockey.”

Shrugging, Viggo crunches his apple. “Oops.”

Suddenly, I feel fabric shifting. A squeak sneaks out of me as the towel slips past my breasts.

“Ren!” I yelp.

He spins, so his back is to Viggo again. I’m shielded with the towel pinned between us. “I’ve got you. Your virtue’s preserved.”

I snort in laughter. “My virtue. I lost my *virtue* in tenth grade, Zenzero.” A blush heats his cheeks. “But thank you. I didn’t want your brother seeing me naked.”

At the worst possible time, my hip gives out, and I wobble in his arms. Ren catches me, then tugs me closer, but not before the towel slips lower and now—

Ren’s eyes widen. My bare breasts smash against his chest. And for the second, but definitely most prominent, time I’m feeling... “Ren,” I whisper hoarsely. “Is that your—”

“Yes.”

“Poking my—”

“Yes.” He clears his throat. “And he’s very sorry for being so assertive.”

I felt the promising outline of it during yoga this morning, but now it’s confirmed. The man is *ginormous*.

“It’s okay,” I tell him, trying to be calm about this. “It’s...it’s just a bodily response. It’s not your fault but, holy shit—”

“You okay over there?” Viggo calls. Another crunch of his apple.

“When I’m out of this pickle,” Ren mutters. “I’m going to ram one of those apples straight down his throat.” He glances down at me. “I am so sorry about this.”

“I’m the one who’s sorry. It’s all me and my bum leg’s fault —”

“No, it’s not, Frankie.” He gives me a gentle squeeze that I think is supposed to reassure me but ends up just pressing all our nakedness together. I’m trying not to respond myself, but my nipples are rocks against his chest, my throat and cheeks burning with a flush. A warm, needy ache between my legs makes me feel even more unsteady.

“I have a plan,” Ren says. “I’ll just walk you backward, down the hall, and then you’ll be out of Viggo’s sightline. I’ll close my eyes and you can get to your room in privacy.”

“Okay.” I nod. “Good idea.”

Slowly, we start walking in step toward my room. Ren moves steadily, leading with a nudge of his knees that I follow as I take careful steps backwards.

He peers down at me, trying very valiantly not to look below my chin, at my bare breasts pressed against his chest. It's his crowning feat of chivalry. Me, on the other hand, I'm shameless. I can't stop fixating on how my nipples tighten, how they scrape across the soft dusting of hairs on his solid chest. I feel the hard planes of his pecs, the heat of his skin.

"It's like we're dancing." I stare up at him, trying to distract myself. "I bet you're a good dancer."

Ren grins. "Why do you think that?"

"How you're moving now. How graceful you are on the ice."

His grin broadens. "Thanks, Frankie."

"You're wel—"

We freeze as Ren's towel loosens between us. Before either of us can reach and save it, the towel drifts down, followed by mine, fluttering past our thighs.

Ren curses under his breath, holding me even closer, trying to pin the fabric somewhere around our knees.

I stare at him, wide-eyed with shock. "Did you just say *carbuncles*?"

"No." He grimaces. "Maybe—"

Before Ren can say another word, I gasp as our towels drop completely. We're naked, front to front. Ren opens his mouth, as if to say something, when a low whistle interrupts him.

"Man, brother," Viggo says around a bite of apple. "I need whatever workout you're doing. Those. Glutes."

Ren's eyes drift shut. I've seen that look only after Maddox does something particularly asinine. That's Ren's Give-me-grace-Jesus-I'm-trying-not-to-beat-the-shit-out-of-somebody face. "Get. Out. Viggo."

Peering past Ren's shoulder, I see Viggo smirk. "I kinda want to stick around and see how this plays out."

“Frankie,” Ren says, deathly quiet.

“Hm?”

“I’m going to pick you up, but hold you close so he can’t see you. I’ll keep my eyes straight ahead and then set you in your room.”

I nod. “Okay. Good plan.”

“And then once I set you down, I’m going to murder my brother.”

* * *

I usually hover in the corner with the other in-house PR and media folks during press conferences. Press conferences aren’t my responsibility, but they affect my work. To do my job well, I need to keep track of everything that’s going on with the team, so watching press conferences unfold live is imperative.

Rob, Ren, Tyler, and Coach sit up at the table, cameras flashing on them. They’re all in their suits, but unlike Rob and Tyler, Ren’s hair isn’t wet and curled up at the edge of his collar like normal. His cheeks aren’t flushed from the cold air and sixty minutes of hockey. He wasn’t allowed the play again with his concussion and his healing shoulder which doesn’t seem to bother him much now, but Amy said shouldn’t weather contact sports yet.

“Why is Ren up there?” I ask out of the side of my mouth to Nicole, our press coordinator.

She glances over at me, arms folded across her chest. “Why wouldn’t he be? He’s alternate captain. He’s also a media darling. They love him.”

“He didn’t play.”

“And he’ll be explaining how soon that’s going to change.”

Rob finishes answering a question when one of the guys in the bullpen calls out, “Ren, there are multiple photos circulating from yesterday and today showing you alone with the team’s social media coordinator, Frankie Zeferino. Can you speak to the rumors that you two are together?”

The world freezes with a resounding record scratch. Well, that’s what happens inside my head.

Ren’s usually a pro at press conferences, but this is new territory for him. Ren never gets photographed with a woman, never gets asked about evidence of a love interest, because there have never been any. I’ve seen Ren blush a lot the last couple of days. I’ve seen him trip over his words and scramble for the right thing to say. I’m prepared for this to turn astronomically bad.

But instead Ren blinks those pale cat eyes and leans on his elbows, close to the microphone. “Who I do or don’t spend time with outside the rink has nothing to do with my professional performance, which is the focus of this press conference. While we’re on that subject, I’ll be returning for Thursday’s game. Next.”

He points and takes another question, moving on effortlessly.

Hot. Damn.

“He’s so good,” Nicole mutters. She smiles over at me. “You two, huh?”

“Oh, no, it’s not—”

“I’m teasing. Darlene told me you’re just staying with him. I’m sorry about your house being broken into.”

I exhale. I hate those kinds of *teases*. I never know someone’s kidding until they enlighten me. My heart’s pounding, adrenaline making my hands shake. “Thanks. It wasn’t too bad, all things considered.”

Turning back to Ren, I let my focus on him steady my breathing. I feel pride watching him, how capably and calmly he handles himself. Always the gentle smile, always polite to the reporters, who to their credit, are pretty polite to him. Everybody loves Ren.

It's only when the cameras are packed away, chairs scraping as reporters stand, that I process the fact that Ren diffused the hell out of that question.

But he also didn't answer it.

Our guys are filing out, back toward the bowels of the stadium, where Coach will finish up post-game talk and send everyone out to celebrate our narrow win. I scramble as fast as I can, weaving through the sea of reporters.

Once I'm past them, so I don't draw undue attention, I hiss-whisper Ren's name.

He glances over his shoulder and stops, his smile widening as he sees me. "Francesca."

"Don't 'Francesca' me." I poke his stomach and swear under my breath. I think I just broke my finger on his abs. "You did *not* handle that properly."

He tips his head, a frown tightening his features. Ren gently takes me by the elbow, coaxing me to walk with him. There's a wall of people waiting behind us, so I let him pull me along.

"Mind telling me," he says quietly, "how you would have had me handle it?"

I make an awkward, baffled noise in the back of my throat. I'm so flustered I can't even find words.

"You taught me that denying something is the surest way to guarantee people think you're hiding something. I dismissed it without negating it. Just like you've always said to."

"*Rennnn*," I groan. This was a time to shut it down. Denial. Short and sweet.

He frowns down at me and pauses, bringing me gently to the side of the hallway. "What did I get wrong? How can I fix it?"

An odd lump of emotion forms in my throat. Ren's saying what I've wondered so many times in my social life. My empathy for his confusion cuts my frustration in half.

"I would have preferred you to say, 'Frankie Zeferino and I are not together. We're colleagues, and I was giving her a ride to

work. That's it.'"

Ren stares at me for a long moment, then nods. "Okay. I'm sorry. I can go find Mitch and tell him."

"It's your call. It's your public life."

He narrows his eyes. "It's *your* life, too, Frankie. I don't want something being said about you that you don't want."

At some point in our discussion, while trying to stay out of people's way as they passed, I got myself rather smashed to his front. Now the hallway's quiet, leaving only the two of us and the heat pouring off of his suit, his clean, spicy scent. Warmth runs through every part of me that's touching him and jolts me with awareness. I take a step back.

"It's okay, Zenzero. Maybe...maybe you did it right. Time will tell."

"Either way, I'll find Mitch. Tell him what you said."

I grasp his arm. "Ren, wait."

He really doesn't mind that people would think we're dating? Even when he's saving his heart for this woman? I'm so confused. But as is always the case for me after a long day out in the overstimulating, socially draining world, I'm too tired to try to figure this out anymore. I just know that what's done is done today, and him backtracking to find Mitch will only heighten Mitch's suspicions. That guy's a nosy motherfucker.

"It's fine," I tell Ren, releasing his arm. "I promise. I overreacted."

"Okay. Tell me if you change your mind, though." His eyes search mine as his smile returns. "You've got a hangry look brewing. Let's get a burger in you."

I open my mouth to disagree with him, but then my stomach rumbles. "I hate when you're right."

Ren laughs, and the sound follows me all the way to the restaurant.

Ren

Playlist: “Mama, You Been on My Mind,” Jeff Buckley

“Oh my God,” she groans. Standing in my kitchen, Frankie rips open a bag of root beer gummies and snaps apart one of the little sticky bottles with her teeth. I ordered a huge box of them after I learned they’re her weakness, figuring I’d surprise her with them at work. Seeing as they were delivered here first, that plan went south when she recognized the box. “Where did you *get* these?” she asks.

“Same place as you, I’d imagine. The corporate beast that is Amazon.”

“Third-party seller?”

I pop one in my mouth and chew. “Yep.”

“Extortionist, soulless bastards,” she mutters.

My belly laugh echoes in the kitchen as I pour the kettle for two cups of tea. “Some things are worth the cost.”

“I swear, when I’m in law school, I’m going to look into what I can do about that. It’s bullshit. I need these things. And it’s like they know. They *know* they can get me to pay fifteen dollars a bag.”

Holding her tea and mine, I use my elbow to slide open the door. Pazza squeezes through the moment she can and bounds down to the sand.

Following her, Frankie crosses the threshold next and watches her pup fly toward the ocean. Steadily, she walks toward the water, then lowers herself carefully onto the blanket I laid out, its corners tucked into the packed sand. When I catch up to her, she’s sitting with her knees drawn up, staring out at the water.

My chest squeezes, impossibly tight. Seeing Frankie in sweats and a messy bun on her head, looking so at home here is a bittersweet moment. I want it to last, but I know soon she'll be gone, with no guarantee that I'll have time like this with her ever again.

"Pazza's in for a rude awakening," she says, lighting up a joint and exhaling slowly, "when she's back to living in my little bungalow, no exciting trips to Aunt Lo's or this swanky spot."

I settle onto the blanket next to her, still holding our teas. "Why won't she go to Lorena's anymore?"

Or spend time here?

Because *she* doesn't plan to spend time here, idiot. Pretty clear, if she's saying that.

Frankie gently extracts her thermos from my grip. "Well, with law school, I'll have a better routine, no overnights or days away. No need to stay at Lo's." She shrugs.

For a while, we sit in silence, staring at the ocean, watching the moon paint the water silvery white. Pazza digs in the sand, rolls and snuffles and bounds away, returning obediently when I whistle and call her back. After long, peaceful minutes, the delicate weight of Frankie's hand jars me, pulling my attention from the shore.

She stares at her fingers sliding over my hand. Her brow furrows, and she pulls her hand away. "Tell me about the real Ren."

I peer over at her. "What do you mean?"

"The one hiding behind all that happy-go-lucky shit. The one we sort of danced around discussing after yoga."

I drop back onto the blanket and stare up at the stars. "Oh. That one. Well..."

As if she read my mind, Frankie holds out the joint in front of me. I stare at it, then extract it carefully from her grip. Over half the team smokes weed, for lots of reasons—pain relief, reducing anxiety, recreation. I've just been so uptight since the moment I signed, I never even considered it. But the thought

of being a smidge more relaxed as I talk to Frankie, less stuck in my noisy thoughts, sounds pretty appealing.

After taking a small hit, I exhale slowly and battle the desperate need to cough.

Frankie grins down at me. “I’ve corrupted you.”

I laugh before it turns into a hacking cough. It doesn’t take long, under a minute maybe, before a quiet heaviness settles in my limbs. My mind is stunningly clear. “Wow. I regret not trying cannabis sooner.”

She belly laughs and ruffles my hair. “Welcome to the dark side, Zenzero.”

I meet her eyes and smile, searching her face. “You said you want the real Ren. Is this quid pro quo? Does this mean I know the real Frankie?”

Her smile falters, even as her finger twines a lock of my hair around its tip, a steady, soothing motion. “Yes, I think so. More than most people do, at least.” She nudges me. “Quit deflecting.”

Turning my head, I watch the constellations. “The real Ren is still a bit of an unsure misfit.”

“Why?”

I shrug and lift my hand, signaling I want another hit. “Who knows.” Carefully, I take another small drag on the joint and hand it back to her, speaking through my exhale. “I was awkward when I was younger. Then we moved when I was in high school, so I had to start all over again, trying to find a few friends. I never found my stride.”

“Until hockey?”

I smile up at the stars. “Yeah. I’m happy on the ice. And I actually get along with the guys. They like my weirdness. I don’t know, I feel accepted, I suppose.”

“That’s important,” she says quietly. “I have that with Annie and Lo. I’d be miserable without them.”

I turn my head and stare up at her. “What about your family?”

Frankie shrugs. “Eh. I love my sister, Gabby, but she was a real asshole when we were younger. I was her baby sister having all these meltdowns and issues, and she felt ignored. We’re mostly past that, but we’re also really different people with a country between us. With Ma, I’m a walking time bomb, and every step I take is one closer to falling apart. Nonna’s cool about the arthritis, but she doesn’t get autism. I drive her nuts with my lack of a filter. I used to embarrass her at church and in her social circle. The Catholic church and I don’t get along too well, and it’s like her life.”

“What about your dad?”

She stares down at the sand, dragging her finger slowly across its surface. “He died when I was twelve. It’s part of why I make my mom so anxious. She never got over losing him. He was a firefighter, and when he died on the job, it just deepened her anxiety about her family’s well-being, if that makes sense.”

Carefully, I press my hand to hers, my knuckles sliding against hers. “I’m sorry.”

Slowly, her fingers dance with mine. “That’s all right. I’ll always miss him, but the pain dulls after a while.” She sighs, stubs out the last of the joint, and sets it next to her tea. “So, tell me about Shakespeare Club.”

I tip my head, confused by her changing directions. “What about it?”

“What you like about it. Why you still participate.” She sips her tea and stares at the ocean.

“Well, it started in high school, a couple of nerds like me who loved reading and performing these words from a time when language *meant* something—when you didn’t just throw words at each other, or I don’t know, maybe you did, but at least you had to get creative about it.”

“Thus, the oaths.”

My cheeks heat. I’m not embarrassed per se, but I wasn’t doing it with the awareness anyone was listening. “You noticed that.”

She grins and sets down her tea. “I think my favorite to date is *boil-brained codpiece*.”

“It gets the job done. I don’t like swearing at people, particularly in public. Maybe it sounds extreme, but I feel the weight of every little fan who watches me, whose parents read what I say in print. I-I guess I want to respect that. Still, at some point, you have to let off some steam, you know?”

She nods. “Shakespeare Club keeps it fresh in your mind. Anyone I know a part of this motley crew?”

I prop up on my elbows and take a long drink of tea, avoiding her eyes. “I can’t tell. It’s a secret.”

When I glance up, there’s a twinkle in her eye, a small smile tugging at her lips. “And how does one gain access to this exclusive gathering?”

“Well, first they have to be invited by a member. Then they have to recite their favorite lines of Shakespeare.”

“Sounds kinda easy.”

“Oh, there’s more to it. Membership is contingent upon authenticity, upon words spoken from the heart. They have to say it like they mean it, like it matters to them.”

“Why?” Frankie asks.

“That’s how you keep it safe. If someone were to join and bring a dismissive attitude, it would ruin everything.”

“Well, maybe I’ll have to brush up on the Bard, then.”

I whip my head sharply to meet her eyes. “Y-you’d want to come?”

“Someday, maybe. Sounds like a good time. Plus, I imagine you’re very compelling, reciting Shakespeare. I have to see it.”

My cheeks heat further. “I’m not sure about that, Frankie.”

“Why not?”

“Because...” *Then you’d see me in all my nerdiness. My absolute oddball dorkdom.* “I’m self-conscious,” I say defensively.

She rolls her eyes. “Ren, let me tell you something. Any person who ever saw you having a fucking ball being a theater geek and gave you shit for it, they weren’t worth your time. My therapist says, show people who you really are, and you get the absolute thrill of knowing they love you for *you*. That’s why the friends I do have aren’t many, but they know and love the real me.”

You know the real me, her eyes seem to say as she peers down at me.

My banged-up shoulder twinges from leaning on my elbow, and I drop down onto the blanket, as stunned by her words as I am by the pain lancing through my body. Frankie slides her hand up my arm, to my shoulder. When she rubs it, kneading the tender spots with her fingers, a groan rumbles out of me.

“Feel good?” she asks quietly.

“Uh-huh.” My limbs are heavy, my thoughts calm. I feel like putty in her hands.

“Good. Now let’s hear why you’re hiding in that nice-guy shell.”

“I feel like I’m being interrogated.”

She grins. “I’m taking advantage of your relaxed state. You’re so damn chipper.” Her finger pokes my cheek, where a dimple is visible when I don’t have the beard. “I need the dirt, Zenzero.”

I give her a teasing glare that melts when she goes back to rubbing my shoulder. “The dirt is I was a late bloomer. Then when I got to college and kind of filled out, found my stride with hockey, people started treating me differently. And I didn’t know what to do with that. I was the same person I’d always been, but now that I looked a certain way and had met with some socially constructed measure of success, I was suddenly supposed to *feel* different?”

Her fingers still for a moment, then gently resume. “Go on.”

“That’s really all there is to it. I just found my place with my Shakespeare geeks, playing hockey, and I guess I’m still trying to figure out how to be *me* and belong to both of those worlds.

This ‘nice guy front’ you speak of is what trying to hedge my bets looks like.”

“Have you had a relationship that made you feel like you could be all of those things?”

“No.”

“Bad relationships?”

“I never had a serious relationship, bad or good.”

“Ah,” she says. “So hookups. Yeah, those are over before you even get to know each other.”

I stare at the night sky, bracing myself for her reaction when I say it. “No hookups, either.”

Her fingers still. She drops her hand. “Holy shit, Ren. You’re a *virgin*?”

Turning, I face her. “Yes.”

“You’re messing with me.” She smacks my chest. “This isn’t funny.”

“Frankie, I’m not messing with you.”

“You’re twenty-five. Smart. Handsome. Like soaked-panties, sexually deviant handsome—”

“I’m sorry, I’m *what*?”

“Just. Forget I said that.” Shaking her head, she blinks at me in disbelief. “I’m having a really hard time processing this.”

“It’s the truth.”

“Wow.”

I try to meet her eyes, but they dance away, to my mouth, my body, before they meet my gaze again. “You can ask me why.”

“Why?” she yells, throwing up her hands in disbelief. “I mean, holy hell, Ren.”

“I never wanted it with the women I met.” I shrug. “I mean my body obviously did. Plenty of times, but I just...I’d get to making out with some girl at a party, at her dorm, and yes, I

learned my way around a woman's body, but I still felt awkward. It didn't feel right."

"Until the mystery lady."

I glance up at her and feel my heart slam against my ribs.

"Until her."

"How is she different?" Frankie asks.

My eyes search hers. "I'm not exactly sure. At least, I'm not sure what it was at first. Now that I know her better, I think we just connect well. Similar humor, maybe some similar soft spots. A lot of physical chemistry, at least on my side of things. And...she's the first person who I ever felt right around. Like I'm not a walking contradiction who'll never belong anywhere, but someone who actually makes a bit of sense. Like I don't have to choose between these different parts of myself."

"She sounds like the best kind of person, then," Frankie says quietly.

I smile up at her and tell her the absolute truth. "She is."

Ren

Playlist: “Everything I Am Is Yours,” Villagers

That talk on the beach unlocked something inside me. I’ve always been attracted to Frankie, enjoyed her humor and wisecracks, how she hides her big heart beneath that grumpy front, but up until now it was fractured in fragmented, inadequate moments of time. Now, a few unbroken days and hours with her feel like a bittersweet gift—a window into what’s possible, but still a mirage—a fantasy held just out of reach.

Even on the road, proximity to her is a new kind of torture. One game down in Minnesota, I’ve spent forty-eight hours sharing meals with her, meetings, interviews, photos. Stealing only fleeting glances, the barest touch and conversation.

And slowly, I’ve been unraveling.

I steal a glance at her. Catch how her skin glows gold under the lights, and those black dress pants hug her round backside, mold to her long legs. She’s beautifully tall. Tall enough that when I hold her close, I don’t have to bend in half or crouch down. When she kissed me on the beach, it felt like we were meant to do that. We fit. Perfectly.

Frankie spins her cane and yell-dictates to her phone, her face painted with a persistent scowl. It makes me want to chuck her cell over my shoulder and kiss her until that wide smile and one deep dimple transform her face to pure joy.

But I can’t. I have to watch her bullshit with the guys, get into it with Rob about *The Office*, trip Kris when he pranks her by pretending that he accidentally tweeted a nude selfie. Frankie isn’t mine. She’s the team’s. Or, really, we’re *hers*. She has all of us wrapped around her finger. Because she has our backs,

keeps us in check, shows us how to handle the trolls and how not to go crazy dealing with social media.

And she's always there, steady and loyal. I'm going to miss spending practically every day with her once the season ends. Worse, after this season, when she's on to law school, if she doesn't want what I want, if there's nowhere for us to go from here, and I have to say goodbye, I'm going to be devastated.

Just that thought spikes my blood pressure. I glance away from her and distract myself with fixing my skate laces, ensuring they're tied tight. Now's not the time to get emotional and frustrated. Now's the time to focus on the game, on the moment right in front of me.

"Don't worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will worry for itself," my dad's always told me. But then again, he has the life he wants—a wife he loves, the brood of kids he dreamed of, a family of his own. Easy for him to say. What's there to worry about when everything's going your way?

When the team coordinators round us up and send us through the tunnel, my body's loose and warm, my shoulder wrapped for stability underneath my pads. It barely twinges with pain when I rotate my arm fully, and I haven't had a headache in seventy-two hours. Last game, I was finally cleared to play, but Coach only let me out for half the number of shifts he normally would.

I grumbled about it, and he told me to talk to Amy. Amy told me I was lucky I'd been allowed on the ice at all. So, I shut my mouth, then nearly pulled a muscle grinning so wide when Coach told me today that I'd been cleared for full-time play.

On Minnesota ice, the energy's palpable, intense with the hunger to prove ourselves in enemy territory. We scraped by with a 3-2 win two nights ago, but it was messy and scrappy. We didn't play our game, and tonight's the night to reclaim our style of play, not to sink to theirs.

The guys are quiet as we skate around, doing warm-ups, everyone getting into their mindset for the game. When I steal a glance at her again, Frankie's still nose deep in her phone, muttering to herself. Her hair drops in a sheet of near black

down her shoulder and I squeeze my hand inside my glove, feeling the reflexive need to smooth it back.

It's a cruel irony that my two most important personal interests are at odds with each other: winning the Stanley Cup and winning Frankie's heart. The longer the playoffs run, the longer I have to wait to pursue her. Normally I find irony amusing.

Not this time.

Someone yells about an incoming puck, jarring me from my thoughts.

Focus, Ren. Deal with the here and now.

I catch it and pick up my speed as I skate around, flicking the puck up on my stick, spinning, faking, losing myself to muscle memory.

The din of voices echoes in the rink, but my hearing narrows to the soothing sounds of smooth, wet ice, the scrape of my skates as I spin and travel backward, my mind quieting, my body centering. Breathing deeply, I soak up that frosty bite in the air, a bursting cool that fills my lungs.

Pure tranquility.

Until I look up and lock eyes with Frankie. Her face is tight, strained in a way I haven't seen before. She looks worried and nervous. Skating her way, I stop near the bench. One hand's worth of fingers are tangled in her necklace, the other holding her phone, white knuckled by her side.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

She swallows as her eyes dance between mine. "Nothing."

"Obviously it's not nothing. You look anxious."

Her hand drops from her necklace. "I'd like to formally request you not get beamed in the head tonight. That's all."

I frown, turning only long enough to slap the puck away, returning it to Kris across the ice. Then I spin back around. "I always try not to, Frankie."

“Didn’t stop you from getting pancaked to the plexi last time we were here,” she grumbles.

A small grin pulls at my mouth. “Francesca.” I lean in. “Are you worrying about me?”

“No.” She wrinkles her nose and flicks her hair behind her shoulder. “And scoot back. You stink like a sweaty hockey player.”

“I am a sweaty hockey player, Francesca. I’d think you’d be used to the smell by now.”

She closes her eyes like she’s searching for serenity and coming up short. “I’m just reminding you, it’s in everyone’s interest here that you play it safe.”

My stomach tightens with a surge of nervous happiness. Frankie cares enough about me to be worried I’m going to get hurt. Enough to scowl at me from across the ice and offhandedly warn me to take it easy.

Kris sends the puck back my way. I flick it up onto my stick and juggle it. “Don’t worry, *älskade*. I’ll be careful.”

Her frown deepens. “Of course you speak one of the few European languages I have no familiarity with. That word at yoga. Now this. I don’t like this recent development of second-language use, Søren.”

“Hm.” Smacking the puck toward François who was not remotely anticipating my shot on him, I earn one of his colorful French oaths. “This coming from the woman who was talking smack in Italian behind my back during yoga with Fabi. Pretty hypocritical.”

“That—” She huffs. “Fine. Fair. But just so you know, I can still look up what you said.”

I grin and start to skate away. “Good luck. Swedish is not phonetic.”

Before she can give me further hell about it, I circle the net, power across the ice, and let my mind settle. But my heart won’t stop galloping at breakneck speed.

* * *

Third period, tied 1-1. Thanks to a few games off, my legs are still fresh, my lungs easily pulling air. I crouch low for face-off and win the puck, passing it to Rob and soaring up the ice into the attacking zone. I've had my eye on Number 27, the one who hit me late and dirty into the boards last time we were here. When I played the other night, he and I only had one shift that overlapped because I played so little, but tonight's another matter.

He's up my ass. Constantly.

So far, I've been able to stay clear of his dirtiest attempts, which seems to infuriate him. He's not the first defender to be perturbed by my agility on ice, given my size. He's also not the first defender to target me like his sole mission is brutalizing my body. Every team we play, I'm a target. I'm our leading scorer, and I'm good at avoiding scrapes, winning the puck, catalyzing offense. I defy physics, and it shocks and then quickly pisses off my opponents.

To be fair, it shocked me at first, too. But now I understand it's my strength, this intuition I have, the way I sense incoming hits and slip away, my body's ability to hold peripheral awareness of so much, then sneak myself and the puck right where we need to go. I couldn't explain *how* I do it if I wanted to—it's just something my brain-body connection implicitly knows.

That said, while I'm adept at dodging disasters, evading and putting up with Number 27 is getting old. Countless hooks, pokes, and slashes, slapping his stick into my skates, hoping to trip me. He's tried and missed smashing me into the boards more times than I can count. And unlike past times when I've weathered his and other defenders' abuse with stoic detachment, simmering frustration has been building to an angry boil inside me. I don't know why what I typically

ignored and let roll off my back is irking me so relentlessly tonight. Why my hands itch to do damage, my fists twitch to draw blood. All I know is, they do.

Maybe you're hitting your limit, Bergman. We all have them.

Fair point, subconscious. I've spent three years in this league being squeaky clean. Backing away from fights, playing a fair game, never taking the bait. I do every PR stunt they ask of me, show up for every magazine cover and interview the league wants. And the whole time I've smiled, kept myself out of trouble, and not asked for a damn thing except a beautiful game to play and my peaceful home to rest in when I'm not.

But most of all I've waited. And waited. And *waited* for Frankie. And now I've had to survive living with her, seeing shower water dripping down her chest, watching her eat my omelets with sleepy eyes and gorgeous bedhead, sharing sunsets on the beach with her and her fluffy dog that I miss already. And I still can't have her. I can't tell Frankie what she means to me or touch her how I'm dying to.

I feel like Mom's pressure cooker the time she forgot about her rice and the lid exploded, showering the room. A mess of suppressed, unmet need, blowing its top.

As 27 knocks my skates again, I spin, slam a shoulder into him and barrel on with the puck toward the goal. My entire focus narrows on the net. I fly up the ice, deking, weaving, knowing my footwork's faster than the defender can keep up with, knowing this goal is *mine*.

I dump it off to Tyler, speeding past the Wild's last man back and pick up the puck when Tyler fakes and flicks it to me. As I bear down on the goalie, the puck glued to my stick, then pull back to shoot, my foot gives from under me thanks to Number 27's stick, which hooks my skate and trips me.

I'm falling, heading straight for a face plant, but somehow, I still manage to get my shot off. My gaze follows the puck waffling through the air, dipping low. Just as I crash to the ice, it sneaks past the goalie's pads and lands with a *thwack*, safe inside the net.

Goooooaaaaallll!

“You lucky bastard!” Tyler yells, hoisting me up. “Three minutes left, and you pulled that off!”

Rob’s lit up with pride, smacking my helmet and bumping my chest like always. “That was amazing.”

When I skate by, 27 shoves me. I freeze, hold his eyes, then begin to skate past, but he puts up his arm again and shoves me once more.

“That’s it,” Tyler snaps, yanking off a glove. “He’s so fucking overdue—”

Rob stills Tyler’s hand. “Ren can fight his own battles. And if he doesn’t want to, they’re not yours.”

Number 27 spits out his mouth guard, and grins nastily, revealing four missing teeth. “He’s too pussy to fight his own battles. Is he your bitch, Johnson? Gotta protect your—”

Tyler launches at him, but I manage to get in between them. “He’s not worth it,” I tell Tyler, shoving his glove into his stomach and spinning him away. “Get out of here. Cool off.”

I glare over my shoulder at the guy, straighten my helmet, then turn and start to skate away. “*Mammering rough-hewn eunuch*,” I mutter.

Rob snorts in hysterical laughter, skating next to me.

“What did you fucking call me?” 27 yells, shoving me from behind.

The ref skates in, turning 27 away.

Tyler howls in laughter as I grab his arm and drag him with me, skating toward the boards to switch for the last shift. All we have to do is keep the lead I just bought us for the next three minutes and avoid a penalty. Then we win the series and advance to the next round of the playoffs.

Rob skates past me, still struggling to contain his laughter. “Best thing I’ve ever heard on the ice.”

I grin, spinning my mouth guard around, feeling the relief of another goal and telling off that jerk. I’m almost to the boards

when I lock eyes with Frankie, who's scowling again. Dropping my mouth guard, I give her a bright smile. Suddenly her eyes widen, her hands waving in alarm. I turn to look over my shoulder, and spin deftly, just in time to slip 27's right hook. Hurling past me, he flies into the boards and crumples to the ice.

When I turn back Frankie's eyes are wide, her mouth open.

"See," I tell her, swinging over the boards and onto the bench.

"Told you I'd be careful."

Frankie

Playlist: “Lovely,” Billie Eilish, Khalid

After the game, Ren begged off dinner with the team. Rob implied it was because of a massive headache, but I have a suspicion Ren’s absence has a lot more to do with what happened when 27 launched himself at Ren and ate ice instead of landing a blow.

I shouldn’t be doing this, but I am. I walk the soft carpeted hallway of the hotel, straight toward Ren’s room. He’s always booked right by me, and it’s maddening. Every time I hear him turn on the shower, opening and shutting his hotel dresser drawers—because Ren’s that guy who unpacks his suitcase tidily for a two-night stay—I have to try not to picture him walking around his room, gloriously naked, with that Viking sledgehammer between his legs, which I’m now shockingly acquainted with after the yoga and shower-towel debacles.

Knocking softly, I wait. Ren opens the door and squints at me. He’s holding a massive ice pack to his head and looks unsteady on his feet.

“How was I supposed to know the guy only has one nut?” Ren mutters.

I shrug. “You couldn’t have known. Just a bad coincidence. Not like he didn’t deserve it, though.”

Turning, Ren leaves the door open and backtracks to his bed, dropping on it with a groan. “It was just an off-the-cuff Renaissance swear. Just a bunch of old words thrown together.”

“One of which was *eunuch*,” I say pointedly.

Ren lifts his palm like, *so what?* “I’ve cursed hockey players using worse Shakespeare than that for ten years now, and never once has it created a problem.” Ren sighs, sounding

exhausted. “I have to get my frustration off my chest somehow. I don’t fight. I don’t take the bait. *I* don’t say nasty things about their mother or call them homophobic slurs. Elizabethan oaths are how I hold on to a little shred of dignity.”

Now that’s something you don’t hear every day. I have the ridiculous urge to squish his cheeks together and kiss Ren breathless for the adorkable things that fall out of that mouth. Instead, I settle for shutting the door behind me and carefully lowering myself to the edge of his bed.

“Well.” I pat his hand. “I can tell you feel bad about calling a guy with one nut a *eunuch*, but he’s an *asshole* guy with one nut. He was coming after you, bullying you, Ren. You just stuck up for yourself, and you didn’t even mean to land such a pointed blow.”

Ren shifts the ice pack on his forehead and doesn’t say anything.

“Can I ask you something?”

He pivots his head on the pillow and meets my eyes. “Yes.”

“What made you decide to play a professional sport that is arguably the most tolerant—celebratory, even—of hostility and aggression, when you’re clearly a nonviolent person?”

“There’s so much more to the game than that,” he says, almost as if to himself. “I love the beauty of it. Grace and coordination, the team effort of hockey. I just choose not to embrace its most vicious aspects.”

“And you feel like you stooped to his level tonight.”

“I didn’t mean to,” he says quietly. “I was relieved he didn’t smash my face, *again*, but I felt awful when I watched him slam into the boards, then fall on the ice. I know he brought it on himself, I understand that in some sense of karmic justice he deserved that, but...”

Ren sighs heavily, eyes closed. “I don’t know. It was like high school all over again. I felt weirdly vindicated and guilty. Does that make sense?”

I nod. “Yes. I get why you needed to skip dinner.”

“Oh, I was coming to dinner. I’m starving. I wasn’t *that* torn up about it. But then I started this headache.”

“Have you been getting headaches a lot?”

He swallows and presses the ice pack harder onto his forehead. “They started a few weeks ago. Amy says it’s what sometimes happens after a couple concussions. So, nice life development.”

I steal the moment to stare at him. Tousled hair, haphazard waves of russet and gold. Full soft lips half hidden beneath his beard. Stupidly, I lean in and push back a piece of hair stuck to his forehead.

His eyes drift open, pale as ice and just as capable of freezing me. “Why are you here?” he whispers.

Voices echo in the hallway, muffled, rooms away from us. I hear myself breathing, rough and rapid. “I’m not sure. I was... I guess I was worried about you.”

His gaze holds mine, like he’s trying to puzzle me out. I only hope he can’t.

Scrunching his eyes shut, he tugs the ice pack over them. “Sorry. Light hurts.”

His free hand fists by his side. I watch his jaw tic. He’s hurting. And as weird or maybe even wrong as it sounds, I feel relieved that I’m not the only one. That Ren might seem like his life is a breeze, but he’s as much a slave to the fallible human body as I am. He knows what it is to hurt, to be debilitated by pain.

Slowly, carefully, I set my hand on top of his fist. “Relax,” I say quietly. “Tensing up makes pain worse.”

He sucks in a breath when I slide my hand over his knuckles, gently prying open his grip. I pick up his hand, and start a firm massage, running my thumb along his Mound of Venus, up through the webbings between each finger.

Ren groans. “God, that feels good.”

“Good.”

I tell myself to breathe, even as heat simmers beneath my skin and every hair on my arms stands up. It’s probably reading *Sense and Sensibility* for book club this month, but what is it that’s so sensual about the simple touching of hands? How can sharing the barest contact feel so intimate?

After a few minutes, I gently set his hand on the bed. Before I can pull it away, he slides his palm against mine, how our mouths and bodies move in my daydreams. Soft, slow. Hot. Close.

Our fingers lock, and I don’t know who did it first, only that it happened.

“If I profane with my unworhiest hand this holy shrine,” he whispers, eyes still shut, “the gentle sin is this: My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand to smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.”

I swallow nervously. “*Romeo and Juliet*.”

“Ten points for Slytherin. Ten more if you can tell me what Romeo’s saying.”

I grin at him. Ren would know what House of Hogwarts I’m in, not that I’m terribly hard to peg. “That Juliet’s hand is a place Romeo feels unworthy of, too pure for him to touch. Which is clearly just a pick-up line, considering he admits he shouldn’t hold her hand and offers to make it up to her by kissing her.”

Ren’s hand squeezes mine. “And how does Juliet feel about that?”

Breath leaves me, short and fast. My heart’s pounding, emotion knotting in my throat. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. You have an incredible memory. It’s like you see something once and you can recall it.”

I don’t exactly have a photographic memory, but I do have a damn good one.

“You knew that line from *Hamlet*,” he presses. “Every Shakespeare play about a king.”

God, he's such a dork. So kissable.

But I can't do it. Not when he's a *virgin* for Christ's sake, someone waiting faithfully for a woman to love and cherish and give everything to. He and I are literally on opposite ends of the spectrum. I have no business kissing him.

Newsflash: you already have.

Okay, I have no business kissing him *anymore*.

I stare at our hands, tangled together. "Palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss."

"Mhm," he says blearily, his grip slackening in mine. "Let lips do what hands do." Bringing our hands right over his heart, he knots our fingers tighter, and sighs. "They pray."

His breathing steadies. His face grows slack. And I let myself steal the faintest touch of his face. I smooth his beard, whisper my knuckles against his cheek, up to his temple.

"What are you doing to me, Ren?" I whisper. "What am I going to do?"

His hand twitches in mine, but his features are smooth, clearly deep in sleep. I stay, holding his hand, smoothing his hair. Longer than I should.

Much longer.

* * *

This is why I've spent the past four years of my life locked down. Because when I keep my heart and feelings and body closed off, I don't find myself waking up nauseously emotional, horny to the point of distraction, or horribly slept. I don't do stupid things like sit with a ginger giant for an hour, until my eyes droop and my joints start screaming for their own bed to sleep in. I don't have dreams that I can't remember except for what they made me feel. Hot. Lonely. Hungry.

It's all Ren's fault.

I'm sore and tired as we stumble off the bus back in LA. My little Civic flashes her lights as I unlock her from across the parking lot and hoist my carry-on bag higher up my shoulder.

"Frankie." Ren jogs toward me, hauling all his shit. Really, when is the guy going to let the minions be minions for him?

"Yes?" My stomach tightens, seeing him run my way. We spent the day tacitly avoiding each other. Or maybe I avoided him.

Okay, I avoided him. Because this is what my stomach did every time I looked at him. And what was there to say? *Hey, I don't know what's going on with me, but I'm having lots of feelings for you which revolve around fascination, desire, and bone-chilling fear.* I'm an unfiltered person, but even I know that would be too much.

I want to kiss Ren and push him away. I want a bath and a bike ride. I need a night alone and a weekend with my friends.

I'm coming unhinged.

He catches up to me. "Can I follow you to your place?"

"You want to *follow* me?"

His cheeks turn red. "That came out wrong. I wanted to come *with* you but drive my own car, and let you drive yours. Because it's your first time going back to your place since... everything happened. I was going to offer to just do a walk-through, make sure you feel safe."

Buh-bye somersaults. Now my stomach's graduated to back handsprings. I grip my cane so hard my knuckles ache. "Well, that's really thoughtful of you. But I was going to pick up Pazza first from Lorena. Echo Park's even more out of your way. That'll make for a late night."

"I figured you'd want to go get Pazza," he says without missing a beat. "It'll help you feel safer to have her there. And no, I don't mind the drive. I need some quiet in the car after days with the hooligans, anyway."

He takes a step closer. “Please, Frankie? It’ll give me peace of mind, too.”

His hair rustles in the wind, unruly and backlit by the glow of the practice facility. Those wintry eyes sparkle beneath long sable lashes, tipped with auburn. How do you say no to someone as beautiful as Ren Bergman?

Especially when he’s even more beautiful on the inside.

I don’t know. He’s got a heart of gold but buns of steel. It’s a toss-up which is better.

“Okay,” I say on a sigh.

His hand reaches and squeezes mine, then gently releases it before I even process what he’s done. My palm burns from that fleeting contact, as last night’s touch rushes to the forefront of my memory.

Without a word, he slips my bag off my shoulder and soldiers ahead of me.

Dragging my feet the whole way to my car, I follow Ren, who holds open my door, merrily sets my bag in the trunk, then double taps it like some chipper bellhop.

He rushes over to his van which is parked right next to mine and waves me to go first. I decide to turn on my audiobook, since book club meets soon, and I am way behind on *Sense and Sensibility*.

It’s not my favorite Austen. There’s something about the story that makes me sad as I read it. Their father’s death and the grief it brings the Dashwood women. How unfair it is, estates being entailed away from a man’s own daughters to their male cousin. Marianne’s immature romanticism, the way she so easily overlooks Colonel Brandon’s kindness to her and falls for that asshole Willoughby.

Then there’s poor Elinor. Just day after day, hiding her heart for Edward, because she’s mindful of what it could cost her and her family if she expressed affection for a man whose feelings she’s unsure of. She’s so dutiful. So patient. She deals with a low-functioning mother, a sister who’s doing everything Elinor isn’t—throwing caution to the wind, madly chasing her

impulses—all while mothering the youngest daughter, Margaret. Her existence feels so heavy that *I'm* tired of duty dragging Elinor down.

“Sense will always have attractions for me,” the narrator reads.

“Damn straight.” That I can empathize with. Because being sensible keeps you safe.

My fingers tightly grip my steering wheel, and I'm grinding my teeth so hard my jaw aches. I have to get my head on straight. Yes, it's true I find Ren attractive. Yes, I have a tender spot for the six-foot-three cinnamon roll. Yes, he's a fantastic kisser, especially for a virgin, which leads me back to a not-infrequent thought lately that a primal part of me wishes I got to be his first. Because someone like him deserves the best first time, and while I'm not saying I'm some sex prodigy, I think I could please him. I know I sure as hell would enjoy trying. Teasing, adoring, and savoring this romantic, kind, gentlemanly, nerdy, hotter than sin—

Shit, I need to stop.

I tune back into the audiobook, willing myself to focus on the story, but Elinor and her damn restraint when it comes to Edward just heaps annoyance on annoyance as I drive, until I'm idling in front of Lorena's apartment building, yelling, “Just fucking tell him you love him already!”

Ren taps my window, and I startle so violently, I nearly shit myself. Once I can breathe again, I press the button until the window is lowered.

He leans his arms on the ledge and smiles, glancing from my dashboard with the pictured audiobook title to me. “Never seen Austen incense a person like that.”

I turn off the engine and nudge open the door, making him take a step back. “Clearly, you haven't read *Sense and* fucking *Sensibility*.”

“Huh.” He shuts the door behind me, following as I step onto the curb. “I didn't know the title included such profanity. Must be the unabridged version.”

“It doesn't,” I grumble. “But it should.”

Ren presses the buzzer for Lo's unit, and the fact that he knows which one it is after only being here once before, when I was a shell-shocked mess, crying for my dog, just twists the knife deeper in my ice block of a heart.

"I actually haven't read that one," he says while we wait. "But you've piqued my interest now."

Before I can tell him to lay off my book club, Lo buzzes us in.

Lorena's in a certain state of undress that indicates she and Mia were having the cozy times, so I keep my pick-up of Pazza quick. I get her into my car, then drive us home, Ren behind me the whole drive from Echo Park to Hawthorne.

When I pull up to the house, my heart starts pounding. My palms get sweaty. Pazza whines from her seat, and I pet her head, staring at my bungalow rental. The place I would normally be so glad to see looks sinister and unwelcoming. No lights on inside. A new handle and lock that I don't recognize mounted on the door, meant for the new, unfamiliar key I hold in my hand. It doesn't feel like coming home.

Sighing, I open my car door, but Ren's there already, opening it for me, grabbing my bag from the trunk, petting Pazza when she dashes over to him, like this is all just par for the course.

When I get to the door, my hands are shaking. I drop my keys, and Ren bends, scooping them up for me.

He holds them, open in his hand, but his eyes connect with mine. "Do you want me to?"

I nod.

Quickly, Ren slips the key into the lock, lets himself in, and immediately flicks on the lights. It helps a little. My misty gray walls, fresh white trim painted everywhere. The cozy oatmeal-colored couch I've snuggled many nights on, decorated with Hogwarts-themed pillows and throw blankets.

Closing the door behind me, Ren turns the bolt and the sound makes me jump. His hand rests warm and steady on my shoulder. One solid squeeze, then he lets go. "You're safe, Frankie. Your landlord did a good job."

I nod again, worrying my lip between my teeth.

“Want me to take a walk around upstairs?” he asks.

“Yes, please.”

Without another word, Ren heads up my stairs, two at a time, silent as a big cat, his large hand wrapped around the banister.

Pazza trots into the kitchen, sniffing around, nudging her bowl.

“I know,” I tell her. “I’m coming.”

Feeding her calms me a little bit. I’m a creature of habit, and this is our routine when I pick her up from Lo’s. We come inside, I feed her dinner, then we head out to my tiny patch of backyard as she snuffles around, then does her business. After that, we curl up on the couch and read. Well, I read. Pazza lies on top of me and vies for my attention.

I hear Ren’s footsteps roaming upstairs. Opening and closing closet doors. My shower curtain being snapped back, then straightened.

A smile tugs at my mouth as I open the container of dog food Lo made for Pazza and drop it into her bowl. He’s upstairs, checking every nook and cranny.

As stupid as it is to get all feely about it, I do. I stand in my kitchen, savoring the sounds of care, because soon they’ll be gone. I’ll be back to being alone.

You like being alone.

Pazza whines, bumping my hand with her head. “We’ll be fine,” I whisper to her.

On a snort, she pulls back and shakes her coat, those pale gold eyes boring into me. *Sure, Mom, they say. Keep telling yourself that.*

Frankie

Playlist: “Sirens,” Cher Lloyd

“Frankie?” Ren calls from the steps. When he stops at the bottom of them, I stare at him, his tall frame filling the entranceway.

“Hi.”

Super eloquent, Francesca, the little devil on my shoulder whispers.

I’m not trying to be eloquent, devil side. I’m trying not to rip off his clothes.

Ren smiles as a stray wave of hair flops across his forehead. Pushing it back absently, he strolls into the kitchen. “I did a thorough search. And trust me, with extensive experience in obscure and wildly unsafe hiding places, thanks to too many long Washington winters cooped up with bored, hyper siblings, I can assure you that your house is completely unoccupied, but for you and me.”

Pazza barks at him and cocks her head.

He grins down at her, scratching her ear when she trots his way and drops to her haunches at his feet. “And Pazza, of course.”

I stare at him, as my heart bangs against my ribs, an inmate shaking its prison bars.

Let me out. Please. Just this once.

Drawing in a jagged breath, I spin away and beeline it for the back door. As I throw open the door, I whistle and snap my fingers in signal to Pazza. She bolts past me, jumping immediately at some insect that dances across the grass.

My throat tightens as I hug my arms around my middle. I hear the quiet rustle of Ren's steps, smell that clean, spicy scent that warms his skin.

His hand gently grips my elbow. "Are you okay?"

I nod without meeting his eyes, feigning concentration on Pazza. "I'm fine. I just needed some fresh air. Thank you for checking the house for me."

He steps closer. "I was happy to do it, Frankie."

My pulse thunders in my ears. It feels like my heart's rattling my ribs loose, it's pounding so violently inside my chest. If he touches me any further, I won't be strong enough to resist Ren anymore. I'll throw myself at him, beg him to give me everything for just a little while. To give me *for now* until he can have *forever* with her.

Her.

God, my blood boils, and a kick of anger surges through my veins. I hate her. I'm wildly jealous of this woman, who I can only assume is entirely, completely worthy of him. And I know, I *trust* that she is, because I trust Ren. He's measured and thoughtful. He has his head screwed on straight. He values the right things.

She's probably an understated beauty, because Ren's too wholesome to need a knockout—he only asks for beauty from within. She's one of those rescue-shelter volunteers who bakes perfectly circular chocolate chip cookies and makes friends with all the grandmas on the block. She wants three kids—two boys and a girl—and she loves to scrapbook. She also reads those criminally sex-free romances and is the least erotically adventurous woman on the planet—

Whoa, there, Francesca. Getting a little nasty, aren't we?

Well, yes. My thoughts have turned uncharitable. That's my jealousy talking. That's my covetous envy. A fierce possessiveness for someone I have no right to. An unwarranted, unfair animosity toward a woman I should be happy for.

"I want to apologize, Frankie. About last night."

I spin, tugged out of my thoughts. “What?”

Ren frowns up at me from his crouched position, petting Pazza. “I don’t remember everything, because that headache was...unearthly painful, and I’d taken one of the pills for it that Amy prescribed me, but I have a vague memory of being very into hand holding.”

Heat rushes through me as I bite my lip. God, you’d think we’d made out, the way thinking of it affects me. “You were.”

He grimaces. “It was unprofessional of me. I’m sorry.” His face transforms to a wide smile as Pazza licks his face, perching her muddy paws on his knees.

“Pazza, down.” My voice is sharp, and she drops immediately, jogging over to me.

Ren slowly stands with a look of wariness on his face. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Just Pazza. Sh-she’ll ruin your slacks.” I point at the grass and mud staining his knees.

He smiles and shrugs. “I don’t care, Frankie. I can do my laundry. I’m a spot-treating wizard, actually.”

“Of course, you are.” I can’t get a stain out of my clothes to save my life.

Why do all these little things about him add up to something so perfectly right to me? Why does he have to be so wonderful?

Why do I have to be so fucked up?

“Frankie.” Ren closes the distance between us, sending the heat of his body pouring over me. “Why do I feel like you’re avoiding the topic?”

“What topic?”

He lifts his eyebrows. “Of last night.”

“Oh. Well. I mean, you weren’t yourself.” I wave a hand, taking a step back. The breeze sends his warm spiciness my way. He smells too tempting. “*Non compos mentis* and all. It’s fine.”

The line etched between his brows deepens. “Why do you seem upset, then? Tell me what’s wrong, please, Frankie.” Ren’s eyes search mine.

“I can’t.”

I can’t feel this way about you. I can’t want you. I can’t do this.

Something in his face changes, as his gaze dances over my features, like he’s read my mind.

“Can I ask you something?” he says softly.

No.

Nothing good’s going to come of it, I can feel it already. He misinterprets my silence as assent.

“Was there...” Ren swallows, raking a hand through his hair. “What did you say last night when I was falling asleep? It’s on the edge of my memory. But I can’t recall it.”

My heart thunders. *Shit. Shit.* “Um...nothing. I-it was nothing.”

His eyes search mine. “Is it *nothing* because you didn’t mean it? Or is it *nothing* because you’re not sure you want me to have heard it, if I did hear it, that is?”

Roaring fills my ears. I lick my lips, clasp my shaking hands together. “I’m not sure,” I whisper.

Ren steps closer. I search his eyes in confusion. If he heard me, if he knows I’m torn up over him, what then?

Holding my eyes, he brushes the back of his hand against mine, sending a bolt of electricity surging through my body. “There’s something that I think I should tell you,” he says quietly.

I stare at Ren, fear of the unknown gnawing inside me. I tug my lip between my teeth and bite until I taste the warm coppery tang of blood.

“Frankie.” His voice is urgent. He sweeps his thumb over my lip and tugs it free. The pad of his thumb presses my bite. His eyes hold mine, searching for answers I don’t have. “You hurt yourself.”

I pull away, but he steps with me, fluidly, intuitively, just like the Great Naked Towel Tango. I take a final step back, until I'm flush against the house's stucco. It pricks my skin, a welcome discomfort. Just the tiniest pain compared to what's shearing through me.

He heard my confession. He knows I've caught feelings for him. And now he's going to graciously, gently break my fledgling heart. I know it already.

"Are you okay?" he whispers.

"Not particularly." I wipe my nose with the back of my hand, then sink my fingers into my fidget necklace. I spin the time turner, slip my thumb through the Quidditch goal. "I don't handle stressful situations well. I get anxious. Overwrought. Histrionic. It's very Victorian."

Ren stares at me, a series of emotions flying over his face before I have the faintest chance of identifying even one of them. "Now I know you're upset, Frankie. You're making bad, self-deprecating jokes."

I scowl at him. He stares down at me, his eyes pale and mysterious as the moon behind him.

I glance away. I can't handle the intensity of his gaze. I stare at his dress shoes, planted wide in the grass. The long line of his legs. Up his solid torso to the hollow of his throat. I close my eyes and remember what he looks like beneath that crisp dress shirt. He has one of those bodies that could be carved in granite. Power wrapped in beauty.

I want Ren so badly. I want him as much as I want to run away *from* him as fast as I can. Because I haven't wanted to let someone in, in a long, long time. It's terrifying as ever. And it hurts even worse, now that I know rejection is coming before I even asked for a chance.

"Frankie." The plea in his voice draws my gaze. I couldn't look away if I wanted to.

"After I say what I'm about to, I want to hear your honest feelings on it but...not now, if that's all right. I was hoping you'll give it a bit of time to sink in first."

I wrinkle my nose. “That’s not generally how I work, Zenzero. I don’t have tons of filter between this and this.” I point from my temple to my lips.

“One of the many things I like about you.” He grins. “But I think what I have to say might leave you a bit...shocked. It will at least buy me the few precious seconds it will take to walk through your house and get in the van. And I’m going to do that. Because I am a coward.”

I swallow in nervousness, clenching my hands into fists, as an odd current of fear and unease rolls through me. “You’re about the least cowardly person I’ve ever met, but okay.”

Ren exhales heavily. “So. Once I say it, I’m going to leave. And when you’re ready—*if* you’re ready—tell me, and we’ll talk.” He glances up to the night sky, like he’s searching the stars for something mere earth can’t give him. But then his gaze drops once more to me, a tender smile warming his face.

“First. I never wanted to keep this from you, but I-I didn’t know what else to do but stay quiet when it was impossible. And then, when I knew you were leaving, I wanted to wait until you left the team, but I don’t know what happened except on the beach, last night, something feels like it’s changed, and now I can’t. I can’t contain this anymore. It needs to be said.

“I want you to know, if you never want to hear about this again, I will respect that. I won’t make it uncomfortable. I’ll be professional at work and leave you alone. Okay?”

Is this how you let someone down easy? Seems like an odd way to do it. I search his eyes. “Ren, I’m so confused.”

He makes a sound of unease and rubs his forehead. “Yeah, I’m realizing that. Which...I don’t know if that makes this easier or harder, but here goes.”

Standing tall, throwing his shoulders back, he huffs a breath and stares intensely down at the ground. Until, finally, he peers up at me through thick lashes and holds my eyes. “The woman I’ve been waiting for...”

My stomach drops. That’s how he’s going to do it. Tell me about her, and like a bucket of ice water, douse every spark of

lust between us.

I feel sick with sadness already, knowing that once I know who she is, this tiny moment I had with him—stolen kisses, heated glances, the soft whispers of tangled fingers, palm to palm—has to end. Because I am many things—obsessive, fastidious, blunt, and short-tempered—but one thing I am not, and never will be, is the other woman.

“That woman, Frankie,” he says. “It’s you.”

It’s you.

Two words. Missiles, tearing through my heart, landing on an earth-rattling *boom*.

Ren’s right. I’m speechless. And long before I once again locate my body in time and space, Ren’s gone from my yard, leaving me blinking rapidly into the middle distance while my brain tries to process the words it just heard.

It’s. You.

Wandering shakily into the house, I slowly sink to the ground, as my breath comes short and quick.

Countless moments with Ren flash through my mind, painted in a new, weighted, gloriously terrifying light.

I’m the one he’s been waiting for.

I’m the one he’s wanted.

My throat is bone dry. I grab the counter and hoist myself upright, fumbling for a glass from the cabinet, filling it with filtered water, and draining it. Setting down the tumbler, I’m met with my reflection in the window above the sink. I hold her gaze, staring at her shocked features.

She’s never felt so many conflicting emotions at once, and it shows on her face. Hope. Terror. Joy.

It’s been so long since I embraced the part of myself that aches to come to life when Ren’s near. The one that laughs and jokes, that hugs hard and kisses deeply. The one that cries at sappy movies and throws open her heart for those she loves. The one that believes someone could love her without one day

resenting her, without seeing her laundry list of needs and hurdles as burdens but rather as beautiful parts of what make her *her*.

Because *I* know that having arthritis, being autistic, does not make me less whole or human. It doesn't make me wrong or broken. It makes some things in my life more challenging in ways, yes, and maybe I don't represent the "norm," but I can be someone who surmounts obstacles without it meaning there's something fundamentally lacking in my makeup.

Problem is, that truth has been harder to hold on to when I let people in. Because then my sensory limits, my unexpected emotions, my easily tired body, my unfiltered mouth, are part of the package deal with me, and apparently, they wear out their welcome. Everyone—my family and childhood friends, my one college boyfriend—*everyone*, except for Annie and Lo, who I have loved and let in, has ultimately come to resent me.

So, when I moved away and started my life fresh, I told myself I simply wouldn't love or be loved that way, not anymore. Because each time I let someone in and they show me I'm not worth the work, it's become more painful, more difficult to bounce back.

"What are you going to do?" I ask my reflection.

For so long, my way of life has worked for me. It's comforted me to guard my emotions, be sensible with my heart, practical with my actions, controlled and ordered. Being safe allowed me to move beyond the pain of my past.

Silence fills my home. A weighty emptiness spills into its corners, as stark and illuminating as the moon outside. An uncomfortable question burrows deep in my chest and pricks my heart.

What if the life I've built, the one that was supposed to free me, has turned into a prison after all?

Ren

Playlist: “Saturday Sun,” Vance Joy

I woke up convinced last night was a dream. But then I rolled out of bed and passed my laundry hamper on the way to the bathroom, freezing as I noticed muddy paw prints and grass stains coloring the knees of my suit pants. And it all came rushing back.

Forcefully.

I told her. I really told her. I listened to an overwhelming intuition, an undeniable voice inside my head, telling me I should.

Because despite my brain-bruised fog the other night, I knew I remembered that I didn't just hold Frankie's hand, Frankie held it back as she whispered something that I couldn't remember but whose *sound* I remember. She sounded sad. Hopeful. Tender.

Knowing that she'd kissed me, the way we talked on the beach, the care in her touch in the hotel. Then everything she said that night over takeout—my brothers said if that wasn't a woman who has feelings for you, they didn't know what was.

I couldn't stand the thought that Frankie might feel something for me and be in any doubt that I felt the exact same for her, too. The deception's benefits no longer outweighed its risks.

So I told her that I wanted her. That I've *wanted* her. For years. Her eyes widened. And stupidly, I stood there for five eternal seconds, hoping maybe she'd leap into my arms, laugh wildly as we kissed under the stars.

Instead she blinked. And swallowed. Slowly.

So I left and hyperventilated while I drove home. Then I took enough Zzzquil to fell a horse and end the misery of

consciousness for a few hours.

Now, as I walk into the practice facility, my stomach's in knots. I barely managed a protein bar for breakfast and forwent my normal iced coffee because my heart's flying just fine on its own without the help of caffeine. As I stroll into the practice facility, I have to take deep slow breaths so that I don't break out into a panicked sweat.

"Morning, toots." Mildred smiles over her half-moon glasses from the practice facility's front desk.

"Morning, Millie." I set a piping hot to-go cup on her desk ledge. "The usual."

She snatches up her coffee, popping off the lid and taking a long, savoring whiff. "Ah, that's the stuff. How much do I owe ya?"

"You always ask that, and I always tell you the same thing." Double tapping her desk, I start walking away.

Millie grins. "You're a good egg, Ren."

Before I can answer her, a new voice cuts across the space. "Zenzero."

I spin around.

Frankie.

How is she lovelier every time I see her? What is it about her practice day outfits—slouchy hoodies and fitted joggers, the long trail of her dark ponytail—that gets to me? Is it that when she's dressed this way, I imagine I'm seeing her soft side, the tender, walls-down woman I've glimpsed so rarely beneath that power-suit, buttoned-up front?

"Hi," I whisper.

She smiles, and it hits me square in the chest. Her smiles are few and far between. Each one's a victory.

"Hi," she says quietly.

Swallowing thickly, I scrub the back of my neck. It's so silent in the entranceway, you can hear the faint echo of the guys' voices all the way down at the other end of the building.

Clearing her throat behind a fist, Frankie walks closer to me. “I was wondering if you were free to get lunch after dry-land and ice time this morning?”

My stomach clenches. I search her eyes, but they’re unreadable. Is this lunch to let me down easy? Or...could it possibly be to tell me what I’ve only spent years hoping I’d hear? *I want you, too.*

“Sure,” I finally manage. “Name the place.”

“I’m not picky. You choose.”

A wistful sigh interrupts us. We both turn and look at its source.

Millie blinks innocently behind her glasses. “Don’t mind me. Just isn’t every day you see young love—”

“Oh, we’re not—”

“It’s not that—”

Frankie’s and my words tumble over each other. We stop at the same time, a mirror of blushing cheeks.

“Right,” Frankie says quietly, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Lunch.”

She walks past me, leaving me alone with Millie, who’s suddenly very absorbed in something on the computer screen.

“Mildred.”

She squints at the screen, avoiding my gaze. “Yes, dear. How can I help you?”

I lean my elbows on the desk ledge, lowering my face until she’s forced to meet my eyes. I know they freak some people out, especially when I don’t blink. They’re Mom’s eyes. Pale and silvery. They’re an unexpected pairing with my hair. A little unnatural. A lot intimidating.

Millie looks me in the eye and swallows with a loud gulp. “I’ll mind my own beeswax from now on.”

“Excellent.” Pushing off the desk, I call over my shoulder. “No more meddling, Mildred. Not with dropping confidential Club

activities, ‘check engine’ lights or spark plugs, or hotel room arrangements, or you’re walking your way to next Club meeting.”

She cackles. “We both know you’re too much of a softie to ever follow through on a hard-hearted threat like that, but nice try, toots.”

She’s right. And sometimes I wish I wasn’t so damn predictable.

* * *

“What are you getting?” Frankie stares at her menu, biting her lip. “Too many choices.”

I glance up from my phone, where a meme that Andy was delighted to notify me went viral plays on a loop in my messages: me eating ice, right as I get my shot off. The goal I scored when 27 tripped me. It has Frankie written all over it. She makes these from time to time, and they always take off.

“Francesca.”

“Hm?” She finally glances up. “What? I’m trying to decide between burgers here, Bergman. Heh. Get it? *Burgers. Bergman.*”

I flip my phone around so she can see the meme.

She has the courtesy to blush, the tips of her ears turning bright pink. “Oh, that little old thing.”

“Oh, Frankie. There is nothing little or old about this. In fact, it’s quite fresh and large. So much so, one might call it *viral.*”

“Give me that,” she mutters. Snatching the phone out of my hand, Frankie spins it in her grip.

“Can’t be that bad...” Color drains from her face. “Okay. It’s that bad.”

I bite my lip, trying not to give away that I really don't care. Actually, I find it funny. Frankie didn't just loop my epic biff, she added a tiny gif of an umpire and the words scrolling across the screen as he gives the signal: *SAFE!*

It's clever. I get why everyone loves it. I look just like a baseball player sliding into home plate. Except I scored a goal to win a playoff series. And hockey's about eight hundred times more interesting and challenging than baseball. But I digress.

Frankie swallows thickly, her fingers drumming on the table. "Ren, I'm sorry, I never—"

I set a hand over her fidgeting fingers. My thumb gentles her palm, hidden beneath my hand, so no one can see the intimacy of that gesture. "I don't care. I was just giving you a hard time."

When she blinks up at me, her lashes are wet. "I feel *terrible*. You said you were a huge nerds-mobile in school, which I can only assume means you got made fun of *a lot*—"

"I mean, not a *lot*—"

"And here I am, making something that got a laugh at your expense—"

"Frankie." I squeeze her hand gently, somewhat stunned by the emotionality of her response. The Frankie I know would have rolled her eyes and told me "tough nuggets." "I seriously don't care. I have a pretty nice life. If a few social media ploys happen to involve laughing at me, my love of the game and the lifestyle it affords me more than make up for it."

Finally, Frankie seems to relax. Her color comes back a bit in her cheeks, and her shoulders drop. "Okay."

"Good." I let go of her hand. Taking a drink of water, I grin at her over my glass. "Plus, I did score to win the series. I mean that fall was practically heroic."

Her lips twitch. "Heroic. Yeah."

I break and laugh, lifting my hoodie to cover my mouth. Frankie's face breaks into a wide grin that she covers with her

hand.

But not fast enough. For just a split second, I catch that bright, unbridled Frankie smile. And it's worth every horrible meme at my expense that she could ever devise.

As our laughter dies away, I notice there are a few people staring at me—*us*—all of whom are not so covertly taking video or snapping photos.

Which reminds me of something. “Francesca.”

She lowers the menu. “Søren.”

I drop my voice and lean in. “I hope I’m not insulting your intelligence when I ask this, but you did consider that we’d be photographed, right?”

“Yep.” She lifts her menu and goes back to reading.

The waiter comes by, filling our waters. When he walks away, Frankie watches until he’s a decent distance from us, then lowers her menu.

“What are a few more photos of us over lunch?” she says, sipping her water. “Whether it’s the truth or not, it’s what people think. Even *Darlene* bought it.”

“She what?”

“This morning she texted me to ask, telling me I could be honest with her, and I wouldn’t get in trouble. Apparently, she thought, especially after the press conference answer you gave, that you and I *were* a thing.” Frankie snorts, then takes a sip of her water. “She said it seemed likely from the photo. Hilarious, right?”

Her words cut brutally. There’s my answer, quick and painfully swift. God, the disappointment.

Frankie frowns as she takes me in. “What?”

I rub over my heart instinctively. It does nothing to quell the ache in my chest.

“Ren. Talk to me. Remember, I can’t...I am even *worse* than the average human at intuiting. But the nice thing about me compared to most people is that I have no problem being told

how and when I get it wrong.” She leans in, sliding her hand toward me, halting halfway across the table. “Please.”

I meet her hand so that our fingertips touch. “You just said the thought of us being in a relationship is laughable.”

“I didn’t say that,” she says gently. “I said that deducing from a *photo* that we’re in a relationship is hilarious. Darlene of all people should know better than to assume that much from a paparazzi shot.” She tips her head, her eyes dancing over my face. “You thought I was saying I found the idea of *us* hilarious.”

I slide my fingers further across the table, until they’re woven with hers. “Yes.”

She squeezes my hand in her grip, making me glance up. “But that isn’t what I said. And if ever you meet someone who means literally what she says, it’s me, Zenzero.”

“I understand. That makes sense.” I’m weathering a boomerang of emotions, but I try to smile and show her I believe her. Because I do.

With a final squeeze, she withdraws her hand. “So. In the spirit of that, I’m going to be direct—”

The waiter shows up again. Worst possible timing. *Ever*.

I’m left hanging, the future of my love life discarded to place a lunch order. It’s not entirely surprising. Food is serious business to Frankie. Turning, she tells him what she wants, snaps her menu shut, and sets it in his arms. I order, too, and we both watch him until he’s gone, leaving us alone in our secluded corner of the restaurant.

“You were saying?” I offer. Trying desperately not to sound... well, desperate.

“Right. I have some questions and concerns. First, what do you want from someone when it comes to having feelings for them?”

“Well, I’m not talking about *someone*, Frankie. I’m talking about you.”

She bites her lip. “Yes. That.”

“That?”

“Just—” She waves her hand impatiently. “Talk. Elaborate.”

“Well, if you felt how I felt, I’d want to date. We could keep it between us until you were comfortable telling other people, given work.”

She nods thoughtfully, her fingers tangling in her necklace. “Ren, I’m attracted to you. I care about you, respect the hell out of you—” Frankie narrows her eyes. “What are you grinning about?”

Hearing her say it, I’m euphoric. I feel how absurdly wide my smile is, so I set a hand over it, and shrug.

“But, here’s the deal. I haven’t wanted a relationship in years.”

“Years?”

“Stop repeating me. Yes, years. I’ve avoided it like the plague.”

“Why?” I ask.

She puffs air out of her cheeks and drums her fingers on the table. “Historically, in relationships, people’s patience wears thin with me and my circumstances. I’ve noticed I’m happier, that my self-esteem and well-being are better, when I’m alone. So, I’ve sort of released the idea of being a white-picket-fence and two-point-five-kids person.”

“Well, that’s fine. I want my house on the beach, which you like; a dog, which you have; and five kids which—”

“*Five?*” Frankie’s eyes widen comically. “Jesus, Bergman. My *yaya* hurts just thinking about it.”

“Your *yaya*?”

“I told you, stop repeating me.” Shutting her eyes, she breathes deeply and says on her exhale, “I got sidetracked.”

“That’s my fault.” When she opens her eyes, I try to meet them. “Can I ask you something?”

She nods.

“Have you ever felt like *I* treat you that way?”

“No,” she says immediately.

My heart does a celebratory somersault.

“But...” Frankie spins her necklace and watches me carefully.
“We haven’t been in a relationship.”

“But I’ve wanted to be.”

Her fingers pause. A blush pinks her cheeks. “It’s not the same.”

“You’re right. So let me promise you, here and now, that I will never view you as a burden or a problem to be surmounted. You’re a *person*, Frankie, one that I’m wild about. And any hardships, anything difficult in your life, well, I’ll just be grateful that I get to be with you as you weather it.”

“Until it gets old,” she says flatly. “Everyone starts out talking like you, Ren.”

I try not to let it hurt. I have to remind myself that her doubt and distrust aren’t about *me*. They’re about her past and how it hurt *her*. For someone whose thinking is as analytical and pattern oriented as Frankie’s, the past is the best predictor of the future.

“Okay,” I concede. “I know that it might be hard to trust me, that I will *never* see you that way. I understand it might require time to experience that. So, if you’re willing to give me a chance to earn your trust in that capacity, I’ll be content. We can go slow, take our time. The only thing I ask for is exclusivity.”

She balks. “Of course, I’d be exclusive.” Reaching, she smacks my arm. “What kind of asshole do you think I am?”

“Well, I don’t know what the kids are doing these days.”

“The *kids*? Ren, I’m older than you.”

“By a whopping one year.”

She rolls her eyes.

“I just...” I sigh. “I just need faithfulness. That’s it.”

Frankie snatches a roll from the bread baskets, rips it open, and smashes some butter into it, entirely focused on her task while she mutters under her breath.

“What are you grumbling to yourself?” I ask her.

Frankie gives me a withering stare and says around a bite of bread, “As if I’d want anyone else if I had you.”

Affection unfurls inside me as her words settle, warm and deep in my heart. “That’s a very nice thing to say, Francesca. And you *do* have me.”

The way she looks at me, her fear and vulnerability gut-wrenchingly close to the surface, is like a blow to the chest. As is so often the case with Frankie—and I’ve noticed this with my sister, Ziggy, too—her mind sees the world incisively, with a raw analysis that most of us avoid. Frankie cuts straight to the heart of love’s vulnerability. And while most of us like to comfort ourselves with the delusion that love is bliss, it’s not called *falling* in love for nothing. We love, entranced by the breathtaking view, and we fall, not knowing where we’ll land.

Our food is set before us, plates turned to an exact angle for best presentation. Waters filled. Then we’re alone again.

Frankie stares at her food and sighs.

“Hey.” I touch her gently, slipping her hand inside mine. “How are you feeling about all of this?”

She meets my eyes. “After last night, when you told me, then you left...I thought about if I could do this, if I wanted it.” Her eyes soften, and her shoulders round, like she wants to curl in on herself. “And all I could think was about how much I missed you. I wished I was with you. So that’s why I’m here, because right now, I can at least tell you with complete sincerity, that I want to be with you, and I feel like I’ll want to be with you more and more. But I also have to be honest, Ren. This is scary.”

“How can I make it less so?”

She smiles softly. “Be honest with me. Be honest with yourself. When it gets to be too much, tell me.”

“It won’t, Frankie.” I squeeze her hand. “I’ll show you that.”

“Well, that’s that, then. But until we’re out of the playoffs or we win the Cup, we act like we always have at work—completely professional. As long as the season runs, no matter what we do personally off-hours, nothing changes in how I treat you in front of others.”

“What about if someone finds out while you’re still with the team? Do you want to wait until after the season?”

Please say no. Pleeeeee say no.

“Hell no,” she says, waving a hand. “We’ll be professional at work, and if anyone guesses why I’m spending time with you outside of it, it’s not like I risk losing my job for it anymore. I’m leaving the team. It’s no one’s goddamn business what we do. I mean...does that work for you?”

I smile at her. “Absolutely.”

“Good.” Frankie smiles to herself and cuts into her meal. She’s quiet as she works her way through her food, and just as I’m starting to worry about the silence, about the places her thoughts have taken her, I’m stopped by the gentle press of her foot next to mine beneath the table.

The tiniest gesture.

But it feels impossibly significant.

Frankie

Playlist: “Crush,” Tessa Violet

I don't know why I play footsie with him under the table. I don't know why it feels so relieving to confess that I feel vulnerable, that the prospect of intimacy terrifies me, because one day he could do what others have done before and hurt me.

What I *do* know is that as we eat and I replay his response in my memory, my heart beats calm and steady, an unfamiliar warmth centering beneath my ribs, radiating to tender, forgotten corners of my body.

I know that sunlight on Ren's hair shines like a weathered copper penny, that some fragile bud of happiness blossoms inside me as we eat in comfortable quiet. He's willing to prove his trustworthiness when he shouldn't have to, and I wish I didn't need that from him. I wish I didn't see people as guilty until proven innocent. But the past has been a harsh teacher, and its lesson isn't easily forgotten—I don't get hurt when I adopt a self-protective outlook.

“So.” Setting down his fork, Ren leans back and lounges in his seat, hands behind his head.

“So.” I slurp the last of my root beer, then frown down at it. When I glance up, he's smiling at me. “What?”

He shakes his head. “What do you plan to do between the season ending and starting law school?”

“Well, not too much. Study, read, catch up on sleep. Maybe get a hip replacement.”

He drops his hands, his eyes widening. “Frankie, you didn't tell me your hip was that bad—”

“Easy, Ren. It was a joke. A bad one, obviously.”

Ren scrubs his face, then rakes his fingers through his hair. “Okay, I’ll catch up. Autoimmune diseases and major surgeries are fair game for humor.”

“It’s not major surgery. The new technique is minimally invasive. And yeah, I have a sense of humor about my medical dossier. You know the saying. ‘If you don’t laugh, you’ll cry.’ So, I crack jokes.”

Our waiter comes by with a fresh root beer. “Oh.” I glance up at him and smile. “Thanks.”

He turns beet red. “S-sure, miss.” Spinning away, he’s gone before I can say anything else, like “Can I see the dessert menu?”

What? I have a sweet tooth.

Ren clears his throat, prompting me to turn back to face him. His eyes dance over my face. “I had no idea that was all it took to earn that kind of smile from you.”

I wrinkle my nose. “What?”

“Root beer. And here I thought it was the gummies.”

“You got those for *me*?”

Ren tips his head. “Of course, Frankie. I knew you liked them.”

“Oh.” I fiddle with my fork. “I thought you just liked them after trying them at my house.”

A beat of silence holds between us. He leans in and wipes my lip clean.

“Ketchup,” he says quietly. Then he sticks his thumb in his mouth and licks it clean with a *pop*.

Preschool Jesus with a Carpentry Awl, my wires are crossing. And as he leans close, he hits me with his spicy, clean scent. I stare into his kind eyes, absorbing his sheer size and proximity. I decide Ren is living temptation. I want under him. Yesterday.

I can’t meet his eyes for long. They see too much, they travel too far under my skin and stir up feelings that make me shiver

and gulp for air. That gently smiling mouth says he can go slow. Those pale cat eyes say *I want you for dinner.*

“Frankie,” he says.

“Hm?”

“Will you come over tomorrow night?”

“Yes,” I blurt.

And I may literally jump you when I arrive.

“Good.” Lifting a hand, he signals the waiter. “Because I miss Pazza.”

“Hey. A girl likes to know she’s wanted for more than her adorable dog.”

He smiles. It’s a new smile. A secret smile. “Then let me reassure you. I want you for much more than that.”

Gulp.

“But as I said, there’s no rush or pressure,” he continues. “On either of us. Physically. Emotionally. We’ll go slow, just spend time together.”

“Oh, I feel zero pressure. Going slow isn’t necessary.” And I swear to whoever is the patron saint of sexual satisfaction—trust me, there is one, Catholics have patron saints for *everything*—if that man doesn’t seduce me the moment that I walk into his house tomorrow, I’m going to lose my mind.

“Great. You can come over tomorrow night. I can cook, and we can just relax.”

Cook and relax. That sounds promising. Like Ren’s version of Netflix and chill.

“That works. But let it be known, I’m going to expect you to pay visits to my humble bungalow, too. I like my hobbit hole.”

“Sure. I’ll spend time at the bungalow. Only thing I’m not sure about is overnights. I need a king-size bed. I don’t fit on those queens.”

“I—what?” I stumble over my train of thought. Sex is one thing. Sleepovers are another. Sleepovers mean cuddles and

bonding. Intimacy I haven't accessed for years except for when I let Pazza smoosh me with her "hugs" on the sofa and I feel the ridiculous amount of love you can harbor for an animal creature.

"So, uh—" I clear my throat behind a fist, trying to look not entirely freaked out. "You're planning on overnights?"

Deep breath, Francesca. One step at a time.

Ren pins me with his cat eyes. "You've seen me work every moment I have under the lights, Francesca. I plan on being similarly dedicated when the lights are out."

Holy soaked panties.

He looks up at the waiter when he arrives at our table. "Can we have the dessert menu? Thanks."

"You're getting dessert?" I croak. I chug some root beer and try to snap out of the sex haze. "What's Lars going to say? He'll smell those simple carbohydrates on your breath. Then it's game over."

Ren grins. "Not for me. I know enough by now to understand that if I'm eating with you, dessert's in order."

"You're buttering me up."

"Hardly. I'm just trying to put a smile on that lovely face with the help of a little culinary indulgence."

I level him with a sharp look. "Don't count on too many smiles. I think I've hit my quota for today."

His grin deepens as sunlight spills through the restaurant. "Yes, ma'am."

* * *

Taryn, our water aerobics instructor, whips her body through the pool, her limbs knifing fluidly as if water's viscosity is just

an urban legend rather than indisputable physics. “Let’s go, ladies! You’re pushing out on me.”

Annie snorts to my left. “I don’t think she should be saying that.”

“Nope,” I pant. God, these treading water segments. “That’s asking to get sued.”

“You’re quiet tonight, Frankie. What’s up?”

I shake my head. “Just winded.”

“Which wouldn’t be a problem if you came to water aerobics with any kind of regularity.”

“Eat me, Annabelle. I have a demanding job. And not all of us have fifty pounds of pregnancy buoying us up in the water.”

Annie gasps, then slaps the water toward me. “How dare you! This is stamina that I’ve built. And while my excess fat stores and uterine fluids are less dense than water—”

“Stop.” I almost gag. “And never say ‘uterine fluids’ ever again.”

She rolls her eyes. “My point is, I’m kicking this treading water challenge’s behind because I’m in shape, not because of the baby.”

“Okay, Annabelle.”

“Francesca, I swear—”

Taryn clears her throat. Loudly. “Do you two mind?”

We smile sheepishly and say in tandem, “Sorry.”

Once Taryn’s attention is directed at the seniors using those flotation devices that I’d give my left tit for right now, Annie glances over at me. “Something’s up with you. I want to hear about it.”

Dammit, *why* must I be so transparent? Ma’s always said I wear my moods on my face, which brings us to another benefit of scowling—it hides everything else that you’re feeling.

Ever since lunch, my gears have been spinning, my brain won’t shut up. My anxiety’s roaring at full throttle, and if I

could wring my hands without drowning right now, I would.

I'm not good at transitions and changes. I'm terrible at facing newness. I'm worse at anticipating everything that could go wrong. This threshold I'm about to cross with Ren typifies all of that. Thus, the freak-out.

"I had a long day," I tell her. "You know how I get. I zone out when I'm wiped."

"Hm." She sniffs. "And here I thought it would be a good idea to go get shakes and fries after we finished class—"

"Okay! I mean, I could carb up after this."

She narrows her eyes. "*And* tell me what's going on while you're at it."

After another twenty minutes of water aerobics hell and a quick shower to rinse off the chlorine, Annie and I drive to our nearby go-to dive diner. Once we have our goodies, we settle into a corner booth.

Sitting with a sigh, Annie lifts her legs, propping her feet on my side. "Do you mind?"

I gently pat her swollen ankles. "Of course not. So. How's the lab?" I ask, struggling with the ketchup bottle.

Giving up, I hand it to her. She pops off the lid and hands it back to me. "Exciting. Challenging. But it's also the same frustrating bullshit as always. Lots of mansplaining. Trying to get myself heard and respected. Pregnancy requiring special considerations in the lab for my safety hasn't helped, either. I swear, if I were a guy, I would *not* be having this hard of a time getting funding."

On a sigh, she sweeps up her milkshake and takes a long drink. "I hope I have a boy so I can raise him to be feminist as fuck. Another man in this world who values women as he should, who supports their equal abilities."

A weird twinge in my chest makes me set down my handful of fries. Ever since Annie told me she was pregnant, the far-off idea of children has hovered closer in my mind—how scary it would be to love this tiny helpless creature, but how incredible

it would be to see them grow up and become the kind of wonderful human that Annie and Tim's baby will be. Ren and his talk about a houseful today in that beautiful beach pad, driving his dad-van, it's pressing in on me—one moment a claustrophobic fear, the next a dizzying hope.

“Frankie?”

“Sorry.” I shake my head and snap out of it. “I’m with you. And I think you’ll raise a great little feminist.”

“How are things at work?” she asks. “And what’s got you so distracted?”

“You know how I get during playoffs. It’s this crazy duality of hype and burnout. We want to win, but we’re all sick of each other. We’re tired, the guys are nursing banged-up bodies, and we’re all wiped from traveling for games. Same shit as this time last year and the year before that.”

“Is that really all?” She reaches for my hand and pats it. “We can talk about him now. We’ve passed the Bechdel test.”

“The what?”

Annie frowns at me. “Frankie.”

“What? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“All the TV you’ve watched, all the books you’ve read, and you don’t know the metric for ensuring film and fiction don’t just portray women only gathered to talk about men?”

“Uh. No. Guess I missed that in my quest for ultimate dorkdom.”

She throws a fry at me. “Anyway. We’ve passed it. Caught up plenty about everything else in life. So, talk about him already.”

“Who?”

Annie rolls her eyes as she slurps her milkshake. “Ren, you goober. He told you how he feels about you, didn’t he?”

I gape at her. “What? *How* did you—”

“I didn’t,” she says, hands raised. “It was just a hunch. His attraction seemed pretty clear.”

“Not to me!”

“Well, I know. As you’ve said yourself, men’s interest is not something you pick up on. From the first time I met him, I swear, just the way he looked at you as you introduced us—*swoon*. But when he joined us for lunch? Confirmed it.”

“Well, how nice to know that everyone else had it figured out except for me.” I throw my napkin on the table and flop back against the booth. Sometimes the areas in life to which I seem so utterly blind and clueless are honestly humiliating.

“Hey. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it to upset you.” Annie sighs. “Frankie, we both know that even if you did know, you didn’t *want* to know. You didn’t want to see it. Because you’re hell-bent on spinsterhood.”

“Annabelle. If you weren’t *heavy with child*, this *spinster* would be giving your *breeches* an epic wedgie.”

“Women didn’t wear breeches back then, Francesca.”

The bell dings as the diner’s door opens, making me casually glance over my shoulder.

The floor drops out from underneath me. Ren walks in. With a woman.

“Kill me now.” I sink into the booth, feeling a cold sweat break out across my skin.

“What?” Annie perks up, like a little baby bird peering out from the nest. “What?”

“Jesus, Annie,” I hiss. “I’m trying to *hide*, not draw attention to us.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh, well, hello, handsome. Oof, there is something about him. Gingers don’t even normally do it for me, but your man is—”

“He’s *not* my man.” I groan. I can’t believe Ren is here. With a tall, willowy woman who has gorgeous dark red hair and wide green eyes.

Why would he be here with a woman when we just talked eight hours ago about trying to be together? There has to be a rational explanation, but hell if I can think of one. It's too much for my brain.

Pulling his ball cap lower, Ren sets his hand on the young woman's back and gently guides her in front of him while they're led by the hostess to be seated. His eyes dance across the space as he notices people looking at him, talking to themselves. I turn around and dive deeper into the booth.

"Who's that with him?" Annie asks.

"I don't know." I have no idea what to make of what I'm seeing, except that Ren's standing side by side with a woman who's as striking as he is and who most likely doesn't have a mountain of personal issues.

Unlike me. The fries and milkshake curdle in my stomach. This is what jealousy feels like. I hate it.

Annie sighs. "You're being ridiculous, hiding like that. It's pointless. He's going to see you. It's not like this is a big diner."

"Whyyy," I whine. "Why didn't we go to In-N-Out?"

"Because Betty's Diner makes the best fries. There was never a question of going anywhere else."

I groan as I rub my forehead. "My shit luck."

"Stop being such a Moaning Myrtle. Oh, I think he just saw me." Annie glances down at me and smiles, her cheeks pink. "Okay. I'm playing it cool. It's just hottie-pants Ren—"

"*Hottie-pants Ren?*"

She shushes me. "I'd sit up if I were you. You're going to look like a weirdo, slumped over in the booth when he comes over and says hi."

I'm just straightening when I see Ren walking my way, icy eyes sparkling from beneath the shadow of his baseball cap.

Ren. Ball cap. Beard.

Guh.

Someone in a nearby booth lifts their phone, and he deftly switches sides so the woman he's with is shielded from the shameless oglers.

Who is she?

"I'm okay," I mutter under my breath. "I'm okay."

"Just breathe, Frankie," Annie says quietly.

"Frankie." Ren smiles down at me, then glances over to Annie.

"Hey, Annie. How are you?"

Annie smiles up at him, turns bright pink, and bats her eyelashes. "Um, yes."

I roll my eyes. "Hey, Ren."

Ren turns slightly, wrapping his arm around the woman's back, setting his hand on her shoulder.

Bile crawls up my throat. Painful, sharp, stabs of jealousy. What is going on?

"Zigs, this is Frankie and her friend, Annie."

The woman extends her hand first to Annie, who's closer, next, to me, bringing her features close enough to inspect. Of course. Startlingly young. Tall. Milky skin, vivid green eyes, rich red hair that's so long, it's almost to her hips. Her clothes don't fit her well—baggy sweatpants and an oversized, stained sweatshirt. Still, there's something familiar and appealing to me about her appearance.

"Wow," she says, eyes wide. "I'm finally meeting Frankie. Ren talks about you constantly."

My belly flip-flops, and I can't help but grin. Ren turns bright red and grimaces. She notices and stares at him.

"What?" Genuine confusion laces her voice as she glances from him to me. "You do."

"Yes," he says on a sigh. "You're right."

Pink stains her cheeks as she glances at the floor. "Sorry."

"You're good, Zigs. It's okay," he tells her quietly.

Something about her embarrassment, that moment of realizing her slip, reverberates with familiarity. I've done it so many times—said what everyone else is thinking but which is apparently catastrophic for adults to admit. I'll never get it and try as I might to learn the pattern of what's said and what's not, I can't. Meaning, sometimes I fuck up. I've been in her shoes.

There's something familiar, too, about the wide-open curiosity in her eyes when we shook hands, her concerted effort to observe the niceties of an introduction but the eagerness to return to the sanctity of her own body and thoughts.

It all clicks into place. This is—

“You're his *sister*,” I say in shock. “You're—

“Yes, this is Ziggy,” Ren says quickly, locking eyes with me. “My little sister.”

Something passes between us. He's trying to tell me something with his eyes but I'm the world's worst candidate for that. So, to play it safe, I keep my mouth shut and gather my thoughts for a moment.

I smile up at her, feeling an odd kinship with this young woman who, even after just a few moments of knowing her, I recognize so much of myself in. This has to be the sister he told me about. The one who's on the spectrum, too.

“Well, then,” I say to her. “My turn to say Ren talks about you lots, too. And it's nice to finally put a face to the name.”

She blinks up at me, then away, on a reluctant smile.

Suddenly someone from a nearby booth wanders our way, hovering right near Ren. I see Ren's open expression shutter, his polite smile take over as he turns, shielding Ziggy behind his body.

“Sorry to bug you...” the guy says.

Why do people say sorry when they're doing something and they're going to keep doing it? Either demonstrate genuine remorse and stop doing it, or just own that you're being an invasive prick, bugging a professional hockey player for a

signature at nine thirty on a weeknight, when he's just out for a quiet bite to eat.

"What's up, man?" Ren says.

"Just wondering if—"

I lift my cane, arced over my head like a wand, and say, "*Sectumsempra!*"

"Jesus!" The guy stumbles back, knocking into a chair and running back to his booth. I give him a death glare, until he sinks out of sight.

Ziggy slaps a hand over her mouth, making her voice come out muffled. "That was awesome."

Ren peers down at me. "Little aggressive of a curse, right out of the gate, don't you think, Francesca?"

Annie shakes her head. "You don't know the half of it. When she and Tim get drunk, she calls *Imperio* and he follows her orders. It's like sick, twisted, Pottermore charades."

If she weren't 300 weeks pregnant, I'd kick her under the table. "That's private, Annabelle."

She waves me off. "Well, now that we lost the fan, why don't you join us?" Annie says to Ren.

Ziggy opens her mouth, but before she can answer, Ren squeezes her shoulder gently. "That's okay. We wouldn't want to encroach on your catch-up," he says. "And I haven't seen this one in a while. She's overdue for a big brother inquisition."

Ziggy rolls her eyes. It makes me smile. And it also makes my heart flip-flop that Ren's protecting time with his sister.

"Hang in there," I tell her. "As the baby of the family with a bossy older sibling, you have my sympathy."

"Hey." Ren shoves me gently, and I milk it, flopping over to the bench. "Shit, Frankie." He wraps his arms around my shoulder, hoists me upright. "I'm so sorry, I'm—"

His features change when he sees I'm trying not to laugh and realizes I'm fine. He narrows his eyes. "That's a dirty move."

“I thought it was pretty funny,” Ziggy says drily.

“Yes, well.” Ren straightens and gives me a half-hearted glare. “We’ll leave you to it.” Turning to my friend, he smiles much wider. “Annie, good to see you.” Back to me with a skunk face. “See you at work tomorrow, Francesca.”

I stick my tongue out at him. “Søren.”

Ziggy sucks in a breath, glancing between us. “She calls you *Søren*? Holy—”

“Come on.” Ren takes her by the elbow. “We’re leaving. Bye!”

Annie grins, watching them walk to their booth. Ren drops into the bench facing me and lands me with a piercing stare. Slowly a grin warms his face like he can’t help it.

“Oh, Frankie,” Annie says wistfully. “You are in trouble.”

I sigh as I feel myself smiling back. “Don’t I know it.”

Frankie

Playlist: “Work,” Charlotte Day Wilson

I lift my hand to knock on Ren’s door, but it swings open before I can.

My fist drops lamely to my side. Jesus Tossing Tables in the Temple, Ren’s wearing joggers. Fitted, dark gray joggers. And a white long-sleeved shirt, pushed up his forearms.

“Francesca.” He steps back, holding the door open wider. Pazza bounds in and jumps up, setting her paws on his stomach.

“Pazza, down!” I poke her butt with my cane and push the door shut behind me.

When I look back, Ren’s eyes are on me, a small smile warming his face. “I don’t mind when she jumps. It’s nice that *someone* looks happy to see me.”

I tip my head.

Ren sighs. “That was a hint. About you.”

“I don’t speak *hints*.” I walk by him, dropping my bag and leaning my cane on the wall so I can reach to take off my shoes. “Say it or don’t—ack!”

Warm, solid arms sweep me off my feet. Three long Ren-strides, then I’m set gently on the kitchen island, Ren’s hands splayed on either side of me. His mouth whispers over my cheek, his lips teasing their way to the shell of my ear. “There’s no pressure. You just have to be a *little* happy you’re here.”

“I’m very happy,” I say breathlessly. My hands slide up his arms and rest on his rounded shoulders, sending air rushing out of him. Ren’s warmth presses closer between my legs.

Gently, his hands span my waist, and draw me nearer. Soft, nuzzling kisses down my neck light a solar flare deep inside.

“Good,” he whispers. One last, firm kiss to the base of my throat, before he pulls away. “I’m happy you’re here, too.”

Carefully, he lifts me off the island and begins to step back, but I launch myself at him, wrapping my arms tight around his broad chest. “I’m sorry that I was frowning when you opened the door. It surprised me. When I’m startled, I frown. Always have. But I am happy to see you, okay?”

“Oh. I understand what you mean. I’m sorry I gave you a hard time about it.”

“That’s okay,” I say quietly.

His arms engulf my body and hold me close. Lips to my hair, my temple, he takes a long slow breath, then presses his mouth to my forehead. “You smell so good.”

A smile against his chest. “So do you.”

That makes him laugh. “Glad to hear it.”

“Spicy.” I stick my nose straight into his shirt and inhale, “Man soap.”

Another kiss warms my face. “Orchids. Night air.”

Tugging my arms tighter around him, I press my stomach into his hips and bite my lip. Ren is hard and thick inside his sweatpants, and all I can think about is the exquisite weight of him over me, inside me.

“Frankie,” he says, a pained hitch to his voice. “I, uh... The oven’s about to go off.”

Groaning, I drop my forehead to his chest. “Why are we eating again?”

“Because I want a happy Frankie, and Frankie’s happiest when she’s well-fed.”

“I’ll be very happy if you and I end up in that big Ren-sized bed.” I blink up at him, trying to smile.

He frowns down at me. “You feeling okay?”

“Yes.” I drop my arms and walk past him, grabbing my cane. “I just can’t make myself smile any more than you can start a hockey brawl.”

“Hey, now.” He walks deeper into the kitchen. “Don’t bust me for my nonviolence.”

“I would never.”

Ren stands with his back to me, stirring something that smells fan-fucking-tastic—aromatic and gamey, some kind of stew.

As my eyes drag up his body, my opinion on the injustice of life is cemented. Why do men look like such sexy beasts in loungewear? Ren’s wearing sweatpants that hug his big hockey butt and cling to the long, powerful muscles of his legs. His shirt tapers to his waist and shows off his cut biceps and shoulders. He might as well be naked—no, it’s actually *more* sensual because he *isn’t* naked. It’s the most frustratingly sexual thing I’ve seen.

Ever.

“Frankie.”

“Hm?” I blink away guiltily from staring at his ass.

“I like your butt, too.”

Lifting my cane, I poke the butt in question. “Men have been objectifying women for millennia. Simply doing my part to settle the score.”

Ren laughs and reaches an arm toward me. I slip inside it and lean against his chest, getting an up-close look at the goodness on the stove.

“Well, yum. What is it?”

He grins down at me and runs his hand along my arm, as if to make sure I’m warm. Like he doesn’t understand that he’s a human furnace, radiating comforting heat. “*Kalops*,” he says.

“*Kalops*.”

“Yep.” With a kiss to the top of my head, he taps the spoon free of liquid and sets it aside. “Swedish beef stew. My mom’s recipe.”

“Why haven’t I ever met your mom? Or your dad for that matter?”

Ren’s eyes shutter, and he glances away, turning toward a pot of boiling potatoes. “Dad’s an oncologist with too many balls in the air. Mom’s been pretty busy with Ziggy since I signed. She’s had a tough time the past few years, and Mom doesn’t like to leave her alone. Ziggy was...in a dangerous place for a while. I don’t think my mom’s gotten over that.”

“Why couldn’t she just bring Ziggy to a game?”

Ren sighs. “You met her, Frankie. Going to an obscure diner is about as much of the outside world as she can manage right now. A cacophonous space like the arena would literally make her melt down.”

I know he’s not throwing around the term “meltdown,” either. One of the things I admire about Ren is that he chooses his words wisely, that he believes in the power and responsibility of language.

People use the term “meltdown” cavalierly, but in reference to autism, it’s a very specific thing. When faced with sensory overload, meltdowns sometimes looks like an adult having a tantrum or catatonically shutting down. It’s the body and mind doing whatever they can to put the overwhelming input to a stop—an emotional surge protector, the mental switch when an overflow of information trips the mind’s circuit breaker. Meltdown is a survival instinct.

“Well, I get it,” I tell him. “You know I wear earplugs during games.” My hip twinges with discomfort and wobbles a little. Before I take a spill and make Ren crap his pants with worry, I grab one of the stools from his kitchen island and ease myself onto it. “Still, it has to bum you out that your parents don’t come.”

I do a tally of the family that I *have* observed at Ren’s games. Freya, the eldest, who came with some hunk with Caribbean blue eyes and black hair—Aiden, I think was his name. Ryder and Willa of course—they’ve come the most. Then, the older brother, Axel, who came alone and looked like he’d swallowed something sour. We didn’t meet. I just saw him

from a distance when he awkwardly hugged Ren, then took off. What about the other ones? “You have a bajillion siblings. One of them couldn’t hang with Ziggy so your parents can attend a game?”

No answer.

“Do your brothers and sisters know why your jersey number is seven?”

His whole body stiffens. I watch his throat work as he swallows. “I just like the number seven.”

“Bullshit, Zenzero. It’s for your family. Seven siblings, isn’t it?”

Who barely come to his games. In what world does being a professional hockey player make you the black sheep of the family?

As if he’s followed my train of thought, he shrugs, opening the oven and peering in. A burst of cinnamon and sugar wafts from behind the oven door, but before I can glimpse what’s in there, he snaps it shut. “The Bergmans aren’t a hockey family.”

“You’re *Swedish* for Christ’s sake. Northern Europeans invented hockey.”

“Nova Scotians, sweet pea.”

I choke on nothing particular except the absurdity of what just came out of his mouth. “I’m sorry, *what* did you just call me?”

Ren grins as he turns off the heat underneath the stew and covers it with a lid. “I need an endearment for you. I’m trying them out.”

“Um. How about Frankie? That’ll do fine.”

“Pff.” Ren closes the distance between us, standing inside my legs. Those warm, calloused hands slip around my neck and delve into my hair, massaging aching muscles. “You call me sweet things.”

I groan as he hits a tender spot. It makes my eyes fall shut. “The Italian word for a root vegetable. And a thinly veiled

reference to a brutal, pillaging Viking. Not exactly amorous.”

“They don’t have to be amorous,” he says quietly. “They just have to be mine, for you...turtledove.”

“Nope.”

“Huckleberry.”

“Hell, no.”

“Lambkin.”

I crack an eye open and give him a look. “You’re hopeless.”

“We both knew that.” He presses a long kiss to my forehead again. “You’re in my kitchen,” he whispers, tipping my head up to meet his eyes. “Pinch me.”

I grab a nice little bit of skin at his side. Just skin, because there sure as shit isn’t any fat on his torso.

“Ow! Frankie, I was being figurative.”

Oops. “Sorry. I’m a literal gal, Zenzero.” I grab his hips and pull him closer. “Let me kiss it better.”

Sliding my hands under his shirt, I shiver with the delight of my palms running over that taut warm skin, the ridges of his stomach.

A low, strangled noise rumbles out of his throat. “Frankie—”

“Shh. I won’t go too far.”

I spot the tiny red mark where I pinched. Leaning toward him, I press my lips to his stomach, then slowly trail my way to just above his hip. It feels much sexier than seems logical. I mean, it’s his stomach. I’m kissing a boo-boo.

But then his fingers slip through my hair, and helplessly, he tips his hips forward.

“Careful, you’ll poke my eye out with that thing.” I kiss his stomach again and palm the formidable outline of his erection straining those sinful sweatpants.

On a groan, he pulls away and bends over, hands on his knees as he takes long slow breaths. Just like after sprints on the ice.

It's oddly satisfying to see I've affected him that much. "You're dangerous, Francesca."

I smile down at him and pat his back. "'Bout time you figured that out."

* * *

Belly full of Ren's killer cooking, we're settled on Ren's couch watching *Sense and Sensibility*. Hugh Grant stands across the screen from Emma Thompson, both of them dressed in Austenian clothes. Hugh, as Edward Ferrars, is trying to talk to Emma Thompson, playing Elinor of course. But he's just awkward as hell. I can't think of anyone who has cornered the market on adorably awkward better than old-school Hugh Grant.

Then again, Ren's pretty good at working the adorkable angle, too.

Ren shifts slightly, sliding his fingers through mine again, and squeezing gently. Never enough to hurt my fingers. Which is good, because they're throbbing just fine on their own.

I've tried to ignore for the past two days that my normal baseline discomfort has ratcheted up to nagging pain and stiffness. I shouldn't be flaring. The biologics and low-dose corticosteroids I take generally work well. If a flare's coming, I'm going to be pissed. Unfortunately, there's really nothing I can do except wait and see. And burrow deeper into Ren's arms as I yawn.

My eyes keep drooping, not because I'm bored. The movie's *gorgeous*. It has my attention. I'm enjoying comparing what I'm reading for book club to the film and noticing the liberties they've taken. But the truth is the team's schedule gets to me. And trekking all day through various degrees of pain and discomfort, not to mention the mental work of keeping up with a demanding job and all the socializing, wears me out.

Then there's being tucked inside Ren's arms. His legs, too. It's so cozy, I can't help but feel sleepy, lounging on his massive sofa in the living room. Dove gray. Soft linen. Plush yet firm. The solid wall of his chest heats my back, and the heft of his arms around me is more soothing than my weighted blanket.

Soft lips press to my temple. "Still awake, sugar lump?"

I half-heartedly jab him with my elbow.

"That answers that," he groans.

"You know what you can call me?" I glance up as he leans over me and we brush noses.

He kisses the tip of mine. "What?"

"Grumpapotamus."

He frowns. "I don't like calling you any iteration of grumpy." Smoothing my hair back from my face, he stares down at me. "You're not grumpy. You're just..."

"Grumpy. We've discussed this. Best not to dispute it. Better to ask *why*?"

He sighs. "Okay. Why?"

I slide my hand along his thigh and watch his jaw tic. "Because I want to turn off the movie. And stop playing spoons."

A slow grin warms his face. "You don't like cuddling?"

"I mean, I do. You're a top-notch cuddler."

He dips his head in a bow. "Thank you."

"I just want more."

Ren unthreads his fingers from my hand and cradles my jaw in his grasp, his thumb scraping across my lips. "We'll get there, Frankie. I want more, too," he whispers, before his mouth sweeps softly over mine. He nudges my lips open, teases the tip of his tongue against mine.

I wrap an arm around his neck and slide my fingers through his hair. It's silky yet thick, and he sighs into my mouth when I scrape my nails along his scalp. Ren wraps an arm around my

waist while one hand cups my face, his thumb gentling the dimple in my cheek. His touch is restrained tenderness. But his kiss is pure hunger.

Sparks skitter across my skin and heat pours through my veins as a sweet ache settles between my thighs. I've made out a good bit in my day, and up until now I would have said it was a pretty fine history of tongue tangles and handsy gropes. But as our kiss deepens and my body warms under his touch, I'm confronted with a new understanding of the past. Nothing I've done prepared me. *Nothing* compares to this.

Ren pulls back and grins, his gaze not leaving my lips. I'm waiting. For hands to slide down my waist, to shuck my leggings and rub me to a rough, powerful orgasm, but instead, I feel warm fingers, calloused and rough, weaving through mine again.

A shuddering sigh leaves me. I'm painfully aroused. Perplexed and in awe that someone who's waited this long seems determined to wait longer.

Ren brings my hand to his mouth and presses hot, slow, open-mouthed kisses to my palm, then every tip of my finger. I'm practically panting, arching toward him as his mouth drifts to the tender inside of my wrist. His tongue swirls in slow, steady circles which aren't hard to imagine teasing somewhere else that longs for touch.

Exhaling slowly, Ren plants one last kiss to my wrist, then lowers it. I stare at him in obvious confusion, my hair mussed from his fingers, my lips parted.

A dry laugh jumps out of him, before he stifles it. "Come on, honey bun. Time for bed."

I gape at him as he stands and holds out a hand for me. "Are you shitting me?"

"Okay, so 'honey bun' was weak, I'll give you that."

"Not *that*."

He frowns, before recognition dissolves the crease between his brows. "Oh. *Going to bed*. No. It's late. Why wouldn't we go to bed?"

“Well, uh.” I gesture to the massive hard-on that’s at my eye level, about to bust his sweatpants. “I’d say we have a good eight inches of reason right there.”

Sighing, he tries and completely fails to adjust himself. A hard-on like that isn’t going anywhere. “It’s fine.”

“Whatever you say.” Taking his hand, I leverage myself up with a bit more effort than normal, straightening slowly and assessing him for any signs of fussing or pity. But he just watches me intently, observing, absorbing. Nothing more.

“*You* might be fine,” I tell him. “But if you thought a hangry Frankie was scary, you’re looking at a sexually frustrated Frankie. Brace yourself.”

Stepping close, Ren wraps his arms around my back and pulls me close. “I said let’s go to *bed*, Francesca, not to *sleep*.”

With a quick kiss to the tip of my nose, he spins away, going through what I already know after a few nights staying with him is his nightly routine of locking up. Double-checking the security system and locks. Making sure the outdoor motion-sensor lights are on.

Pazza snuffles awake from her position near the door where she’s been snoring. Ren sweeps up my cane, then sets it by my side.

While I stand dumbstruck, wondering how a virgin got so damn good at the game of seduction.

Ren

Playlist: “Toothpaste Kisses,” The Maccabees

After I locked up last night, we brushed teeth side by side at the twin sinks in my bathroom, Frankie scowling around toothpaste suds and the hum of her electric brush, me grinning at her reflection in the mirror. Before I had her over last night, as I cooked and tidied up and changed the sheets on the bed, I had a long think about what Frankie told me at lunch the day prior. How scary this was for her, to open up and try being together.

The only thing I have on my side, I realized, is time. Time to show her I can take it slow, build trust and comfort. Time to show her I don't find a single thing about how she ticks or what she needs to be intrusive or inconvenient or anything else the people from her past made her feel.

So, when she came over, I held her hand instead of slipping it inside those tight black leggings, much as I wanted to. I swirled my tongue over the silky skin of her wrist, rather than the silky skin between her thighs.

What I failed to anticipate was exactly *how* cranky it would make her to go slow. So, making an adjustment, I figured I'd tuck her in, touch and kiss her, give her an orgasm and put a smile on her face. After brushing teeth, I kissed her thoroughly to try to erase that pout darkening her features. It seemed to work somewhat, because she wandered out of the bathroom without any cranking, straight toward my bed, where she dropped with a groaning flop.

But by the time I showered off, used the bathroom, and came out, she was snoring softly, tucked inside the blankets, her dark hair a splash of ink against paper-white sheets.

Slipping into bed, I thanked God for my memory foam mattress that absorbs motion and didn't even shift her body in the least as I settled in next to her, before I turned off the light. And then I curled around Francesca Zeferino, kissed her cheek as I breathed her in, and fell asleep.

Her soft moan is the first thing I hear. Then birds chirping outside. I blink awake to sunlight bathing her in its glow and lift my head enough to get a good look at her. Frankie's eyes are scrunched shut, her jaw tight. I can't tell if she's dreaming or just pissed that she's partially awake.

Glancing over my shoulder, I read my clock. It's only a few minutes until my alarm goes off, so I silence it, before it starts playing banjo music and makes the little ray of sunshine in my arms likely to commit murder.

Another quiet groan leaves her. Carefully, I prop myself up on my elbow, searching her for the reason she sounds so uncomfortable.

She has arthritis, bud. Of course, she's uncomfortable, especially in the morning.

Not that Frankie needs to know, but once I realized what she was dealing with, I did my homework on RA. I know the cost of sleep. Lying still settles inflammation in your joints and stiffens them. It's unavoidable.

But why is she *hurting*? Aren't her meds supposed to manage that? A fierce surge of worry and protectiveness blasts through me. I want to wrap her up and kiss it all better. I want to take everything inside her that hurts and put it in my body. I'm big. Solid. Someone like me should have this, not someone like Frankie. It's unfair. Patently unfair.

"Think any louder," she grumbles, "and you'll wake me up."

I smile, gently sliding my hand down her arm and back up as I press a kiss to the crook of her neck. "*Morrn, morrn, min solstråle.*"

"Calling me names again."

I huff a laugh. "I just said, 'Good morning, my sunshine.'"

“Sunshine or not, nothing good about mornings.” On a long groan, she rolls slowly from her stomach to her back, her face pinched. “At least not for me.”

“Frankie, what’s wrong?”

She sighs. “Mornings are the worst. And you don’t have a heated mattress pad. Which is basically the only thing that helps.”

Relief soars through me. “Actually, I do.” Leaning past her, careful not to press on her body, I flip the switch for my heated mattress pad. It was one of my first purchases when I signed with the team to combat the muscle soreness and body aches from playing a whole new level of hockey, a good chunk of change for the promise that it’s up to temp in less than thirty seconds.

“You do?” Her big hazel eyes widen. A long happy sigh leaves her as warmth floods the surface of my bed. “You do.”

I stare down at her, taking in her face, still soft with drowsiness, a pillow wrinkle slashed across her cheek. Her hair’s uncharacteristically frizzy, and her lips look extra full, pursed in sleepiness.

“You’re staring at me,” she whispers.

I nod, bend, and press a kiss to her jaw, then her neck. Everything about her is smooth and soft, so impossibly tempting.

This is why I put on fresh sweatpants when I got into bed last night—I’m so hard, the brush of the sheets, the weight of the blanket over us is nearly excruciating. I want so badly to spread her thighs, grasp her hips, and sink inside her—to feel Frankie’s body tight around mine, to move with her and hear her cry out, but now’s not the time. Not yet.

You say that a lot, Bergman. Not now. Not yet.

Tell me about it. Or rather, tell it to my tortured morning wood.

“I’ll be back,” I whisper against her neck.

Throwing off the sheets, I jump out of bed and pull on a shirt. Another noise coming from Frankie makes me spin around, shirt halfway down my chest. “What is it?”

She frowns at me. “I wouldn’t have minded my coffee delivered by a shirtless Søren, that’s all I’m saying.”

I tug down my shirt the rest of the way. “I’m feeling rather objectified right now, Francesca. Now, I planned on bringing a breakfast snack and some coffee. Need anything else?”

She shakes her head. “Besides your nakedness? Nope.”

Pazza’s been lying dutifully at the foot of the bed but she bolts upright when I open the bedroom door. There’s a happiness to the pound of her paws, her nails clattering on the hardwood floors, that makes me smile. I pull open the sliding door, watch her run across the deck, down the steps and to the sand, where she promptly pees on the row of fescue that partially shields my property from the shore. She runs a bit farther off, sprinting across the hard sand, terrorizing a seagull.

When I whistle, she comes running back up the deck, pausing long enough for me to hose down her legs and towel her off.

“Breakfast, pup.”

She jogs over to her bowl of food that Frankie packed, while I make Frankie’s coffee how I know she likes and warm two of the cinnamon rolls that I baked.

It’s domestic. And peaceful. Letting out the dog, making coffees while Frankie rests in bed and has some time to get comfortable for her day.

Don’t get ahead of yourself. She said she’s nervous to do this. She said she’ll try. That’s it.

Worry tightens my stomach. While I value Frankie’s honesty, her forthright communication style that seems to go hand in hand with autism, being so keenly aware of her apprehension about a relationship is nerve-wracking. I’m mildly terrified Frankie’s going to break my heart before she even realizes it’s hers to shatter.

Pazza whines up at me and cocks her head. If dogs smile, this one just did.

Sweeping up the tray of goods, I stroll down the hall, shoulder open the door, and nearly drop everything. Frankie's sitting up in bed in nothing but one of my V-neck undershirts. On me, it's snug, fitted enough to be invisible beneath the tailored dress shirts I have to wear before and after every game. But on Frankie, it drapes.

Torturously.

The "V" neckline knifes down her chest, exposing her collarbones and the line of her sternum, the shadow curving between her full breasts. Dark nipples poke sharply against the fabric. Staring at them, my mouth waters.

"See?" she says, clearly fishing for some positive feedback. "Look at me. Vertical." With a few rotations of her wrists, she sweeps up her arms, like an actress prepared to receive applause. "I even got up and peed. Splashed my face off. Changed into something comfy. Aren't you proud?"

I gulp.

She grins, seeing where my eyes have snagged. "Thought you might like that."

"'Like' is an interesting choice of word." I cross the room, set the tray between us on the bed, and hand Frankie her coffee.

After taking a long sip, she sighs contentedly.

"Hardly seems fair," I say, trying to keep my eyes on the cinnamon roll I'm cutting into quarters but largely finding my gaze drawn over and over to her breasts. "I wouldn't look nearly as good in one of your shirts."

She smiles. "The heating pad helps my joints, but it makes me sweat like a prostitute in church. None of my shirts felt good when I put them on. Too scratchy. Too hot. I just needed something big and soft and nice smelling."

I pop a bite of cinnamon roll in my mouth and graze the back of my hand against her nipple, pebbled sharply through the material. "Glad you found one."

“Hope you don’t mind,” she says. A subtle shiver rolls through her as my finger dips between the valley of her breasts and teases the other nipple just the same way. “I rifled through your drawers and found it.”

My head snaps up. “You went through my drawers?”

“Mhm,” she says before taking a bite of cinnamon bun and chewing. “Who knew Søren Bergman color-codes his underwear, socks, shirts—”

I kiss her, if for no other reason than to stop her teasing. And while I know nobody likes morning breath, now we both taste like cinnamon and coffee.

When I pull away, her eyes are hazy, and she has icing on her lip. I lick it away and feel her breath hitch. “I like things tidy,” I say quietly. “Helps me find them more easily.”

Her smile is slow but warm, and when she lifts a hand and brushes the hair off my forehead, I want to drop to my knees.

“Hi,” she whispers.

“Hi,” I whisper against her lips. I kiss her again, then sit back and lean against the headboard, like her. We eat in quiet, but it’s comfortable. Easy and peaceful.

Until Frankie finishes her cinnamon roll and licks the tips of her fingers. Not that I’ve been anything less than hard for the past twelve hours, thanks to Frankie’s proximity, but now my cock throbs as a furious ache builds in my groin.

Frankie *tsks* and sets down her coffee. “Can’t have that, Zenzero.”

I glance up from my coffee. “Can’t have wha—Jesus!”

Her hand slides over my joggers, right between my legs, and I nearly scald us, violently sloshing my coffee as I throw it down on the nightstand. I want to stop her, but if I do, I’m pretty sure I’ll keel over from the blood rushing to every inch of me that Frankie’s palming with expert strokes.

“F-Frankie, you don’t have to—”

“Søren Bergman, unless you’re about to go into cardiac arrest or the house is on fire, shut up and let me make you come.”

I grunt as she releases me and then slides her hand beneath the elastic of my sweats. Turning toward her, I set the tray off the bed, and drag Frankie down, flat on the mattress. My mouth clamps over her nipple, as I suck hard through the cotton of her T-shirt. With new wetness, her nipple’s evident, a dark berry color I want to lick and bite and tease for hours. Cupping her full breasts, I groan appreciatively.

When I drag my teeth gently over one wet, stiff peak, her fingers delve into my hair. She gasps and arches into me. “Holy shit, Ren.”

Working her nipple with my mouth, I slip my hand down her stomach and curve it over the wet heat seeping through her panties. Just a faint slide of my finger and her thighs clamp on my touch.

“Oh. Don’t stop doing that,” she pants. Her fingers tighten in my hair, holding me close. Her hips tilt upward.

I grin in satisfaction, until I feel her palm gliding over my boxer briefs, her grip hugging the length of me, up and down. “Frankie.”

It’s all I can say, all I can see and feel. Her lips press to my hair as I suck and tease her nipples, as I gently rub her through her panties, quick, tight circles. Frankie’s hand works me, sure and fast, sending dizzying heat and a furious ache for release surging down my spine. The need to thrust, to drive and pound takes over. I press my hips harder into her grip, feeling the warning of release building, hot and powerful.

“Ren,” she whispers.

I lift my head long enough to meet her lips, to kiss her as she cries against my mouth and comes in soft, beautiful waves against my hand.

I want to savor it—the hazy satisfaction in her eyes, the way she smiles wider than I’ve ever seen her—but her hand is temptation itself, and I’m scrambling at the edge.

Holding my eyes, she bites my lip, dragging it between her teeth. The pain of it trips the wire that sends me soaring. On a grunt of pure bliss, I come, while Frankie's hand works me in gentle rubs that stretch out my orgasm.

After a long, silent moment, I flop back on the bed and pull her carefully with me, holding her head to my chest but distanced from the hot spill all over my stomach. With one firm kiss to the top of her hair, I sigh heavily.

"Ren?" she says quietly.

I peer down at her. "Yes?"

"I'm feeling a little worried."

I grasp her chin, tilting her head so she'll look at me. "Why?" Her face is tight, anxiety clear in her features. "What is it?"

She reaches and kisses me. "Because if it's that great when our clothes are on, what the hell's going to happen when they all come off?"

Searching her eyes, I try to see why the promise of something so good scares her so much. But I come up short. There's no answer, other than the fact that all of this is new and unnerving for Frankie, as it is—albeit, in different ways—for me. There's nothing to be done or dismissed about that. Just space to be made. Time and patience.

With a kiss to her forehead, I rest my head on hers, allowing quiet to be answer enough.

For now.

Frankie

Playlist: “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” Leanne & Naara

At some point recently, my life became an Austen novel. As if the book itself might be capable of some kind of sexually repressing black magic, I’m tempted to throw *Sense and Sensibility* out the window and hope it sends Ren bounding into my room to make an honest woman out of me.

It’s been beautiful, glorious, dizzying torture. Days of cuddling and finger tangling and making out and dry humping and Holy Saint Francis of Assisi and His Furry Animal Friends, I need Ren to use that big old stick God gave him and score with me already.

I bypass two of the guys in the hallway, breezing into the training room. I need to find Ren, because it’s four o’clock. Which is when my plan of action kicks in.

I’m not the world’s best at lying on the spot, but I am damn good at premeditated subterfuge. In precisely three minutes my stomach will start to hurt. I’ll let Ren know I’m going home for the night, that I’ll miss the game.

Darlene’s in on my plan and made sure one of the PR interns is prepared to at least keep up with Twitter and Instagram during the game, so we’re covered on that front. It’ll only be the second game I’ve ever missed. The first I missed was because I got a horrible chest cold—thank you very much immunosuppressant medications—and finally had to admit defeat, laid up on the couch and yelling hoarsely at the TV while Pazza’s head swiveled furiously between the hockey game and me.

“Seen Ren?” I ask Lin.

He shakes his head as John tapes his ankle for him.

“Schar? Have you seen Bergman?”

Kris glances up from heel stretches. “Negative, Frankie.”

Muttering under my breath, I storm out of the training room and roam the halls, my ears attuned, hoping I catch the warm, low tenor of Ren’s voice.

I’m supposed to be at Ren’s childhood home in exactly one hour, and with the bitch that is LA traffic, I want to leave plenty of time for me to get there and for his parents to make it to the arena. Because Ren Bergman was not playing another professional game without his parents being there, complex family dynamics or not. Plus, it gave me a perfect opportunity to hang out with Ziggy. He talks to her on the phone every day, and a few days ago—sue me—I eavesdropped. Ren caught me, those cat eyes crinkling as he grinned, and the scary connection between that expression and my libido was reinforced, because I nearly came on the spot. “*Want to say hi, Francesca?*” he said.

I abhor phone calls, but I have some pride. I took that phone from him, and don’t ya know, chatting with Ziggy was weirdly okay. After that, I felt like we had enough foundation for me to act on my idea.

Lost in thought, I slam right into a familiar chest. Warm, spicy, solid. I have to fist my free hand not to grab him by the shirt and kiss him.

“Francesca.”

I smack his stomach. “That’s Frankie to you, Zenzero.”

“Whatever you say, ladybird.”

My eyes roll so hard it hurts. “Hopeless.”

Gently, Ren grasps my arm and steers us to the side of the hallway as Andy and Tyler walk by. I usually don’t sense when people are coming or going around me if my focus is otherwise occupied. I’m that person who’ll stand in the middle of the hallway, gabbing, oblivious to blocking your way.

“Everything okay?” Ren asks quietly.

Clearing my throat, I set my hand on my stomach. “Actually, no.”

The look of sheer panic that immediately tightens his face makes sympathy rush through me. I bring my hand to his chest, an intuitive gesture of reassurance, but then I pull it back when I remember where we are. “I’m okay overall, but my stomach—it’s *no bueno*.”

He tips his head. “Your stomach? Did you eat something bad? Do you have a virus?”

“Ren. Relax.” The fact is that twinging cramps have been bugging me since last night, sharp and persistent. I’ve also been an achy, creaky mess for the past week, too. I’m due to start my period, so it’s not entirely surprising. It makes it much less difficult to feign discomfort. Because I *am* uncomfortable, just nothing that would normally keep me from working. When you live with chronic pain, you get used to living through it. You just do life, until you collapse. Then you pick yourself up, change around the meds, and try again.

“It’s...lady stuff,” I tell him.

He visibly relaxes. “Oh. Okay. You know, I’m not delicate, Frankie. You can say you have cramps and you’re getting your period.”

I smile at Ren, delighted by his attitude and somewhat surprised. It’s a natural bodily function. I don’t see why we have to wrap it up in euphemisms. But long ago, I learned that’s what’s expected, especially from men. It’s nice to know that with him, I don’t have to play that game.

“Okay. Yeah. I have horrible cramps, so bad that I’m nauseous. I’m heading home.” Holding his eyes for a brief moment, I slip my fingers inside his, careful that it’s hidden from anyone’s view in the hallway. “Good luck tonight. Hat trick or bust, Bergman.”

He grins. “As always, I can only promise my best.”

Isn’t that true. It’s all anyone can do. And so few of us are comfortable admitting that. When I release his hand and start to turn away, Ren calls my name.

“Yes?”

Stepping closer, he drops his voice. “Can I come over tonight?”

“I mean...like I said, I might be out of commission.”

“I know that. I just want to stay with you.”

My heart does a pirouette inside my chest. “Oh. Well, sure. But let’s be real. My bed sucks compared to yours. How about I’ll meet you at your place after the game?”

Ren opens his mouth to speak, pauses, and smiles politely at one of the team coordinators as she passes. When she’s gone, his eyes return to me. “Just go there now. Use the soaker tub in my room, relax. Okay?”

“Okay.” We hold eyes, and Ren’s jaw tics. I know he wants to hug. Kiss. He has this habit of swaying me in his arms when we hug that’s not only dreamy but soothing. “Bye,” I whisper.

He squeezes my hand, then releases it. And I walk away with a sinking feeling that grows with each step. I don’t like leaving him without kissing him goodbye.

Who the hell are you?

Good question. Something’s shifting inside me, a mere week into this little experiment. One in which I’m prying open the ironclad doors of my heart and letting someone in. Something inside me doesn’t just want to creak those doors open oh-so-slightly. It wants to fling them wide open in welcome. It wants to trust love and tell the universe, do your worst.

Because there’s no arguing, eventually the universe will.

* * *

Okay. So, meeting Ren’s parents in person was a shit ton more stressful than I thought. I felt like some sneaky teenager who’d almost been caught making out in the basement. They don’t

know I've savored their son's breathtaking body with desire guiding my hands. They don't know that he makes his mother's cinnamon roll recipe for me and kisses my forehead every morning when he hands me my coffee. They don't know that I've laced profanity with his name so many times as he made me come apart.

And if I have my druthers, they never will.

I also felt a tad awkward, first because I snuck Ziggy's number from Ren's phone, texted her and asked her if she was okay with my idea—which I simply presented as an opportunity to get her parents out of her hair and talk, girl-to-girl. While the idea was born out of wanting to get Ren's parents to a damn game already, fact is, I *do* want to be a friend to Ziggy, to give her some encouragement I could have used when I was first diagnosed. I'm reaching out not only because of this heart-spinning feeling I have for Ren, but also out of genuine concern for Ziggy and a wish to know her better.

So, then came calling Mrs. Bergman, explaining I was a good friend of Ren's who knew Ziggy and wanted to offer to hang out with her as another woman on the spectrum, have a heart-to-heart. I told her Ren wasn't in on this—that I wanted to surprise him with their presence. After which Mrs. Bergman sounded pretty wary. I asked her to use Willa and Ryder as a character reference and call me back.

She called me not even ten minutes later, sounding a lot nicer than before.

See, Willa and I *are* friends. So there.

When I got to Ren's beautiful childhood home—sprawling calm, a sea of creamy white walls and natural wood, it was surreal to put a face to his mother's voice, to see Ren's eyes and cheekbones in her features. Then greeting his dad with that booming voice and wide smile that I knew instantly he'd given Ren, along with his wavy, copper-penny hair, and broad, powerful build. I was so nervous, my palms were slick with sweat, and my heart was banging against my ribs.

But once they left, most of my anxiety left with them, leaving just enough nervousness about doing right by Ziggy as I try to

reach out to her.

She stares at the TV, watching the hockey game. The second I glance at the screen, I can pinpoint Ren. Taller than everyone, swooping around the goal. A lick of russet curling around his helmet.

“One day I want to be able to go,” she says quietly. “I can tell he’s sad I never come. That I make it pretty much impossible for Mom and Dad to go.”

I don’t say anything right away. I don’t know all of what happened, except that Ren said Ziggy was in a dangerous place at some point. Seems best to simply give her space to talk and process, especially when I don’t know the particulars.

I don’t touch Ziggy, either, or even sit terribly close. I can tell she doesn’t like it. Since the moment I walked in, she’s kept at least six feet between us. Her parents didn’t hug her goodbye, either. Just kissed her forehead and left.

So, instead, I’m curled two spots away in a corner of a sofa that’s so capacious, it makes Ren’s look like a pin cushion. Nestled under blankets, I stare at the TV for the most part, crunching on popcorn and cursing these cramps.

“What do you feel keeps you from going?” I finally ask her.

She laughs emptily. “All of it. The crowds. The noise. The lights. Even the drive there. Traffic makes me claustrophobic. I hate just *sitting* there. I jumped out of the car and walked the final quarter mile the last time we were stuck in gridlock on the 405. Mom freaked.”

That makes me snort a laugh. “Eh. I don’t blame you.”

Ziggy glances my way, her sharp green eyes that I now recognize are twins of Ryder’s, spearing me. “How do you do it?” she asks.

I raise my eyebrows. *I* told Mrs. Bergman I’m on the spectrum. But I haven’t told Ziggy. Because *she* hasn’t told *me*. And I don’t want to pressure her.

“Do what?”

“You’re autistic,” she says matter-of-factly. “Like me.”

“Did Ren tell you?”

She nods. “Just like he told you about me.”

Touché.

Staring at her hands, she mutters, “He said you’re someone I could talk to if I wanted.”

“Well,” I say on a groan, as I shift on the couch and try to buy myself some comfort. “He’s right. I am. So, do you?”

Ziggy glances up, staring at the TV again. “I don’t know. Sometimes I think so. Other times, I don’t think I want to know.”

“Don’t want to know what?”

She shrugs. “The hard parts. The stuff that doesn’t get better. The past few years have sucked. I can’t imagine anticipating anything more challenging than this.”

Setting the bowl of popcorn between us, I peer at her. She’s rail thin. Curled up into herself. If she’s anything like I was at that age, she doesn’t eat regularly, and she’s chronically under-slept and anxious. Which has me deeply curious about what kind of support she’s getting. “Are you in therapy?”

“Talk therapy,” she says flatly. “I find it occasionally helpful. Mostly exhausting.”

“Other than talk therapy, are you in occupational therapy? Have you learned about sensory diets?”

She scrunches her nose. “Occupational therapy, no. But the guy mentioned it in talk therapy, maybe? I don’t remember. I zone out a lot when I go. I do it to please Mom and Dad. Because they’re worried about me.”

“Well, maybe he’s working you toward OT. That’s where you learn about how to take care of the stuff that’s hard to explain and draining to talk about. For example, sensory diets. Just like a dietician helps you figure out what your nutritional needs are, sensory diets are tailored for each individual person to keep your brain and body balanced and as peaceful as possible, at least until the outside world throws it all up in the air.”

Ziggy turns so that she's angled slightly toward me. "What do you mean?"

I lift my fidget necklace. "I'm a fidgeter, always have been. My mom said she could have sworn I was going to get an ADHD diagnosis when she took me for my comprehensive eval. But here we are. I'm autistic. And I need sensory input to feel settled and calm. So, I sit on a big exercise ball—that way I can bounce and swivel and sway. I have a necklace that people don't think twice about me playing with, and with it I can stim when I need to, without it drawing particular attention to me. I do yoga every morning and swim to burn energy, any activity that doesn't hurt my joints."

I flip the hem of my dress slacks. "French seams. No itchiness. Tag-less shirts." I drum my fingers, wracking my brain. "What else... Oh, yeah. I usually wind down the day under a weighted blanket and my dog on top. But I'm sensory *seeking*, so maybe you wouldn't like that. You seem sensory—"

"Avoidant," she finishes, staring down at her ripped-up cuticles, and biting a nail. "Yes and no. It just needs to not catch me off guard, but I like hugs. From the right people. At the right time. I'm not a robot."

"I didn't say you were. But I understand feeling defensive about it. It's a stereotype of autistics, that we're these cold, emotionless shells, which isn't true. We just feel differently. And often the case is that we actually feel *so* much, we have to compartmentalize it, funnel it into coping mechanisms that make it manageable."

She sucks in a shaky breath. "You're the first person who gets that."

I try to sift through her meaning, which isn't easy for me. I have a hunch she's not just referring to fidget necklaces or how much talk therapy sucks when you're tired of talking. I have a growing suspicion no one has really touched Ziggy since she had her breakdown and got diagnosed. I mean, I saw Ren hold her shoulder, gently touch her back, but has someone hugged her? Held her? Helped her contextualize these big, overwhelming, scary feelings and challenges, so she knows

that they don't have to consume her, that they don't make her inhuman or broken, but that instead they prove her resilience, her capacity to heal and grow?

Loving touch reminds us of our humanity. Most everyone needs it, in some shape or form or timeframe. Sometimes, all we have to do is ask.

“When's the last time someone hugged you, Ziggy?”

A tear slips down her cheek. Shit. I made Ren's baby sister cry. He's going to disown me and stop giving me great orgasms and never again make me Swedish food—

Chill, Francesca. Focus on Ziggy.

Another tear spills over, and she blinks away, staring at her hands in her lap.

“Ziggy,” I ask her quietly, “would it be okay if *I* hugged you right now?”

A small, eternal silence hangs in the room as tears spill faster and faster down her cheeks. I witness the weight of her grief, which I entirely recognize, and it clutches my chest in memory, twists my heart.

Ziggy wipes her nose with her sleeve, then nods, two slow dips of her chin.

Carefully, I set the popcorn aside and scoot closer to her on the couch, holding my arms open. I let Ziggy come to me. Because I know, from the way her brother opens his arms and lets me choose how and when I fall into them, what a world of difference it makes when someone doesn't just tolerate you for where you are but *embraces* you for it.

Slowly, like a sapling cut and felled, she drops toward me, until her forehead lands on my shoulder, her cheeks wet with tears. The sobs start quietly. But they don't stay that way. They build, a wave of buried emotion, finally surfacing. Pain. Confusion. Hopelessness. I feel them seeping out of her. I feel their echoes in my memory. Tears stain my cheeks as I carefully wrap an arm around her, rubbing her back in steady figure eights.

“You’re going to be okay, Ziggy. And while it might not be as soon as you’d like, you’re going to figure this out. You’re going to be happy again one day, I promise.”

Her sobs grow sharper, and suddenly she clutches her arms fiercely around me, a vise grip of bird bones and tenacity. “God, I hope so.”

“You will,” I whisper, laying my cheek to the top of her head. “I promise. And I don’t say that lightly. I *promise*, okay?”

I sway her in my arms, until her cries grow quiet. As I gently release her, she sits up, palming her eyes, and gives me a tentative, watery smile.

Handing her the box of tissues, I join her in blowing noses and wiping eyes. Our eyes puffy from tears, we both seem lighter, steadier, and between us feels like clarity to the air after an earth-shaking storm. I reach for my bag and pull out my laptop.

“What are you doing?” Ziggy asks quietly.

I smile as I flip up the screen and power it on. “You and I are getting on my favorite sites for sensory doodads and comfy clothes. My kind of shopping—straight from the couch. Sound good?”

Her face brightens. Carefully, she scoots across the couch until she’s nestled close. When Ziggy glances at me, her bright green eyes glitter with something I haven’t seen in them before. Something small and fragile, but unquestionably *there*.

Hope.

Frankie

Playlist: “Close To You,” Rihanna

“Love nugget?”

Ren’s voice reverberates through the house, echoing in his bathroom, where I’m soaking in a tub that was clearly made for a giant. A gentle, ginger giant who I’ve missed unreasonably much all evening.

His parents got back to their house first but said Ren was on his way to have a quick visit with Ziggy, so I bolted, picked up Pazza from my place, and drew myself a bubble bath.

“In here, stud muffin,” I call.

His laugh is low and quiet, but it still carries through the house. Long, solid strides grow louder, until the bathroom door creaks open and dress shoes clack on the room’s polished tiles.

“Stud muffin,” he says, a hand over his eyes. “I can get down with that.”

Shifting in the water, I make sure the essential bits are covered in bubbles. I’m suddenly, bizarrely self-conscious. Maybe it’s because I feel shaky, a little unsure. Maybe Ren will be glad about what I did with Ziggy and his parents.

And maybe not.

“My virtue is preserved,” I tell him. “You may uncover your eyes.”

Dropping his hand, Ren smiles at me, sending air rushing from my lungs.

I haven’t seen this smile before. It’s deeper. More complex. That’s the only way I can think to describe it. He drops gently

onto the edge of the tub and plays with a strand of my hair that came loose from the messy bun piled on my head.

“Hi.” I glance up at him, fighting the nervous urge to hold my breath and vanish underwater.

He’s just so beautiful to me. And yes, in part, that’s because Ren is objectively handsome, but there’s much more to it. There’s the kindness in his eyes, the readiness of his smile, yet the feeling that some smiles of his are special, some are just for me.

His dress shirt’s a crisp white, which somehow works against his fair skin and the faintest whisper of freckles along his chest and neck. His wavy hair’s disheveled from a quick post-game shower, his beard quickly combed but in need of a real trim, which it won’t get, of course, until after playoffs.

I feel an odd tightening in my stomach, a need to throw myself into his arms, as he smiles over at me in his suit and loosened tie, with nothing between him and my nakedness but a tub of water and rapidly dissolving bubbles.

“Only two goals tonight, Mr. Bergman.” I *tsk* in mock disapproval. “I expected better.”

“Apologies,” he says drily. “Frankie.” Releasing my hair, Ren slips his hand behind my neck, massaging gently. “Thank you for what you did tonight.”

“Oh... Um. Sure.”

I blush in embarrassment. I want to dissolve. Let the lukewarm water take me.

I’ve never handled thanks well. It makes me feel put on the spot, topped off with a splash of imposter syndrome. Wouldn’t anyone do what I did when the opportunity presented itself? Being thanked for doing the decent thing feels weird.

As if he’s read my mind, Ren shakes his head slowly. Leaning in, he kisses me with absolute tenderness, as his thumb slides maddeningly along my neck.

When he pulls away, his eyes are on my mouth. He leans in and steals one more kiss before straightening. “I’ve been told

in no uncertain terms that you're to come to Ziggy's family birthday party, and if I don't bring you, I'm not welcome."

A genuine laugh jumps out of me. "She's a good one, Ren."

He nods, his face sobering. His hand moves down my neck to my shoulder, his fingers tracing droplets of water slipping down my skin. "Yeah, she is."

"She'll be okay. We talked about a lot tonight. I just don't think your parents—no offense to them—or the counselor are coming at it the best way. They're still approaching her therapy from her breaking point. But the root of Ziggy's breakdown wasn't depression or anxiety. Those were her symptoms. She got depressed and anxious because she was burned out. Now what needs to happen is being *proactive*, not reactive."

Ren tips his head. "Go on."

"Basically, she needs help learning her sensory thresholds, her needs for comfort, routine, social environments. She needs an eating schedule—I shit you not, I had one for a while in high school because I forgot so often—and she needs to be homeschooled if she wants, just to get a break from people until her battery is recharged.

"Oh, and we ordered her some clothes that will fit her, too." I raise my eyebrows. "Honestly, she's six feet tall, with this long, pretty body, and she was wearing boy clothes. I mean, I asked her what she wanted to wear—didn't want to make any assumptions—and she said the reason she wore her brothers' hand-me-downs was because they were the only comfortable clothing she could find, but she wants to dress differently. She just didn't think she could feel comfy and look how she wanted. I reassured her that both were possible, as I am evidence."

Ren laughs, and his eyes dance. "You always look beautiful, Frankie."

"Thank you. So, we ordered some size small, extra-long leggings from this place that makes them so soft, with no itchy seams. A bunch of tag-less long- and short-sleeved, one

hundred percent cotton tops. Soft hoodies, a fidget necklace like mine, and she also wanted to try some stim—*mmp*h!”

His lips are on me again, but this time his hands are clasping my face, his tongue sweeping against mine, his mouth hungry.

“I cannot express how grateful I am to you,” he whispers against my lips. “And I want to hear a lot more tomorrow. But I don’t want to talk about my baby sister anymore, not tonight. You’re naked, in my tub, and if I don’t touch you *now*, I’m going to lose my mind.”

Heat rushes through me. My breasts tighten, and a fierce ache builds between my legs. “Then touch me.”

Ren keeps kissing me, but his hands are busy, furiously working the sleeves of his dress shirt open, then cuffed up his arms, before his hand dives in the water and finds my clit like a homing beacon.

“Jesus, Ren.” I lift a hand from the water to brace myself on the tub’s ledge as he kisses me, his mouth patient but urging.

Open. More. Harder.

I scrape his lip between my teeth, flick my tongue teasingly and earn his quiet growl. His fingers slide over me steadily, whispering touch that works me to a frenzied, desperate need. Drifting his mouth down my jaw, to the delicate space behind my ear, he swipes his tongue across my skin and blows cool air.

A shiver wracks me. “Ren,” I whisper.

“Hm?”

“I want—” I’m cut off, gasping as he curls one finger inside me and rubs my G-spot with the kind of dedicated accuracy that betrays his profession. Target. Aim. Score.

My first wave of release blindsides me, jarring me up in the water. I grip the tub’s edge so hard my hand aches, but Ren doesn’t stop.

“Another,” he whispers, followed by a hot, tangling kiss as teeth and tongue battle for control.

“I c-can’t.” I’ve never orgasmed back to back. *Multiples*. When they were first just hookup buddies, Lorena condescendingly bragged about Mia giving multiples *alllll* the time. While Annie and I pouted in the corner that the doofuses we’d been stuck with couldn’t seem to string a decent orgasm together for us if their lives depended on it.

Well, not until Tim, for Annie.

Not until Ren, for me, apparently—

“Oh, *God*,” I yell.

Ren swipes away the last of the bubbles covering my breasts and drags his tongue over each pebbled tip. Time becomes fuzzy. Seconds become minutes stacked on minutes without the slightest sense of their passing. If it takes forever, I have no clue, and Ren doesn’t seem to care. I’m blissfully mindless of the construct of time, and Ren’s unfazed by the steady work of his touch, each hungry kiss grounding me to the present, cherishing me.

He’s doing something different with his fingers, and it is magic.

“I’m gonna co—” I cry out and turn toward him, throwing my arm around his neck because I can’t do this alone. I can’t feel this much as I soar over the edge from new heights. Weightless, breathless, satisfied.

“Beautiful,” he mutters, warm and soft against my neck. “So beautiful.” Gentle kisses chase gentler words.

My tongue’s thick, my body heavy and loose. Who needs pot when you have orgasms? “*Urgubuh*,” I mutter.

He smooths away hair that’s stuck to my face. “Is that right?”

“Sorcery,” I wheeze, chest heaving as I drop back into the water.

Ren laughs while he stands and reaches for a towel from the towel warmer. As soon as I see that hot fluffy cotton waiting for me, I realize my lips must be nearly blue. I’m shivering.

Holding the towel, Ren averts his gaze as I step out of the tub, into the warmth waiting in his arms. Wrapping my body tight

in the towel, he smiles down at me. “Afraid I’m capable of no such wizardry, Francesca. Just good old-fashioned muggle labor.”

I point to the legitimate situation in his pants. “Care to explain the wand, then?”

He rolls his eyes. “Honestly. That’s the best you can come up with?”

“Nine to fourteen inches!” I say indignantly. Ren bends, then begins gently drying my legs and feet with another warm towel. “That’s impressive length. If you read *Harry Potter* with any kind of dedication, you’d know me calling your penis a wand is the world’s best compliment to a man.”

He lifts an eyebrow from his crouched place at my feet, looking thoroughly unimpressed. But when I open my mouth to argue the point, he’s somehow already upright, kissing me before I can say another word.

“Did you and Ziggy eat?” he asks, bending to scoop up his suit jacket and my pile of discarded clothes. I absolutely stare at his butt.

“Yep. We ordered pizza—*owww*.” A hard, painful cramp clenches my belly, followed by the familiar warmth of blood trickling down my thigh. “Fucking hell.”

Ren’s hands are on my shoulders, his head bent, trying to meet my eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Ren freezes as he notices the blood. He blanches. “Oh, God, Frankie. Did I hurt you?”

“No, Ren! You didn’t do anything wrong.” I sigh. Thank God for bathwater. Because talk about a close call. “It’s my fucking womanly curse.”

His entire body relaxes. Relief washes over his face and he rubs my arms gently. “I’m sorry you’re hurting. Do you have stuff here? Do you need me to run out?”

I stare up at him, feeling a wave of irrational emotion pricking my eyes. “I forgot. I picked up Pazza, and I was in a rush...”

To get here as soon as possible and be naked in the tub when you came home, hoping I could seduce you.

Yeah. I keep that thought to myself.

He squeezes my shoulders gently. “What brand?”

I blink at him. Guys aren’t supposed to be *this* chill about periods, are they? Especially after such a narrow escape. But Ren’s not just any guy, is he?

“Um,” I say unhelpfully.

“Here.” He gently sweeps me up in his arms, carrying me into his room.

“Ren!” I squeak as he hoists me higher in his arms. “It’s a period, not consumption.”

“I know, it’s just easier. Because I know you’re going to fight me about—”

“Not in your bed. I’ll make your mattress look like a crime scene!”

Flipping back the sheet, Ren lays me down and strides over to a closet where he quickly retrieves two thick beach towels. With military precision, he folds them crisply in half, stacks them on top of each other, and shoves them under me, wrapped like a burrito in my bath towel.

Retrieving my phone and water bottle from the other side of the room, then extracting one of his undershirts from the dresser, Ren sets everything next to me on the bed.

“There,” he says.

I scowl up at him. He smiles.

Patting his pockets, Ren checks for his wallet and phone, pulls out his keys. With one last kiss to my cheek, he turns away and strolls out of the room, looking all sexy hockey player in his after-game suit.

“Just text me brand and size. And get comfy!” he yells from the hallway. “You’re allowed out to grab a bag of root beer gummies, but I swear if you’re anywhere other than in my bed when I get back, Francesca, you’ll be in big trouble.”

I want to tell him where he can shove his high-handed directives, but don't you know, instead I find myself silently, happily snuggled in his bed, a sunshine grin warming my face.

* * *

Not that I'm surprised by my shit luck, but I *would* get my period right when it seemed like Ren was going to quit torturing me and finally let me get under him. Another week—because my periods are assholes—of cruel celibacy. Okay, maybe not *celibacy*. He made me come last night just from teasing my nipples while doing this thing with a vibrator—

“Frankie?”

I jerk from my seat in the car. “Huh?”

Ren's mouth tips in a grin but his eyes stay pinned on the road. “You didn't hear a word I just said, did you?”

“Nope. Sorry.” I take a slow, calming breath. “Didn't mean to zone out. I was daydreaming.”

He squeezes my leg gently. “You don't need to be sorry. I didn't know your thoughts were elsewhere.”

“‘Elsewhere’ makes me sound very philosophical, when really I was just picturing new variations on mutual non-penetrative pleasure, and how much I really want you to bend me over the sofa, then—”

“Frankie.” Ren's voice is strangled. “I'm going to be walking into practice with a...” He gestures to his groin and a pronounced erection.

“I'm sorry.” I bang my head on the headrest and sigh. “I'm just frustrated. I hate periods.”

“I said, I didn't—”

“No.” I lift a silencing hand. “Absolutely not. No way were you losing your V-card to me while I'm riding the crimson

tide. Nooooope.”

“It’s not like I’ll be swapping tales with the guys over a pint. It’ll be private to you and me. I don’t care.”

“*I care.*”

Ren sighs. “Clearly. And here we are—you, a fresh level of ornery, and me, so freaking hard I’ll be lucky if I can skate straight.”

“Aw. Dumpling. Are we having our first fight?”

Before he can sass me back, a sports car cuts us off, exploiting the safe following distance Ren’s afforded the car in front of us.

Ren has to hit the brakes hard. His hand instinctively spans my chest, holding me back as his eyes fly to the rearview mirror, rightfully anticipating a possible rear-end collision, which we somehow avoid.

Adrenaline pounds through my body. I exhale in relief, and glance down at Ren’s arm, still protectively stretched across me. Tears blur my vision. I’m holding my breath. It flashes through my mind that if I’d been with my family, with my friends from college, it would have been a whole smothering to-do. Worries about whiplash. Demands for X-rays.

Please don’t do it. Please don’t—

Abruptly, Ren’s arm leaves my body and with a slam of his fist, he nails the horn. Jabbing a bunch of buttons until his window lowers, Ren yells at the douchebag Boxster in front of us, “*Swag-bellied miscreant!*”

I bite my cheek. Bringing my hand to the base of Ren’s neck, I slip my fingers through the shaggy upturn of his thick hair, hoping to soothe him a little.

Ren jerks a sharp glance at me. “Are you okay?”

I nod.

“Nothing hurts?” he presses.

I shake my head. And wait with bated breath for what comes next.

“Okay.” He exhales heavily, scrubbing his face. Turning, he cups my cheeks and kisses me. His hands start traveling my body, like he doesn’t believe me. “You sure nothing hurts?”

“I’m okay, Ren.” Gently, I scrape my nails through the scruff of his beard and kiss him back. “Trust me?”

He nods. “Okay. We’re all right.” A car horn sounds behind us. Ren’s gaze swivels to the rearview mirror with a ferocious glare. Bright morning sun beats down on him, making his hair glow fiery red. And by Jesus Skipping through the Resurrection Garden, Ren *scowls*.

Everything inside me turns inferno hot. Not-smiling Søren Bergman is nothing short of magnificent.

“You’re awfully handsome when you’re angry, sweet cheeks.”

He narrows those cat eyes on me. “Why are *you* the one using infuriating pet names and smiling,” he grits out, “and *I’m* the one cursing at strangers while gnashing my teeth to dust?”

Because we’re both so sexually frustrated thanks to the worst timing ever that we’re about to explode?

“Because the world is a cruel place, and Los Angeles drivers suck.” I smile and point ahead. “Eyes on the road, love button. Traffic’s moving.”

Frankie

Playlist: “And the Birds Sing,” Tyrone Wells

“She’s so tiny,” I whisper. Naomi Grace Churchill was born yesterday afternoon. She’s my goddaughter and I might be mildly obsessed.

“And you’re hogging her,” Lo gripes.

Mia elbows her. “Chill out. Let her get her fix. Frankie obviously has baby fever.”

My head snaps up and my eyes find Ren instinctively. He leans against the wall, arms folded across his soft gray T-shirt. Old jeans hug his long legs. Ball cap pulled low. Not a soul recognized him when we came to the hospital. Or if they did, they were nice enough to leave him be.

The corner of his mouth lifts as his cat eyes crinkle, startlingly pale in the shadow of his cap’s brim. But he doesn’t say a word.

Annie smiles at me. “You do look good with a baby, Frankie.”

“That’s why you had her for me,” I tell her. Naomi holds my pinky with her fist. Her skin is flower petal soft.

“Oh, is that what I did?” Annie says drily. “And here I thought she was for Tim and me.”

“Nope. I’m taking her home.”

Tim laughs. “How about you take her home at night. We’ve barely slept at all.”

Lorena’s practically baring her teeth at me.

“Ugh, fine,” I grumble. “Take her from me. We should get going anyway.”

“Where are you headed?” Lo takes her carefully from me, cradling Naomi in her arms and swaying instinctively. If I have baby fever, Lo’s having a baby febrile seizure.

“Don’t drool on her. Ren’s sister’s birthday party.”

“Aw, that’s nice!” Annie winks at me, then directs herself to Ren. “So, Ren, you’re bringing Frankie to a *family* event—”

“Annabelle,” I warn.

Ren smiles at me, then turns and looks at Annie. “I am. She gets to meet everyone today. Thoughts and prayers appreciated. I’m one of seven, so it can be a bit much.”

“Ah,” Lo says. “So that’s why Frankie’s been sitting here, looking like she’s about to poop herself.”

“You know, guys...” I stand slowly from the recliner next to Annie. “I’d say I hate to leave, but I’m a shit liar, so to everyone except Naomi, who’s never said a snarky word, I say, smell ya later.”

I give Annie a gentle hug first, then make the rounds until we’re at the door.

“Wait!” Annie calls.

Ren and I freeze, then turn around. “What is it?” I ask her.

Tim smiles sheepishly. “My grandma has the kind of crush on Ren that you probably never want to know about and she’s sick with a cold, so she can’t come to the hospital to meet the baby. I thought it might make her decade if we got a picture of him holding Naomi and sent it to her.”

I’m about to be all no-BS-Frankie and decline for Ren—because shouldn’t a guy just get to be a man sometimes, rather than a jersey?—but Ren just shrugs and comes forward.

“I don’t mind. Sure.”

Annie looks at me and mouths, *Sorry*.

I point to Ren and shrug. If he doesn’t care, I don’t. I simply feel protective of him. He’s always smiling, always being nice, always signing things. I want him to say no when he wants to.

And when he's having a hard time, I'm happy to step in, as an expert.

"Let me wash my hands real quick." Ren uses soap and water at the sink, eyes on his task. I watch him, stupidly enjoying how his hair kicks out around his ball cap, his scruffy playoff beard, the purse of his lips as he concentrates.

Staring at him, I feel all warm and fuzzy. That big L-word bangs around my head, and I practically smother it.

Too soon. Not yet. Slow down.

"Here." Ren takes Naomi gently from Lorena, capably spinning her to nestle inside his forearm.

Jesus Walking on the Water. I've seen Ren hold babies before, but not... "My baby," I mutter.

"She's not your baby." Lo swats my butt playfully. "She's mine."

"She's *our* baby," Annie says diplomatically.

Tim gets the camera close and catches the exact moment Naomi's eyes blink open and then widen as she sees Ren. "All right," Tim says. "Got it!"

I step closer and set my head on Ren's bicep. It's like a pillow. If a pillow was solid muscle carved out of stone. Still, he smells spicy and clean, like the soap he used while showering this morning. I brushed my teeth extra long so I could watch the top half of his body not hidden by the steam, muscles bunching and flexing as he washed himself.

"She likes him," Mia says smugly. "And look at his face. Ren's got baby fever, too."

I roll my eyes. But when I look back at him, Ren's gaze meets mine, the smallest smile tipping his lips.

A smile that's not bright as sunbeams or wide as the ocean. Not the smile for fans or grandmas or passersby. A small, knowing smile.

For me.

* * *

“Okay.” Ren parks the van and blows air from his cheeks in a slow, steady stream. “I’m not going to lie, my family’s weird and overwhelming. I’m one of the rowdy ones, and *I* still find us too intense sometimes. So, if you just need somewhere quiet to slip away, I’ll show you my old room, and you can take whatever time you need. That’s the nice thing about my family, they won’t be remotely insulted if you tell them to their face that you need a break from them. Willa’s done it dozens of times—”

I clasp his hand, curling my fingers around his. “It’s okay, Ren. I know I can tell you if it’s too much. I’m sure everything will be fine.”

Ren laughs uneasily. “Yeah. Right. Okay.”

“Hey.” Cupping his face in my hands, I give him a slow, thorough kiss. When we break apart, he sighs, dropping his forehead to mine.

“Thanks,” he whispers. “I needed that.”

I reach for one more kiss. “Me, too.”

Rounding the car, he opens my door as always, then offers his arm.

There’s a slight hill from where he parked, and he’s glaring at it. “They should have left me a space up front.”

“Why?”

Ren throws up a hand. “For you. So that you don’t have to walk all this way. Here, I’ll carry you—”

“Okay, Zenzero. Time-out.”

Ren spins, hands on his hips, and if he weren’t so preciously worked up, I’d find it a very intimidating stance.

“You don’t scare me with that Big Red gun show, so just relax.”

He drops his arms. “I want this to be nice for you.” He gestures to the house again. “And we’re starting it off with a quarter-mile walk to the house. You put on a tough show, Frankie, but I know walking on stuff like this hurts you. And you’re hurting right now.”

“Eh. I have the Elder Wand, and I’ll grab your arm if I’m about to biff it. Okay?”

He sighs. “Fine.”

I take his arm to placate him. Immediately, he squeezes it to his side.

Ren tugs his ball cap lower and scratches his neck. “It’ll be fine,” he says, as if to himself.

I smile up at him. “Exactly.”

The walk isn’t terrible, but Ren’s not wrong. My hip would have been happier without having gone that far on uneven ground. Ren doesn’t knock, doesn’t hesitate, just throws open the front door of the house and yells something in Swedish that I don’t understand.

A chorus of the same phrase echoes back, making me startle.

He grins down at me. “I told you we’re weird.”

“You’re here! Finally. You’re late.” Ren’s mom strides toward me, hugging me hard.

“Oh—” I start to say, but Ren cuts in.

“Mom, I told you I had a practice.” He catches my eye and sighs. I was forewarned that his mother is brutally blunt. I reassured him blunt is the last thing that’s going to bother me. “Hey,” he says to his mom. “Easy on her.”

Elin’s hands loosen. “Right. Sorry! I hug hard. But you—” She clasps my shoulders lightly, pinning me with the same wintry eyes she gave her son. “I must be gentle with you.”

Ren massages the bridge of his nose.

“Thank you for having me, Mrs. Bergman—”

“Oh, just Elin. Please,” she says on a bright smile.

I tap Ren’s stomach. “You have my purse.”

“Ah. Right.” Sliding my bag off his other arm, he hands it to me.

I have to set it down so I can grip the straps, pull them open, and extract the wine I brought. Straightening, I swallow a groan of discomfort in my back and hand her the bottle. “Thank you.”

“How kind.” Elin takes it, gives me a smile, and then slinks her arm in mine. “You take *my* arm, now, Frankie.”

My eyes travel to the wide-open room. The massive, rough-hewn dining table. Clean lines, the expansive kitchen, and then to the right, the comically big sectional sofa. Noise centers in the kitchen filled entirely with women, bringing me to a nervous stop.

Elin glances over at me. “We don’t normally divide like this, but they all just finished a football game, and while the women were ready for a cocktail, the men didn’t want to stop playing. Why don’t you join us? We’re just making drinks now.”

I smile nervously at Ren over my shoulder. Ren smiles softly back.

“Frankie!” Willa jumps up from her stool and gives me a hug. “You just missed a massacre. We kicked their butts, didn’t we?”

“Yes, we did,” Ziggy says, a soft smile brightening her face. She opens her arms first, so I know it’s okay for me to step into them.

“Happy birthday, Ziggy,” I whisper. As I step back, I set a wrapped package in her hands.

“What is it?” she asks.

“Open it.”

Ziggy drops it on the counter, tears off the paper. She squeals. “It just came out! Mom, Frankie got me Book Six! Oh my

gosh.”

When we last talked, Ziggy told me about this fantasy romance series she was tearing through, so I got her the next in the series, which just came out last week. Jumping up and down, she lunges herself at me and hugs me hard. “Thank you so much.”

I hug her back. “You’re welcome, Ziggy.”

Sighing happily, she clutches it to her chest. “Oh! And did you see I’m wearing the clothes we ordered? Just changed into them from my soccer stuff.”

I give her a once-over. Black leggings that fit down to her ankles. An emerald-green T-shirt that matches her eyes. “You look great, Ziggy.”

She blushes bright pink. “Thanks. It’s so comfy.”

“Good.” I squeeze her arm gently, before turning to Freya, who I’ve only met once before. She’s almost her mother’s copy. Sharp, striking features. Pale eyes, wavy white-blonde hair worn just past her chin.

“Hi.” I offer my hand. “I’m Frankie.”

“I remember,” she says. “Freya.” Her voice is smoky, and while I can’t read her expression, her voice seems tinged with sadness. She shakes my hand gently, not squeezing, which isn’t surprising. She’s a physical therapist, Ren said. She’d know to take it easy. “It’s nice to finally meet you, not just wave hi in the stadium.”

“Arena,” Ziggy corrects.

Freya waves it off. “Whatever. We’re a soccer family.” She smiles at me. “Ren’s said such great things about you for so long.”

I catch his eye and watch him turn bright red. “Oh?”

She cocks a blonde eyebrow. “I mean, he’s been crazy about you for—”

Ren cuts her off with a hug, muffling her against his chest before he sets her at arm’s length. “Freya Linn. You’ve been

wimping out on me.”

She thumps his stomach with a loose fist, but it just bounces off his abs. She shakes out her hand. “Am not.”

Ren smiles at me, hooking an arm around Freya’s neck, pulling her in and giving her a noogie. She twists his nipple, which makes him yelp and spin away.

“*Strumpet*,” he calls her.

She lunges for his nipple again, but he’s too fast. Setting his hands gently on Ziggy’s shoulders, he stands behind her. “The birthday girl is base. No more nipples.”

This is the real Ren. The one I’m seeing a little bit more of each day I’m with him. Playful, dorky, a smidge antagonistic, still a bit bashful. My smile’s so wide my cheeks hurt, watching him among his family.

“Happy birthday, Zigs.” Ren hugs her from behind and kisses the top of Ziggy’s head, slipping a card into her hand.

She tears it open, reads it, folding what looks like a gift card tight in her grip. When she glances up at him, she’s teary eyed. She hugs him for a long moment, and he hugs her back.

Ziggy turns to face us all and wipes her nose. “Ren got me a gift card big enough to get the cleats I wanted,” she says quietly.

Elin smiles over at Ren and shakes her head. “The money Americans spend on shoes—”

“They’re not *shoes*,” Ziggy says defensively. “They’re cleats, and they mean so much to me. Thank you, Ren.” She hugs him again. When she turns back from hugging him, she smiles at me, stacking the gift card on top of the book I got her. “I’m glad you brought Frankie,” she says.

Ren grins at me over Ziggy’s head. “I’m glad I brought Frankie, too.”

My cheeks heat. Ren’s looking at me how he looked at me when he stepped past me, then into the shower this morning, and it’s revving my engine in ways that aren’t acceptable for family gatherings.

“So.” I turn toward Freya. “What’s this challenge he’s talking about?”

“Freya and I are doing a squat challenge,” Ren answers. “But she’s failed to report her reps for the past week.” He points to Freya’s long, muscular legs sticking out of ripped-up denim shorts. “Clearly, she’s slacking.”

Freya narrows her eyes at him from the other side of the kitchen island. “I’m not slacking.” Inverting a giant bottle of wine into a tall glass pitcher, she steals a piece of fruit from the pile that Elin’s chopping next to her. “I’ve just been a little busy with work, lifting and moving the human body all day. I could squat-press *you*, Ren.”

Ren lets out a low whistle. “Challenge accepted.”

Elin smiles to herself. “Do you have siblings, Frankie?”

“An older sister.”

“Ah,” Elin says, peering up at me. “You’re close, then.”

“No, not really. I mean we love each other, but there’s an age gap and a country between us.”

“Hm.” Elin glances down at her task. I feel like I just failed a test or something.

Willa leans in and whispers, “Don’t worry, she’s just curious. There’s no right or wrong answer. Trust me. If I got folded into this family, anyone can.” Pulling out a stool at the island, Willa pats it. “Come on, sit.”

Ren opens his mouth, probably to tell her they kill my hips, but I talk before he can. “Ren, why don’t you go say hi to the guys? I’ll hang here for a little, then wander out and visit with them. Gives me some time to settle in.”

Ren seems torn, his eyes dancing between the women like he doesn’t quite trust them. Suddenly he points a finger at Freya, then to his mother. “You two. No embarrassing stories from the early years. Frankie’s seen me make a fool out of myself enough.”

Freya rolls her eyes. “Why are men *so* fragile? We have other things to talk about besides the time you pooped in Grandpa’s

hat after it had fallen off the coatrack and landed upside down.”

“I was *potty training!*” Ren yells. “It looked exactly like the kiddie toilet upstairs.”

Elin throws her head back in laughter. “Oh. That one gets me. Every time.”

Ziggy glances up from her phone. “Best part of that story is, nobody noticed until Grandpa put his hat on his head.”

Willa blasts a laugh next to me. But my eyes stay locked on Ren who stands flushed and embarrassed from ten feet away. “Søren—”

The room goes silent.

“*What* did you just call him?” Freya says.

Ren smiles at me, ignoring her. “Yes, Francesca.”

“I did almost the same thing.”

Ziggy drops her phone on the counter. “You did?”

“Mhmm.” Extending my hand, I wait for Ren to come within reach. When he does, I wrap my arm around his warm, solid back. “Except I was at Mass, and I figured the baptismal font seemed as good a place as any to take a pee.”

Willa slaps the counter and laughs. “You didn’t.”

“Oh, I did.” I slide my hand along Ren’s back and rub gently between his shoulders, meeting his eyes.

See? You’re not alone. So long as I’m here.

I wish he could read my mind, could hear what I want him to know.

And, the funniest thing happens. It’s as if he does just that. Because he leans in, with a soft kiss to that tender place behind my ear, and whispers, “Thank you.”

No sooner does Ren make for the sliding glass door leading out to their deck, but a tall blonde throws it open and bumps into him. Tugging the door shut behind her, she greets

everyone happily. Golden hair cut blunt to her shoulders. Sparkly eyes that dance between green and blue, land and sea.

She is sunshine incarnate.

And when she looks up at Ren, I want to summon lightning and smite her.

He gives her a hug hello and quickly steps back. Standing next to each other, they could not be more perfect looking. A very odd, terrible feeling settles in my stomach.

That's the kind of person I used to picture Ren with. An effortless social butterfly—emotionally nimble, expertly gregarious, who passes out smiles like a pageant queen at the parade.

She even looks like him somehow. Statuesque and tall. Strong features, wide smile, alluring body.

“Well?” She elbows him in the ribs. “Can I finally meet her?”

Willa clears her throat. “Since you were *my* friend first, Rooster, I'd like to do the honors. Rooney, this is Frankie. Ren's lady love.”

So *this* is Rooney, Willa's best friend from college.

Rooney walks away from Ren, leans in and gives me a gentle hug. “So good to finally meet you.”

When she straightens and winks at me, it's as blindingly unnerving as staring into the sun. But maybe I'm just that unused to people as pathologically cheery as Rooney. She puts Ren's temperament to shame.

“You too,” I manage.

Freya stirs whatever alcohol is in the pitcher. I watch it swirl obediently in the wake of a long wooden spoon. Fruit. Booze.

Sangria.

Oh thank God. I need a vat of it. This is so many people in one place, including a woman who in this moment of insecure weakness only reminds me of all the ways I feel inadequate.

“Get out of here, Ren,” Freya says on a wave, as she takes an experimental taste from the pitcher. “And if you see my husband being sporty outside, tell him I hope he trips.”

Elin smacks Freya’s butt and mutters something in Swedish.

“Not touching that one.” Ren waves and slides open the door. “Come out soon, okay?” he says to me.

I nod. “I will.”

Very soon, if I have anything to say about it.

Rooney plops down next to me, reaches for a carrot and swipes it through a bowl of hummus. Crunching, she looks me over. “You are *hot*.”

Willa sighs. “Is there no faithfulness, anymore?”

Rooney blows her a kiss. “You were my first, honey. But you chose Ryder over me. It’s time for me to move on.”

I stare between them. “You two...were...together?”

“They don’t speak our language, Frankie,” Ziggy says, swiping through her phone. I think she’s reading. At her own birthday party. Smart girl.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Ziggy glances up. “It’s all one big joke. If you take any of it literally—which is how you and I tend to take everything—it’s very confusing.”

Rooney smiles sheepishly. “Sorry. It’s a bad habit. I’m an only child who grew up watching a lot of Gilmore Girls with no one to be the Rory to my Lorelai.”

“But that would make you her *mom*,” I say confusedly.

Ziggy lifts a hand. “My point is made.”

Willa gently pats my arm. “What Rooney means is she likes to talk. A lot. And I do, too. We talk back and forth, mostly about nothing, but it’s all wrapped up in love. Make sense?”

Not really.

I never talk unless I have something meaningful to say, and then I have *lots* to say. Talking for talking’s sake is exhausting.

Ziggy grins at me as if she just thought the same thing, then goes back to her phone.

A shadow graces the patio doorway, and in steps the oldest Bergman, Axel. He's taller than Ren and lean, like he runs marathons. Long, wiry muscles. Ramrod-straight posture. He's very handsome, if not a little intimidating, with his severe expression. Ryder's and Ziggy's grass-green eyes. Tousled chocolate hair like Viggo's.

He freezes when he sees all of us. "Why is everyone staring at me?"

Rooney mutters under her breath, "Because who the hell *wouldn't* stare at him?"

Willa snorts. Axel narrows his eyes at her.

"No one's staring, Ax," Freya says, pouring more wine into the pitcher. "You just walked in. People tend to look at a person when they enter a room."

Axel sees me, but his expression doesn't change. An odd prick at the back of my neck makes me sit straighter.

"You're Frankie," he says. There's very little inflection in his voice. Because faces confuse me, I rely on tone of voice to intuit subtext. I get nothing from this neutral delivery.

"I am. You're Axel." I offer my hand. "Good to meet you."

Striding my way, Axel takes my hand, squeezes it. "You too." When he notices Rooney, he does a double take. "Your hair's shorter."

She grins. "Yeah. I chopped it. What do you think?"

He stares at her, wetting his bottom lip with his tongue. "You changed it."

Her smile falters. "You don't like it?"

"Change makes Ax hive," Freya says, stirring the sangria. "He nearly disowned me when I got the pixie cut a few years back."

Axel stares at Rooney still. "I think...I need to get used to it. In my head you have long hair."

“Well, at least I’m in your head,” Rooney tells him. Her smile’s back, and it is formidable.

Clearing his throat, Ax backs away. “Bathroom,” he says.

Three long strides, and he’s gone. The kitchen goes unnaturally quiet. And a furious blush stains Rooney’s cheek.

Frankie

Playlist: “Mushaboom,” Feist

Willa leans and watches Axel’s departure until a door beyond my view clicks shut. Snapping back, she lobes a block of cheese at Rooney. It bounces off her forehead. “You are *shameless* with him.”

Rooney picks up the cheese and pops it in her mouth. “He’s such a hunk. I can’t help it.”

Elin grins to herself as she rinses off her hands. Freya sets a glass of sangria in front of me, and I nod in thanks. I don’t really know what to say, so I sip my drink instead.

“Rooney always goes for the broody types,” Willa says.

“I *used* to,” Rooney corrects her. “I’ve sworn off men.”

Every woman in the room except me erupts in laughter.

“I have!” she says. “They’re all horrible. Except Ax. He’s different.”

“He is, is he?” Willa says, wiggling her eyebrows.

“How long have you, uh...” I clear my throat, trying to be conversational with her. “Sworn off men?”

“Let me think.” Rooney taps her chin and stares at the ceiling. “Five weeks. It’s been brutal. But I ordered a dildo, which should be here any day, so things are looking up.”

Willa snorts into her sangria. Elin seems unfazed, and Freya just chuckles under her breath. Ziggy’s reading and misses it entirely.

When someone drops that kind of truth in a group setting, they’re on my good side forever. “Cheers to that.” I lift my glass. Rooney clinks her glass to mine, and when she smiles at me, I actually find myself smiling back.

Conversation takes off without my help after that, though I find my moments to chime in here and there. After not too long, there's only one glass of sangria in my system, but I'm flushed and relaxed, slightly buzzed, which is when I feel like I have a tiny glimpse of what it's like to be a socially fluent human. To flow with conversation and enjoy it, instead of following it like a tennis match, trying desperately to keep track of who served and whose turn it is to volley back.

But I'm also warm, and a little agitated, which I've learned by now means I need fresh air and a few moments of quiet. Excusing myself, I step out onto the back deck and nearly collide with Ren's father.

"Shit!" I yelp. "I mean, shoot. I mean—"

His laugh is so like Ren's that it makes me do a double take. "Frankie. I'm no saint. You can curse around me." Steadying me, he neatly steps to the side. His hand gestures toward a chair for me to sit in.

"Oh. Um. Okay." Awkwardly, I plop into the chair, picking up a placemat off of the outdoor table and fanning myself. "Sorry, again, Dr. B." It's what I heard both Willa and Rooney call him, so it seems like the way to go. "I wasn't looking where I was going."

He waves his hand, groaning softly as he drops into a chair across from me. "You mind if I join you? Those beasts I raised down there wore me out."

"Be my guest," I tell him.

"Thank you."

I smile, watching all five of the Bergman brothers volleying a soccer ball, trying to keep it in the air. Viggo chests it, then cracks a shot into the nearby net, before the only brother I don't recognize and by process of elimination is Oliver, jogs off to scoop it up. My gaze sweeps past the lawn beyond us, sprawling and flat, nestled among blossoms and a grove of trees a way off. Dusk is my favorite time of day, when the sky glows peach and violet, and the air turns cool.

When I glance back over, I freeze. Dr. B's pant leg has lifted enough to reveal a titanium rod in place of an ankle. I stare in complete shock.

On a quiet groan, he massages the muscles right above his knee, staring out into the yard at his sons, a soft smile warming his face. When he glances my way, he pauses. His gaze travels my expression. "He didn't tell you?"

I shake my head.

"My military souvenir," he says while patting his thigh. "Gets sore after a long day and trying to keep up with them. I'm sorry if it upset—"

"No," I blurt.

My heart's pounding. Why wouldn't Ren tell me? All my hemming and hawing about my challenges' potential pitfalls in a relationship and he never thought it would help for me to know he grew up seeing that kind of love firsthand?

See? Fulfilling interabled coupledom is possible, the little Lorena on my shoulder gloats. I'm tempted to flick her off her perch, if she weren't a figment of my imagination and it wouldn't completely disconcert Ren's dad.

"Please don't apologize," I finally manage hoarsely, bringing a hand to my throat and rubbing uneasily.

Dr. B grins at me, and it's another dead ringer for Ren. "If it makes you feel any better, you're not the first person I've surprised. I think sometimes my kids forget it's not normal to everyone else. It's all they've ever known."

"How was that? Being in a rigorous profession, married, having kids, with..."

"With a physical limitation?" He glances out to the field and sighs. "Hard sometimes. Discouraging others. Always healing."

"Why? Why 'healing'?"

Dr. B drums his fingers on the arms of his chair. "Well...when it happened, Freya was a toddler, Elin was pregnant with Axel. I was devastated. I thought I'd never be able to give my wife

and children what they needed. Not as I'd envisioned, at least. I'd never be able to practice medicine again how I'd hoped. I felt like my life was over.

"But then Axel was born, and I held him, those eyes just like mine staring up at me, and something clicked. I realized he loved me. Already, he loved me, just how I was. I'd made him with his mother, and he was my flesh and blood and not having most of my leg didn't change that. Finally, I understood my life wasn't over, only my *idea* of my life was.

"That's when I fully released my old expectations, how I thought my life should be, and instead loved my life for what it was: a gift. A heart beating in my chest. Breath in my lungs. A wife and children who loved me as I was."

My eyes blur with tears. I dab my face as they spill down my cheeks. "That's very...encouraging," I whisper. "Thank you for telling me."

He nods, holding my eyes for a long moment, before our gazes shift together, toward the field again. Dabbing my eyes, I search the grass until I see Ren's in goal. Right as Oliver takes a penalty shot, he dives, completely missing. All five brothers fall into various postures and volumes of hilarity, and Dr. B laughs, watching them. As if he knows I'm watching him, Ren glances up as he stands and catches my eye. His laugh dies away as our eyes lock. My heart skips inside my chest.

Suddenly, the door slides open again, and Ziggy bounds out, practically throwing herself at her dad and landing in his lap. He catches her with an *oof*, before she kisses his cheek and wraps her arms around his neck. I'm relieved to see their easy affection. It means that her parents have stopped keeping so much distance between them and Ziggy, that she feels more comfortable with physical closeness again.

"Hi, Ziggy Stardust," he whispers, wrapping his arms around her.

"Hi, Daddy." Ziggy glances over at me and repositions herself on his lap, like it isn't comical someone so grown and long-limbed is draped over her dad. It's sweet and innocent and

entirely Ziggy. She's still a girl in a lot of ways. Very much how I was as a teen.

Dr. B rests his cheek on her head and sighs, his eyes crinkling happily. "You know who Ren's named after?" he asks me.

I nod. "Kierkegaard."

"That's right. I was reading his *Works of Love* toward the end of Elin's pregnancy with him. I'd read aloud to her while she soaked in the tub, after I'd put Freya and Axel to bed. It just fit. The name, his philosophy..."

"I'm not familiar with Kierkegaard in any detail," I tell him honestly.

Dr. B glances up at the fading daylight and smiles. "'To dare is to lose one's footing momentarily. Not to dare is to lose oneself.'"

"The other one, Daddy," Ziggy says quietly.

He kisses her forehead. "'The most common form of despair is not being who you are.'"

Ziggy smiles. "That's my favorite."

"And *my* favorite," Dr. B says, as he shifts Ziggy on his lap, "is—"

A new voice breaks in. I glance over my shoulder to see Ren smiling down at me, hands in his pockets. "'To cheat oneself out of love,'" he says, "'is the most terrible deception; it is an eternal loss for which there is no reparation.'"

My throat's dry as a desert. I lick my lips and feel myself melting in the heat of his stare. "That's a good one."

Ren nods. "Yes, it is."

"Frankie!" a voice yells from below.

I turn and lean against the deck rail, squinting to find who said it. "Yes?"

Viggo waves. "Come down here. I need a partner."

I glance across the field. They're setting up...badminton? Oliver and Axel stretch the net with Ryder's help. I don't see

Freya's husband, Aiden, anywhere. When I glance up at Ren, I see he's glaring down at Viggo, his jaw tight.

As I stand, I shuffle out from between the table and chair and salute Dr. B and Ziggy both. "It was good talking to you. But now, it's time to go get my ass handed to me at badminton."

Dr. B grins and pats Ziggy's back, his eyes holding mine. "Go on and show 'em how it's done."

Peering up at Ren, I smile. Hands on his hips. A flush in his cheeks. Angry Big Red stance. I thread my arm around his waist and smile up at him.

Ren frowns as I hold on to him while we walk down the deck stairs to the back lawn. "I told Viggo croquet would be better," he grumbles.

"Maybe. But I think I can hold my own in a corner of the net. We'll divvy up the area, and I'll stick to mine." I pat his cheek. "Remember. Give me a chance. Don't assume I can't."

"I'm trying. I'm..." He sighs. "Can I be honest?"

"Always. Please."

"Okay." He rakes a hand through his hair and tugs roughly. "I'm worried you'll get hurt. Not because I think you're incapable or that badminton is beyond you—truly, I don't—but look at us—" He gestures to his brothers, all of whom are over six feet and pushing 200 pounds.

"Well, that's a fair point. But it's not a contact sport."

"*Everything* is a contact sport in the Bergman household."

I laugh. "It's okay. I'll be careful."

Ren wraps an arm around my shoulder and kisses my hair. My head rests on his shoulder in a way that I can see behind his back, where Oliver is stealthily creeping toward him. I've seen that stance. That's an I'm-about-to-depant-a-guy stance.

Shoving myself around Ren so that he's shielded behind me, I lift my cane and point it at Oliver.

Ren's younger brother grins, frozen to the spot. "Foiled by Bellatrix. What's she gonna do?"

“I might be Slytherin,” I tell him. “But I’m no Death Eater.”

Ryder glances between us. “What the hell is this? Did I just fall into a ninth circle of nerd hell?”

Ren shoves him. “Lay off. She’s protecting me.”

Oliver grins, feinting to the right. I arc my cane and yell, “*Stupefy!*”

He freezes perfectly, mouth agape, mid-crouch.

“That all you got?” Viggo calls.

Lifting my cane higher, I touch the tip to Oliver’s chest. “*Locomotor Mortis.*”

Trying not to smile, Oliver snaps up, legs locked together, and topples over onto the grass. A burst of applause sounds from the deck, where Ziggy and Dr. B, now Willa, Rooney, and Elin stand.

“Woohoo, Frankie!” Willa hollers.

Before I can respond, I’m tucked tight inside Ren’s arms, a soft kiss pressed to my cheek.

“You saved me,” he whispers.

I grin up at him and steal a kiss. “I did, didn’t I?”

Ren

Playlist: “Close,” Nick Jonas, Tove Lo

“What’s up with Frankie?” Andy asks. “She’s been extra moody this week. And I didn’t even see her leave tonight.” Yanking his jersey over his head, he throws it down, shaking sweat off like a wet dog. I sit on the bench and stare at my locker. Dazed.

Come home hungry.

That’s what her text says. The moment the buzzer went off and the game ended, with a narrow win on our part, Frankie dissolved into the flood of staff and personnel while some PR intern handled wrap-up and quick interviews, obviously covering for her. As soon as I could, I strode into the locker room and riffled through my bag until I found my phone. Because I knew she wouldn’t leave like that without an explanation.

Come home hungry.

I swallow nervously. There are a couple ways to interpret that message. One of which sends lust slamming through my system.

A shove to the shoulder makes me glance up.

Andy’s still there. “What’s that again?” I ask him dazedly.

“I said—” He shoves me once more, and this time I shove him back, sending him stumbling into his locker. “What’s up with Frankie?”

I pull off my helmet and drop it, dragging my fingers through my hair. “Stomach was bugging her again,” I lie off the cuff.

“Well, at least it’s not that nasty shit Maddox brought around.”

Maddox is out with bronchitis. After he hacked a lung around us all the past week at practice. Around *Frankie*. I fist my hands and try to exhale slowly. If she gets sick from his carelessness...

Andy scrunches his nose. "It's just weird. Frankie's such a hard-ass. Sick or not, she's always here. You think she's okay?"

Patting his arm, I give him a distracted smile. "I think she'll be fine."

"Hey." Kris walks up to me. "You seen Frankie? It's weird without her."

Andy rolls his eyes. "Dude. He just said she's got a stomachache. Listen, would you?"

While those two devolve to bickering, I tune them out, strip quickly, and grab a towel. When I walk by and hear their ongoing conversation, I can't help but think how right Kris is, how weird it is without her being here. How unprepared everyone will be, when we're without her for good.

As I step in the shower, water running over me, I feel the press of anxiety in my chest. Fear that I won't always have her, tenuous hope that no matter where life takes her next, I'll be by her side because we built something solid and long-lasting between us—

There's something solid and long-lasting between you two, all right.

I glance down at my hard-on. There he is. Jutting straight out and miserably unfulfilled, which is pretty much how it's been most of the past few weeks. Just thinking about Frankie makes me ache, always has. But recently, the torture's been all the greater, with the time we've been spending together, surrounding me with her night air and orchid scent, feeling the silk of her hair brush my cheek when she nestles into me, wrapping my arms around her in bed and tucking her soft body against my hard one.

Emphasis on hard.

My cock twitches angrily at the memory of the way she arches into my touch when she comes, how her full backside nestles against me when she's ready to fall asleep.

Groaning, I slap the tiles and turn the water ice cold, shivering while I quickly wash myself. It works. I get my body under control but still my mind wanders to Frankie. Biting her lip while she thinks. Stepping inside my arms, letting me sway and kiss her. Tangled in bed, exploring, learning each other's bodies through clothes and stolen touches beneath them.

Snapping the towel off the hook and wrapping it around my waist, I wander over to my locker. No need to change in the shower area now that I know Frankie won't be here.

Yes, my modesty on that front was entirely for her. Because I held out hope that if I could avoid her seeing me and my dangly bits, I wouldn't simply be one of the guys who couldn't be bothered to cover himself up when she was milling around. Just like her body was and is still largely a mystery to me, I wanted mine to be a mystery to her, too.

Come home hungry.

It has to mean for more than late dinner. My stomach tightens with nerves. I pull out my phone, swipe it open, and type.

Yes, ma'am.

* * *

When I shut the front door, air rushes out of me. Frankie stands at the stove, wineglass in hand, swaying to music playing from her phone. A slow, sensual rhythm making the tiniest pair of pajama shorts flutter as she moves. A tissue-thin top drapes off her shoulder and her hair's piled on top of her head, faint wisps of chocolate ribbons caressing her neck.

Glancing over her shoulder, she smiles as she sets down her wine. "Welcome back."

I close the distance between us, slide my hands around her ribs and tug her against me. I kiss her, suck at her bottom lip, tease her tongue.

“Ren,” she says breathlessly. “Everything okay?”

Shaking my head, I kiss her neck, drag her lobe between my teeth, making her jolt, then melt in my arms. “I missed you,” I whisper.

Her laugh is soft and breathy. “It’s been an hour.”

I cup her face, angling it so I can kiss every point I want to. “No, it hasn’t,” I mutter. “It’s been years.”

Frankie stills, tipping her head, and bringing a hand to my cheek. Her eyes search mine. “What’s wrong, Ren?” she asks quietly.

I pull back enough to hold her gaze, my thumb sliding over her dimple. “Just something one of the guys said. It made me nervous. Sad.”

“What is it?”

“When you leave,” I whisper. “I’ll miss you.”

Her face softens. “Oh, Ren. I’ll miss you, too. But...” Blinking away, she smooths back my hair. “I mean, assuming we’ll still be together. I’m hoping, that is—”

I kiss her. “Frankie,” I whisper against her lips. “God, I’ll do anything...” There’s the truth, strong and steady as my heart beating inside my chest.

I love you.

I always have. I’ve loved her since the moment I saw her. Somehow, inexplicably, it’s true.

I kiss her again, tangling tongues, holding her hips against mine, showing her how badly I need her. “Do you know how long I’ve wanted you?” I say against her neck, dragging my tongue over her collarbone.

She sighs. “Me, too.” Her hands come to my tie, struggling with the knot. I yank it loose, then attack the buttons of my shirt. Frankie grabs my buckle, tugging it so hard, she loses

her balance and nearly bumps into the stove. I catch her by the elbow and wrap an arm around her to keep her steady.

“Shit,” she mutters, staring at the meal she was cooking.

I reach past her, flicking off burners. “Later.”

She nods, leaning up, kissing me, arms around my neck. I scoop her up and wrap her legs around my waist. “Does that hurt?” I ask against her mouth.

“No,” she whispers, dropping her head, stretching her neck for me to kiss.

I groan when she reaches between us and palms me over my suit pants. “You’re done?” I ask.

She nods furiously. “Today. Thank God.”

Setting her on the kitchen counter, I press her back, then kiss my way down her stomach. I shuck her shorts, dragging them off of her legs and tossing them aside.

“What are you—Oh, *God*,” she gasps, her arms dropping softly onto the cold granite.

“You said come home hungry.” I kiss her stomach, swirl my tongue lower and lower. “And I’m more than happy to follow orders.”

My hands part her, as finally, *finally* I see her close, breathe her in. Velvet soft skin, dark curls that I run my fingers through. Exploring the delicate skin of her stomach, I reach further and cup her breast. “Look at you. Perfect.”

She arches into my touch as I tease her nipple and press slow, wet open-mouthed kisses on the inside of her thigh. “Ren, you don’t have to—”

“Don’t bother finishing that sentence, Frankie. I’ll die if I don’t do this.”

She laughs breathily. “So dramatic—” A gasp leaps out of her as I bend and sweep my tongue where she’s warm and wet, decadently soft. My thumb teases her clit with faint, featherlight touches, while I taste her and spear her with my tongue.

Faint, steady cries leave her. Her fingers delve into my hair, but there's no tug, no push, no direction. She's hesitating.

“Are you holding back on me, Francesca?”

Breath rushes out of her. “N-no.”

“You're taking what you want?”

She nods, but it's slow. Tentative.

I yank her hips to the edge of the counter, cupping her bottom as I drop to my knees and swing each of her legs over my shoulders. “No, you're not.”

Frankie cries out, a broken sob as I lock my mouth over her and take her with my tongue. One finger curled deep inside her, where she's softer, tender, so impossibly wet. Then two. I want her ready. I don't want it to hurt when I'm inside her. I only want pleasure for Frankie, no more pain. No more than she already has in her life.

She's sweet as honey, warm silk. I nuzzle, nibble, and finally lower my lips to her tiny, swollen clit, and gently suck—

“Yes!” she slaps the counter, canting her hips up into my face.

I pull back long enough to bite her thigh tenderly, chasing it with a kiss. “Tell me what you want.”

“I—” She cries out again as I flick her clit with my finger. “I want it harder. Rough.”

“You want to fuck my face.”

“Jesus,” she moans. “You would be the unexpected king of dirty talk.”

“Tell me.”

“I want to fuck your face!” she yells.

Grinning up at her, I lower my mouth, so my breath whispers over where she's glistening wet and flushed. “Then do it.”

When I tongue her again, hold her close, she grinds up, wild, reckless, riding my mouth, fisting my hair, guiding me until she explodes on a hoarse scream.

Her thighs tighten around my shoulders. She cries out again, and this time a rough sob follows. Soft, pulsing waves against my lips. A rush of sweet release hits my tongue and I groan, palming myself reflexively. I almost come from just tasting her.

She's panting, wracked with shivers as I stand, then sweep her into my arms and stroll down the hallway. Once in the bedroom, I slowly lower her down my body, clenching my teeth when she slides against my groin.

Frankie stares up at me, her hands resting on my chest. Time slows, the only sounds the distant roar of the ocean, the steady rhythm of our breaths. Carefully, she runs her fingers beneath my suit jacket and slips it off. Tugging it off my arms, she tosses it on the nearby chair. I stare at her as I yank off my tie and make quick work of the rest of my buttons. Frankie rushes me, shoving off the fabric, tugging at my undershirt.

When I'm shirtless, she presses a hot kiss to my chest, scrapes her teeth over my nipple.

"God." I fist her hair, holding her close.

Frankie pushes away and I tackle her shirt, dragging it over her head. A moan tears out of my chest as I see her. So beautiful. More breathtaking than I could have ever imagined. I stare down at her as my heart pounds. Soft breasts, her nipples taut. Long muscles, a maddening slope to her hips. Golden skin. I run my hands up and down her waist and sigh. She's so soft.

"You're beautiful, Frankie. So impossibly beautiful."

She smiles and presses up on tiptoes, giving me a long, slow kiss. "Take off your clothes," she whispers, her hand dropping to my buckle again. "I want to see you."

I shuck my pants and boxer briefs, sweep her up again and carry her to the bed. After laying her down, carefully, I stand over her.

She bites her lip as her eyes trail my body. "Søren. You are magnificent."

Her thighs rub together as she stares at me. I pull her legs apart and fist myself, a long tug of my cock that draws a rough groan from me as I stare at her. A fierce, primal force drives me to touch myself while I look at the most intimate part of her.

“This is what you do to me, Frankie. You’ve done it for years. Made me so hard, I ache.”

“Well, that sounds fair,” she says dazedly. She stares at my length as I pump it, her eyes wide, lips parted. “Seeing as I’ve been nothing but despicably wet around you for too damn long. Do you know how uncomfortable drenched panties are, Ren?”

A growl rolls out of me. Dropping over her, I slip an arm under her back, and drag her up the bed with me, settling between her thighs. “Confession.”

Her hands slide up my arms and cradle my head. “I’m listening.”

“I’m terrified this is going to be a disaster.”

She laughs and kisses me. “That’s impossible. It’s you and me. We’ll talk. Show each other what we need.”

I bend, kiss her, lost for words. My heart thunders in my chest, anxiety pinching my shoulders. As if she intuits that, Frankie’s hands glide along my back and gently massage my shoulders.

“Look at me,” she whispers. She smooths my hair off my face and smiles up at me. “Trust me?”

I nod.

“Good. I trust you, too.”

Frankie and I have talked about birth control. Clean bills of health. How we both really want nothing between us. Meaning there’s nothing stopping us from finally being connected as close as two people physically can be.

Taking each of her hands in mine, I drag them up over her head. It sends her breasts high, shows the curve of her ribs, the hollow between her hips that’s ready for me. I rest myself against her, holding her eyes.

Slowly, robbed of breath, I ease inside her, just a few inches, and stop. Frankie pants for air, her eyes scrunched shut. It's unlike anything I've ever known. Warm, tight, intricately smooth yet somehow not.

"Are you all right?" I whisper.

She nods furiously. Then shakes her head. "You're huge. It's like a Mack truck trying to take a back alley."

I laugh into her neck. "I'm sorry. I'll go slow. I want to make it good for you," I whisper.

She kisses me gently. "I'm not worried about that," she whispers back.

"Good. That makes one of us."

A laugh bursts out of her, and I have to clench my jaw because of how it makes her body flex around mine. "Just give me like...five hours to get adjusted," she mutters.

"I'll be lucky if I last five minutes, Frankie."

"Go slow while you can, okay?" she whispers. "It's better that way. Gentler. Like this."

At her cue, I loosen my grip and free her hands. Gripping my backside, she guides me with her as she leans her hips back, then rocks up. Air rushes out of me.

"God, you feel incredible." I set my mouth over hers, kissing, tasting, sharing breath as I follow her rhythm and my body's instinct. I pull away and moan helplessly as I ease in again.

Holding my weight on my elbows on either side of her face, I kiss her neck, her jaw, her lips, finally sinking so far inside her, I feel where I can't go any farther.

Frankie gasps. I pull back reflexively, but she stops me, panting for air. "It's okay. Don't stop, okay?"

My body's begging to thrust and pound and take. It's too harsh, too much. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't," she says gently, her hands drifting to my backside again, guiding me, pulling me to her. "I promise you won't."

Waves of muscles tighten around my cock. A sigh falls out of me as I draw back, then press into her, sure and slow. I feel sparks soar up my legs, a fierce need to move guiding me.

“Again,” she whispers. “Again.”

Our moans echo in each other’s mouths as I thrust into her, as Frankie hugs me tight. Her hips roll in rhythm with mine, first slow, then urgently. Faster.

“Faster, Ren,” she rasps. “Faster.”

The last thread of my hesitation snaps, unleashing a torrent of need. I find her clit with my thumb and circle it steadily in time with each drive into her. Fast. Deliberate. The slap of skin on skin, the quiet rhythm of her cries. More waves, fluttering and faint, teasing spasms along my length as our bodies move together.

I’m so close already, I have to stop. One more stroke, and I’ll be done for. Seating myself inside her, I kiss Frankie’s breasts, suck her nipples roughly. My body trembles as I hold back.

“Ren, it’s okay,” she says gently. “It’s okay for you to come. You already made me—”

“No,” I mutter against her skin. “I want to feel you come with me. I want to feel you come all over my cock. I *need* it, Frankie.”

Her body tightens around me. “I do, too,” she says softly.

“Then, let me do this.” I flick her clit, suck her nipples, and slowly rock inside her.

“Yes,” she chants quietly. Her hands search my body as she writhes beneath me. “I’m coming,” she mumbles. “I’m coming. Oh my God—”

She shakes beneath me, as the grip of her body tightens sharply along my length. I want to hold still and savor every expression as she comes undone, but I can’t. I have to move. It’s an unrelenting demand, a consuming need to move furiously inside her, until lightning snaps up my spine, and I thrust into her with a final roar.

I spill so long that stars dance at the corners of my vision, before finally I can tug in air. A shiver wracks her body as I press gentle kisses to her throat, her jaw.

Dropping against Frankie, I turn her with me, so she's tucked into my side, her bad hip up off the mattress and splayed carefully across me. My hands dance over her skin, my lips travel her cheeks, until finally our mouths find each other's, hands gentle faces, and we sigh, a long, satisfied exhale.

Frankie blinks open her eyes and smiles up at me on a happy sigh. "Told you we had nothing to worry about."

Frankie

Playlist: “Cinnamon Girl,” Lana Del Rey

Ren tosses aside the washcloth he used gently between my legs, along his length. Falling back on the bed, tugging me close, he stares up at the ceiling, moonlight casting his hair a cool tarnished copper. His skin is pale as moonbeams, his gaze an icy winter sky. Tight, powerful muscles bunch in his arms as he wraps me in his embrace. I touch him everywhere I can, running my hands along long muscle, firm skin, the sharp indent where his hip meets his backside.

“Wow.” With a thick swallow, he turns and glances at me. “Was that...okay for you?”

I laugh and press a kiss to his neck. “So much more. So much more than okay. It was *wow*.” Interlacing my fingers with him, I kiss his hand. “What about you?”

He shakes his head side to side. “There’s nothing... Nothing comes close to what I just felt with you.” Pressing his lips to my forehead, he hugs me close, then glances down at me, breathless, eyes glowing.

Smiling, he smooths my hair off of my forehead. “You’re incredible,” he says quietly.

I run my hand along his chest and kiss over his heart. “So are you.”

Hooking my leg higher over him, I drift my hand across the terrain of his body, tracing the planes of muscle and bone. I kiss him as I run my hand down his stomach, touching him gently. Even relieved of an erection, he’s thick and heavy.

And I’m already aching for more.

With each touch, I watch him harden. It makes me feel delirious, learning this new part of Ren—his desire, his wants,

every idiosyncrasy of his pleasure.

He throws his head back when I slide my grip lower, my fingers wandering to cup him, exploring velvet soft skin, hard muscles. His abs ripple, and his grip tightens on my shoulder.

“Oh, hell,” he mutters. His hips falter as he presses into my grip. Slowly, I ease my way over his body, kissing down his ribs, the narrow line of hair pointing to his erection.

“Frankie, you don’t have to—”

“I want to,” I whisper. I want to taste him. I want to bring him pleasure for pleasure’s sake. And it’ll be the first time he’s let me do this.

Ren groans and rolls his hips as I take a soft, teasing lick. He reaches for my waist and spins me so he can reach between my thighs. Rubbing my clit with his thumb, he curls two fingers inside me.

A rough cry rips out of me, before I grip the root of his cock and take him deep into my mouth. My legs shake as he strokes my G-spot, works my clit. Ren breathes unsteadily, his free hand delicately cupping my head, his fingers knotting in my hair.

“Oh, God, Frankie. Your mouth. Jesus.”

I moan with pleasure, watching him fall apart under my touch, locking eyes with those pale irises that widen as his hips falter.

“Close,” he whispers, warning me, trying to pull away. I shake my head, hold him tight in my grip.

Stay. I want this.

My orgasm begins at the heart of me, radiating out. Ren feels it, his eyes widening, then growing hazy as he thrusts into my mouth. Air rushes out of me as I fly over the edge, as light dances behind my eyelids. With a pained shout, Ren arches his back, pouring in hot, long pulses down my throat. His breath is rough and erratic. I slowly release him with one final kiss to the tip and smile up at him.

With no preamble, he reaches for me and pulls me flush over his body. After long quiet moments, he presses cool lips along

my neck, up to my mouth with a heavy, satisfied exhale.

“Well, Zenzero,” I say happily against his neck. “Not that I’m surprised, but your Rookie of the Year, MVP status remains unchallenged.”

A laugh rumbles out of him, as he meets my lips for a tender kiss. “I feel like this is all we should be doing. Like I want to quit my job and spend the rest of my life doing this with you.”

“Guess what?” I whisper.

“What?”

“That’s what off-season’s for.”

A warm, mischievous smile brightens his face. “And there goes all incentive to win the series.”

* * *

I used to find the morning after I slept with someone cringey. Mostly because it was always a mistake. It was never my intent to stay over, to be small spoon, a man’s muscly arm my pillow as I slept. But as with everything when it comes to Ren, each morning since our first night has proved deliciously different.

I woke up to a hand slipping between my legs. Hot, warm kisses painting my neck. Another time, gently laid on my back. Others, turned on my stomach. Always a warm mattress beneath me, gentle hands massaging my stiff joints. An eager, already expert mouth and fingers and body spiraling me to glorious orgasms, sending light exploding beneath my eyelids just like the sun cresting the horizon.

That’s the first—and my favorite—part of our routine. The second is a morning walk, at least while the weather is warm enough.

I stroll along the sand, watching the ocean breeze whip Ren's hair into a mad fury of sunrise-copper waves. I hold his arm to steady myself, and I feel my body loosen, my joints open with each step across firm, cool sand.

"I was out cold last night when you came home," I tell him.

Ren glances down at me and smiles. "Oh, I know. I heard you snoring the moment I came in."

I glare at him. "I'm congested." His face tightens in concern. "Allergies, Zenzero."

"Hm." He glances away.

"How was Shakespeare Club?"

I almost died of the cuteness last night. I got my quiet night, curled up on the couch with Pazza, but first I got a goodbye from the sweetest dork that lives. There he was, a well-loved mass-market of *As You Like It* shoved in his back jeans pocket, massive tray of baked goods from Viggo tucked in his arms. And a secretive, delighted glint in his eye that I'd never seen before.

As if the universe is set to prove me wrong, Ren peers down at me, cat eyes crinkled with that same conspiratorial sparkle. Leaning to press a soft kiss to my temple, he murmurs, "It was fun." The words buzz softly against my hair, before he straightens and glances ahead.

Pazza tears off after a gull, barking madly, and when it soars into the sky, she drops glumly to her haunches.

Watching her, I'm distracted from where I step, so when I hit a dip in the sand, my leg buckles, pitching me toward the water. Just before I anticipate an icy wake-up swim, I'm yanked back, a warm hand wrapped around my waist and hoisting me upright.

"*Oof.*" I bump into Ren's chest, my hands reflexively fisting his shirt. Embarrassment heats my cheeks, and rather than meet his eye, I rest my head on his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart.

He presses a kiss to the top of my head. "You okay?"

I nod, but a stupid tear rolls down my cheek. It's the first time I've tripped like that in front of him, and it feels exposing. Indecently vulnerable.

Holding me close, he wraps both arms around me tight. Like he knows I need a minute.

"I'm tough," I whisper.

He nods. "I know you are."

"I can take care of myself."

"You have," he says. "You still do. You always will. I've just joined in, too. Now we take care of each other."

I hiccup a stifled cry and press my forehead to his sternum. His chin fits exactly over my head. I feel his Adam's apple as he swallows.

"Frankie?" he says quietly.

On a snuffle, I say, "Hm?"

Sliding one hand from my back, slowly down my arm, he holds out my hand, and interlaces our fingers. "Dance with me?"

I rear back enough to meet his eyes. He's grinning, but there's a blush on his cheeks. A look, I'm starting to learn, that he wears when he's nervous. "Okay?"

Tucking me close in his grasp, Ren brings our joined hands to his chest. As he sways us, he hums softly in my ear. It's warm and low. No melody I recognize, but it doesn't matter. It's beautiful all the same.

"You got ahead of me," he says quietly. "Trying to do a dip before I've even asked you to dance."

Fresh tears spill down my cheeks. "Søren."

"Yes, Francesca."

A long, silent moment holds between us as an unfamiliar force churns from the core of my body. A powerful, surging, unstoppable *something*, it roars through my chest, tearing

through my heart. A lock slipping into place, it settles with a small, quiet, irrevocable *click*.

The door of my heart swings open, and out tumbles the most terrifying handful of words. Inside me, the irrefutable truth that clatters into place.

I love Ren.

That knowledge makes me feel free, weightless, as if Ren let go of me right now, I'd catch on the sea breeze and float serenely to the sky.

“What is it, buttercup?”

I turn my head enough to playfully sink my teeth into his pec. “You’ve got me all tied up. No nicknames when I can’t defend myself.”

He smiles down at me, slowing our dance until we’re still but for the wind that swirls around us, whipping our hair and clothes.

Ren dips his head and kisses me. A soft, searing sweep of his lips. Gentle and cherishing.

“I love you, Frankie.” Those wintry eyes search mine as he holds me close. “I’ve loved you for a long time. And I know maybe that’s not how you feel, and that’s okay. But I needed you to know. This. You and Me...” He sweeps back the hair tangling across my face. “It means everything to me.”

I nod, trying to swallow the lump of emotion in my throat. But all I can manage, as I cling to this man is the faintest, tear-choked, “Me, too.”

* * *

Three subsequent games. One more at home, two in Denver. Zero wins. Lots of great sex. Lots of cuddles and talks,

sneaking into hotel rooms, and lounging on the couch. But the team's mood is somber, and mine's not much better.

There's a tickle in my throat, an ache settled in my joints. My body's warm and slow. I'm either preparing for the flare of the year or I'm coming down with something. Which, I'll be damned if I tell Ren about.

Sitting on the deck, Ren rubs his forehead as he reads the sports page on his phone. His brow is knitted, his jaw tight. And for some reason I feel responsible.

“What if I jinxed you?”

Ren glances up from his phone. “What?”

“Since we started sleeping together, you've lost three in a row.”

Ren chuckles to himself and takes a sip of coffee. But when he sees my face, he sets down his cup with a clunk and leans in. “You're serious? Practical, rational Frankie, is blaming her sex life for a team that's just not having its best playoffs.”

I shrug and bite into my bagel. “I don't know. I mean you guys suck. *Bad.*”

“Gee. Thanks.”

Setting my hand on his massive thigh, I squeeze affectionately and glance out to the sand where Pazza bolts toward the water, barking at the waves.

“Not you, specifically, Zenzero,” I say quietly, pulling out a tissue and blowing my nose. Ren and Rob are basically the only thing holding the team together. Maddox is still out sick—not that he was playing spectacularly—but he also took down a few other key players, too, with whatever contagion gave him a lung infection.

Ren glances over at me, rests a hand to my forehead, then cheek. “You started sniffing in your sleep last night. You haven't stopped this morning.”

“I'm fine.” I brush his hand away lightly and sip my coffee. “Seasonal allergies.”

He makes a noncommittal noise. Turning slightly to face me, Ren sets one leg on his knee and rests an arm along the back of my chair. His hand slides around my neck and massages.

I hiss at the pain-pleasure of his touch. I ache everywhere, and while I don't have a fever, I'm thinking it's only a matter of time. Not that Ren knows that. Because if he did, he'd tuck me in and insist on staying home and taking care of me. That's not happening, not when tomorrow's game five of the series, and if he doesn't show to practice today or the game tomorrow night, Coach will disown him, *and* they'll definitely lose.

When Ren slides his thumb up my neck toward the tender base of my skull, I almost cry uncle and confess how shitty I feel, but for once, my mother's number lighting up my phone to FaceTime is a welcome interruption.

"Gotta take this," I mutter, leaning out of his grip.

Ren makes no move to leave.

I lift my phone and raise my eyebrows. "You mind?"

He smiles, settling back into his chair with his coffee. "Not at all. Please take it. I'd like to meet her."

Sputtering, I nearly drop my phone. "I. What? Ren—"

"You're going to miss her call, snickerdoodle."

I roll my eyes and swipe to answer her. "Hi, Ma." Ren's mouth quirks. I smack his chest. "My New York comes out when I talk to her. Don't you dare make fun of me."

"Love bug, I would never."

I practically growl at him.

"Frankie?" my mom yells. She's staring down her nose through her glasses, walking through the kitchen.

"Ma. Sit down. You make me nauseous moving around like that."

"Nice to talk to you, too," she says. "Glad you're alive. It's been a while."

Ren lifts an eyebrow in censure. I stick my tongue out at him.

“Don’t stick your tongue out at me, young lady—”

“Ma, it wasn’t for you. It was for him.”

“Oooh,” she croons. “A man? Finally. I told Gabby I thought you were going for that friend of yours with all the fancy piercings, but she told me you don’t bark up that tree.”

“Gabby would be correct. Besides, Lorena’s way out of my league.” Sighing, I swivel the phone so the camera faces Ren. “Ma, this is Ren Bergman. Ren, this is my mom, Maria Zeferino.”

He waves hi and her jaw drops. “Jesus,” my mom whispers.

Ren glances nervously from me back to her.

I lean toward him and grin. “Where do you think I got my love of gingers, Zenzero?”

Ren turns a brilliant red. Clearing his throat, he smiles at her. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Zeferino. Frankie’s said wonderful things about you.”

Like hell I have. I dig my heel into his bare foot, but he doesn’t seem to care.

Ma cocks an eyebrow. “Nice to meet you, Ren. But I doubt that highly. I drive her crazy. It’s why she moved a country away from me.”

I roll my eyes, bringing the phone back to facing only me. “I moved cross-country for a kickass job and mellow weather.”

She waves her hand. “How’s your health?”

“It’s fine,” I say through gritted teeth.

“You exercising? Taking your meds? Getting your bloodwork and X-rays—”

“Ma. I said it’s fine.”

She squints at me. “You look thin. And your nose is red. Are you sick?”

Ren makes a disapproving noise. “See?” he whispers. “I told you.”

I glare at him. “And I told you,” I hiss back, “that I don’t need another fussy mother. So, back off, Ren.”

He sits straight, eyes narrowed. On an abrupt stand, he sweeps up his coffee and goes inside. Guilt settles in my stomach. I shouldn’t have snapped at him, but damn, is it aggravating to be talked to so paternalistically. I’m a grown woman. It’s my body to manage.

Or mismanage.

And tough shit. I warned him this would be an issue, that it was a sensitive and unwavering boundary for me.

As I hear him through the open screen door, banging around in the kitchen and muttering to himself, my stomach tightens in unease, weight presses on my chest that no deep breathing resolves. I’m definitely getting sick. Just with what, I’m not sure.

Tell him. Trust him.

I can’t. Because I can’t trust him to be objective. He’ll toss aside his responsibilities and then down that terrible resentment road we’ll go. I’ll drag him, he’ll go along happily...until he’s miserable, and I’m left with someone who has to choose between me and a fulfilling life. I won’t. Fucking. Do it.

“You done?” Ma says.

My head snaps down as I peer at my phone. “Sorry. My mind wandered.”

“Tell me where it went.” She leans in and sets her cheek in one hand. “I’ve got all day.”

Searching her eyes, I bite my lip in hesitation. I love my mother. And before I was always a checklist of health issues, I felt like we were close. Has time whittled away that barrier between us? Can I open up to her and unburden myself?

Her eyes are like mine, and they brighten as she smiles. “I know I can be overbearing,” she says. “But I called because I miss just talking. That’s all. I trust you to take care of yourself, okay?”

Oh, the guilt.

“I won’t nag or poke you about anything health related,” she says. “I promise. I’ll just listen. And we can talk about other stuff.”

With a glance over my shoulder, I see Ren wandering the kitchen, presumably cooking breakfast. Regret tugs at my heart. I just pushed him away. I’ve become a bit of an expert at that, haven’t I? As if I need further proof, I peer at my mother, the woman who loves me imperfectly, but loves me, nonetheless. Who after our mutual hurts and blunders, I’ve slowly, systematically withdrawn from.

Leaning close to her image on my phone, I clear my throat, searching Ma’s eyes, the ones she gave me. “I miss you,” I tell her, unsteadily.

Her gaze softens behind her glasses. She snuffles. “I miss you, too, honey. But you look like sunshine and seventy degrees almost year-round suits you. So that makes missing you a little easier, knowing you’re happy where you are. You are happy, right?”

I nod. “Yeah, I am.” Glancing over my shoulder, I see Ren, at the window, eyes down. As if he senses me watching him, he glances up. Our eyes lock. I offer him a tentative, apologetic smile. He gives me one back, then turns and disappears deeper into the kitchen.

“I feel like I’m seeing something I shouldn’t,” Ma says wryly.

Breaking my distraction, I refocus on her. “Sorry. I snapped at him, and I wanted him to know I was sorry. And...” I sigh. “I feel like I owe you a sorry, too. I’ve been distant. Gabby nags me every time we talk to just have it all out with you, but I never know where to begin, Ma.”

She nods. “I know, honey. I feel the same way. But maybe we can just talk for now, then work our way toward the hard stuff, eventually, huh?”

“Okay,” I say tentatively. “Well, what do you want to talk about?”

Ma settles into her chair and sweeps up her coffee. “That hunk of redhead love you were all cozy with when I called.”

I scowl at her.

“Now don’t deny you’ve got yourself a big hot cup of ginger tea.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “And while you’re at it, spill.”

Ren

Playlist: “Let’s See What The Night Can Do,” Jason Mraz

“I’m sorry again about this morning,” Frankie says quietly.

I switch lanes and smile over at her when it’s safe to. “It’s okay, Frankie. I get why you were upset. I channeled my inner dad on you a bit.”

Her hand plays idly with my hair at the nape of my neck. She has these little ways that she touches me—twirling my hair around her fingers, sliding my palm against hers in a steady rhythm—that make me feel like she’s wrapped me into her sensory habits, her need to move and touch, and I can’t find a word to explain how much that means to me. Emotion hitches in my throat as she leans and presses a kiss to my neck.

“Zenzero,” she says against my skin. “Why won’t you tell me where we’re going?”

Because it’s expensive, and after googling the restaurant, you’ll veto it.

My grip tightens on the steering wheel as her hand drifts up my thigh. Dangerously high. “Hey. No seductive interrogation tactics while I’m driving.”

She laughs and nips my neck.

“It’s nothing revolutionary,” I manage, willing myself to stay focused on the road. “Only somewhere to eat that’s completely private, so nobody will bug us and there’ll be no bad press before you quit the team.”

Frankie sits back suddenly and lets loose a harsh, wet cough. Tugging her sweater tighter around her, she stares out the window and idly rubs her throat. Seasonal allergies, my ass. She’s coming down with something, probably that crud

Maddox spread around the team, and she's hell-bent on denying it.

"Someplace private to eat is not very specific," she says. "Am I dressed up enough for it?"

I glance over at her, then back to the road. Beneath her gray sweater she wears a black maxi-dress that pops against her skin. The neckline of her dress scoops over her breasts, revealing mouthwatering cleavage that her fidget necklace barely hides. Evening sunlight dances off of her collarbones, the tip of her nose, and brings out the flecks of bronze in her hazel irises.

"You're perfect," I tell her.

Snorting, she laughs. "I'm far from perfect, but if you mean I'm appropriately dressed, then I'll take it."

As I turn into the private valet parking entrance, Frankie sets a hand on my thigh again, her voice softer. "But while we're on the subject, you look pretty perfect yourself, Zenzero."

I glance down. I'm only wearing charcoal gray slacks and a white dress shirt, sleeves cuffed, no tie. "You dressed me."

"I did. I have excellent taste. And my muse is very handsome. Inspiration wasn't hard to come by."

I smile as I turn off the engine. "Thank you, honey cakes."

"They get worse and worse," Frankie mutters. She cranes forward, glancing up at the building's brick façade. "What is this place?"

"A well-kept secret."

She turns and gives me a narrow-eyed frown. "This better not be some practical joke of a surprise party. I hate surprises."

"I know you do, Frankie. It's just you and me."

Finally.

After a quick elevator ride, we're led to our table overlooking the water. Frankie settles into her seat, peering about analytically as I scooch in her chair. "This place feels expensive, Søren."

“Francesca. Please don’t do this.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Don’t do what?”

“Give me hell for taking you somewhere half decent and private to eat.” I drop into my chair and open my menu. “We cook virtually every night. Chinese is the rare splurge. I can spring for a meal out.”

She mumbles under her breath, lifts her menu, and opens it.

Peering around, I take in the space, then Frankie, who glances away from her menu and stares out at the water, a private smile tilting her lips. It’s exactly what I wanted, what I thought Frankie would want. The ocean behind us. Seclusion. Heat lamps so she doesn’t get cold. And her favorite kind of food.

She returns to the menu, promptly drops it, and stares at me, slack jawed. “It’s all burgers.”

“That’s the idea.”

“It’s like you’re trying to get laid or something, Zenzero.”

I smile as she bites her lip and tries not to smile back at me.

Suddenly, her face turns to a frown. “We need to talk about something,” she says seriously.

My heart leaps off a cliff and free-falls into panic “Oh? What’s that?” Worst-case-scenario thoughts blitz my mind with stunning clarity.

She’s not satisfied.

This isn’t working for her.

She just wants to be friends.

“I don’t know your middle name.” Her frown deepens. “And I realized it’s one of those details you’re supposed to know when you’re serious about someone. I feel like I failed because I didn’t ask you that. That and a few other things.”

No longer plummeting to its doom, my heart flips and lands in a pool of sweet relief. I drop my head on a rough exhale.

Frankie doesn’t notice. “I realized in the shower earlier,” she continues, “I’ve shared more life with you, had more sex with

you than anyone else, talked about worldviews and politics, but I don't know your middle name. I know you want to stay with the team for as long as you can, that you want to miss the woods as much as you love the ocean, that you want a piano in your house, but I don't know your middle name. And I should. Am I making any sense?"

Finally, my body's calmed from the free fall my heart just took, and I glance up, meeting her eyes.

"What is it?" she asks, looking at me in confusion.

"Oh, I just catastrophized. I thought you were breaking up with me for a minute."

Her mouth drops. She blinks rapidly, and then she bursts into laughter. Hysterical, *loud* laughter. "How?" she says between fits of laughter. "How could you think that?"

"I don't actually find the internal panic I just went through *that* funny, Frankie."

She sobers. "I'm sorry. It isn't funny, you're right. It's just that, Ren... I'm happy with you. *So* happy." Her features grow guarded. "Are *you* happy?" she asks quietly.

I slide my hand into hers and tangle our fingers. "Far beyond happy, Frankie. I'm over the moon. Every day."

A small, pleased smile warms her face. "Good." After a beat of silence, she pulls away and takes a sip of her water. "All right, fill in the gaps for me, then. Middle name. Cough it up."

"Isak. Yours is Chiara."

"How did you...?" She gives me a look. "You totally scoped out my ID, didn't you?"

I smooth my napkin, straighten my knife. A man needs a little dignity in life.

Taking my non-answer for the answer that it is, she moves on. "Do you really want five kids?"

Glancing up, I meet her eyes, trying to trace the route of our conversation, which isn't always clear when Frankie and I talk. She doesn't do all the pit stops and detours that "typical"

dialogue takes. Sometimes I need a minute to catch up, but I find it wildly refreshing to speak so directly with her.

“It’s a ballpark,” I tell her. “I’m open to discussion. You?”

“A couple at least.”

I stare at her, finding it easy to picture her as a mom, and a good one, at that. Playful, empathic, affectionate. I can see her sitting near the water in a comfy beach chair, reading a book with a baby sleeping on her chest. That picture, that moment in my mind’s eye, it’s something I want with a physical hunger.

Frankie smiles and slips her legs between mine under the table. “I think you like me, Zenzero, conversational speed bumps and all.”

God, if she only knew how much. “I more than like you, pumpkin patch. I love you, exactly as you are.”

She smiles and peers down at her menu again. “That’s the disturbing thing.”

After we order, we watch the sun set, and I smile as she moans and sighs over a gourmet burger. When the server clears our plates and leaves a dessert menu, she picks the chocolatiest confection, then sits back with a sigh in her chair. The sea breeze sweeps her hair up and drags dark strands across her face. Frankie deftly tugs them back and glances at me, catching me staring at her.

“Hi,” she says quietly.

I grin and stretch my legs further beneath the table, tangling with hers. “Hi.”

“This has been really nice, Ren. Thank you.”

“Good.” I lift my water in a toast to her. I’m not touching alcohol, not when I’ll be driving her home. “Congratulations on law school, sugar plum.”

Her lips twitch as she lifts her root beer. “Thanks, pudding pop.”

The waiter clears his throat, looking like he might have gotten more than he bargained for when he took this exclusive two-

top. Frankie glances away, hiding her smile by sipping her drink.

Accepting the check, I pull out my wallet and hand him my card. “Thanks.”

The best kind of server, our waiter simply sets the dessert right in front of Frankie, slips one candle in it, which he lights, then silently disappears.

“Huh.” Frankie reaches for something on the middle of the table. “What’s this?”

I watch her pick up the fortune cookie paper as if it’s in slow motion. It must have fallen out of my wallet. I didn’t mean for her to see that. Not yet.

Faster than you’d think, she snatches it up, and spins the worn paper between her fingers. But I’m fast, too, and my hand clamps over it.

Her eyes narrow at me. “What?”

“It’s...private.”

“A private fortune?” She tries to pull her hand away, but my grip is solid. “What’s the big deal?”

“Please, Frankie. It’s a souvenir of sorts. It’s special to me.”

She frowns. “Why won’t you let me read it?”

The lightbulb goes off over her head. Her eyes widen. “Souvenir? Is this from that night? When you came over and ate all my Chinese?”

“Excuse me. We split that food fair and square, Miss Revisionist History. In fact, I think you stole one of my wontons, maybe even two.”

Wrangling the paper out of her grip, which I feel a little bad for—late in the day, Frankie’s hands get stiff and, in her words, “sloppy”—I flip open my wallet and slide it back inside.

I’m saving that fortune paper for a day in the future. One involving a sparkly ring and me hiving with anxiety.

Giving me a scowl, Frankie lifts a fork to dig into her cake, then pauses as she sees the solitary candle. Her face blanks. “Why the candle? It’s not my birthday,” she says.

“I told him we were celebrating you. I think he misunderstood.”

Frankie peers at the flame, as if it holds a secret. “What do I do?”

I rub my knee against hers, knowing touch is sometimes all she needs for a little reassurance. “It might not be your birthday, Frankie. But you can always make a wish.”

She glances up at me and holds my gaze. The sunset blazes in her eyes, sets her skin on fire. I soak in every detail I can when she closes her eyes and blows out the tiny flame with one powerful breath.

As smoke curls in the air, my heart says its own wish, too.

* * *

Once we park in my garage and get inside, Pazza’s thrilled to see us. Frankie doesn’t even scold her when she jumps up and tries to lick me. She’s far away, her brow furrowed. Gears turning.

Following Pazza out onto the deck, Frankie watches her run down to the sand and wander the shore, sniffing and digging. I’m right behind her, plugging my phone into the speakers.

Frankie turns and glances up at me, then at the speakers. “What’s with the music?”

I bow, straighten, and offer my hand. “Madam. May I have this dance?”

The line between her brows vanishes as she belly laughs. “You were totally born in the wrong century.” Stepping closer, she

fists my shirt, yanking me close. I cup her face, leaning to kiss her. “Wait.” Frankie sets her hand on my chest.

I pull back. “What?”

“You shouldn’t kiss me—” She pauses, biting her lip.

“Last I checked, allergies aren’t contagious, Francesca.”

“Don’t ‘Francesca’ me, Søren,” she grumbles. After a beat of silence, she meets my eyes. “Okay, I might have a small cold, all right? Now please, *please* don’t go nursemaid on me. This is what I meant that day when we got lunch. When this all started, Ren.”

I hold her eyes, then press a kiss to her cheek. Closer to the corner of her mouth.

“Ren—”

“If I don’t have whatever this sickness is by now, I’m not getting it, Frankie. Just let me kiss you.” I sweep my lips over hers, a faint teasing touch as my thumbs gentle her cheeks. She tastes sweet like chocolate, and her lips are decadently soft.

As I deepen the kiss, the breeze wraps around us, a blanket of sea air and the faint wisp of flowers. Frankie drapes her arms around my neck and leans in.

“You have my heart, Søren Bergman,” she whispers against my neck. “Please, please be careful with it.”

I wrap my arms tight around her, swaying her with me.

“Always.” Pressing a soft kiss to the corner of her mouth, I slide my grip down her waist, my other hand tangling with hers. “Same goes for you, Francesca. Or else I’ll be reduced to writing maudlin amateur poetry.”

She sets her head on my shoulder and sighs happily as I lead us in a slow sway across the deck. “Such a good dancer,” she mutters. “You’re annoyingly good at everything you do.”

“Well, not everything. I can’t do a backbend to save my life. I’m horrible at long division. And I’m still learning how to be good at something else.”

Frankie peers up at me. “Like what?”

I snort softly, feeling a blush creep up my cheeks. “You’re going to make me say it?”

“Ohhhh.” She waves a hand. “No worries, there. You’re the best lover I’ve ever had, Zenzero. Hands down.”

My heart twists. Not out of an ego boost, but because I tell myself it has much more to do with what Frankie *feels* when we’re together. In her heart, not just in her body. That for her, as it is for me, it’s not just sex. It’s making love.

“I’m sorry if I haven’t told you,” she whispers. “It’s not for lack of me thinking it. A lot. Frequently.”

I press a soft kiss to her lips.

Her eyes meet mine, and she stares at me curiously. “You know how you told me to get into Shakespeare Club, you have to recite verses that mean something to you?”

“Mhmm.”

“If I were standing at the entrance for your meeting, determining whether or not *you* got in, what would you say to me?”

The wind sends a swirl of dark hair across her face. I slip it safely behind her ear, tracing my fingers down the shell of her ear, the smooth line of her neck. “Francesca, are you trying to say you’d like to be wooed?”

She smiles up at me. “I was attempting to be coy. How’d I do?”

“Nailed it.” I pull her closer, feeling her heart beat hard against my chest. “Let’s see. Ah, just the thing.”

Clearing my throat, I search her eyes. “‘Doubt thou the stars are fire, doubt that the sun doth move, doubt truth to be a liar, but never doubt I love.’” I peer down at her, giving her a soft kiss. “How’s that?”

Frankie’s smile deepens as she kisses me back. I hold her close in my arms under the night sky’s canopy of fiery stars.

Frankie

Playlist: “My Body Is a Cage,” Arcade Fire

There’s a restless energy among the team. Ren’s features are uncharacteristically tight, like he’s only half present, distracted with worry. Worry that I hope isn’t directed at me. Even though I’m a fair candidate for it. I feel like shit stuck to the bottom of a beat-up sneaker.

I went to bed last night feeling under the weather and woke up knowing I was heading straight for the eye of the storm. My chest is heavy. I keep stifling a wet cough in the crook of my arm. And when I used the restroom just ten minutes ago, my pee was dark, my skin sallow as I stared at my reflection over the sink. I know I need to drink water, but I can barely get it past my throat.

Worst part is, I’m not even the saddest looking one in the room. Andy’s quiet—which he never is—Tyler’s cranky, Lin’s heart’s not in it. Rob’s got a scowl going, which my memory has filed away under the label “I had a fight with the wifey,” and if François were any more stressed, I’d slip him one of my emergency Ativan.

Like always, the team’s gathered in a warehouse corner of the arena, where trucks back in with all kinds of stock you wouldn’t think is necessary but is apparently vital to running a sports rink. It’s where the guys do their usual soccer ritual that’s just supposed to keep them limber, connected, and distracted before they suit up for the game.

Their version of soccer isn’t a game, per se. It’s just the guys in their warm-ups, circled around, volleying the ball. The sole aim of the exercise is not to let the soccer ball hit the ground.

It makes you careful with your touches, aware of your teammates. It's a smart pre-game activity.

They're just sucking at it.

Ren stands on the opposite side of the room, amid the circle, a head taller than either guy surrounding him, hands on his hip. He's staring at me, clearly lost in thought. I tip my head and jerk my chin. *Pay attention.*

When Kris drops the ball, Ren finally blinks and breaks away from watching me.

Rob sighs and scoops up the ball. "Again."

"Why?" Tyler says. "We're losing tonight, at which point the playoffs are over, and you know it."

Ren drops his hands, and gestures to Rob. Rob volleys it to him. As Ren chests it, then easily uses his thigh to send it back to Rob, he yells, "*Scapegrace!*"

Rob's eyes narrow as the ball sails his way, but when he heads it toward Lin, a grin lights his face as he hollers, "*Rapscallion!*"

Half of the guys' gazes swivel over their shoulders to me. I studiously focus on my phone, so they don't feel intruded on. I'm having a hard time focusing my eyes, and out of my peripheral vision, I can see them all passing some kind of inscrutable look between themselves, like they've been caught doing something they shouldn't.

I cough thickly into my arm as Lin says his word, so I miss it. But when François cracks it toward Andy, his bellowed oath echoes in the room: "*Base-court apple-john!*"

Lin snorts. Tyler doubles over in hysterics, and Andy flies toward the ball, saving it from touching the floor. Juggling it, he settles it on his foot, then stares at Kris, deadly serious. "*Mewling cut-purse.*"

Laughter erupts in the room, the ball starts flying, not once touching the ground, as shoulders drop and frowns dissolve. I watch the ball travel in a psychedelic blur across the space as

stars dance in the corner of my vision. The room's warmer, my labored breaths a refrain as it tilts and spins beneath me.

I take a step back and brace myself against the wall, rubbing a hand over my face. My hand comes away damp. I'm sweating. Clearing my throat, I try to take a slow breath, and squint, one-eyed, hoping it clears my vision.

For a moment, the world seems clear, and I can see how different the atmosphere is in the space, now. As if a switch was flipped, the room's mood is shades brighter, like the sun bursting over land the moment it escapes a cloud.

The oaths just keep coming, their laughter swelling in volume and complexity like a swarm of bees. These guys either all picked up on Ren's cursing creativity over the past three years, or they've turned into giant Shakespeare dorks, too. Whatever the explanation, the effect is the same. Morale restored. Spirits lifted.

God, the brilliance. Ren did what he always has—brought the joy, made people feel better. And this is why he's instrumental to the team. This is why, as my legs buckle and I sink to the floor, I can only hope he's too busy to notice that not even his miraculous sunshine can save this little cloud from being swallowed up in the storm.

* * *

Without opening my eyes, I already know where I am. I know by the smell, the scratchy sheets, the threat of fluorescents nearby. Maybe a bathroom light left on, the door wedged open.

The fucking hospital.

When I take a jagged breath in, my lungs feel less soupy than they did, however long ago that was, when the warehouse went sideways, and my legs turned to goo. I have no concept of time.

I can feel my hip throbbing like a son-of-a-bitch. I lick my lips and am surprised to feel they aren't chapped. I feel the warmth of a calloused palm pressed to mine, long fingers wrapped possessively around my hand.

Ren.

My eyes blink open, slide right, toward the hand that he holds. I smile involuntarily at the sight of him, sleeping. Slouched low in those wildly uncomfortable hospital recliners, his mouth faintly open, smudges under his eyes.

I'm weak. I can feel that. My body feels heavy, and I already want to go back to sleep, but I want Ren to know I'm okay even more.

My nose itches. I scratch it and bump clumsily into an oxygen cannula. My hand aches where the hep-lock is taped on, where the needle sends God-knows-what into my system. Antibiotics. Saline. Steroids. Pain relievers.

The prescription list is written in scraggly marker on the white board at my feet. I can't read it for shit. I just know it's long. Ren shifts in the chair, stays asleep, and I watch him. I've watched him sleep before, and maybe that sounds weird. But sometimes I wake up before him and watch dawn paint his face, cast shadows over his cheekbones, his soft lips, that smooth brow, relaxed in sleep. His brow isn't smoothed now. It's furrowed. He's worried.

I try to squeeze his hand but can barely do it. Clearing my throat, I rasp, "Ren."

His eyes snap open, dart my way, then widen. Sitting upright, he stands and bends over me, cupping my face. "Hey," he says. His voice is unsteady. His eyes red-rimmed.

"I'm okay," I whisper.

He nods. Blinks, eyes wet with unshed tears. I try to lift my arms to wrap around him, offer him comfort, but they're too heavy.

My voice feels raw, but I clear my throat and croak out, "Come here, Zenzero."

A sound breaks from him as he leans closer, rests his head in the crook of my neck. I turn my head and kiss his temple. His arms slip carefully between me and the mattress. He sighs, slow and heavy. The sound of relief.

“Frankie.” It’s all he says, but I feel what he means, love and worry braided with my name.

When he pulls back, he sits and drags the chair closer. After smoothing back my hair, he slides the cannula back where it’s supposed to hook around my ear.

“How long have I been out?” I whisper.

He focuses on my hair, his fingers making gentle work of its tangles. I’m sure I look like double-microwaved hell.

“Forty-eight hours.”

I lift my eyebrows. “Impressive.” Clearing my throat again, I grope for the button to raise myself up a bit. “How’d the game go?”

Ren drops his hand from my hair, squeezes my hand. “We lost.”

“I’m sorry, Ren—”

“Good morning, sunshine!” Lorena stands, framed in the doorway, reading my thoughts, seeing the frustration, the embarrassment.

The helplessness.

Crossing to the other side of the bed, she smacks her lips to my forehead. “I won’t even ask. I can tell you feel like shit.”

Dropping to the foot of the bed, she starts massaging my legs. I groan because it feels amazing, and I also hate that the people who love me know me this well. I feel weak and needy.

“I heard you made quite the dramatic exit.” She gives me a saucy grin.

I glare at her. “Why are you here again?”

Ren swallows his smile, hiding it behind a fist and clearing his throat.

“Because you have double-lung pneumonia,” Lo says, “and you’re one of mine. Because I love you, and when we’re healing, we need all the love we can get.”

Ren brings my hand to his cheek, kisses my palm, then sets it against his beard. Reflexively, I curl my fingers into the soft hairs, scrape my nails along his scruff.

Lo sighs. “Well, I’ll leave you two lovebirds. I’m gonna go bug your nurse. Boss somebody around.” Standing, she kisses me again on the forehead and pats my leg. “Welcome back, baby.”

Ren watches her walk out, then gently stands and shuts the door behind her.

I stare at him as he moves, loving the way simple clothes drape beautifully on his body. Ball cap pulled low. Jeans that are dark and worn, a weathered blue T-shirt that brings out the ice in his eyes and the copper in his hair. When he sits, he strokes my cheek with the back of his knuckles.

I clear my throat roughly, then lick my lips. Ren reaches reflexively for the hospital tray and sweeps up a lip balm. Uncapping it, he swipes it over my mouth, then pops the cap back on.

“You did that?” I ask. My voice sounds watery.

“Pretty much the only thing I *could* do was make sure you didn’t wake up with cracked lips.” His smile is faint. “Frankie. Why didn’t you tell me how bad you were feeling?”

I search his eyes. “I knew you’d worry. I didn’t want to pull you away from the game, from the best chance of winning.”

His eyes tighten at the corners. “So, you decided you’d make that choice for me?”

Shifting in the bed, I try to buy my hip some relief. “I know you, Ren. This way, you got to play the game, and I got to have the peace of mind that I wasn’t a roadblock. This is what I talked about when we agreed to give a relationship a chance. I don’t want to be a point of resentment. I don’t want my health stuff to prevent you from doing your work and being successful.”

Ren just stares at me. “Frankie, you’re more important than a hockey game. Unequivocally.”

“Maybe one game. But this happens to me, Ren. I catch shit because my immune system hates me, and my meds don’t help. Trust me, it won’t be the last time. Down the line, you’ll be glad that I keep this stuff to myself.”

He shakes his head, blinking rapidly. “I...I’m... Are you *serious?*”

I frown at him. “Absolutely. Tell me how the hell you would have felt if you didn’t play that game, and they lost. If you sat next to me in the hospital, useless, while I slept in a drugged stupor with a perfectly curable issue, and you watched your team struggle and fail without you. In the back of your head you would have been wondering if you should have been there, if, with your help, they would have won, thinking ‘if only Frankie hadn’t gotten sick’—”

“That’s the last thing I’d think.”

I laugh bitterly but it’s complicated by a coughing jag. Ren pours a cup of water, plops a straw in it and holds it to my mouth. I drink half of it and drop back on my pillow with a sigh.

His face is taut, his jaw clenched.

“Why are you angry?” I ask, confident I’ve read *this* emotion correctly.

He whips his head toward me, pinning me with those wintry eyes that feel particularly cold at the moment. “Because what you’re saying is bullshit.” The word snaps in the air. Swearwords really do have more weight when a person uses them rarely.

He stares at me, unblinking. “I *was* here with you. I’m the one who had half an eye on you and caught you before you nearly cracked your head on the concrete. I’m the one who knew what to do. I’m the one who wouldn’t let anything come between you and me until I knew that you were okay and that you were going to wake up.”

I stare at him in disbelief. “You missed the game.”

“Of course, I missed the game, Frankie!” He sits back and stares at me, stunned. “How could you even—”

“I told you that’s the *last* thing I ever wanted!” I yell hoarsely. “I didn’t need you here, Ren.”

He leans in, a breath away from me. “*I* needed to be here.”

“Exactly. This is *your* trip. And every time you choose my health problems over your own life, it will be your trip, too. Then, when it builds up, when you make these choices, time and again, you’ll resent *me* for it. If you didn’t act like a lovesick idiot every time I got a cold—”

“Double. Lung. Pneumonia,” he growls, ripping off his ball cap and slapping it onto the cart. “You were unconscious. Your oxygen saturation level was terrifying. This isn’t a head cold, Francesca.”

“You shouldn’t have come.” I drag myself up higher in the bed, trying to get some kind of ground over him. “You can’t choose me and my health shit over your career and commitments. Eventually—”

Ren stands abruptly, sending the chair scraping cross the room. Planting his hands on my hospital bed, he leans in, eyes locked on mine. “I will *always* choose you. And I will never resent you for it. That’s what we agreed—that I would demonstrate what I just said with my actions. But apparently even *that’s* impossible to trust. I have to be an asshole who leaves his critically ill girlfriend in the hospital to play a stupid hockey game to prove himself.

“Guess what, Frankie? I’m not that guy, and I never will be. If you can’t trust me, after all that I’ve entrusted to *you*, showing you who I am and that I am a man of my word, then that really fucking hurts.”

“You’re making this about you,” I counter. “You’re letting emotion cloud your judgement. And this is how *I* will end up getting hurt. In the moment, you didn’t want to feel guilty for not being with me. To avoid that, you stayed. But every time you do that, it’ll feel a little bit less worth it. And every time,

you will blame me a little bit more. Even though I'm telling you I don't need you here."

Ren pushes off the bed, pacing the room like a caged animal. Scraping his hands through his hair, he sweeps up his ball cap from the hospital cart and tugs it on, brim pulled low.

"I can't believe you're that cynical, Frankie. I can't believe you'd say that about me."

I stare up at him, as hot tears spill from my eyes. "I'm not cynical. That's what happens, Ren."

"No, that's what *happened*. And it was wrong. But that wasn't me, Frankie. What about me? Don't I get a say in how this goes?"

His words land uncomfortably close to my heart.

Trust him. Believe him.

He takes one look at whatever face I'm making and sighs in defeat. "Because if not, how do I ever outstrip your past? No matter how much I reassure you that I will never resent you, that I will never consider you and my own happiness at odds, you don't believe me. I have to act how *you* think I should. I can't have my own needs in this relationship."

"That's not fair." My throat hurts from talking. I reach for the cup of water and Ren strides forward, helping me when I can't even hold up my arm long enough to get it.

I suck on the straw and peer up at him as my eyes fill with fresh tears. Will he really always look at me like this, when I'm at my worst? Like he loves me, like my pain is as real to him as it is to me?

Like there's nowhere else that he'd rather be?

"How is that not fair?" he says quietly, setting down the cup.

"Ren, I'm just trying to say there's a compromise here. When I feel like this, you can take care of me in reasonable ways, but don't put your life on hold."

He shakes his head. "No. That's literally saying my love for you has to have conditions. I'm not okay with that. That's you

trying to find a loophole so that you don't have to trust me all the way."

I glare at him. "You're being so fucking condescending right now!"

"Frankie." Scrubbing his face, he sighs. "I understood becoming a couple to mean that, among other things, when either of us was hurting, we were no longer alone in that. So, I have a relationship to your pain. It's not mine, and I don't get to tell you what to do with it, but I get to choose to love you through it. And if and when you need care and comfort—which, like it or not, the past forty-eight hours, you did—I get to be the person who gives it to you. That's basically the *point* of a relationship. Isn't it?"

My jaw's tight. I feel pushed and cornered and talked down to, tired and sick and infuriatingly defeated. "Well, then we probably would have been better served discussing this philosophy of yours rather than middle names and numbers of kids over dinner. Because I'm not sure I agree with that."

His eyes narrow as he tips his head. "I was here because I *love* you. Partners who love each other are there for each other. You don't agree with that?"

Stubbornness draws the arrow. Wounded pride aims. Anger fires, fatally accurate. "I never said I loved you."

Ren opens his mouth, then freezes. Slowly he straightens and stares down at me. I can see his gears turning. It's playing with semantics. We both know I've meant it, even though I have yet to say those exact words.

His jaw tics. His eyes glisten as he stares at me. "What are you saying?"

It hurts like hell, looking at him. Knowing that I'm pushing away the best person I've ever had in my life, but that's the problem. I don't belong with someone as good as Ren. He's not detached enough, not selfish enough. His boundaries are too lax, his impulse for intimacy too quick.

The truth is there, like it's always been. Sunshine and storms share the sky, but never together. They brush, tangential,

fleeting moments of breathtaking beauty—the burning, life-giving sun piercing through a blackened sky—until it’s over so quick, it makes you wonder if it ever happened at all.

“I’m saying you should leave, Ren.”

He rears back like I’ve struck him. Blinking, he glances away, then down to the ground. “You don’t mean that, Frankie. You’re angry. And while I disagree with you, you’re allowed to be angry with me. But I’m not leaving.”

I shut my eyes, press my back into the bed, and swallow my tears. “Yes, you are.”

“Frankie—”

“Get *out*.”

It’s silent for a long moment. Nothing but ambient noises—doors open and shut, the beep of a machine. I keep my eyes closed, hold my breath, and pray for the torturous moment to end.

Suddenly his voice is near my ear. “I’ll give you time. But I’m not walking away from this, not for good. You deserve better than that. And I do, too.”

I bite my tongue, tears slipping down my cheeks. Finally, I feel his heat, that clean, spicy scent drift away. Long strides fade from the room before the door clicks shut.

And then I fall apart.

Not a minute later, Lo reenters my room and looks straight from my tear-stained face to Ren’s empty chair. “Okay. What level of self-sabotage did we just activate?”

I dab my eyes with one hand, and with the other, lift a sparkly painted middle finger.

“Grumpy meets glitter,” she says. “I like that.”

“It’s been that way forever.”

“Just like your piss-poor attitude.”

I slam a fist into the bed and glare at her. “I sent him packing. I can send you, too.”

“Ooh.” She fakes a shiver. “I’m scared.”

I clench my jaw and shut my eyes again. Closing the door behind her, Lo takes her time walking over to me.

“Actually,” she says, “*you’re* the one who’s scared.” My hands twist the sheets as Lo drags Ren’s chair next to the bed and plops down on it. “The question is, what exactly are you scared of?”

When I don’t answer her, she wraps her hand around mine and leans in. “Relationships aren’t perfect, Frankie. They’re living, breathing things. They have growing pains. They have highs and lows. They take trust and forgiveness. They don’t require perfection or flawlessness. They just require two people who want to love each other and keep learning the best way to do that.”

I open my eyes and slant her a sharp look. “Who needs the Hallmark Channel when I have you and Ren?”

Lo searches my face. “Oh, honey.” She sighs and thumbs away my tears. “That’s what you’re scared of, huh? Being loved by that big redhead teddy of a lover who worships the ground you walk on?”

I wipe a stray tear angrily from my cheek. “I kicked him out, Lo. What did I do?”

“You reacted badly to being loved well.”

“I love him,” I sob, covering my face. “And I just made him leave.”

“I know, Frankie. And that is what we have to work on. Because Ren doesn’t need that shit in his life, and neither do you.” Lo gently squeezes my hand. “So, what’s the therapist say? When you’ve talked to her about him?”

“Well...” I clear my throat. “I haven’t actually—”

“Oh, woman.” Lo releases my hand. “You haven’t talked to her about him.”

I shake my head.

“Because you knew what she was going to remind you about, and you’re too scared to own the truth she would have dropped on you.”

I nod.

“Which is?” Lo presses.

“That I deserve love for being exactly who I am,” I admit miserably. “That the person worthy of my love will love all of me.”

Exactly what my therapist has told me. Exactly what I told Ren that night on the beach. I’m damn good at giving advice and shit at taking it.

Lo sits back in her chair and throws her feet on the bed. “That’s right. So you’ve got to make a decision. If you believe you’re lovable, you have to believe there’s someone out there up for loving you. Isn’t that him?”

“Yes,” I whisper, as I wipe away tears.

“No, you will never know if he’s going to hurt you, not definitively. Guess what, Frankie? *Nobody* knows if love’s going to hurt them. You simply have to take a chance.”

My breath comes fast and short. I fist the sheets, trying to breathe. God, I fucked this up. So badly. I’m still terrified and insecure and insanely vulnerable, but she’s right. *I’m* right. If anyone is going to love me, if there’s anyone I want to love and be worthy of loving, it’s Ren. And when he showed me how much he felt that way about me, I pushed him away. Because this is frightening. Beautifully, vulnerably frightening.

I try to smile at her. “It’ll be fine. I’m okay.”

She cocks an eyebrow. “Really? ’Cause you look like you’re trying not to shit yourself.”

I groan. “You know I can’t smile on command.”

“So why try with me?”

“Smiling conveys all-right-ness. I’m trying to show you that I can handle this.”

“Hey.” Lo squeezes my hand. “Yes, you’re going to be all right. And yes, you can handle this. But guess what?”

“What?”

She smiles. “You don’t have to do it alone.”

* * *

Three weeks. Lots of bickering with Lo, who just finally left my place a few days ago, when she was confident that I wasn’t going to pass out in the shower or spiral into another fit of anxious sobbing. Five tele-therapy sessions with my counselor to actually talk through my hang-ups about having a relationship.

I’m not fixed. I’m not perfect. And I never will be. But I’m healthy enough to travel and ready to be brave. I can only hope Ren will find that’s enough for him.

At the airport, I sit in the terminal, phone pinched between my ear and shoulder.

“So listen,” Willa says over the line. “Word is Aiden showed up at the Love Shack—”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“The Love Shack,” she says simply. “Trust me. Once you get to the A-frame, it will all be very clear.”

“I’ll be lucky if Ren doesn’t spin me around in the road and tell me to go right back where I came from.”

Willa snort-laughs. “Please. He’s going to lose his shit with happiness when he sees you. The person he’s going to send packing is Aiden.”

“Just don’t pull away as soon as you drop me off.”

“Of course, I won’t,” she says. “But I’m telling you, you have nothing to worry about—”

The flight attendant announces early boarding over the speaker, cutting through our conversation. Signing off with Willa, I stand and grin at the grannies who eyeball my cane and mutter “faker,” loud and clear.

Even when your illness isn't invisible, people can still be blind to it. But I'm done being embarrassed or humiliated or defensive. I'm being me. Because that's enough. And for the first time in too many years, I know that I'm loved for exactly who I am. The person who reminded me of that waits for me in a little cabin in the woods. I can only hope he'll forgive and love me still.

Ren

Playlist: “The Night We Met,” Lord Huron

“Easy.” Aiden drops the axe and wipes a hand across his sweaty forehead. “What did that log ever do to you?”

I glance up, meeting my brother-in-law’s gaze. “Just staying busy.”

Aiden rolls his eyes. “Could you be any more tortured?”

“I didn’t ask you here, Aiden. It’s my stretch at the cabin, *my* time here that you’re crashing.”

My parents own an A-frame in Washington State, which is where I spent a lot of my childhood, up to my sophomore year of high school. We moved to LA because Dad got a great offer at UCLA Medical, and while I enjoy Southern California, I like coming back to the Pacific Northwest. Bundling up, seeing my breath in the air when I wake up. Surrounded by evergreens and deep blue sky.

The siblings all get use of the cabin, but the older ones have to come during our scheduled time and do maintenance to keep that privilege. My time is usually mid-summer since my work schedule is most flexible then, but Ryder swapped with me and gave me this stretch of late spring when I essentially begged him.

“Bit of a theme I’m bumping into lately,” Aiden says roughly. “I’m unwanted here. As I’m also unwanted in my own home. The one I worked really damn hard to buy and fix up.” Aiden lifts the axe and swings, splitting a log in two. “Thank you for reminding me. Not that you’ve asked why I’m here or what’s wrong.”

“You’re right,” I grunt, hauling an armful of wood over to the stack and dropping it. “I haven’t.”

“Which is very unlike you,” Aiden calls.

“Guess I turned over a new leaf.”

I swing and split another log, feeling the ache in my muscles, the burn in my back. All I’ve done is try to exhaust myself around here. Otherwise, I can’t sleep to save my life.

Three weeks.

Three weeks and those two words still ringing in my head. *Get out.*

After I got home, I beat the hell out of the punching bag, cried in the shower—yes, you heard me, I cried—and then I took advantage of Ryder’s willingness to trade times at the cabin and came straight here. If I spent another moment in my house with Pazza’s chew toy lying on the floor or Frankie’s scent all over my sheets, I was going to lose my mind.

Aiden just showed his punk butt up here two days ago, looking disheveled and under-slept. I didn’t ask him what was going on with Freya, because I didn’t want to know. I have enough of my own problems.

In the hospital, I told Frankie I’d give her time, that I wasn’t walking away for good. I’m about at the end of my rope with that waiting, though. I promised myself after a month, she was going to hear from me, see my face, and have to talk this out.

“You surly is weird. When you scowl, you look like Axel.” Aiden drops to the ground and leans against a massive hemlock, sipping from his water between pants for air. “Shit, when did I get out of shape?”

“Happens when you work all the time.”

He levels me with a look. “So, you *do* know why I’m here.”

I glance at him over my shoulder before I turn and swing, splitting another log. “I have no idea why you’re here. I just know you’re a workaholic.” Aiden’s a professor at UCLA. He’s actually the one responsible for pairing up Willa and Ryder when they were both his students, largely against their

will at first. “You teach, grade, lecture, guest panel, publish constantly. When would you have time for exercise? Or anything else, for that matter.”

Aiden’s jaw tics. He has near-black hair, a shade darker than Frankie’s, and three days’ worth of scruff, a sharp contrast to his blue eyes and the dark circles below them. He looks angry and exhausted.

Welcome to the club, Aiden.

“Freya kicked me out.”

My head snaps up. “She kicked you *out*?”

He sighs, eyes shut, head against the tree. “Say it again. I love hearing it repeated.”

“Aiden, I don’t have the capacity for your sparkling sarcasm. I’ve got my own...” I exhale roughly, feeling a swell of emotion tighten my throat. “I’m dealing with my own stuff. Say what you need, but I can’t be your cuddle buddy right now. Call Ryder or something.”

Aiden chucks his water at the ground. “What, so he can drive here and beat the snot out of me for hurting his sister? No, thanks. You’re the listener in the family.”

I drop my axe to the ground with a thud. “You hurt Freya?”

Aiden lifts his hands and leans away. “Not physically. Jesus, Ren, what do you think of me?”

“Doesn’t matter. Emotional wounds are just as painful, sometimes more so.”

Scrambling to stand, Aiden locks eyes with me. “I didn’t mean to hurt her, Ren. I don’t even know when it happened. All I know is that I got off-track with her at some point. I’ve been busy lately, a little distracted.

“I missed something, I’m not sure what, but she’s angry with me. *Really* angry. I begged her to talk it through, told her I wanted to fix it, but she said...” He scrubs a hand over his face and looks toward the water nearby. “She said she needed time. That she doesn’t know if it can be fixed.”

When he glances over at me, his eyes are red-rimmed and bloodshot. He looks shattered. "I can't lose her."

"So don't. Go home and fight for her."

He laughs but it breaks with emotion. "How do you fight for someone who doesn't want to be fought for? How do you repair something that they say is irrevocably broken?"

"You show up and demonstrate hope. You show her that, yes, things break, and they'll never be what they were before, but when you piece them together, they can still be beautiful, only different."

Thunder rumbles in the distance, followed by a fat raindrop that lands on my cheek and slides down.

Aiden sighs. "She's never been like this. I've never seen her so bleak. That light that's always in Freya's eyes was gone."

"So go put it back." I shove a handful of wood in his arms. "Quit hiding here and go fight for what you promised to fight for. Love for a lifetime, thick or thin, sickness and health..."

God, the words just rip through me, like a hot knife. I kick a pile of wood and storm off. Aiden's wise enough to leave me alone. I hear him dump his armful and traipse back into the cabin. For his own good, I hope it's to pack up and go home.

Droplets of rain become a waterfall. The sky blackens, thunder booms, and though I'm under a canopy of trees, I flagrantly avoid caution and wander through them, scooping up twigs and smacking anything I can like I would line up pucks for drills.

It's not enough. Circling back to the clearing, I pick up the axe and go at the dead tree Aiden and I started on this afternoon. My hands throb with fresh blisters ripping open, but I don't care. Better to hurt on the surface than deep inside.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Thunk.

A grunt leaves me with each swing. Until I can't even hold an axe anymore, and it falls at my feet. I groan, pressing my forehead to the tree. *How* did I lose her? I did exactly what I promised her I wouldn't. I made a choice that made her feel like a problem I prioritized rather than the person I love.

And "therein," as Shakespeare says, "lies the rub." Because I will always choose her. I will show up for her and care for her, the same way she's shown up and cared for me—with tenderness and empathy—but until Frankie stops seeing herself as a burden, she'll always see my choices through that lens of obligation. Meaning all I can do is hope that with some time and perspective, she'll see things differently. Once again, I'm left waiting.

I've waited for her before. You think I'd be able to cope, but it's like slowly suffocating without her, aching to know how she is and what she wants and if there's a chance in hell she'll finally see herself through *my* eyes.

Helplessness and anger possess my body. A raging cry surges through me as I yell into the woods, and lightning cracks through the sky. I jump back instinctively as the world flashes blue-white, revealing the outline of a woman down the drive to the main road. A torturous ghost of a woman.

Long hair plastered to her face, a short walking stick. She glances up and I choke when I recognize them—gold-green eyes, sun and earth, glowing in the light of the storm.

My heart jumps in my chest. "Frankie?"

She smiles, and lifts her hand in a wave.

I say her name again. And again. Then, I'm running toward her, sprinting down the muddy road, breath filling my lungs for the first time in weeks. Laughter taking over breath. She's here. She came.

I stop, toe to toe with her as she looks up at me, shivering. Clumped dark lashes. Two curtains of wet, dark hair framing her face. "H-hi," she says shakily.

I swallow as a tear slides down my face. "How did you get here?"

“By plane. Then Willa,” she says simply.

I glance past her shoulders and see Willa and Ry’s Subaru pull out from the main road, followed by a stream of staccato honks. Staring down at Frankie, I shake my head and blink. This can’t be real.

“Ren,” she whispers. Stepping close, she cups my cheek. I jolt at the touch, and my heart takes off inside my chest. “I’m so sorry. You loved me and I threw it in your face. It...it scared me, Zenzero. I’m not going to lie. No one’s ever loved me with no reservations.”

I stare at her as rain pours down, as a love whose magnitude and depth and strength I can barely fathom wraps around my heart and pulls me toward her.

Her eyes search mine. “What I said at the hospital, it wasn’t true. I have—I *do*—” On a shaky exhale, she steps closer. “I love you, Ren.”

“Frankie. I love you,” I whisper, cupping her face, so close, so soft.

“Still?” she asks warily. “Even after the past few weeks?”

“Still. Always. I’d wait lifetimes for you, Frankie. You would *always* be worth it.”

She peers up at me. “Ask me.”

“Ask you what?” I say dazedly.

“‘Membership is contingent upon authenticity,’” she repeats, just as I told her months ago. “‘Upon words spoken from the heart.’ Ask me what I’m prepared to say.”

I shake my head. “Frankie, you don’t have to—”

“This.” She brings her hand to rest over my heart, her eyes searching mine. “I want in. Lifelong privileges, ideally, but I’ll settle for a month-to-month trial-membership if necessary.”

“Frankie, you already have it.”

“Love is not love,” she blurts, wiping rain from her eyes and blinking up at me. “Which alters when it alteration finds, or

bends with the remover to remove. O no! It is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken.””

“It’s cold, you’re still—”

“Please, Ren, let me tell you. Let me say what you mean to me.” She inhales roughly, then shouts through rain and thunder, a rush of wind through the trees,

““Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

Within his bending sickle’s compass come;

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out even to the edge of doom.””

I hold her close and kiss her, then pull back enough so I can stare into those wide, deep eyes. “I love you. I always have.” Wind rushes through the trees, wraps around us, as I tuck her close, as I press a kiss to her lips and whisper, “It was always only *you*.”

Her cry breaks against my kiss, as I sweep her up in my arms, shielding her as best as I can from the rain. She shrieks with laughter, clutching her bag and cane tight against us, throwing her head back to the open sky. Tears of heartache become tears of joy, as the clouds break for the determined sun.

I kiss Frankie and taste hope.

Ren

Playlist: “Like I’m Gonna Lose You,” Meghan Trainor, John Legend

I watch firelight play on her skin, a wash of sunset watercolors. Gold and bronze, ruby shadows beneath her chin, the swell of her bare breasts. Frankie, naked on a couch dragged in front of the fire is a vision of sated beauty.

Leaning past her, I poke the fire and throw on another log. Her hand slides up my back and tangles in my hair.

“That was nice of Aiden to make himself scarce,” she says.

I laugh drily. “It was a *requirement* that Aiden make himself scarce.”

Which he did. He took one look at me holding Frankie, both of us sopping wet from the rain, laughing and love-drunk, hiked his bag onto his shoulder and muttered something about the airport as he walked out. I heard the tires of his rental catch on the gravel, then the noise of an engine fading in the rain. Then I tore off her clothes, set Frankie in a hot shower, and got down on my knees to show her how much I missed her.

Frankie smiles up at me. “I feel bad, but it’s best he’s not here. You are a noisy lover, Mr. Bergman.”

A blush heats my cheeks as I glare down at her playfully. “I think you mean, passionate, Ms. Zeferino.”

Her smile deepens, broken only briefly by a lingering cough that sounds much better than it did three weeks ago.

I slide my finger along her dimple. “This has tortured me many months, Francesca. Years, to be precise.”

“My dimple?” She slaps a hand over her cheek and my finger, looking self-conscious. “It’s weird I don’t have two, isn’t it? It

always bugged me because my mind craves symmetry.”

“That’s why I like it. You were always so neat and exact. Then you had this lopsided dimple that I only saw when you gave a rare smile. Even if it’s an imperfection, it’s beautiful to me.”

Her face falls. “Some imperfections aren’t so beautiful, Ren.”

“No. Perhaps not.” I slip my fingers through her hair. “But if they’re yours, I love them. And you love mine.”

She grabs my wrist, stilling my hand. “I need to explain this. I need you to understand.”

Smoothing her cheek with my fingers, even as she holds my wrist captive, I stare down at her. “I’m listening.”

Frankie holds my eyes as often as she can, before they dance to my body, the fire, my mouth, my hair. “Something my therapist said to me a few weeks ago... I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about it.”

I wait for her, listening in silence but for the snap and pop of the cured wood roaring in the fireplace.

“She said you can’t believe someone’s love for you until you think that you’re worthy of it,” she says quietly, staring at the fire. “You have to love yourself. And in that way, I think you are far ahead of me, Ren.”

“How do you mean?”

She sighs. “Some days I do feel cynical. Other days I’m optimistic. I think that on hard days, when everything hurts and everything feels difficult, I don’t find myself very lovable. And I know it’s not *true*, that I’m not allowed to struggle, that I’m not lovable when I do, but it feels...*real*.”

I pull her close.

Frankie blinks up at me, breathtakingly lovely, lit by the fire, bare and rain-washed, wary and hopeful. “Does that make sense?” she asks.

“I think so. I’m not saying it’s the same, but it reminds me a bit of when I spiral into old places from the bullied years.

Telling myself I don't fit, that I can't get it right, that I'm not good enough because I'm not a 'normal dude.'”

“What do you do when that happens?”

“Sometimes I call Ryder and just let him make me laugh. Other times, I reread a book that was the escape I needed at a critical moment in my past, that made me feel like I belonged. Most often, I just count down the minutes until I see you again. Because you, Frankie, have always made me happy. You have always made me feel like I'm exactly who I'm supposed to be, that it's good.”

She snuffles. “How? I've always been so surly.”

I laugh. “Maybe that was why. You were the nicest surly grump I'd ever met. You cared. You seemed like you at least picked up on those parts of me that I tried to minimize. Like the parts that I felt made me weird were actually the parts you liked best.”

“Ren,” she says, cupping my cheek. “You are weird.” We both break down laughing as she strokes my beard and steals a kiss. “And so am I. But not everyone has to love us, just the people who matter. That's what I told you, but you *showed* me: be yourself, and let those who are lucky enough to love you, love you for who you are.”

I wrap my arms around her, kiss her hair, her temple, her cheek. My lips find the corner of her mouth as she tips her head to meet my kiss. Slipping my hand around her back, I hold her close. “I love you.” I tap her bum and squeeze. “So much.”

She grins up at me. “And you love my butt.”

“It's only fair. You love mine.”

Sighing, she kisses me, nuzzles my nose. “This cabin's cozy. Let's move here.”

“I don't think so. You'd never leave. You'd wall up the windows with books and make Uber Eats use a four-wheeler to bring us Chinese.”

“That sounds like a brilliant existence.”

I smile down at her. “Where you go, I’ll go. I didn’t take you for a drafty Pacific Northwest girl but...”

As if only by the power of suggestion, she shivers, her nipples hardening in the cold. It makes parts of *me* harden, too. I stare at her, tenderly cupping her breasts.

“Excuse me. Eyes up, Zenzero.”

I don’t glance up. I kiss each nipple, swirl my tongue and lick until they’re stiff peaks and her breath comes shorter, faster. “What?” I ask.

“I—” She sighs, pulling me over top of her, taking my aching hard-on in her grip, rolling her thumb over the exquisitely sensitive tip. “I forget. I was going to argue about something, but this is much more enjoyable.”

“Frankie,” I whisper. Easing inside her, I hold her close.

“Ren,” she breathes against my skin.

My mouth finds hers, as I taste and savor and tease. As my hips roll, each stroke steady and reverent. My hands find the soft swell of her breast, the velvet between her legs. My fingers sweep over her, as her hands claim my shoulders, then neck, as she sighs, quiet cries that grow in desperation.

The room is a haze of firelight and candle glow. Smoky air and sweat and soft blankets tumbling to the floor. Her hands hold mine and tangle our fingers. Glorious, tortured need, sharp demand course through my body.

I call her name, pressing my body deep inside her. Frankie clasps me close and writhes beneath me, as the waves of her release catch me in their power and take me with them.

On a gasp for air, I turn her with me, our bodies close, our hearts closer. I kiss her hair, look into her eyes. And I stare at Frankie for long, quiet moments, memorizing firelight on her skin, the way flames dance in her eyes that watch me intently.

I push up on my elbows, carefully separating myself from her. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” Her hand trails down my chest. Her voice is tentative.

“You’ll see.” Giving her a kiss, I smile down at her. I was going to wait, but if this experience has taught me anything, it’s that the only right time to tell someone what they mean to you is the moment you know it. No more waiting. No more partial truths.

I sit up and hurdle the sofa, strolling down the hall until I find my jeans in a pile near the bathroom. Yanking out my wallet, I extract the paper and toss my wallet aside.

Frankie watches me reenter the great room, arms behind her head, a wide smile on her face. “I think you should slow down probably,” she says. “The floors seem slippery. You, rushing, naked, lit only by a fire... It seems dangerous.”

I grin at her, freezing for just a moment to let her feast her eyes, before I run at the sofa, stopping myself enough to gently land back on the couch with a flop.

She sighs. “One day I’ll turn you into an exhibitionist for me.”

“Here.” Pressing a kiss to her temple, I offer her the fortune cookie paper, pinched between two fingers. “You do the honors.”

Frankie unfolds the paper, spins it around and stares at it, then reads quietly, “‘Your love is the one you look upon.’ Oh, Ren,” she whispers, throwing her arm around me and kissing my neck. “This is insanely sweet. And thank goodness you weren’t ‘looking upon’ the wonton soup when you read it.”

I laugh as I kiss her back. “I’m so glad it was you instead.”

“You didn’t really love me at first sight,” she says skeptically. “That doesn’t exist.”

“I don’t know, buttercup. You walked through the door on my first day, and my heart kicked in my chest. Knocked the wind right out of me.”

“Hm. Well, for my part, I realized I liked you when I bumped into that fabulous naked chest.”

“Francesca.” I growl softly against her neck and nip it.

“Okay. It was when you were doing shirtless push-ups.”

Pressing her into the sofa and sliding down the blanket, I settle between her legs. “Gumdrop, you’re taunting me.”

“Doodlebug.” Frankie slides her arms down my back. “I’m going to be real honest and confess the first thing I liked about you *was* your butt, but only because you’d passed me while my head was down, walking into the meeting room, so I only caught the back half of you.” She gives the backside in question an affectionate squeeze.

“But then I walked in, and saw this copper hair, those wintry eyes.” She sighs. “And I thought, ‘Well, damn. He’s off-limits, Frankie. So *fuhgeddaboutit*.’”

“Don’t notice the way he listens attentively. Don’t fall for how gentle he is, how hard he works. Don’t feel yourself falling deeper when you see him demonstrate that strength lies not in an assertion of power but in acts of service. Don’t love him when he reads children’s books and tears up or holds your friend’s baby like he was *made* to hold babies. Definitely don’t give him your heart when he dances with you by the shore and makes you feel like you’re light on your feet.”

She smiles up from underneath me, her hands gentling my face. “Don’t fall in love with him when he touches you. When he makes you feel from a place in your heart that you didn’t know existed. All that ridiculous naysaying, and I still never stood a chance.”

Her hand rests over my heart as I hold her eyes. “Francesca?”

“Yes, Søren.”

“I love you. Always.”

“Always,” she whispers and seals her words with a kiss.

THE END

Ren and Frankie’s story is over, but this isn’t the last time you’ll see them! Freya and Aiden’s story is next, and with their marriage in crisis, the whole Bergman family is in on the plan to save it.

Acknowledgments

This wasn't an easy book to write. More than usual, it felt like tugging out my guts and shoving them into a romance novel for theoretically countless people to put their eyeballs on and critique. A bit exposing, you might say.

I've known I wanted to write an #OwnVoices story, but for a good while, I was far from confident about where to begin. Turns out, confidence never came so much as conviction. Conviction that autism needs to be loved and better understood, and that as an autistic woman, I am the best person to write stories that affirm that.

Frankie is me in some ways, and in others, she is not. She's an amalgamation of life experiences and autistic friends and research. Though autistics are not a monolith, we have things in common, and so I hope that while Frankie does not capture all facets of autism any more than a single autistic person in real life would, she does justice to the many spectrum girls and women who deserve to be compassionately, sensitively represented. A special thanks to Katie who gave me one of my favorite things as an autistic: straight talk. Katie made Ren and Frankie stronger both individually and together, and affirmed that the two autistic women in this story are not caricatures or clichés, but three-dimensional, lovably imperfect people.

It is my hope that you see them that way, too—as women who are most likely different from you, who struggle in ways you do not, yet who are worthy of great lives and deep loves; who have so much to gain from and give this world not in spite of being neurodiverse but because of it.

XO,

Chloe

About the Author

Chloe writes inclusive romance because she believes everyone deserves a love story. Portraying underrepresented experiences, her romances embrace humor, heart, and heat, with a dash of nerdiness for good measure. She's an avid reader, lover of leggings, and can't eat enough mint chocolate ice cream.

To sign up for Chloe's latest news, new releases, and special offers, please visit her [website](http://www.chloeliese.com) (www.chloeliese.com) and [subscribe](#)! Want to connect further? Find Chloe on the following platforms:

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[They're Strictly Friends \(Elodie & Lucas, Spinoff #1\)](#)

Restraint

Adriana Locke

**Mason Family Series Book 1 by *USA Today* Bestselling
author Adriana Locke**

Blaire Gibson knows better than to have one-night stands.

She prides herself on her decision-making skills. It's the one asset that has never let her down. But even the best thinkers have weaknesses.

Hers is a delicious business mogul with a quick tongue.

Unfortunately for her, that tongue is good for more than just talking.

Holt Mason doesn't need to justify anything to anyone.

He wants Blaire. He pursues Blaire. And he gets Blaire because that's how his life works.

Until it doesn't.

What begins as a single night in a hotel room spirals into an unusual agreement. As late nights provide the space to trade secrets and walls come tumbling down, more is shared than just pillow talk.

They both should've known better. They should've shown restraint. Because when guards are dropped, hearts get shattered.

Chapter One

Holt

“Watch where you’re going.”

I quirk a brow at the man who just bumped my shoulder. He reads me correctly and mutters a half-assed apology just as I switch my brown leather briefcase to the other hand — maybe to avoid a confrontation and maybe to get a hand free for one. It’s up to him.

The stars must align in his favor because the next thing I know, he’s scurrying to the other side of the partition that separates us.

It crosses my mind, once again, that I could avoid this. I could forgo the hassle of airports altogether if I’d just give in and buy a private jet. Oliver, one of my younger brothers, keeps bringing it up, but I keep vetoing the idea. It’s not the money. It’s the pretentiousness of it all. Unless you’re flying weekly or have more money than brains, owning your own jet is a sign you need attention. It’s the more affluent version of the middle-aged, balding man driving a cherry red sports car, and I have no trouble getting attention without an overpriced toy.

Turning the corner, I’m muttering to myself about how Oliver’s going to be on my case about being late when I collide head-on with another body.

“Ah!”

A flurry of gauzy fabric and long, tobacco-colored hair go tumbling in front of me. My mouth falls open, practically brushing against the cheap linoleum of the breezeway, and my eyes feast on the beauty bent on one knee in front of me.

She picks up an array of items that fell from her purse. Each motion is deliberate and graceful. Scents of her perfume—warm and seductive—drift through the air.

She looks up, her blue eyes in stark contrast to the dark hair that sweeps below her elbows. Her fair cheeks pink as she watches me. She runs a hand through her strands as her full lips, a pale red, begin to part.

Holy. Shit.

Travelers scamper around our diversion, but they're no more than a blip on my radar. I'm focused on her as I try to put all the pieces together that are laid, so beautifully, so exquisitely, in front of me.

"Let me help you up," I offer, extending a hand.

She watches me for a long moment before lifting her delicate palm. The handful of gold bracelets encompassing a narrow wrist clamor together before she places her hand in mine. Her skin is warm and soft—so soft it almost makes me shudder. Immediately, I wonder what the rest of her feels like as I tug her gently to her sandal-clad feet.

She stands, removing her palm from mine, and smooths out her skirt. Pulling at a cord nestled between her breasts, two earbuds pop free. "I should've been paying attention. I know better than to listen to an audiobook in the airport."

"Must be a damn good audiobook." I cringe at the reply. It's not my best line, but it's all my brain can come up with to continue this conversation and keep her standing in front of me for a while longer.

"It's a podcast, actually, on a recent Supreme Court case."

Brains and beauty? No wonder my cock is throbbing.

"Do you agree or disagree with the decision?" I ask.

Her perfectly arched brows pull together as she tries to hide a smile. "Well," she says, pausing as if she's unsure whether to answer the question or not. "I believe the Justices followed the Constitution, and that is their job."

"Nice non-answer," I chuckle, watching a sparkle flicker through her irises.

"I'm an attorney. We never say too much. Or," she says, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, "most of us try not to."

Clearing my throat and, hopefully, my head, I pick up a tube of lipstick at her feet and hand it to her. She takes it without touching me. Instead, her eyes roam over my suit, take in my watch, then draw up my arm and over my chest, landing on my face. She studies me with intent. If I turned around right now, I bet she could draw a composite of me with intricate detail.

As if we've done this before, we turn toward the baggage claim and begin to walk together. Her posture is perfect, her narrow shoulders held just so. There's a cool elegance to her, a sophistication, a refinement that lures me in. But it's the warm complexity, an intelligence in her eyes that holds my attention.

"Are you in town for work?" I ask.

"No," she scoffs. "I'm on vacation." Her long, thin nose crinkles at the end. "For three long days."

"You say that as if it were a death sentence."

"I'd rather be working." She stops in front of a wall of windows. The sunlight streams in, highlighting the red and gold tones in her hair. "My brothers arranged this. How could I not come?"

I laugh. "That was nice of them. My brothers would've sent me to work and taken the vacation on their own."

"How many do you have?"

"Four."

"I have three, and they're a giant pain in my ass." There's a slight upturn to her gorgeous lips as she says the words, and I find myself wondering how much of that I really believe.

"I'll trade you," I offer.

Our eyes lock, her grin pulling my own wider as the throng of bodies hustling around us thickens. A thousand questions are on my lips, an itch to know more about this intriguing beauty in the middle of Savannah Hilton Head International Airport. Before I can figure out which way to go with this conversation, she gestures toward an exit.

“I apologize for running into you,” she says. “It was nice to meet you.”

“No, wait.” It’s too quick, too telling—and not my style. I make fun of men for tripping over themselves like this, but it comes out before I can think. “Can I take you to dinner sometime?”

The question surprises me as much as it seems to surprise her, but I don’t regret it. As a matter of fact, I like the idea. A lot.

She hesitates, her response on the tip of her tongue, but she doesn’t let it pass. I almost think it’s on purpose, but I’m not sure if she’s fucking with me, or if she has plans. Or a man.

For about a half a second, I contemplate if I care about the latter.

I don’t.

My phone buzzes in the jacket pocket of my suit, and I know it’s Oliver asking me where I am. I’m never late. But I can’t even mull that over right now, not with her standing in front of me and looking at me with the same curiosity about her that’s filling every nook of my mind.

“Ugh,” she grimaces, taking a large step toward me as the crowd begins to fill the entire hallway connecting the concord with the baggage claim. The top of her head barely reaches my eyes. “I’m not a big people person.”

“Me either.” I lift my briefcase and step so that my back is against the wall, giving her more room. “So ... dinner?”

She considers this. “I don’t typically go to dinner with nameless men.”

“That’s an easy fix.” I grin. “I’m Holton Mason. My friends call me Holt. All three of them.”

She laughs, her long lashes fluttering. I fight from reaching out and brushing the stray strand of hair off her cheek.

A hundred people might be swarming around us, but it may as well just be her in front of me. A circus could be clamoring down the hall, complete with elephants and man-eating tigers, and I wouldn’t notice.

“I’m not sure what my plans are, actually,” she says finally.

“Well, let’s meet up, and I’ll help you make them.”

She smiles. “I bet you would, Holt.”

“Ah, you used the nickname. That’s a good sign.”

“I just feel sorry that only three people like you.”

“Does that mean you’ll give me your number?”

Digging in her bag and pulling out a small notepad, she rips off the bottom of a sheet in a crisp line. She offers it to me along with a pen. “No, but you can give me yours.”

“I could text it to you.”

A single, perfectly arched brow rises farther. “And I could exit those doors and get into my rental car. Your call.”

My fingers wrap around the scrap of paper, glancing at her delicate fingers in the process. Visions of them gripping my cock pop immediately to mind, and I have to shake them away.

“I can’t say I’ve had a woman refuse to give me her number before,” I say, the words mixed with a chuckle.

A part of me wants to refuse, just to see if she’ll bend. But when I look at her standing there, the resolution in her eyes means she’s not bluffing. So while that’s frustrating in a plethora of ways, it’s also really kind of hot.

“But there’s a first time for everything, right?” I scratch out my digits and hand the paper back to her.

She presses her lips together and drops the pen and paper into her bag without even looking at it. “Thanks.”

“I look forward to seeing you again,” I say as she turns toward the doors.

“Nice to meet you,” she replies with no indication that I will see her again. In a split second, she disappears.

Like a damn fool, I don’t move. I just stand and watch her, breathing in the remaining notes of her perfume. It’s a second too late before I realize I don’t even know her name.

When I shove my hand into my pocket, it nudges my phone. As if on cue, it begins to ring. Again.

“Yeah, Ollie?” I ask, my voice filled with a level of frustration equal to the pulse in my temple.

“Where the hell are you?”

“On my way.”

Chapter Two

Blaire

I jerk the curtains back and swing the sliding glass door open, filling my lungs with wonderful, salty air. The sea a few stories below sparkles in the sunlight. The sandy beach is spattered with sunbathers and kids building castles.

Standing at the window, I watch the activities below. I'm reminded of summers at Lake Michigan with my parents and brothers years ago. My middle brother would be reading a book, my oldest brother creating a track for various toy cars he'd made my mom pack, and the youngest holding a drink in one hand and chasing girls or birds, depending on his age.

No matter how much I really don't want to be here, I can't help but appreciate that they at least picked a beach. It was undoubtedly Sienna's decision. Walker, my eldest brother's girlfriend grew up here, and as I take in the sunshine and palm trees, I have no idea why she ever left.

With another deep breath, I head back into the little condo that my three infuriating, difficult, ornery brothers rented.

I flop on the sofa and take in my new digs for the next few days. The walls are painted white. Decorations in soft pink and seafoam green, most of them seashells and sand dollars, are everywhere. I suppose it's relaxing to most people, but it makes me want to start stripping wallpaper. In lieu of that, I eye my briefcase sitting by the bedroom door across the living room and wonder if it's too early in this little getaway to start working.

As if he knew I was about to grab my client files, my phone rings. Walker's name appears on the screen. I pick it up. "Hello?"

"Did ya make it?" His voice is gruff on the other side.

"Yes. A couple of hours ago."

“I told ya to call when ya landed, Blaire.”

“This is not the first time I’ve taken a trip by myself, you know.”

“Of course not. Just the first time in, what, a decade?”

“Why do you really care how often I take a vacation?” I ask for the millionth time, squeezing my eyes shut. “I’m just going to sit here and dwell on how far behind I’m falling at work.”

“I care because I heard you go batshit crazy on a man through the phone the other day. And because you were telling me you were afraid your assistant was going to quit over your workload.” He sighs. “I know you feel all fancy and shit in that corner office in the city, but fuck, Blaire. You can’t live to work.”

He’s right. Of course, he’s right. But that doesn’t mean he’s ... right.

“You’re wrong.” I roll my eyes even though he can’t see me. “I absolutely can live to work. I find it fulfilling.”

“Whatever. How’s Georgia? Sienna said it’s nice there this time of year.”

I turn my head and peer out the window. Palm trees sway in the sea breeze, and birds loop lazily through the air, highlighted by the cloudless blue skies.

“I can’t imagine it ever not being nice here,” I say. “I’ll never understand why she moved to Illinois.”

“You have met me, you know.”

“My point remains.” Pulling my legs up under me, I rest my head against the pillows. “Sienna made you a sap.”

“I’m not a fucking sap,” he cuts back. “I’m just saying. Been thinking a lot lately ...”

The way his voice trails off hits me right in the heart. My face falls, and I fight the urge to lecture him or mother him in some way. This happens every summer. I think all my siblings start to think of our parents and their accident. It’s the time of year Walker is a bit less cantankerous. Lance drinks a little more.

Machlan calls in the middle of the night with philosophical questions that I never can answer.

Before I can figure out what to say, Walker changes the subject.

“Can I ask you for a favor? Well, not for me, but for Sienna?” he asks.

“Sure.”

“Can you meet up with one of her brothers and pick up some paperwork or some shit?” The sound of metal crashing onto a hard surface ricochets through the line. “Fuck!”

I laugh. “What are you doing?”

“Come finish this before I stick a fucking wrench in it!” The line gets muffled before he comes back. “I was trying to take an oil filter off a tractor, but it’s stuck. God knows I’m not gonna get any help with it either. I just shouted for someone to come finish it, but it’ll be there a day from now if I don’t circle back to it.”

“Hey, it’s job security,” I say through a laugh.

He chuckles as the sound of water in the background trickles through the phone. “Anyway, can you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Meet with one of Sienna’s brothers?”

Something about the way he says “brothers” takes me back to the man at the airport today. He was devilishly handsome in his business suit with a Rolex strapped around a thick, muscled wrist. He spoke well and seemed educated, which were bonus points to his light-colored hair and jade eyes.

The problem? I see men like him every day. My office is full of them. That controlled, alpha vibe stops being attractive when you peel off the suit. They’re just like other men—overgrown children who want a woman to fight for them.

And fight for herself.

Because if she doesn’t fight for herself, no one is going to fight for her.

“I’m not sure what my schedule looks like,” I say for the second time today.

“You don’t have a fucking schedule. I made your schedule.”

“I’ll happily refund your money and come home.”

“The hell you will.” He sighs. “It won’t kill you to do her this one favor.”

“For what? So, you can get laid?”

“I’ll get laid regardless ...”

“Ew!” I say, getting to my feet. “How did we get here? I don’t want to talk about this.”

“I’ll text you the address, okay?” Walker asks.

Moseying across the sage-colored carpeting, I gaze across the water. Families are holding hands, letting the waves rock against them. I wish I could do that—just throw all caution to the wind and let my guard down. But I can’t. Or if I was like that, I’m not anymore.

“Fine,” I say finally. “But tell Sienna she owes me blueberry muffins when you pick me up from the airport.”

“Will do. Talk to you soon, Blaire.”

“Bye.”

The line goes dead as he shouts at our cousin again.

Tossing the phone to the sofa, I stretch my arms overhead. For once, I don’t feel the weight of the world on my shoulders, don’t have to look over my shoulder for a colleague or client. It’s an odd sensation that somehow makes me feel more guilty about this little getaway.

I glance at my briefcase. There are only two files situated inside the leather case. My boss plucked the rest out of my hands before I left and shoved me out the door.

Two files. I can have them worked over in forty-eight hours. Tops.

My phone dings with Walker’s text, and I wonder how I, Blaire Gibson, got relegated to running my brother’s

girlfriend's errands.

I sink on the couch next to my phone and sigh.

This might be the longest three days of my life.

Chapter Three

Holt

“What in the hell took you so long?” Oliver hits the gas, barely giving me enough time to shut the door to his sport utility vehicle.

“Delayed flight.”

My briefcase sails across the floorboard in the back, ramming the door behind my brother, as he takes a tight right turn onto the freeway.

“You know, we could always buy a private jet.” He looks at me like he just proved a point he’s struggled to make for years.

As the president of Mason Ltd., I control the purse strings and major financial decisions. I remind him of this with a simple quirk of a brow.

He scoffs. “We’re going to be late to our meeting with Graham Landry.”

“And what the fuck should I have done about it? Explained to the weather gods in Portland my little brother needed me for a business meeting and the storm should just vanish because I said so?”

He’s not entertained. With a roll of his eyes, he sits back in the leather seat and hits cruise control on the steering wheel.

“And stop fucking calling me every twenty seconds and handle shit like a big boy,” I add for good measure.

“Really, Holt?”

We watch each other, a heated standoff like only brothers who run a multi-million-dollar company together can manage. We’re both type A, intelligent, and damn good at what we do. This causes a few skirmishes, but we are also loyal. To a fault.

And that's what makes our bond stronger than any other in the business and why Mason Ltd. kicks ass.

The ringing of Oliver's phone through the car breaks our stalemate. Oliver answers. "Oliver Mason."

"It's Rosie."

"How are you, Rosie?" I ask our shared assistant. She's seventy-five years old and still good at old-fashioned typed things. Neither Oliver nor I can let her go, despite having to hire separate assistants to help pick up the slack. Our brother, Wade, was going to hire her in his architectural office because it's more low-key, but when Oliver brought it up to her, she looked hurt. So, we pretended there was a big fight over her. She was happy again, and we just made do.

"Is that you, Holton?" she asks.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You've made your brother extremely nervous today. I've warned the Landrys you're running late. Told them you had a weather delay."

I grin at Oliver as he shakes his head. "You're right. It was the weather."

"Of course, it was, dear. I shall ignore any strange credit card charges from the past couple of hours when your bill hits my desk."

"That would be awfully kind of you, Rosie."

Oliver butts in, going over a few things with her while I gaze out the window and try to quiet my head. Meeting with Graham Landry is no joke. The man is a powerhouse all on his own—quick-witted, smart as hell, and cutthroat. If you aren't on top of your game, you're out of play.

We pause at a traffic light and wait as the cars in the opposite lanes barrel across the intersection. Oliver ends the call with Rosie. I'm about to ask him how far away from the meeting we are when a pedestrian with long, dark hair crosses in front of us.

Unlatching my seat belt, I rise in my seat to get a better look. Oliver's eyes are on me as I try to ascertain whether this is the girl from the airport, but I ignore him. Instead, I watch the sway of her hips back and forth and determine, without a doubt, it's not her.

I sink back into the seat just before Oliver slams the gas again.

"Wanna tell me what that was about?" he asks.

"Not really."

"Does it have anything to do with why you were super fucking late?"

"I wasn't that late," I contend. "Just shut the hell up about it."

"Fine, fine. Just be ready for Landry. He knows how much we stand to make if we purchase this property from him, so he's not going to give it to us easily."

I look at Oliver and laugh. "Does he ever?"

"Maybe he'll be nice and use some lube."

"Let's hope he remembers how much Dad donated to the Landry mayoral campaign a few years back. Maybe that'll help."

He takes a right off the freeway and heads to the outskirts of Savannah where the Landrys' estate is located. I've been there a few times for random events and meetings, and it's nice as hell. I keep telling my brothers we need something like that, but our personalities are too different to agree on anything. We just meet in Aspen and go skiing every winter instead.

As the car pulls up to the gate, a man takes Oliver's information and buzzes us through. We slip by tall rows of trees along the freshly paved path leading to the massive farmhouse nestled back away from the road. Oliver parks the car and looks at me.

"You ready, big guy?" he asks.

"Let's do this."

* * *

Blaire

A lot of assumptions are made on first appearances, so for that reason, I strive never to be underdressed for an occasion. Yet as I walk up the steps to the large farmhouse at the address given to me by my brother, I feel totally unprepared.

A flowy, pale yellow sundress hangs from my shoulders and hides the sandals on my feet. It seemed like the perfect easy ensemble to do a little shopping on the quaint little street beside my condo, and I didn't see the need to change before picking up some papers for Sienna.

I was wrong.

This place is gorgeous and elegant and oh, so Southern. As I knock on the door and wait for someone, presumably a butler, to open the door, I wish to heaven I'd have worn something slightly more professional.

Footsteps sound from the other side before the door is whisked open by a man standing in a pair of dark dress pants and a blue and white checkered shirt. He's divine with his freshly cut dark hair and clean-shaven face.

"You must be Blaire Gibson?" he asks.

"Yes, I am."

A smile stretches across his cheeks. "I'm Graham Landry. Nice to meet you." He extends a hand as he steps out of my way so I can enter.

We shake quickly, his palm heavy and strong, then he leads me into the back of the house. I can hear laughter coming from a room in front of us as Graham turns toward me.

“I’m winding up a business meeting,” he says. “It would’ve been over, actually, had my brother Lincoln not shown up.”

As the laughter grows again, I laugh too. “I have a brother like that.”

“So you feel my pain. On a serious note, Sienna has told me a lot about you. I wanted to thank your family for taking her in the way you have.”

We stop just short of the doorway.

“She’s so good for my brother. He’s smitten with her,” I say.

“I think she’s in about the same shape.” He grins. “Come on. I’ll introduce you to Linc while I grab the papers you’re after.”

He enters the room in front of me and makes his way toward a chair at the head of the table. I, on the other hand, stutter step.

Sitting in front of me is a man in a tailored suit. A Rolex sits on his wrist. A hand runs through his sandy brown hair as he turns my way.

“And then he ...” Holt’s voice trails off as our eyes meet somewhere over the fancy hardwood floor. He leans back as though he can’t quite focus. “Didn’t I ...?”

Recovering more quickly than I anticipate, I paste on a practiced smile. “It’s good to see you again,” I say to him.

He looks at Graham before switching his eyes to me again. “You too.” It’s more of a stammer, a caught-off-guard statement than anything. “Do you know the Landrys?”

“I’m just here to pick up a few papers.”

The gazes from around the room are heavy, heating the air even more than the exchange of energy between Holt and me. The slight drop of his jaw and his furrowed brow are slowly replaced with a twitch of his lip and oh, so narrowed eyes that are enough to make me want to back out of the room slowly.

“Is this why you were late today?” A man across from him sighs. He looks like Holt with lighter hair and darker eyes.

Holt responds, bickering back and forth with the man across the table about minding his own business while I take in the

men around me. Graham is ignoring them all as he sorts through a stack of papers. A younger version of Graham sits next to him with a wicked grin on his face.

“Lincoln Landry,” he says with a little wave. “Nice to meet ya. You must be Blaire.”

“Yes. Nice to meet you too.”

“Here they are,” Graham mutters, pulling out an envelope and handing it to me. “I put everything she needs in there. If she’s missing something, she can call.”

“Great. I’ll make sure she gets them,” I say, taking the envelope.

“We’d love to have dinner with you this week,” Lincoln says. “Mom would love to meet you.”

“I need to check my schedule,” I say, reverting to my new go-to line. “I’ll get in touch if I can work it out.”

Holt’s chair scoots back in front of me, and he gets to his feet. “I’ll walk you out.”

“I can do it,” Graham offers.

“Clearly, he doesn’t want you to do it, asshole,” Lincoln says to his brother. “Sit down and pretend you can see what’s happening here.”

My cheeks warm. I look between the Landry men. “Nice to meet you both. And you too ...” I say, pulling my gaze to the other man.

He stands. “Oliver Mason. Holt’s brother.”

“Nice to meet you, Oliver.”

“Likewise.” He tucks his tie beneath his jacket as he takes his seat again. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other again.”

My first reaction is to tell him not to sound so excited about the prospect. My second thought is to ask him what makes him think we’ll ever see each other again. Instead, I catch myself and give him a tight grin instead.

“Have a good evening,” I say and turn toward the front door.

Holt's energy ripples behind me, the musk of his cologne filling my nostrils as I reach the exit. He hops in front of me and opens it before I can get to it.

"Thank you," I offer as I step onto the expansive front porch complete with hanging ferns. Breathing in the cut grass and coolness to the evening air, I look up at the colorful sky. "It's beautiful out here, isn't it?"

"I didn't notice until now."

The gravel in his voice snaps my attention to him without me even realizing it. Before I know it, I'm standing in front of Holt Mason as he peers down at me. His irises flicker, greens and golds swirling together in a heady mix of something I don't want to name.

Passing a hot swallow down my throat, I re-grip the file in my hands. "Look at you, being all charming."

"It's one of my many talents."

"Your confidence is underwhelming," I tease.

"There's nothing wrong with confidence if you can back it up."

"Is that so?"

"It is." He grins. "It becomes a problem when people tout their abilities and have nothing to fall back on."

I ignore the look in his eyes and, instead, pretend to ponder his declaration. "The flaw in that logic is in the definitions. Meaning, what if someone truly believes they're amazing at something, and the other person finds them to be lackluster. Is that confidence wrong?"

"Not if they believe it," he banters back. "It's their truth."

"Fair enough."

The air flutters around us, almost dancing a private show for our benefit. Crickets sing in the distance; stars begin to shine in the early evening sky. It's as if the world flipped a switch for this moment. If I believed in gooey girlish things, I'd be delighted. Too bad I'm more realistic than that.

I clear my throat and turn toward my rental car.

“Again, nice to see you, Holt ...”

“Quit it.” He sighs, brushing a stray strand of hair away from my cheek.

The connection roots me in place.

His fingertips lightly brush my skin. They’re warm and slightly calloused in a way that makes my thighs ache.

“Let’s go to dinner,” he says.

“I already have a reservation.”

“For one?”

“For dinner,” I say with a smirk. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

I wait for him to move out of my way, but he doesn’t. He just stands in front of me and flashes a shit-eating grin my way.

“I’ll take you to the best restaurant in Savannah,” he tells me. “You’ll love it.”

“Why do men always think they know what a woman wants? It’s annoying, not to mention arrogant.”

“It’s not arrogant if I’m right.”

This should turn me off. This should be a blazing, flashing red light to dress him down, put him in his place, and be on my way. It’s what I do to every other guy who thinks he’s something I can’t live without. But I don’t. Or I can’t. I don’t know which, and I can’t even spare the mental capacity to sort it out because every synapse is firing just for him.

There’s a look in his eye, something behind the brazen façade, that intrigues me. I haven’t given a man more than a dirty look in longer than I can remember. Who has the time? Who has the energy? Who wants to deal with that bullshit?

But as I stand on the porch of this beautiful home in the middle of a perfect Southern evening, I remember Sienna’s instruction to enjoy my vacation.

“You don’t know enough about me to be right,” I volley back, continuing the banter because I can’t help myself.

“I disagree.” He shifts his weight, folding his arms across his chest. “I’ll tell you three things about you besides the obvious. If I’m right, you’ll go to dinner with me.”

I think this over. I didn’t tell him anything about me, not even my name. So, there’s no way he can actually come up with one thing, let alone three, that’s deep enough to warrant a dinner date.

If nothing else, it’ll be a fun little experiment and a chance for me to prove that men don’t know everything.

“Fine,” I say. “But you have to impress me. Hair color, eye color—those types of things don’t count.”

He grins. “Absolutely not. There’s no fun in that.”

“All right. Shoot.”

“Your name is Blaire,” he says, catching me off guard. “You like gummy bears but feel like it’s a childish thing to enjoy, so you try to be discreet about your obsession. You prefer the red ones and hate the green ones. You like shopping but hate spending loads of money on things you think are a waste.”

My jaw almost hits the floor.

“And,” he says, taking a step closer to me, “you don’t date because you don’t have time. You also find men to be barbaric, adolescent creatures which, may I add, I find offensive.”

“How could you possibly know all that?” I demand. “Are you a stalker? Do I need a restraining order?”

The heat rolling off his body clamors into me, upping the beat of my heart tenfold. I hate my reaction to him, and I hate even more that I can’t control it.

“Lincoln said your name. You dropped the candy from your purse in the airport, and I just happened to notice you had it hidden in a little pouch. All the red ones were gone, and it was chock-full of the green. Your lipstick was a type my mother uses, so I know it’s expensive as hell, but your earbuds earlier weren’t a name brand, so I put together you don’t value them as much.”

“I just lose them constantly,” I say, still sorting his observations.

“And now you lost our bet. Ready to go?”

My summer dress billows in the breeze, reminding me, once again, I’m not home.

This wouldn’t be like a dinner with a man I see regularly or could even see regularly if I wanted to. He lives almost a thousand miles from me.

What could one dinner hurt?

“Fine,” I say, stepping around him. “But I’m driving.”

“Great,” he says, much to my surprise. “Let me tell the others I’m taking off.”

“But you weren’t done. We can pick this up tomor—”

“Oh, no.” He laughs, his green eyes lighting up with mischief. “We were done a while ago and now we’re just shooting the shit. I’ll be right back.”

He takes off inside, and I brace myself against the railing.

What have I gotten myself into?

Chapter Four

Holt

They say a person's eyes are the windows to their soul. You can tell everything you need to know about them by a quick glance. Doors are like that for a business, and the ones leading into Picante are ornate and heavy.

It's my favorite place in all of Savannah. Sitting atop a luxury hotel with views across the water on one side and the city on the other, it's spectacular. Especially at night. It's also impossible to get into without a reservation.

"After you," I say to Blaire as she enters in front of me.

"I should've changed, Holt," she says under her breath. "Look at these people."

"There are people? What people?" I grin.

She tilts her head, clearly unamused.

"Fine." Looking around, I spot the hostess and give my head a subtle nod. She scurries our way.

"Mr. Mason. Good to see you this evening."

"Thank you," I say, less amused at her wandering eye than usual. Moving slightly to the side so I'm closer to Blaire, I clear my throat. "Two, please. For the Radar Room, if it's available."

"I'll rearrange for you, sir. Right this way."

Blaire casts a look over her shoulder with her lips pressed together to hide a smile. She follows the hostess along the wall to one of the private rooms beside the main dining area. I place my palm gently on the small of her back. I want to touch her so fucking bad, but I don't want to come across the wrong way.

She tenses for a brief second before her shoulders relax; mine follow. I flex my fingers against the smooth fabric of her dress, finding her body warm against my touch.

There's a conversation between Blaire and the hostess, one I can't hear, but I'm not mad about it. Just watching her speak, hearing her laugh at the hostess's jokes, is enough for me. Right now, anyway. It's a world-class view without any pressure.

We enter the private room, lit with candles and ambient lighting, and I pull out Blaire's chair before she sits. This seems to please her, which, in turn, pleases me.

Once we've made a drink selection and the hostess is gone, the energy in the room starts to shift. I finally have her to myself.

"Thank you for coming with me tonight," I say as she drapes her linen napkin on her lap.

"I believe you came with me, but that's just semantics."

"Excellent point." I laugh. "How do you know the Landrys?"

"One of my brothers, Walker, is dating, or engaged, I'm not really sure, to their sister, Sienna," she explains.

Lifting the glass of water in front of her, she swirls it lightly around. My question seems to have made her think of something else, and I want to know what it is. I want to know everything about this woman.

"So you grew up around here?" I ask.

"Me? Oh, no. I grew up in a little town in Illinois. That's where my family still lives. I live in Chicago."

I can't imagine living apart from my brothers. We all live and work together in some form, except Coy. When he's not touring with his band, he's right here with us.

"Is that hard?" I ask.

"What?"

"Not being around your family. I see most of mine every day. Hell, my mom still calls me to make sure I've eaten all the colors of the rainbow once a week."

A smile parts her lips. “I miss them a lot. But ...” Her smile wobbles a bit. “I went to law school and work in the city. I can’t do what I love to do and live in Linton with them.”

I nod.

“I’m still really close to them,” she says. “And I visit as much as I can—at least once a month to see Nana.”

“Nana?”

“My grandmother. She’s as feisty as my brothers, but God, I love her. She was my dad’s mom and spoiled us rotten growing up.” She takes a deep breath and then adds, almost as an afterthought, “Now I try to spoil her when I can.”

Something about the way she says this catches my attention. It’s sweet and careful, something I’m not sure I’ve really attached to Blaire so far. But when she looks back up at me, that’s all washed away.

“What about you?” she asks. “Are you close to your brothers?”

“I work with Oliver, so we’re together every day. We see Wade and Boone a lot. Coy is gone a lot, doing his thing.” I shrug. “But, yeah, we’re all close. We golf together, go boating, play some poker.”

“My brother Machlan has a bar,” she tells me. “They tried to have poker night there a couple of times until I advised him to shut it down. I had no idea those things got so serious.”

“Oh, yeah. If you ever meet Coy, ask him what joker’s wild means.”

She laughs. “I’ll make sure I never do that. Thanks for the warning.”

A soft knock on the door sounds through the room, and a waitress arrives. She takes our orders and disappears quietly.

Once we’re alone again, I relax back in my chair and look at the beauty across from me.

“So,” she says, resting her forearms on the table. “What do you do for fun?”

“Honestly?”

“Yes, honestly.”

“I work.”

Her laugh is the freest I’ve heard from her. It causes the corners of my lips to twitch.

“You sound like me,” she says. “I get such satisfaction from finding a bit of evidence the prosecution didn’t think I’d see or hearing a verdict go the right way.”

I lean forward and rest my arms on the table. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Do you ever have to take on clients you know are guilty?”

“Yes. Sometimes. But, before you go judging me, I’d like the opportunity to explain.”

I nod. “The floor is yours.”

She smiles, but her game face is on. A finger touches the gold chain sitting around her neck. “My job is to ensure my clients are tried fairly in accordance with the Constitution. Yes, I’ll represent men and women who I know are guilty if, and this is a big if, they haven’t been accused of a violent crime. And I cannot ethically encourage them to plead not guilty, and I won’t put them on the stand if I think they might lie. I have to sleep at night.”

Her eyes shine with a ferocity and intelligence that fucks with me. It raises a hundred questions that I want her to answer if for nothing but to watch her speak.

“For what it’s worth,” I say, “I think that’s highly admirable.”

And fucking hot.

I sit back again and try to block out the image of her in a courtroom.

“What do you do?” she asks. “Work-wise, I mean.”

“Business shit,” I say, trying to brush it under the rug. Going into the ins and outs of my world seems like a waste of time

when we could be talking about her.

She grins. “I’m going to need a little more than that, Mr. Mason.”

“I’m the CEO of Mason Limited. My grandfather started it. My father expanded it. Oliver and I are ushering it into a new age.”

“I love the sound of that.”

“It’s fun.”

She slides a lock of hair behind her ear. The candle in the middle of the table casts reflections across her high cheekbones. She looks like a model sitting across from me, but one you could touch without knocking her over.

I’ve been with a lot of women, but none quite like her. She might just be the total package.

“What?” she asks, catching me studying her.

I could toss her a canned line or redirect the conversation to something that’s not how gorgeous she is. But if I know anything about Blaire so far, it’s that she can pick out a line of bullshit a mile away.

“You’re beautiful, Blaire.”

She flushes. “Thank you.”

“It’s not a line. I mean it—you’re fucking beautiful.”

The candlelight flickers as she shifts in her seat. Her eyes pull away from mine, and I instantly regret opening my mouth.

She clears her throat as her fingertips touch her necklace again.

“I’m sorry if that makes you uncomfortable,” I say carefully.

“That might’ve been a little forward.”

“It’s fine.” She takes a deep, steadying breath. “To be frank, I’m not used to situations where someone would say something like that.”

“I don’t understand.”

She sits up a bit straighter. “I don’t have a lot of dinners with men who I’m not trying to outwit or outplay. This whole thing tonight is a little foreign to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t date,” she says simply.

My brows shoot to the ceiling. “You don’t date? At all?”

I tilt my head as though it will help me hear her better—as if the idea of Blaire not dating will make more sense if the octaves are a bit higher.

It’s baffling. How could a woman like her not date? Sure, women say that shit all the time because they think it ups their desirability. But I actually believe Blaire. And, lo and behold, I need to adjust my cock at the thought. So maybe they’re on to something with that line.

“I mean, I’ve dated,” she says. “Just ... not often. I’m just too busy to entertain another human. I can barely keep my own life on target, let alone adding someone else’s life in.”

“I feel the same way,” I say. “My life goes a hundred miles an hour. I can’t be thinking about buying flowers or chocolates or making sure I pick up my shoes.”

“See? That’s a hard limit for me. Pick up your own damn shoes.” She laughs. “That is one of the reasons I find men to be barbaric creatures, as you so carefully noted.”

I point a finger at her and wink. “That’s what you tell yourself.”

“Excuse me?”

“You like to think you find barbaric tendencies in men to be appalling. Society has taught you that. There’s no place in the world for aggressive men, men who know what they want.” My smile deepens. “But deep down, you enjoy an alpha male.”

She bites her bottom lip. “That’s not completely true.”

“Is it not?”

“No. I do find those tendencies appalling. Truly. They insinuate that the woman is the lesser sex—that we should pick up men’s shoes, make them dinner, have a lower paying job—and to that, I call bullshit.”

She lifts her glass and takes a drink, keeping her eyes glued to mine over the rim. There’s a steeliness to the blue irises that feels like a challenge. But as they stay trained on mine, I see a softness, too, that feels like an invitation.

“As you should,” I say, my voice lowering. Breathing in the warm notes from her perfume, I watch her chest rise and fall at a quickened pace. “I have no doubts you are as capable and intelligent as any man I know. But I also know something else.”

She sets the glass down. Her finger runs around the bottom, her chin lowered as she looks at me through her lashes. “What’s that?”

I lean forward and run my teeth over my bottom lip. The movement catches her attention. Her gaze drops to my mouth as her own lips part.

The air between us warms, the connection between us cackles with energy. Her brows arch as if she knows the answer and is waiting on me to deliver.

So deliver I will.

“I have no doubts that if I bent you over a chair and buried myself in you, there wouldn’t be any complaints.”

Her eyes widen as she shifts in her seat.

She wants it as badly as I do, but there’s no way I’d do that. Not here. Maybe with another woman—one who would orgasm all over my balls in the middle of this dining area and not regret it. But Blaire? She’s cut from another cloth, albeit one I’d like to mark.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I silently curse whoever it is. She hears it and motions for me to take it. While I type a quick response back to Rosie, I glance up. She’s watching me carefully.

“Like what you see?” I tease, slipping the device back into my pocket.

Her mouth opens as if she’s going to say something but snaps it shut again before she does. Her brows tug into one long line as she mulls over a thought.

Giving her space to work whatever it is out, I sit back in my chair. She starts to speak again yet stops herself.

“Blaire?”

She looks up through her lashes again, her eyes wide.

“Say it,” I demand.

“Say what?”

“Whatever it is you keep stopping yourself from saying.”

She makes no movement to do anything of the like, but I see exactly what she wants.

As soon as our eyes meet, really meet, the desire burning in the blues is undeniable. Her lids hood, her tongue swiping along her bottom lip as she watches me very slowly push away from the table.

My cock is pressed so tightly against my pants that I think it may burst through the seams. It’s all I can do to ignore it for the time being and, instead, sidle up behind Blaire’s chair.

She doesn’t turn to face me. She doesn’t flinch as I brush all the hair off her shoulders so it lays down the middle of her back.

“I’m going to touch you,” I say just loud enough for her to hear.

Pausing to give her just enough time to object, I lay my hands on her shoulders. A slight gasp escapes her lips as I knead my palms against her skin.

She’s warm and smooth and supple, and I want to bury myself in her body on this damn table.

Her head bends to the side, almost laying her cheek on my hand. I continue to work it back and forth, listening to her soft

moans as I go. Finally, she sits up again and clears her throat. My hands drop to my side.

She doesn't turn around to face me. She doesn't move at all. The only thing that changes is her voice when she says, "Do you think it's possible to rent a room here tonight?"

"I'll be right back."

Chapter Five

Holt

The key card takes forever to activate the lock on the suite.

The elevator ride was quiet, yet every time our eyes met, I swore I could hear the air vibrating between us. Despite the dilated pupils and labored breathing— something I notice but don't think the other guests in the hallway do—she appears calm. Confident. Controlled.

She's a damn conundrum, a puzzle with equal pieces sexy and soft. If there's one thing I won't do tonight, it's fuck this up. Fuck her up. In order to do that, I need to clear my head.

When I glance over my shoulder, it's clear she needs a second as well. Her blue eyes war, a storm crashing wave over wave as she waits for the chirp of the lock.

The door snaps, freeing itself, and although I've been anticipating the sound, I still jump. Blaire wastes no time taking the power in the situation. She moseys by me, pressing her palm flat against my chest as she enters the suite with the naughtiest grin.

Working the knot in my tie loose, sure as hell I'm going to choke, I step inside and let the door slam shut behind me. It's her turn to flinch.

As she spins around, I step toward her in one deft movement. Her back hits the wall, a soft intake of breath parting her lips just before mine land against them.

Her back arches and her chin tilts back as my hands frame her in along the gold-painted wall. Warm and soft, her lips move against mine but not like I predict. She's slow, methodical, each kiss a decided choice in an easy, calculated flow.

One hand cradles her cheek, her face a perfect mixture of hollowed and round. I brush my thumb against her jaw and am rewarded with a soft, feminine moan.

The sounds of our connection whisper through the room, echoing in the grand entryway. Years before I'm ready to break the kiss, she does just that.

Breathless, she pants as she pulls away, leaving me dragging air into my lungs. Dropping my hand, I let it skim her arm as it falls to her hand. Placing it in mine, I lead her onto the patio. She doesn't object, just follows me as though it's our nightly ritual.

Large plants in beautiful clay pots line the sides of the balcony, giving the feeling of seclusion. The sky is clear with a host of silver stars dotting the darkness.

The taste of her mouth is still fresh on my tongue as I sit on a chair with a soft crimson pillow. She slips her hand from mine and chooses a chair a few feet away.

A sliver of thigh is unveiled as she gets settled. My cock, already rock-fucking-hard, throbs so much it physically aches. I try not to wince as I will it to ease, sure I already have precum in my boxers.

The breeze catches her hair, making it dance in a cloud around her. She pulls it into a knot on top of her head, and I'm surprised at how much it changes her appearance. Her cheekbones are sky-high, nearly touching the bottom of her lashes. The corners of her eyes are almost an almond shape, something I never noticed before. Everything about her looks more sophisticated, more regal, and I'm left no choice but to adjust my cock before it explodes.

"I'm going to admit something," she says. "This is a little too easy for me."

"What's too easy? I'm fucking hard as hell." Wincing, I openly cup myself and try to find some relief.

She grins. "That's exactly why I sat over here."

"Isn't that a good thing? For you, I mean. That you make me this turned on?"

"Of course," she breathes. "I just ... um ... I feel like we got here in two seconds."

“I’ll tell you what, gorgeous. You sit over there until you’re completely and utterly sure this is what you want. And if you decide it’s not, you can walk out, and I’ll take a cab home.”

She cocks her head to the side as though she’s not sure what to say. She searches my face before smiling. “There has to be a bad side to you.”

“Oh,” I say with a low, rough chuckle, “I can be as bad as you want me to be.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she says, her hand waving toward her pinked cheeks.

I grin. “By the way you’re fanning your face, I think that’s exactly what you meant.”

Her hand falls to her side. “Do you always say what you’re thinking?”

“Absolutely not.”

Gripping the edges of her chair, she wars with herself about what to do. I’m not a man who will ever convince a woman to sleep with me, but I will let her know I’m willing. And so fucking able.

“But, for the record, I’m thinking about how wet your pussy is right now,” I say, resting my forearms on my knees. “I’m thinking how your muscles will spasm around my cock as it slides into you, how your eyes will struggle to stay open, the little sounds you’ll make as I suck on your breasts.”

Her breath stalls in her chest as her hips shift on her seat.

“I’m wondering what kind of panties lay under that dress and how easily they’ll slide down your thighs. How hot is your pussy? What does your slit taste like as I run my tongue up it and toy with your clit?”

As the breath she’s holding is released, with it seems to go a decision that is evident in the playfulness in her eyes.

“If I were wearing panties, they’d be soaked,” she whispers. Leaning back in her chair, one long leg lifting and crossing on the other, the corner of her dress slips and hits her right at the top of her thigh.

Gulping past the red-hot lump in my throat, I have to tear my eyes from the sliver of creamy skin. When I look at her face, her eyes shimmer with amusement.

Her tongue darts out, skimming her bottom lip. Her chin lifts ever so slightly, her eyes smoldering with the promise of a tease.

I'm only a man. A very virile, capable man who has limits and restraints just like the mortal I am. And I've hit my limit.

"Why don't you come here?" I spread my legs, my cock clearly locked and loaded through the fabric of my pants, but I don't give a fuck.

She stands, the hemline of the dress toppling to the floor. The front dips, the roundness of her breasts on full display.

I think I'm going to lose my damn mind.

Taking her time, she strides to me, making a one-second trip into about four. It feels like eighteen. Standing before me, her lips pursed together, she smirks. "I'm here. Now what?"

* * *

Blaire

My heart is pounding as I look down at him. The moonlight sweeps across his features, the angles causing him to look even more roguishly handsome than before.

As we sat in the dining room, just the two of us, he wore down my resolve. I was certain we'd share a meal, and that would be that. After all, I don't really even know this man. I barely sleep with men after three dates. Yet here I stand, figuring I'm on vacation and should live a little.

I want to sleep with him. My brain has chosen this moment to let my hormones override any sensibilities, and as I look at

him looking at me, I don't even care how illogical this is. Any regrets I have about this later will be from my decisions. They'll be my doing. He's given me a hundred ways out, and I keep shoving my way in.

His hands grasp my waist, his fingers biting into my hips. With a gentle yet firm grip, he urges me to take a step toward him. To close the small distance.

The scent of his cologne fills the void between us, swirling with the warm evening air. My thighs clench together; my legs sticky from my arousal as a grin plays across his lips.

"I've never had this problem before," he grunts.

Making a show of glancing at his lap, I drag my gaze up his chest until it settles on his eyes again. "Doesn't look like you have a problem to me."

He bites back a laugh with a slight shake of his head. "There's no problem there."

"I could find out for myself if you weren't so chatty."

The chuckle comes now, as does a grin. "I was referring to knowing where to start, smart-ass."

"Have you never done this before?" I tease.

"I'm confident when I say I'm certain I've never been with a woman like you."

There's a kick to his tone, an almost reverence, that takes my breath away. It's swoon or seduce, and I choose the latter.

"Well, then let me show you." Prying one of his hands off my hip, I hold his gaze. Bringing it to my throat, I let the back of his fingers trail down my skin, gliding them over my sternum and between my breasts. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows, fighting the urge to take over. But he doesn't. He lets me direct the moment.

My skin burns beneath his touch, a trail of unseen flames left behind his contact. My brain buzzes, almost drunk, numb to any thought other than him and me. The powerfulness coursing through my veins, that a man like this is responding

to me in this way, beats any victory in a courtroom. It's surreal.

Twisting his hand so his palm is flat as it rubs down my stomach, he turns it at the apex of my thighs. Cupping my sex through my dress, the fabric sinks into the dampness under his palm.

His eyes flick to mine.

"Is that wet enough for you, Holt?" I ask, lifting a brow.

He doesn't answer. Instead, my dress is bunched up and held in place at my waist. The air brushes against my bare vagina, and I feel incredibly exposed. The sensation startles me for a fleeting moment. He erases any sense of bewilderment with his warm, cradling gaze.

Grabbing the back of my thigh, he squeezes my leg. I try not to yelp because it doesn't hurt, but a sound comes out as I reach my breaking point. He bites his lip to contain his amusement because he knows I want him. He's aware that I need him. But it's apparent that he's not going to give it to me until he's ready.

My legs part at his nudging, his fingers trailing up the inside of my thigh. With each inch they go higher, my heartbeat spikes a little more until the tips of his fingers reach my opening.

I suck in a hasty breath as I watch him feel, for the first time, how turned on I really am.

"My God," he groans. "You weren't kidding." Pulling me toward him, he reaches farther back and inserts one long, firm finger in the middle of my slit. I moan, my body turning to gelatin as he drags it through the wetness.

"Holt ..." I gulp as my stomach clenches.

He holds the finger in the air, my desire glistening off it.

"There's one question answered," he says, his tone rough. "Let's answer another."

"Which is that?"

Looking me dead in the eye, he wraps his lips around his finger. My jaw drops as his eyes light up.

“You taste amazing,” he says.

Before I can react, before I can come up with a witty response, he’s dipping a finger inside me again. It goes in slow, and even I can feel my body squeezing around it. He works it inside, his other hand gripping my bare ass, before sliding it out and inserting it again. With each stroke, the flame in my belly grows hotter.

My fingers dig into his hair and tug his head back, capturing his mouth with mine. He strums my pussy, like a key to an ignition, as his tongue wraps around mine and strokes it to the same tune.

He pulls back, giving my bottom lip a gentle bite before burying his head in my chest. He kisses across the top of my breasts before tugging down the neckline of my dress. My breast pops free of my bra, sitting atop the white lace.

His tongue coats a budded nipple, working a small circle around the engorged flesh. As he sucks it into his warm mouth, he inserts a second finger into my pussy, and it’s all I can do not to scream out in delight.

I can’t focus on either sensation. Every synapse is firing, misfiring, and re-firing in such quick succession that I can’t make sense of any of it. All too soon, he pulls away from my chest, and his fingers slow.

My breath ragged, my sight fuzzy, I release the back of his head and stand straight. “What are you doing?”

“I’m about to do you.”

Needing a release, I swirl my hips against his hand. This only makes him pull it away altogether.

“Take off your dress,” he orders as he unfastens his belt.

“But ...” I look around the balcony. “Here?”

“I’m not waiting to get inside you.”

His pants, shoes, and socks are placed on the chair, his shirt joining them.

Holt Mason stands in front of me, a chiseled portrait of absolute perfection. His muscles are created, not swollen or pumped by a chemical, but designed ... maybe by God or maybe by a trainer. I don't know, but I'd like to thank them.

He takes a condom and rolls it over the top of his swollen cock. While he does this, he watches me expectantly.

Any hesitation I had about getting naked on a balcony is gone. I'd remove my clothes for him in the middle of the street if he told me to right now. This is completely ridiculous, I'm aware of that, but I. Just. Don't. Care.

My dress and bra join his clothes in a heap behind him. He takes a few calculated steps my way.

"I let you call the shots. But from here on out, I'm in control," he breathes. "I will take care of you in every way, but you need to trust me."

"I don't know you well enough to trust you," I whimper as he wraps his arm around me and pulls me against his chest.

"Then give me a chance to earn it."

When I don't respond, his eyes light up. He presses a gentle kiss to the middle of my lips, before turning me around.

His breath is hot against the shell of my ear, his cock heavy and hard at the small of my back. Moving a lock of hair fallen from my bun, he presses another kiss to the side of my neck. "Bend over and grab the railing in front of you," he whispers.

Looking over my shoulder, I'm silenced by what I see.

Lust. Control. Consideration.

A man in power.

And for the first time in my life, I'm okay with giving up that power for one night.

As I grip the rail, my hands sweaty and threatening to slip, he positions himself behind me. The tip of his cock parts my pussy and hovers right at the opening.

Before he slides into me, he pauses. “If you start to fall, I have you.” And then he presses into the wetness, parting me into two halves and bringing me more pleasure than I’ve ever allowed myself to enjoy.

Chapter Six

Blaire

His breathing evened out an hour ago, but I couldn't get out of bed. I laid next to him, his arm protectively around my abdomen, and watched him sleep.

There's been plenty of time for me to second-guess everything that happened today, and I've tried in a very me-like way, but I just can't make it happen.

Holt was rough yet tender, crass yet careful, smoldering yet sensitive, and I can't make myself wish I'd made another decision rather than to be with him. Even so, I know the choice I have to make now, and that's to be realistic. Smart. Gone.

I close my eyes. Even hours later, I can feel him inside me. The taste of his sweat is fresh on my tongue. The strength of his arms as he scooped me up and carried me to bed and lavished kisses against every inch of my body is at the forefront of my brain.

The safety of his gaze. The gentleness of his touch. The absolute control in which he executed every second of last night will be the bar that every man after him is compared to. But the longer I lie here and relish Holt's hard body next to mine, the more difficult it will be to extricate myself from this situation scot-free.

Lifting his arm off my stomach, I slip quietly out of bed. The silk sheets are decadent, and I have a notion to cancel the room my family got me across town and get another one here, but I don't.

My dress slips across my body, and my shoes and purse are in my hands in a couple of seconds flat. I tiptoe toward the door but stop when I see a notepad sitting by the little lamp on the table near the window.

Holt,

Thank you for a wonderful evening.

Blair

I place the pen next to it and go to leave but stop again. Fishing through my purse, I find the red panties I removed inconspicuously during dinner and lay them next to the note.

With a final look at a man I'll never see again, I let myself out.

Chapter Seven

Holt

Ring!

I shake off the dream clinging to me and swipe my hand against the nightstand. It collides with something where my bedroom lamp should be. I reach farther in my sleep-induced haze to silence the incessant ringing of my cell phone.

My fingertips hit something smooth, knocking the item—a clock, maybe—onto its side. I sit up in bed, jolted awake by the sound.

“What the fuck?” I ask as I peer around the room.

The sheets bunched around my waist are not mine. The mattress under my ass isn’t mine either. What *is* mine is the ringing phone that’s sitting next to a lamp that isn’t in my bedroom.

It takes a full minute to piece together where I am. And why.

Blair.

Just like that, I’m wide-awake.

I scan the suite as I reach for the phone. The floor-to-ceiling drapes on either side of the open doors leading to the balcony flutter in the breeze. Soft streams of the morning sunlight filter through the room. The pillow next to me has a single strand of dark brown hair but no head to go along with it.

“Hello?” I ask as I bring my phone to my ear.

“Mr. Mason?”

“Yes.”

“This is Sherrie from the front desk.”

I rub a hand down my face and try to clear my head. “What can I do for you?”

“We found a credit card in the Radar Room after your visit last evening. I believe it belongs to someone in your party.”

My eyes flip to the bureau along the wall. Folded next to a statue of a half-dressed woman are my clothes from last night. Next to them, the spot where I laid Blaire’s clothes after she fell asleep, is empty.

I glance at the clock.

“I’ll pick the card up at the front desk before I leave this morning. Thank you,” I say. Before I can end the call, she speaks again.

“It’s not your card, sir.”

My forehead crinkles. “Is it Miss Gibson’s?”

Sherrie sighs. “I shouldn’t divulge that kind of information. But, yes. Gibson is the name printed on the card.”

My body feels like I went a couple of rounds with Boone in the boxing ring as my feet hit the floor. I stretch my free hand over my head and try to work some life back into my limbs.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Mason. May I put you on hold for one moment, please?”

“Sure.”

I switch the phone to my other hand and walk around the suite. There’s no sign of Blaire anywhere ... except on my back. I stop in front of a mirror and spot scratches from her nails etched in my shoulders.

My gaze sweeps through the room again as my brain deciphers my current situation. She’s gone. That’s clear. And while my ego is a little bruised, it’s a total boss move on her part, and I can’t be pissed about it.

I run my hand over my jaw and fight a grin.

“I apologize for making you wait,” Sherrie says. “Is Miss Gibson available to pick up her card?”

I turn—mouth open to speak—when something catches my attention. It takes all of three steps to reach the piece of red lace illuminated in the sunlight. I lift the piece of paper beside

the panties to find her goodbye written beautifully in black ink.

I want to laugh at her choice of words. *Thank you for a wonderful evening.*

First of all, I should be thanking her. Men don't often get the pleasure of being with a woman of her caliber without jumping through a lot of hoops. And, second, who uses the word *wonderful* to describe what happened last night?

Blaire. That's who.

My chuckle comes out before I can stop it.

"Excuse me?" Sherrie asks.

"I apologize. Miss Gibson is my guest," I say, picking up the lace. "If you leave the card with the front desk, I'll pick it up before I leave today. As I said."

She starts to object but reconsiders—probably in part due to the rather large tab my family spends at Picante every month. Her sigh is quick but present. "Yes, sir. Have a good day."

"You, too. Thanks."

I toss my phone onto the bed. As soon as it hits the mattress, it rings again.

"Fucking hell," I say, picking it right back up. "Hello?"

"What's up your ass?" Oliver asks.

"You right now."

He chuckles. "Well, let me worm my way up there a little farther. Just got off the phone with Graham Landry."

I bunch the lace up in my hand and hold it at my side. The fabric is soft and stretchy, and I wish I could've seen it on Blaire's skin.

The thought makes me hard.

Pushing the image out of my mind, I try to focus on my brother.

"Do either of you two sleep?" I ask.

“Landry called me at one in the morning. While I do appreciate a good night’s rest, I’m thinking he doesn’t.”

“What did he want?”

I sit on the edge of the bed. The mattress dips with my weight and instantly brings back memories of laying Blaire in this very spot just hours ago. The way she smiled with a vulnerable confidence. How her body molded into my hands. The feeling of her handing over control ... and then taking it back this morning by leaving with only a note.

A fucking note.

Still, I have to admit that it’s better than waking up with a woman stuck to me like sleeping together somehow equals monogamy and having to coax her into a cab as gently as possible. Blaire left. On her own. And while I wouldn’t have minded a morning round for good measure, I respect her game.

Hell, I wonder if I could adapt it for my own use.

“Holt?” Oliver draws me back to the phone.

“Sorry. I’m here.”

He sighs. “What are you doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what are you doing? You’re distracted as hell.”

My lip twitches. “I *was* doing Blaire. And I did it well, I might add.”

Oliver sighs. “Well, let me turn around.”

“Why? What are *you* doing?”

“Well, I was on my way to your house. But if it’s this early in the morning, and you’ve been with Blaire, then you sure as hell aren’t at home, are you?”

I rub a hand down my face.

My refusal to take a woman home with me, even for one night, is a running joke with Oliver. He can’t understand it. He also didn’t help me clean up the mess the last time.

It's a rule that allows me to work and play and keep them in separate, clean little boxes—just like I like it.

“No. I'm at a hotel,” I say, bracing for the rant that I know is coming.

“Look, I really don't give two shits about Blaire or what the two of you are or are not doing ... although by the sound of you this morning, I do have to say that I'm leaning more toward the are not. But—”

“Hey, Oliver.”

“Yeah?”

“Fuck off.”

He laughs. The sound works its way through me and, before I know it, has me smiling too.

“Back to Landry,” I say, feeling a bit more focused. “What did he want?”

“Well, Graham talked to his dad, I guess, and he has reservations about selling us the land. Something about a promise they made in a campaign about protecting the environment.”

I balk. “Since when did they become environmentalists?”

“Since they needed votes in the last election, I guess. Fuck if I know. Anyway, I assured them that Wade was on board with using environmentally-friendly designs and building methods.”

“Yeah, I'm not sure Wade gives a fuck.”

“Yeah, well, I'm not sure that I care what Wade gives a fuck about,” Oliver says.

I run a hand down my face.

We've spent so much time working on this deal that we've neglected others. As the president of the company, that was my call. The future of the company is in my hands in a way it has never been before. And if it falls through ... we fail.

I fail.

I cause my family to fail.

The muscles at the back of my neck tighten.

“You’re right,” I say, working my jaw back and forth. “We have one week to convince Landry to sell to us before he puts it on the market. We have to procure this deal because it’ll change everything for our company.”

“Exactly. We stick with our plan—get the property in our name. I feel good about this, Holt. I really do.”

Because I’ve micromanaged the shit out of this for the past ten months.

“We’ve thought it over from every angle. Boone already has some bites from investors. We have a dream concept with hotels, retail space, spas. If we need Wade to put on his hippie hat to get this contract, then he’ll put on the hippie hat whether he likes it or not. We have seven days to pull this off. We can do this.”

We have to do this.

I close my eyes to work through the problem, but when I do, the only thing I see are Blaire’s bright blue eyes. I must sigh because Oliver sighs back with a hefty dose of sarcasm.

“You’re going to make me play therapist, aren’t you?” he asks.

“Absolutely not,” I say, opening my eyes. “Why would I need a therapist?”

“I don’t know. I just know since you ran into this girl at the airport, you’ve been all ...”

“What?”

“Pussified.”

I stand and laugh. “I have not.”

“No, *you have*,” he teases. “You remind me a little of Boone when you’re all emotional like this, but that’s okay. The family has me.”

“*Riiight*. It’s a good thing we have you. Where would we be without your expense reports that easily double the rest of ours? Or your penchant for golfing on Fridays? Or the way we had to pay off the secretary because you—”

“Hey,” he interrupts. “First of all, my expense reports are because I actually wine and dine potential clients. Golfing on Fridays is also another work burden that you don’t bother helping me lift. And that secretary thing ... Well, let’s just say that I didn’t expect her to blackmail me for giving it to her doggy style on my desk after hours, okay? Might not have been my best move.”

“That’s what she said.”

“I’m not dignifying that with a response.”

I put the call on speakerphone and begin to get dressed. My clothes smell like Blaire’s perfume—faint and floral with a dose of elegance. As I pull on my shirt, I spot a dab of her red lipstick on the collar.

My stomach twists, sending a coil of energy through my body. It nestles itself deep inside my core, and I can’t deny my desire to see her again.

“Where is Blaire now?” Oliver asks. “Not that I care. I just know that we will end up having this conversation, so we might as well get it over with.”

“I’m not sure,” I admit.

“What do you mean that you’re not sure?”

I slip on my socks. “It means I don’t know where she’s at, dammit.”

Oliver’s laugh is instantaneous. It roars through the speaker and causes me to flinch.

“I didn’t have her pegged to be a one-night stand. But good for her. I like her style,” he says.

My jaw tenses as I shove my wallet and keys into my pocket. Before I head toward the door, I grab the panties and shove them in my pocket too.

“That really bothers you, doesn’t it?” he asks.

“What?”

“That she left. Total power move. She stole your thunder.”

“She didn’t steal my thunder,” I say, rolling my eyes. “And it doesn’t bother me. I kind of like it, actually.”

Even though the words come out of my mouth, I’m not sure I believe them. Not totally, anyway. It might be nice not to have to be the one to enforce a one-night stand for once, but I wouldn’t have minded a goodbye.

Hell, I might have even offered breakfast before going our separate ways.

When I think of Blaire, I’m heated. Energized. Itching to have a conversation with the woman who intrigues me mentally as well as physically.

But she’s gone. While that might make things less interesting this morning, it keeps it a clean break. There’s a beauty in that.

Still ...

“She did leave her credit card,” I say. “I need to figure out how to get it back to her.”

“Um, call her?”

“Would you believe that I don’t have her number?”

It doesn’t take long before his laughter fills the phone again.

“You don’t have her fucking number? This is gold. She just played you.”

“She did not,” I fire back, annoyed at his amusement in all this.

“Yeah, she did. Blaire is my fucking hero right now.”

“I haven’t *needed* her number,” I insist. “I ran into her at the Landrys, and we had dinner. I haven’t had to call her because she’s been with me, asshole.”

Oliver’s laugh dies down. He takes a deep breath and blows it out slowly.

“As the smartest of the Mason family, let me point out one piece of the puzzle that you’ve not yet put together,” he says. “*You* might not have her phone number, but the Landrys do. And I might have told Graham that you would call him today about Wade being a closet hippie.”

I shove off the desk. Whether it’s my imagination or whether the sun really did choose this moment to shine brightly into the room, I don’t know. But the warmth radiating in from its rays is impossible to deny.

Returning her card is the practical thing to do. It’s the right, moral thing. And asking the Landrys to contact her for me—she’s practically their family—would only make me look good in their eyes too.

It’s genius.

I grin. “Ollie, I really hate to say I appreciate you, but I appreciate you, man.”

“Hold on. I’m going to put that on the calendar right next to the words Holt Got Played.”

“You are such a dick,” I say with a laugh.

He chuckles. “So, you’re good then? You’re calling Landry? And you’ll remember to bring up the project and not just your own personal one?”

“Yes, sir, I will.”

“Good.” Papers shuffle in the background. “Are you coming to the office today?”

I slip my hand into my pocket and feel the lace slip across my fingers. My brain tries to imagine the scarlet fabric on Blaire’s smooth skin. My blood heats my flesh, and I’m forcing a swallow as Oliver sighs at my pause.

“Yeah,” I say, “but it might be later.”

“Well, I’ll be here for another hour or so. Told Gramps I’d come over and watch golf with him this afternoon.”

“You have fun with that,” I say.

“I will. You should come too.”

I pull my hand from my pocket. “Gonna have to take a rain check.”

“I bet you are. Let me know what Graham says.”

“Will do.”

“Later.”

“Goodbye.”

I slip my phone in my pocket and take one final look around the suite. If Blaire hadn't lost her credit card, maybe I could have left whatever we shared last night in this room. But she did. So now I have an obligation to return it.

“It's the gentlemanly thing to do,” I say to myself.

I snicker as I head toward the door.

Gentlemanly, my ass.

Chapter Eight

Blaire

“That will be sixteen dollars and eighty cents—including the delivery fee,” the voice on the other end of the phone says.

I reach my free hand up to balance the towel wrapped masterfully around my head and sit on the couch. Towel secured, I yank my purse to my side.

Despite the long, hot shower I took immediately after getting back to my room, I can still smell Holt on my skin. A tingle fires through my body every time I move. Every raise of my hand, bend of my neck, stretch of my legs is another reminder both of Holt and of muscles I haven't used in an embarrassingly long time.

“That's perfect,” I say, pulling my mind back to breakfast. “Let me grab my card.”

My abdomen rumbles as I lift my wallet from the depths of my bag and flick it open with my thumb. I tell myself it's from needing nourishment and has nothing to do with the rich, almost tobacco-like scent of Holt that just whispered through the air. The rumble turns into a tumble as the bottom falls out of my stomach.

“Shit,” I mutter as I balance the phone against my shoulder.

My driver's license, building identification, and various other useless cards snap as I pull them forward one by one.

Where is my card?

I only brought one with me since I didn't plan on doing much but working in the room. Each snap of plastic is louder. Every nook that comes up empty adds to the ball of weight forming in the center of my chest.

I toss the wallet to the side and begin sorting through my bag. The phone nearly falls from my shoulder.

Out comes a gummy bear wrapper and earbuds. Next is a backup battery for my phone and a pair of sunglasses. Irritated, I dump the remaining contents onto the sofa.

Still, nothing.

“I’m sorry,” I say, getting to my feet. “I’ve misplaced my card. Can I call you back?”

“Absolutely. Hope you find it.”

“Me too. Thank you.”

I press the red end button before tossing my phone onto the sofa. My heart strums in my chest as I hurry to my briefcase and pop it open. My credit card isn’t there. It’s also not in my suitcase, but I check it just in case.

Shit.

“Where did I have it last?” I groan, massaging my temples with my fingertips.

My brain is doused with a fog that somehow hovers over everything after I left the Landry’s house. Certain pieces are strikingly clear—Holt’s jawline through the candlelight at dinner, the sound of his voice on the balcony, the weight of his body on top of mine.

But that’s it.

Me, Blaire Michelle Gibson, the person who prides herself on attention to detail, has not even a shred of an idea where her credit card might be.

“This is mortifying,” I say, squeezing my eyes shut.

I can imagine my brothers’ reaction to this story. Walker would grin but not say a lot—he’d just let the look in his eye do all the talking. Lance would outright laugh at me, and Machlan would make some asshole comment about getting laid.

Despite the fact that my cheeks heat, I find myself smiling.

I get up and go to the room phone beside the bed. Bringing the receiver to my ear, I press the zero button. The line buzzes a

couple of times before a woman's voice greets me ... and asks me to wait. The line goes to on-hold music immediately.

The music does nothing but heighten my anxiety. Each beat amplifies the dread building inside me.

I had the card at the airport in Chicago to purchase a latte.

Did I have it to get the rental car? Yes, I did.

Okay, breathe.

Did I have it at dinner?

The line crackles as the attendant comes back.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting," the woman says. "How may I help you?"

I sigh, imploring myself to be patient.

"This is Blaire Gibson in room 1924. Has anyone turned in a credit card with my name on it?"

"Not that I recall. Can you hold, please?"

"Sure."

The line gets muffled before she returns. "It's not here. If it gets turned in, we'll call your room or the number on file."

"That would be excellent. Thank you."

She laughs. "I wish all my customers were as pleasant as you this morning."

"Bad day?" I ask as I rub my forehead.

"No. It's just that all of America is calling for a hotel room next week, and they aren't taking nicely to the fact that all hotels in Savannah are booked. But that's what happens when you have the Seafood Fest and a Kelvin McCoy concert in town the same week."

She goes on about the concert and how she tried to get tickets, but they were sold out in twenty minutes. All the while she's telling me this, a phones ring incessantly behind her.

"Well, maybe you'll get some next time," I say, raising my voice slightly in hopes it will draw her back to her, our, current

predicament. “If you get my card, please call. I need to go cancel it, I guess.”

“Absolutely. Have an excellent day, Miss Gibson.”

“You as well. Goodbye.” I set the phone back on the receiver.

The towel wobbles on the top of my head as I sit on the bed. I remove it and unwind my hair from the bright white material.

I could call the restaurant from last night. And the hotel. *And Holt.*

While there is an undeniable pull toward the last option—and I even find my eyes searching for my phone at the thought—I quickly bring myself back to reality.

I left him this morning for a reason. It was a calculated, non-emotional rationale that I’m fully confident was the right decision. Nothing good would have happened if I had stayed.

The corners of my lips twitch.

Well, something very good probably would’ve happened—if I could be so lucky. But then it would get awkward with a walk of shame through a hotel in the morning rush.

“I need to cancel my card and move on,” I tell myself as I get to my feet. “It’s the logical solution.”

I run a hand through my locks as I make my way to my phone. As soon as I reach it, it rings. It’s an Illinois area code.

“Hello?” I say.

“Hey, Blaire. It’s Sienna.”

“Oh, hey. I didn’t recognize the number,” I say, switching the phone into my other hand so that I can detangle the opposite side of my head.

“I’m borrowing my friend’s phone. Mine isn’t charging and Walker and Peck are using a ... whatever you use to air up a car tire to try to clean out the port.”

I laugh. “Oh, dear lord.”

“I know, I know. Anyway,” she says, her tone lighter than before. “I come bearing gifts.”

My stomach growls. “Of muffins? Please be muffins. I’m starving.”

“No. Better than muffins.”

“Not sure anything tops muffins right now.”

“This will. Promise.” She pauses for what I think is effect. “I come bearing ... information. Well, information and a ton of questions, you little minx.”

She giggles.

I look at the ceiling as I fill with dread.

There’s zero chance she isn’t calling about Holt Mason. How that’s possible, I’m not sure. The simplest solution would be that her brothers mentioned that I left their house with Holt, but does word travel that fast between siblings?

It doesn’t in mine. Not that Lance doesn’t keep me in the loop regarding all their shenanigans, but I don’t hear about them the next morning unless Machlan, our youngest and rowdiest brother, has done something borderline illegal like punching someone in the face. That does warrant an early morning call. But this? The behavior I’m uncharacteristically exhibiting is, or was, characteristic for the Gibson boys. It’s never gotten me a phone call.

“It appears that Holt Mason has your credit card,” she practically sing-songs into the phone. “Wanna explain that?”

“I do not.”

She laughs. “Blaire! Come on. I want details.”

I straighten my shoulders and clear my throat. “There are no details to be shared. I’m sorry to disappoint.”

“That’s bull, and we both know it. There’s only one reason a woman would be with Holt in a situation so ... *intense* that she loses her credit card. Especially a woman like you.”

I can’t help but laugh. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you don’t exactly slum it, Miss High Brow Attorney. You’re beautiful, smart, and there’s no way you didn’t sleep

with him, especially after Lincoln called and told me that Holt basically chased you out of there last night.”

What?

I get to my feet and catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My skin looks bright. My lips are full. There’s a slight purple mark on the top of my breast that I can see as my robe dips in the front.

All in all, I don’t look as depressed at being on vacation as I thought I would. And maybe I have Holt to thank for that.

But did he chase me out of there last night? Not like she’s implying.

Although I don’t really mind the sound of it when phrased like that.

I grin. “Lincoln is adorable, by the way.”

“Lincoln is gross. He’s my brother and has way too much time on his hands at this point in his life. But anyway, Holt *is not* my brother, and he *is* smoking hot. I’ll have you know that I had the biggest crush on him my entire life. We used to see the Masons at events, and I’d literally drool over Holt. And Oliver. And Wade. I’d spy on them and drive my brothers crazy.”

I sit on the couch again and recline back into the pillows. “When I was little, Walker and Lance used to have their friends over, and they’d chase me with frogs. We had very different childhood experiences.”

Sienna laughs. “And look at us now. We’re practically sisters.”

“That’s ... true.”

“So spill it, *sister*.”

I nestle down into the pillows and try to embrace the odd sensation washing over me. It’s slightly uncomfortable but strangely pleasant to have this kind of girl talk. Either way, it’s definitely new for me.

This kind of mindless chatter never involved me. Girls in high school or college—sometimes even now in the lunchroom at

work—giggle over romantic comedies and men they see on social media. I'm always too busy to be drawn into irrelevant conversations. But it feels different with Sienna, and I wonder what life might've been like had I had a sister of my own.

"We had dinner," I say. "He's very interesting."

She groans. "You're so not doing this right."

I bite my lip before letting it pop free. "That's not what he said."

"Blaire!"

I laugh, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment. "I'm sorry."

"No! Don't be sorry. This is what I'm after. This is how it works. Now keep it going and tell me what else he said or didn't say, did or didn't do."

"I just ... We had dinner. We had a nice time. I left early this morning and apparently left my credit card behind. That's it."

That is it—more or less.

But when I say it like that, it feels too simple. Too cut-and-dry. Too much like I met some random man in an equally random place and slept with him, and that was that. Because while all that is true, there's a thread to it that isn't.

Holt.

Not one single thing about that man is ordinary. He's not the man you meet in a bar or the acquaintance you agree to hook up with because you're desperate for a release after a workweek from hell. Those types of guys deliver mediocre, forgettable performances. I'm usually neck-deep in work briefs with a laser focus by ten o'clock the next morning, not having a discussion with my brother's girlfriend about the events of the night before.

So while that might be it, it also might not be a complete summary of the events of the evening. I still might be figuring that out.

Sienna sucks in a breath. "You're totally going to call him and go get it, right?"

My stomach rumbles, reminding me that I haven't eaten. My heartbeat races at the thought of seeing Holt again. My insides twist as I try to determine what the best course of action is to resolve this predicament.

"He's the perfect vacation fling, you know," Sienna says cautiously.

"He was a great one-night stand." I get to my feet. "I need to go, Sienna, and deal with this card issue. Thank you for calling me and letting me know where it is."

"I am going to teach you how to be a sister yet."

I chuckle. "We'll talk soon."

"Hopefully with more detail."

"Goodbye, Sienna," I say, holding back a laugh.

"Bye, Blaire."

I end the call but leave the phone in my hand. With my hair wet against my shoulders, I stare at the device and wonder what to do.

Chapter Nine

Holt

“And then Wade acted like *I* was crazy,” Boone says. “I told him to go double-check his facts and call me back and *maybe* I’d answer. Can you believe that?”

“Nope.”

I give myself a mental pat on the back for getting the timing right with my response. I have no clue what he’s talking about nor do I care.

Boone is the youngest of my brothers but only eighteen months after Coy. The two of them were buddies growing up while Ollie and I book-ended the other side. That left Wade in the middle. He’s now your proverbial middle child with two older CEOs on one side of him and two heathens on the other. Sometimes, I feel sorry for him ... especially when Boone is on his back.

The late morning sun streams through my office windows as my brother starts in again.

“Anyway,” Boone begins, “Mom called this morning and wants everyone over for brunch next week since Coy will be home. I’m supposed to spread the word.”

I tap the edge of Blaire’s credit card against my desk. Each tap makes it seem like my brain is being split farther in two.

Half of it is here, in my office, processing my conversation with Graham Landry and listening to Boone. The other half is perplexed with a raven-haired woman who I’m now considering might be fucking with me.

I don’t really believe that. She’s not the game-playing type. I’m positive about that. *Mostly*. But she’s also not the leave-your-credit-card-behind kind of woman, yet here I sit, holding it. It makes a man wonder if this is a game or some fucked-up gift from above.

“You’re coming, right?” Boone asks.

I sit back in my chair and pull my thoughts back to the present.
“Of course.”

“Okay. I’ll let her know.”

“Like Mom’s not going to call us all and give us a run-down on her menu and ask if we have any requests.”

“She asked for *my* help,” he says with a hint of pride. “I’m just doing what I said I would.”

I scoff. “Whatever. She’s just trying to keep you busy so you keep your dick out of ... what’s-her-name.”

I can hear Boone’s jaw drop. Or maybe it’s just the way he gasps and hides a chuckle right after. Either way, his reaction makes me laugh.

“Mom does *not* know who my dick is in,” Boone says.

“The hell she doesn’t. Mom knows everything, and the sooner you realize that, the better.”

“She can’t possibly know I’m fucking Daphne Monroe.”

The edge of Blaire’s card presses into my thigh as I move it back and forth.

“Boone,” I deadpan. “You don’t think Daphne is running her mouth to everyone who will listen—especially to all the women at the country club? That girl is shooting for the Mason family trifecta or whatever it would be called with five people.”

He laughs. “You mean four because Wade isn’t gonna fuck her.”

I laugh too because he’s right. Wade’s not going to get a piece of that because Wade doesn’t get a piece of anybody. If Oliver and I are workaholics, Wade is whatever the next level of that is because no matter how busy Ollie and I get, we do our own versions of dating. Wade does not.

“I’m not fucking her, either,” I say, wrinkling my nose at the thought of banging Daphne Monroe. “I guess trifecta works, after all.”

I flip the card into the palm of my hand and rub my thumb across Blaire's name.

Maybe I should just stick it in the mail or have someone run it over to the Landry's.

The raised, gold letters spelling her name prickle against my skin. I can't help but remember how she felt against me last night. But as I think back, I realize the best part wasn't the curve of her waist or the way she fit so perfectly around my cock.

The absolute best part was watching her choose to cede control—to let me have my way. It was a deliberate, calculated decision, and there's something inherently sexier about it than when a woman just rolls over for me.

Fuck.

"What are you doing today, anyway?" Boone asks.

"Going over Wade's plans again. You?"

"Not sure. I'll tell you what I'm not going to do—go watch golf with Oliver and Gramps."

"I'm sure you'll find something to waste your time." I pull the phone away from my face and see an incoming call. "Hey, Boone. I gotta go. I have a call I gotta take."

"Sure, man. Later."

"Bye." I waste no time in clicking over to the other line. "Hello?"

"Hello, Holt."

My heartbeat quickens at the sound of Blaire's smooth, sweet voice.

I sink back into my seat. My shoulders soften against the leather as I take a moment and listen to her breathe.

"I was starting to think you weren't going to call," I say finally.

"To be perfectly honest, I wasn't going to."

A grin plays on my lips. I toss her credit card onto my desk, and it skids into my keyboard before it stops. “May I ask why not?”

“I just thought things would be better if we left things between us in the hotel room.”

At the mention of things being left behind, my hand slides into my pants pocket. The lacy fabric slips between my fingers as I imagine her arching a brow in a quiet challenge.

Challenge accepted.

“Like your panties?” I tease.

She coughs in surprise before recovering quickly. “I was thinking more along the lines of not making our encounter awkward or complicated.”

“We aren’t wild animals, Miss Gibson. We didn’t have an encounter.”

“You know what I mean.”

I lean forward, my forearms resting against the desktop. My cock twitches as memories of our encounter flash before my eyes.

I grin.

“Yes, I do know what you mean. What you mean is that we fucked.”

My breath halts in my chest as I await her reaction. The phrase hangs in the air between us. It’s a quick recap of our night together, but at the same time, it’s an impossible-to-ignore statement that quietly demands a response.

“We did indeed,” she says carefully.

“I don’t know about you,” I say, my gaze focused on the sky outside the window, “but the word *awkward* isn’t one I would use to describe last night.”

“I’m glad to hear that you have a broad vocabulary, Mr. Mason.”

A grin slips across my lips. “My mother always touted the benefits of a good lexicon.”

“A woman after my heart.”

She takes in a quick breath. The air pulls across the phone, and even though I’m not in the room with her, it feels like I am. I can envision her lips parting, her eyes narrowing with a slight twinkle.

“My mama is the best,” I say. “Hands-down. She raised five boys and most of us are pretty well-behaved.”

“Well, my mother was a gem. She raised me and three boys, and none of us are particularly well-behaved,” she says, ending with a laugh.

“Sounds like we’d get along just fine.”

“I can see you and Lance being friends, actually. He’s a history teacher and wicked smart, but he can drink you under the table. Machlan would poke at you and see if you’d fight—bonus points if you would,” she says. “Walker, though ... he’d side-eye you until he decided whether he liked you. And that decision would really have nothing to do with anything you say and just how you respond.”

“Sounds like a fun guy.”

“Walker is probably my favorite. I’d never tell the others that.”

My laughter is easy as I sit back in my chair again. The springs squeal as I tilt it backward. “Yeah, well, I don’t have a favorite because all my brothers are assholes.”

“Ha. Right. I don’t believe that.”

“You should because it’s true.” I shift in my seat and spot the credit card again. “So what are we going to do about your predicament?”

“What? Oh, the card.”

A smile parts my cheeks. “Yes, the card. Did you forget about that already?”

She balks. “No. Hardly. I have an order pending at a deli near here, and a stomach that’s threatening to swallow my intestines.”

“Sounds like a bigger problem than I realized.”

The sound of plastic being crinkled takes up the silence between us. Finally, she sighs.

“I was just calling to thank you for letting me know you have it,” she says. “I’m going to report it lost and have them overnight me a new one.”

My brow furrows. “Why would you do that?”

“Because it’s easier.”

I can’t stop the snort that comes out of my mouth. “That’s absolutely *not* easier, and you know it. The easier solution would be to meet me for lunch and get your card back.”

“Holt ...”

There’s a wariness in her voice. She knows I’m right because she’s an intelligent, rational woman. I know she wants to see me again because I’m a smart, logical man. But how do I convince her to follow through?

If one thing is clear from spending time with Blaire last night, it’s that she likes to call the shots. She needs to be in the driver’s seat. I’m going to have to give her a map, hand over the steering wheel, and hope she picks the right exit.

“I’m going to be very frank with you,” I tell her.

“I hope you will.”

“I enjoyed spending time with you last night—both at Picante and after. And I was a little disappointed to wake up and not see you beside me.”

She doesn’t say a word.

“But I get it. Can’t say it’s ever happened to me before, but I kind of dig it,” I admit. “Like you said, it keeps the morning after very uncomplicated.”

“Until I go and lose my credit card.”

I grin. “If it makes you feel any better, I’ve been telling myself all day that you lost it because I had charmed you and made you lose your mind.”

“You just keep telling yourself that,” she says, making no effort to suppress her amusement.

“Ouch. Wounded ego alert,” I say as I laugh too.

“I’m sorry. Honestly? You were charming. You *are* charming. And I enjoyed my night with you as well.”

She takes a breath, and I use the opportunity to jump in.

“Then why did you leave?” I ask. “I’m usually the one doing the leaving, and now I’m curious.”

“Because you have things to do today and so do I—”

“You’re on vacation,” I interject.

“Don’t remind me.”

Despite the huff in her tone, I can hear her smile—which is a weird thing to be able to hear, but I can. Maybe it’s the subtle, quick breath or the way she ended the phrase with a softened lilt, but I can hear it. That makes *me* smile.

“Last night was a one-night stand,” she says. “They aren’t my favorite encounters—”

“There’s that word again.”

“But I’m not complaining about getting fucked this time.”

Hearing those words come out of her pretty little mouth sends a shot of adrenaline through my body.

“Let’s thank God for that,” I mumble as I adjust myself under my desk.

“As I was saying, they aren’t my favorite *situations*,” she says, emphasizing the word, “but they do serve a purpose. Lingering around makes it less of a one-night stand and more like a date that went on too long, and now both parties are uncomfortable.”

Fair enough.

“I left,” she continues, “to maintain the integrity of our arrangement.”

“I didn’t know we had a particular arrangement.”

“It wasn’t a signed and sealed contract, by any means. But there was definitely an unspoken agreement between us. Don’t you think?”

Do I?

Generally, I’d say yes. That sleeping with a woman you just met constitutes something light and simple. All I’m positive about, though, is that I feel like I’m about to get into a contract dispute. And while I’m a great negotiator, I might be out of my depths with her. So I ignore her point and switch gears.

“How long are you in town? Through tomorrow, right?” I ask.

“How did you know that?”

“You told me in the airport.”

I think she smiles.

“By the time your new card arrives, you’ll be leaving,” I tell her. “There’s even a possibility of it not showing up until after you’re gone, and in that case, you’ll have two cards floating out there.”

“This is true,” she admits.

I have an opening. I just have to pick my way through it—and hand over the steering wheel—carefully.

Taking a deep breath, I choose my next words carefully.

“If you have a good two days—a day and a half at this point—left in Savannah, you’re going to need to eat,” I say, stroking her practical side. “Meet me for lunch. Get your card back. Enjoy the rest of your vacation.”

I tip my chair back farther and await her response. I have her considering my suggestion, which was a step I wasn’t even sure I’d be able to make.

But I have. And now I have to stay quiet before I ruin the progress.

After what feels like an eternity, she sighs.

“What are you thinking?” I ask.

“I’m thinking that I’m not used to men talking logic.”

I laugh. “I hate to break the news to you, but I’m also well-versed in reasoning.”

“Did your mother teach you that too?”

“I think that was actually my father.”

She laughs, her voice blending with mine. “Fine. You’re right. As much as I want to, I cannot come up with a strong argument as to why meeting you and retrieving my card isn’t the easiest answer.”

My seat squeals as I sit upright and put all four wheels on the floor. “What hotel are you staying at?”

“Have you ever been to the restaurant called Hillary’s House?”

“That wasn’t the question, but yes. All the time.”

“Is it good?”

I get to my feet. “Does this mean you’re letting me buy you lunch?”

“This means I might let you sit with me while I eat. And if you happen to order your own sandwich, I can’t stop you.”

I shake my head as I swipe my keys and Blaire’s credit card and put them in my pocket. “I’ll meet you there in twenty minutes.”

“See you then.”

Chapter Ten

Blaire

“Welcome to Hillary’s House.” A woman smiles brightly as she closes the cash register drawer. “Grab a seat and I’ll be with you shortly.”

I grab the strap of my purse on my shoulder and take in the little restaurant pegged as a hidden gem in the touristy pamphlets in my hotel room. It’s bright and filled with sunshine. Instrumental music plays so softly that if there were more than a handful of people inside, I doubt you could hear it at all.

The décor is much fancier than I imagined with dark woods and chairs upholstered with printed cloth instead of the pleather I envisioned when the description included the word diner.

I spot an empty table in the back corner. But before I can take a step in that direction, a low, gravelly voice rakes across my skin.

“Good afternoon, Miss Gibson.”

I hear his voice behind me before I hear the door chime or feel the warm breeze of outside air, which is unfortunate. A few seconds’ warning that I’m about to come face-to-face with Holt Mason would’ve been appreciated.

Instead, I pivot instinctively as if the cells of my body are magnetized to his in some invisible way. My gaze finds his as a slow smirk spreads across his lips.

“Hello,” I say.

He’s wearing a pair of dark denim jeans and a crisp white button-up with the sleeves rolled to his elbows. A pair of sunglasses are tucked into the top of his shirt.

His dark hair looks fresh from a shower, and despite the fact that I know he didn't get a lot of sleep last night, he appears rested and energized. It's a look that's both magazine-worthy and effortlessly sexy. It's also slightly irritating.

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "Did you bring my card?"

He pulls his eyes away from mine and scans the room. "Of course. But lunch first."

I open my mouth to object. In the two seconds it takes to do that, he's already walking across the room to the little table in the corner that I had my eye on.

The purse strap bites into my shoulder as I follow him across the room. My brain sounds an alarm that I need to ensure he knows he's not calling the shots. I have to manually override it and remind myself this isn't a courtroom, and I'm not having lunch with a man who I'll be going head-to-head with at any point in the future. My inner monologue is still working that out when I reach the table and chair that Holt has pulled out for me.

He lifts a brow.

I sit.

He looks pleased, and I sigh at myself for giving in so easily.

"That went easier than I expected," he says as he sits across from me.

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know, exactly. You're confounding."

It's my turn to lift a brow as I set my purse on the seat next to me. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"I don't know yet," he says before narrowing his eyes.

"Let me know when you figure it out."

The waitress slides up to the table. Her smile is bright until it lands on Holt. It wobbles as she takes in the whole of him—as if he physically knocked her sideways with nothing but a glance—before she mostly recovers.

“I’m Lola,” she says, placing two menus on the table. “What can I get you to drink?”

Holt looks at me expectantly.

“Water with lemon, please,” I say.

“Make that two. We’ll need a few minutes to decide on our meal,” Holt tells Lola.

She nods. “Sounds great. I’ll be right back.” Her gaze lingers on my dining partner for a moment too long before she scurries into the kitchen.

I look at Holt to catch his reaction. He simply places a menu in front of me before taking one for himself and not bothering to react to Lola’s subtle flirtation.

“That happens to you a lot, doesn’t it?” I say, looking over the menu items.

“What?”

“Waitresses barely able to keep themselves vertical when you walk in.”

His chuckle is warm and full. “She was polite.”

“That she was,” I say, deciding on the grilled chicken sandwich. I set my menu down and look up to see Holt watching me with an amused grin on his face. “What?”

“I’ve decided that your confounding qualities are a good thing.”

“Good to know.”

“Yes. Good to know,” he says as Lola appears again.

She places our drinks in front of us and takes our order. She lingers closer to Holt than is necessary. Her laughter at his not-really-even-a-joke is a little much. Still, he never looks her way. Only at me.

My skin heats under his stare. I can’t help but remember the way it felt to have him watching me as I came undone around him.

I shiver.

“Are you cold?” he asks, fighting a smile.

As if the thoughts running through my mind didn't make me blush enough, his ridiculous smile amps up the heat in my cheeks another few levels. It's like he knows what I'm thinking.

“Me? I'm fine,” I say as I move my drink to my right. “What are you up to today?”

He shrugs. “What about you?”

“I'm going to head back to the hotel and pull out my briefcase and get lost in paperwork. I go home late tomorrow, and it will feel really good to be all caught up.”

“You didn't see any of Savannah at all, did you?”

“Nope. Not a thing. Besides Picante,” I add with a grin.

He grins too. “You know I'm a big fan of work myself, but you should really get out and see some of the city. There's so much to do here.”

I sit back in my seat and study him. What does someone like him do on the weekends? I can imagine him shirtless on a boat, drinking beer from a bottle. It's not hard to envision him walking down a cozy street at dusk after seeing a live band and having dinner al fresco. But I can also see him sitting on a balcony overlooking a grassy field with a computer on his lap.

“What is your favorite thing to do on the weekends?” I ask, hoping he doesn't say that he likes to pick up random women and take them to random hotel rooms.

That would suck.

“I don't do a lot, but I'm from here,” he says. “so it's different.”

“Sure, it is,” I tease.

“It is. I've done it all.”

“Well, what would you suggest someone do if they were only going to do one thing?”

He taps a finger against his bottom lip. “There are the trolley tours downtown that are fun but kind of touristy. You could kayak or take a riverboat cruise, which would be perfect if you like outdoorsy kinds of things. And you have to see the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. Forsyth Park. Bonaventure Cemetery.”

“A cemetery?” I laugh. “Not that I had kayaking in mind, but definitely not a cemetery.”

“And maybe that’s why you need to go.”

I lift a brow. “So I can tell people I saw a cemetery in Savannah?”

“So you can broaden your horizons.”

“Listen, Mr. Tour Guide—I’ve done more things on this vacation that are out of the ordinary for me than I’ve ever done. I think we can skip the cemetery.”

We exchange an easy grin as Lola walks by. She doesn’t stop to check on us, and I wonder if it’s because neither of us looks her way.

“You know what I would do if I was going to be here a while longer?” I ask.

“Not the cemetery.”

“No. Not the cemetery.” I lean forward and pull my glass in front of me. “I’d go see the Kelvin McCoy concert.”

His forehead mars as if he misheard me.

“What?” I ask. “You don’t like his music?”

“I ... No. I like it just fine.”

“Then why are you looking at me like I just grew three heads?”

He sits back in his chair and crosses his arms over his chest.

“Are you a fan of his?”

Something about the way he looks at me bothers me. It’s as if I’m wrong to like the country singer that Sienna turned me on to.

“Yes, I guess,” I say. “I don’t know his entire catalogue or anything, but I put a couple of his songs on my cleaning playlist.”

“You have a playlist for cleaning?”

“You don’t?”

“No, I don’t,” he deadpans.

“You don’t what? Listen to Kelvin McCoy or clean?” I narrow my eyes. “You don’t clean, do you? Your house is probably filthy. That’s why you took me to a hotel.”

His jaw falls open in faux-surprise, and it makes me laugh.

“First of all, my house is immaculate, thank you very much,” he says, a chuckle in his tone. “That might be because I pay a very nice woman to come do it, but it’s clean nonetheless.”

“I bet she listens to Kelvin McCoy,” I tease.

He scoots to the edge of his chair, his eyes sparkling. He rests his forearms on the table. I can’t help but notice the way the veins rope around his tanned skin and beneath the heavy watch sitting around one of his wrists.

I say a silent prayer in gratitude that he isn’t an attorney that I have to go up against because staying focused—even for me—would be extremely hard.

He makes a fist and twists his forearm. The muscles flex as he moves it side to side. He clears his throat. I look up.

“Your watch is nice,” I say, picking up my napkin and dabbing the corner of my mouth. It’s a total attempt at distraction ... that does not work.

He grins. “It is, isn’t it?”

I nod, setting the napkin back on my lap.

“I bet Kelvin McCoy doesn’t have one like this,” he says.

“Probably not. His music makes me think he’d have something more ... leathery.”

Holt’s laughter is loud. “Leather? That’s too badass for him.”

“So you aren’t a fan. I see the truth now.”

“Eh, he’s okay. Kind of a pussy but he’s all right.” He stretches his legs out in front of him. “Maybe Kelvin will come to Chicago, and you can check out his watch. See what you think in person.”

I frown. “I’ll never get to see him live.”

“Why not?”

“I spend all my days and most of my nights in the office.” I sigh. “It’s impossible to find time to do anything else. And it’s been so long since I did that it feels ... overwhelming. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“Ticketmaster?” he offers.

I laugh. “That’s not what I mean. I mean finding people to hang out with. You don’t go to concerts and things alone.”

“You don’t have one friend to do things with?”

“I have an assistant ...”

Holt laughs as Lola sets our plates in front of us. I thank her, and thankfully, she gets the hint and goes away.

“An assistant is someone you pay,” he says, dragging his plate in front of him.

“Maybe I pay her to be my friend.”

He looks at me like I’m crazy. “You have no social life? None at all?”

Suddenly, the idea of being a hermit feels abnormal. I bite the bottom of my lip as he studies me like a science experiment.

“I don’t have time,” I say, fiddling with my napkin and ignoring his gaze. “It’s by design.”

“Seems to me that you need to rethink your design.”

“Why? So I can split my time between work and play and constantly be stressed out? Because right now, there’s no split, and it really works for me.” I lift my fork and finally look up at him. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

His head is tilted to the side. “How do you refill your tank?”

“Coffee.”

He laughs.

I start to spear a french fry when my phone rings in my purse. I set the fork down and dig inside my purse. My assistant's name is on the screen along with her personal cell number.

"I'm sorry," I tell him. "I need to get this."

"Of course."

I tap the green button. "Hello?"

"Hi, Blaire. It's Yancy."

My assistant's voice is stressed—more so than it was when I left the office last week. It feels like someone threw a rock into my stomach.

"What's wrong?" I ask, ignoring Holt's concerned glance.

"The Grimrose Building is closed," she says. "The contractor redoing the bottom floor found asbestos, and the city came in and shut us down. Everyone had to vacate the premises."

"Oh, shit." I switch the phone between my hands. "What does this mean?"

"No one is allowed in until it gets remedied. We had a few minutes to grab any files we needed and were ushered out by the health department."

I rub my forehead with my hand. "What about my apartment?"

She sighs. "I think you're locked out, Blaire. Do you have any pets? That's one thing they're letting people go back in for."

"No. No, I don't have any pets," I say, my mind racing. "Do they know how long this is going to take?"

"I've heard it's confined to the first floor so far. It's mass chaos down here right now. No one knows anything for sure, but the office will be closed until at least the start of next week, and I'm not sure when you can get back into your apartment." She takes a breath. "I'm sorry."

Me too.

"Yeah. Thanks. I ... Did you get the Lawson files? I have a hearing on that next week. *Shit,*" I say, fidgeting in my seat.

“I didn’t. I literally had five minutes to get things, and I forgot about Lawson. I’ll file an extension with the court now.”

I groan. “Thank you, Yancy.”

“Is there anything else you need me to do immediately that you can think of?”

“No. I just ... Let me get back to my files in a little while and get back to you. I’m supposed to fly home tomorrow, so I might need you to help me find a place to stay until they sort this out.”

“For sure, Blaire. Anything you need.”

“Thanks for calling.”

“Absolutely.”

I end the call.

My body ripples with energy. I want to head to the airport immediately and get back to Chicago. But it won’t help. It’ll probably just make it worse.

“Is everything okay?” Holt asks.

I blow out a breath. “I work and live in the same building. Apparently, asbestos was found and the building’s been emptied until it’s fixed.”

“That’s fun.”

“Right?” I rub my temples again. “There’s nothing I can do. I just need to make a list and look at my calendar and see if I need to push anything back.”

“Is there anything I can do to help you?”

His tone is kind and sincere. I drop my hand and appreciate him sitting across from me.

“I’ll be fine,” I tell him. “I do probably need to go and see which one of my brothers I’m going to stay with.”

“If I was ever homeless, I wouldn’t be living with my brothers. That’s for sure.”

I laugh. “Yeah. It’s not the best-sounding solution, but it beats staying in a hotel for God knows how long.”

Holt shifts in his seat. He starts to talk but stops. Then slowly, his lips part again. “I have an idea.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Stay here.”

I laugh again. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Well, first of all, even if I wanted to, all the hotels are booked for the weekend. Something about a seafood festival.”

He nods. “Yeah. I forgot about that.”

“Second of all, I need to work. I need quiet. The people across the hallway this morning had a crying baby while I took a shower. That was irritating enough. I can’t imagine how that would go over when I’m actually picking apart witness statements, and someone’s freedom is on the line.”

His chest rises and falls. With each second that passes, the rhythm grows quicker.

He leans forward again, his eyes searching mine.

Our food is untouched between us. Our drinks have barely a sip removed.

My brain slows down as time seems to stall around our table, and Holt begins to speak.

“Stay with me,” he says.

It’s a simple sentence—three whole words. But it feels like he’s just spoken a complex mathematical equation in Mandarin because he can’t possibly be asking me to stay with him.

“Excuse me?” I ask.

“Stay with me,” he says again—this time with more force.

“And you called me confounding.”

He shifts in his seat again. “I’m just going to lay out a few facts as I see them, and then you can make whatever decision works for you.”

I don't respond. I'm not sure what to say.

"You can't go home," he starts carefully. "Staying in a hotel isn't optimal. Neither is staying with your brothers. But I have a big house, and it's really quiet. You could work all day unbothered, and I'll take you out to see Savannah at night."

"Holt ..." I say, an uneasiness creeping in my gut. It's not from his offer but because his offer is tempting. *He's* tempting. I don't want to be tempted.

I want to go back to my apartment that's twenty floors above my office and work under shitty halogen lights and do all the things that are what I do. That are predictable. That are safe.

Holt Mason is none of those things.

Yet for some reason, I'm drawn to it. *To him*. And that scares me.

He sits back in a false display of relaxation. "What could it hurt?"

"What could it hurt? I don't know. The entire idea is crazy."

"Is it?"

"Yes," I say, exasperated. "I met you yesterday, and you're offering to let me stay at your house. You don't even know me."

The corner of his lip twitches. "I'd say I know you pretty well—inside and out."

I look at my water glass to avoid his eyes.

"I'm just saying it could be fun," he says. "And I think you need a little fun."

"I need something, but I don't think fun is it."

He sighs. "What do you need then?"

"I'm not sure."

He fiddles with the edge of the napkin. I want to knock it out of his hand and make him stop, but I don't want to touch him. Something tells me that if I touch him, things will get cloudier.

“Your problem is that you can’t put this in a box,” he says.

My gaze flips to his. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that you like to have everything labeled. It’s work. It’s acceptable. It’s unacceptable. It’s a one-night stand. You can’t figure out how to label what it would be for you to stay with me for a few days.”

“Yes, I can,” I say. “I would label it as crazy.”

He bites his bottom lip. “Crazier than sleeping with me last night?”

I look around the room. No one is within earshot, and that relieves me a little. But when I turn my attention back on Holt, I don’t think he cares either way.

“You need a label? Fine. Label it *a multi-night stand*,” he says, fighting a grin.

A warmth spreads through my middle as his eyes hood. I used to know how to fight this feeling. I don’t seem to anymore.

“So you really just want me to sleep with you again?” I ask.

“Yes. But also no.” He leans forward in one swift movement. “I’m not going to lie and say that it didn’t cross my mind. Imagining you spread out on my bed has me hard as hell right now. But I also think that it might be fun showing you around for a couple of days—even if you don’t want to sleep with me.”

I blow out a long, tense breath.

My body screams at me to take him up on the offer while my brain begs me to think it through. My heart checks out of the conversation because it knows better, thank God.

I’m just left with a brain full of logic and a body needing a replay of last night. It’s a dangerous position to be in.

“I’ll think about it,” I say.

“Fair enough.”

As I watch him slice his fish, I wonder if there’s anything at all fair about Holt Mason.

Chapter Eleven

Blaire

“That feels good.”

I tidy the papers in front of me into a nice, neat stack and then close the folder. The Lawson case is a mess of epic proportions. Fortunately for me, it was the perfect thing to throw myself into after the whole asbestos bomb was dropped in my lap. But if the asbestos call was a bomb, that makes Holt’s offer to stay with him a nuclear missile.

We let the idea slide during the rest of lunch. Holt didn’t mention his offer again until he paid for my meal and then returned my credit card. I’m not sure if I would’ve brought it up if he hadn’t. Probably not. I’m also unsure if I should take him up on it. Again—probably not.

I get up from the table and stretch my arms overhead. The clock next to the bed shows that I sat down at the desk five hours ago. As I look at the folder stuffed full of notes, I’m relieved at what I was able to accomplish despite the crying baby across the hall again. But, at the same time, I’m not sure how I’m going to find the space to sort through the rest of the evidence and witness statements.

The muscle across the back of my neck tenses as Yancy’s text from a couple of hours ago filters back through my mind.

They’re now saying they expect us to be displaced for five to seven days. Not as bad as originally thought.

“Great,” I mutter to myself.

I walk to the window and peer outside. Groups of people sit on the sand and watch the waves while others kick a ball back and forth. The sky is a brilliant, muted blue. The water shimmers from the sun’s early evening rays.

For the first time in a long time, a heaviness slides into my chest.

Instead of fighting it, I let it sit inside me and burn in its dull yet still piercing way. It's a pain I know well. It's an ache I avoid.

I take a deep, shaky breath and close my eyes. The words of the therapist I saw for a few months whisper softly through my brain.

“You have to feel your feelings to heal, Blaire,” she said. “Feel to heal.”

My breathing evens out as I open my eyes again. The weight still sits in the center of my chest—a lump that feels as though it's tripled in size in seconds. With each bit of growth, it brings back memories, and feelings, that I don't want to deal with.

The sound of my mother's laughter. How we would spend all year planning for the long weekends we'd spend in the summer at Lake Michigan and how she'd get so excited about menu planning.

The way my father smelled like engine grease mixed with the Old Spice he'd use to disguise the smell of the cigarettes that he'd hide from my mother. The long talks we'd have while he was under a truck and I was sitting on an overturned bucket. We planned my entire life in the garage.

And then one fucked-up Fourth of July afternoon, everything I'd ever known was gone. It was ripped right out from beneath me with one hysterical call from Lance. Things have never been the same. Things will never be the same either.

I clear my throat as best as I can with a rock resting inside it.

“I have to get my shit together,” I say, turning away from the window.

My brain relies on muscle memory and switches away from all things emotional to all things practical.

“Where the heck am I going to go?”

I perch on the edge of the sofa and consider my options. Going home is out of the equation. Staying in this room is also impossible. I could visit my brothers, but that would equate to me getting zero work done because they equate me coming

home to acting like children again. I could stay with Nana or I could get a hotel room in Chicago.

Or I could stay with Holt.

Would it be so awful to stay with him?

I bite my bottom lip and eye the folder on the desk.

He does work a lot, so I'd probably be able to get a lot done. And God knows I need to get a lot done. And would it be that bad to see a little of the city while I'm here?

I grin. *It wouldn't be terrible if I got a little time in his sheets either.*

"What did he call it?" I ask aloud. "A multi-night stand? That's not a bad idea. It's really no different than dating a guy for a few weeks just to get some action even though you know it's not going to go anywhere."

I mull that over. The longer it marinates in my head, the more it makes sense.

And the more I like it.

I grab my phone and call Sienna. She answers on the second ring.

"You've called me more since you've been out of town than you've called me since I've known you," she says with a laugh.

"I've called you twice."

"Exactly."

It's my turn to laugh. "How are things back there?"

"Good," she says sweetly. "Walker and Peck were out late last night working on a tractor in a field somewhere. They're just dolls this morning, if you get what I'm saying."

"Oh, I know how they can be."

"Right. And then they went by Nana's this morning for breakfast, and guess what they found?"

"I have no idea."

“A man,” she squeals. “And apparently he’d stayed there all night last night. Your cousin kind of lost his mind a little bit, and Walker just got ... well, grumpier. They said seeing him at Sunday dinner was one thing, but this was another. I’m totally loving it, though!”

“Wow,” I say, trying to wrap my mind around that tidbit of information. “Good for her. I’m not sure I’m ready for my grandmother to have sleepovers, but I’m sure I’m dealing with that better than my brothers and Peck.”

“I’m so happy for her. She’s been glowing lately. She deserves to be happy.”

“Absolutely.”

I chew on the edge of my fingernail as I rule out the possibility of staying at Nana’s. Listening to Sienna and Walker going at it is one thing. Potentially hearing Nana and a guy getting down is a whole other world I’m not ready to process.

That leaves two options—Holt’s or a hotel in Chicago.

“Hey, Sienna. I wanted to ask you a question.”

“Sure. Shoot.”

“How well do you actually know Holt Mason?”

Her giggle is ridiculous. I can’t help but roll my eyes.

“I know him pretty well. We grew up around their family. I know his youngest brother, Boone, the best. He’s closer to my age. But all the Masons are really familiar to me.” She smacks her lips together. “May I ask why you’re inquiring about this specific tall, dark, and handsome man?”

I roll my eyes again—this time, at myself. The excitement in her voice has worked its way through the phone and into my veins. I fidget as I try to put together a proper response.

“We had lunch today,” I say. “I’m just curious.”

“Oooh.”

“Sienna.”

She sighs. “Let me love this, Blaire. Please? I’m supposed to love this.”

“There’s nothing to love.”

“But there is. You don’t know how this works, obviously.” She sighs again for effect. “See—when you call a girlfriend and bring up a hot guy, that means you’re interested or there’s a story there. It’s your way of bringing the item to the table. So, my job, as your girlfriend, is to be excited for you. Or to be ready to throttle him, but I don’t think that’s the direction this conversation is going to go. Is it?”

The end of her question is loaded with innuendo. It’s clear she’s giddy over the idea of something happening between her childhood crush and me. And by the smile spreading across my cheeks, it would be clear to her—if she could see me—that I am a little bit happy too.

“He is hot, isn’t he?” I ask.

She laughs. “Yes. *He so is*. Now tell me all the things.”

I pace in a circle and attempt to slow down my thoughts. “My building in Chicago has asbestos, and I can’t get back in for a week or so.”

“And ...”

“And I could stay with you and Walker.”

“Of course.”

“I was thinking about staying with Nana, but if she’s” I wince. “I’m not staying with Nana.”

She pauses, letting the silence work between us before speaking. “No, you’re not. You’re staying with Holt.”

I suck in a quick breath. “Well ...”

“Blaire!” she shrieks. “You are? I mean, I was just throwing shit at the wall and hoping something stuck. You’re going to stay with him?”

“I don’t know,” I say, rushed. “I’m not sure. He offered to let me stay with him, and I’m thinking about it. I just don’t know

a lot about him and wanted to at least ... explore the possibility, I guess.”

She giggles. “Say yes.”

“You’re not thinking clearly, Sienna.”

“Oh, but Blaire—I am,” she says with exaggerated sincerity. “He’s from a great family. Smart. Kind. He’s funny and always smells amazing, and I know he’d show you a good time—in any way you might want to take that.”

She drones on and on about Holt’s virtues, but I stop listening. Mostly because my mind starts imagining what it might be like to actually be in his home.

I pretend to say yes and allow that decision to sit in my stomach. I close my eyes as Sienna veers away from Holt and onto the virtues of getaways and try to see what it feels like to take him up on his offer.

And strangely, it feels good. Fun. *Exciting*. Those are three things that are a bit foreign to me but tap pleasantly through my veins.

“Are you listening to me?” Sienna asks.

“Yes. I should agree to his proposal. I hear you.”

“Yes, you should. So ... are you?”

Am I?

While the idea has nested itself in my psyche, I’m still not positive. Rushed judgments tend to lend themselves to trouble, and I know better. I need to think clearly.

“Maybe. I’m going to think about it for a while first. Good decisions come after a lot of thought.”

“Well, good experiences come from impulsive decisions, so don’t think about it too much.”

“You’re crazy,” I say with a chuckle. “I gotta go, Sienna. Talk to you soon.”

“Don’t overthink this!”

“Goodbye, Sienna.”

“Ugh. Fine. Bye.”

I end the call.

Chapter Twelve

Holt

“I can move this building here and change the interior concept,” Wade says, moving his finger across the paper on my desk, “but it will be an engineering nightmare.”

My chair squeaks as I rock backward and take in Wade’s point.

“Oliver said Landry won’t agree to sell until we demonstrate our intent with the property,” he continues. “Ollie tried to gloss over it as best as he could, but Landry wanted visuals.”

I tear my eyes away from the design and look at my brother. “With this version, we still have hotel space, two restaurants —”

“Three.”

“Okay. And some office space too, correct?”

“Correct.” Wade takes off his glasses and sighs. “Boone has been working his ass off, believe it or not—”

“Or not,” I mutter.

Wade grins. “I’m confident we have solid interest in all the spaces except for the retail section on the east end. If you can get Landry to sell the land to us, we can start securing merchants and investors. It will make us a motherfucking fortune.”

And if we don’t get him to sell to us, it might cost us everything.

I sigh. “I know.”

I push my chair the rest of the way back and get to my feet. My right hand clasps against the back of my neck where the muscles are rigid. As I work my neck back and forth, my

thoughts veer from Wade's monologue on architectural symmetry to Blaire.

Blocking out a woman—especially when a project of this magnitude is on the table—has never been an issue. I've always gotten way more out of a multi-million-dollar deal than a relationship. That's probably why I've never been in a lasting relationship to start with: it can never hold a candle to what I do all day.

So why in the hell am I tuning out Wade and tuning into Blaire?

I know better than this. *Fuck.*

"Where the hell did you just go?" Wade's voice snaps me out of my delirium. "You didn't hear a word of that, did you?"

I rub a hand down my face. "Wade, I think I'm losing my mind."

"Please. No. Don't leave me with Oliver and Boone all on my own."

I can't help but chuckle.

Wade takes in the scene before him—my less-than-stellar attention span, mussed-up hair, and wrinkled forehead—and sighs. He sits on the sofa near the door and looks at me unamused.

I lean against the wall and stare back at him. It's like looking in a mirror. Our hair is the same color. Both of our eyes a green-gold mix. We're built the same too. If he didn't handle his stress better than I do, we could be twins. Unfortunately, I have way more lines on my face than him.

"Can we get this over with?" he asks.

"What?"

"Why are you losing your mind?" he asks as if I'm a baby.

I glare back at him. "You wanna know what I did today?"

"No. But here we are, so tell me so we can get on with it."

“I asked a woman to stay with me,” I say, my jaw set in place.
“In my house. Willingly. This week of all weeks.”

This gets a reaction. He leans up, pressing his hands against his knees, and makes a surprised face.

“I know,” I mutter.

“I have to admit that you’ve stunned me a little bit.”

“Hell, I’ve stunned myself.”

He mulls this over. “Do you like her? I mean, you must if you’re subverting your whole ‘my house is my sanctum’ rule.”

Do I? Do I like her?

What a stupid question to be asking yourself now, Holt.

I turn toward the glass that overlooks downtown Savannah and consider his question. Of course, I like her. She’s intelligent and witty and fucking gorgeous. *But do I like her enough to stay with me?*

My house is off-limits and has been for years. Ever since Kendra Thompson and I ended things—something I apparently thought was a lot less serious than she did—and she destroyed the walls and carpeting while I was at work and then refused to leave. It took weeks to fix the damage and left me without a place to relax after closing one of the biggest deals of my life. That was four years ago. I’ve held tight for four freaking years.

So why am I breaking that rule now?

I’m cracking under stress.

“This is none of my business,” Wade says, running his hands down his thighs. “But you brought it up, so here’s what I think—you’re lonely in that big old house, and you’re stressed out from this whole Landry thing. You’re probably not thinking clearly, and she’s pressured you into—”

“No.” I shake my head. “She didn’t. Not in the slightest.”

“Wow. Okay. Who is she?”

I force a swallow. “Blaire Gibson. I met her at the airport and then again at the Landrys.”

He nods, having heard this story from Oliver, I’m sure.

“Am I?” I ask. “Am I losing my mind? Or does this make as much sense as I think it does? But then again, I say it out loud, and it sounds ridiculous. Like Boone-level ridiculous.”

Wade cocks a brow, unfazed by my confusion. “You know what I think about women. Ergo, I think you’re losing your mind.”

I roll my eyes. “I realize you’d rather eat lead than spend time with a woman, but all of us aren’t as self-reliant.”

“And y’all aren’t as smart, either.” He sighs and stands. “Women are a giant pain in the ass. They demand your time and money and attention, and they wreck your truck.” A fire flashes through Wade’s eyes as the unfortunate night one of Boone’s girlfriends wrecked his truck undoubtedly comes to his mind. “None of you are ever happy when you’re dating someone, so why do it?”

“Coy looks happy.”

He snorts. “Coy is happy he’s getting paid to be America’s Sweetheart’s pretend boyfriend. Coy loves money more than he loves women.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” I say before getting irritated at the twist in conversation. “But this isn’t about Coy. This is about me. Should I call Blaire and guide her away from staying with me?”

“Fuck if I know.” He walks across the room and stops in front of my desk. “This isn’t a conversation for me.”

“Then who am I supposed to ask? Boone?”

Wade shrugs and rolls his designs up into a log. “I don’t know. This isn’t in my wheelhouse. Call Mom. Call Larissa,” he says, referring to our cousin. “Call Blaire and tell her you want her to have your babies for all I care. But I have work to do while you’re off wasting time with this bullshit.”

He plops the log onto his shoulder and heads for the door.

“You know what?” I call after him. “You aren’t my favorite brother anymore.”

“Good. You were never mine.”

“Liar.”

He pauses in the doorway and turns to face me. “You’re only my favorite because the others are idiots, and this side of the company would fall on its face without you. You’re the backbone around here—no pressure.” He gives me a fake smile that slowly morphs into a real one. “But as far as the girl goes—I can tell you like her, so go through with it. Let her stay with you. She doesn’t live here anyway, right? What could it hurt? She’ll have to go home eventually.”

I shrug.

“I’ll call you tomorrow about the changes to these,” he says, tapping his free hand against the drawings.

“See ya.”

He disappears around the corner without saying another word.

I drop into my chair again and let out a deep breath. I don’t exactly know how I got into this predicament, but I do think Wade is right.

What could it hurt?

Not much. She’ll be chomping at the bit to go home and get back to work as soon as she can. That much I’ll guarantee. The odds of her going Kendra and becoming a huge problem are really moot when I think about it. And hanging out with her in the evenings for a few days might be a good way to recharge while we’re battling Landry.

Besides, it’s a nice thing for me to do. It’ll get me good karma.

“She might not even take me up on it,” I say, scooting up to my desk. “I’m probably wildly overthinking this.”

I grin when I see that Wade left me a copy of his design. I peer over the papers and make a few notes along the side. I’m just about to grab a glass of water when my phone rings.

“Hello?” I ask, sinking back into my chair in anticipation of Blaire’s voice.

“Hi, Holt.”

“Hi, Blaire.”

My internal rhythms change immediately, evening out into a steady pace. The wariness from my conversation with Wade and the uncertainty I felt as I studied the plans are gone. In their place is an excitement that I can’t—and don’t want to—deny.

“Are you having a good day?” she asks.

“Wade just left my office so ... not really.” I laugh. “I’m in the office. What about you?”

“Am I interrupting? Because I can call back or—”

“No,” I say, sitting up. “It’s just me now. I need a break anyway.”

She blows out a light breath.

“What about you?” I ask again. “Are you having a good day?”

“Yes, actually. Well, I was until the baby across the hall started crying again. I’m starting to think it has colic.”

I furrow my brow. “What’s colic?”

“It’s when babies cry for no apparent reason. My youngest brother, Machlan, had it when he was a baby. He would cry every afternoon from four o’clock to seven thirty on the dot. It was the strangest thing.”

“Huh. Well, I don’t know much about babies other than I’m not sure I’m built for diapers.”

She laughs. “Me either. My nana keeps pushing me to have kids before she dies, which is a completely morbid thought in my opinion. I’m hoping my brothers hurry up and have kids so the pressure gets taken off me.”

“But you’re the only girl, right?”

“Yes.”

“That might make a difference,” I counter. “She might want to see her maternal line move another generation.”

“Well, she should’ve had more children and upped her odds.”

“That’s what I tell my mother. She’s always telling us that we need to have daughters since she had five boys. I tell her it’s not my fault.” I laugh. “Then we tell her that Boone will definitely have daughters with all the estrogen in his blood so it’s not a worry.”

Blaire laughs. “So Boone is the one you tease?”

“Nah, we all get teased for different things. Boone’s the baby, so he gets punked a little more just because of birth order ... and the fact that he really embraces the baby-of-the-family role.”

“Machlan is the baby in our family, and he *does* the punking. Except to Walker. I don’t think they’ve ever actually fought, but I’m not sure who would win.”

I fiddle with the top button of my shirt. It takes a few tries before I get it undone.

Rising to my feet, I walk over to the windows. The sun is still warm even though it’s flirting with the horizon. The day whizzed by. This time last night, Blaire and I were on our way to Picante. That seems unreal. It also seems unreal that I might not see her again if she leaves tomorrow.

“Did you give any thought to my offer?” I ask.

She hesitates. “Yes, actually. I did.”

“And ...?”

“I was thinking that it might not be a terrible idea to stay in Savannah for a few more days and see the city.”

My reflection in the glass shows just how big my smile grows.

“I think that’s great,” I say.

“Do you? Because I can always get a hotel room in Chicago. I don’t want to be a charity case. I’ve considered that maybe—”

“Blaire?”

“Yes?”

“You’re rambling,” I tease.

She laughs. “I’m sorry. I just ... I don’t know what to say right now, to be honest. I don’t want to be an inconvenience.”

I lean against the window. The tension in the back of my neck is gone, as is the ache in my jaw that developed when Wade walked in the door earlier. I feel like I could go for a run or turn on the television—both things I never feel energized enough for or peaceful enough to do, depending.

“How about you just say that you need my address?” I offer.

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

She sighs. “Okay. Holt, I need your address so that I can come tomorrow after check-out. So probably around noon-ish.”

I shove off the glass. “Why don’t you just come now?”

“Because I just told you I’d come by tomorrow.”

I hear the edge in her voice—the one that serves as a warning not to push her. The strength and fearlessness in her tone makes me fucking hard. It also makes me want to push.

“Fair enough,” I throw back. “Stay in the room with the crying baby instead of coming to my house where I’ll be working in pure silence while ordering takeout. That makes total sense.”

I hold my breath as she analyzes my point. It’s a good one. I’m sure of it. The only way she won’t take me up on it is if she’s proving some other point to herself. Or if she pushes back just because I pushed first.

Which could happen.

“How about this?” I ask, rethinking my tactics. “I’ll text you my address. You are welcome to come at any time. If you get driven crazy by the colic kid tonight, come on by. Or wait until tomorrow. That’s cool too. Totally up to you.”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you tomorrow,” she says matter-of-factly.

I want to ask her another question just to keep her on the line, but Wade’s drawings taunt me from across the room, and I feel like maybe I can concentrate on them now.

“I’ll text you in just a minute,” I say.

“Thank you, Holt.”

“No problem. See you soon.”

“Goodbye.”

There’s a hesitation in her tone that makes me think she didn’t expect to get off the phone either. But for both of our goods, I press the red button anyway.

Chapter Thirteen

Blaire

“Vacations are so good for you,” I say in my best Sienna impression as I pilot my car down Cobblestone Way. *“I just read a study that says you work harder and smarter when you’ve had a chance to relax. And Holt is so cute.”*

I blow out a breath and try to relax back into the driver’s seat.

“This is all that screaming baby’s fault. Not mine,” I tell myself. “I could’ve held on until morning. I know I could’ve.”

The street is lined with giant oak trees. Their curved, drooping branches hang with picturesque Spanish moss flowing nearly to the ground. Houses are tucked back from the road, encompassed by large lots and obscured by the vegetation. With the final rays of daylight streaming through the foliage, it’s almost as though I’m driving through a movie set.

In this particular movie, however, the heroine isn’t a fashion designer coming home to get divorced or a bride-to-be heading to the beauty shop with her mother. This time, the leading lady is a displaced attorney heading to the house of a man she met a whole two days ago—and slept with once—as though it’s a good idea.

Because that’s what people do who graduated J.D. summa cum laude in law school. I’m really putting all my intelligence to good work these days.

As though the universe can sense my wobble, the numbers 1942 appear out of thin air. The numbers are black and pop against the brick mailbox that sits next to a wide driveway. A lamp sits on either side.

I turn toward the house.

My headlights flicker on as I slip beneath a row of moss-heavy trees. I travel around a little bend before I see the house itself.

“Holy shit,” I whisper.

Sitting in front of me is not just a house but an estate. Tall, white columns stand on the porch and frame a massive wooden door. The roof is slate gray, and the house itself is a warm, almost yellow paint that nearly glows in the sunset.

The driveway, a stamped concrete that makes it feel like you’re driving on stone, forms a y at the front steps. The right arm wraps around the side of the house; the left leads to an oversized four-car garage with doors the same gray as the roof.

It’s immaculate and incredible, and the landscaping adds to the secret garden, magical ambiance.

I park the car just as Holt appears on the porch.

“Dear lord,” I say, turning off the ignition.

He’s wearing the same jeans from this afternoon but has replaced the white button-up with a black T-shirt. And he’s barefooted.

Of course, he is. He knows how to play me like a fiddle.

He hops down the stairs with a spring in his step. “You found it,” he says as he pulls my door open.

“I drove past it five times, it’s so small.”

He makes a face as I climb out of the car.

“That’s something a guy never wants to hear,” he says, shutting the door behind me. He reaches in the back and grabs my bags and briefcase from the back seat. “But I’m glad you made it even if it took you five tries.”

“Six. But it was worth it. I can carry those,” I say.

He silences me with a look. The heat in it makes me shiver. After ensuring his point was made, he starts toward the porch.

“On a serious note, this place is beautiful,” I say as I follow him. “You are now officially never invited to my apartment in Chicago.”

“I didn’t know I was invited before.”

“Well, you weren’t. But you’re really not now.”

He grins as he holds the door open. I try to slip by without tipping him off that his cologne lights me on fire.

I step inside and gasp again. “Oh, my gosh, Holt. This is incredible.”

The foyer is white marble with a subtle yet spectacular chandelier hanging in the center. A few steps farther and the room opens up. Floor-to-ceiling windows with white shutters line the far wall. Pine flooring warms the space that hosts cathedral ceilings. An oversized fireplace constructed from the same marble as the foyer is the centerpiece on one wall, and across from it, nestled against a set of stairs, is a grandfather clock.

I tear my eyes away from the fluffy sofa that begs to be curled up on with a book and look at Holt instead.

He’s leaning against a wall, watching me review his home. The playful look that’s typically written across his features—or is hiding just beneath the surface—is gone. Instead, a seriousness is painted on his handsome face.

“It still needs some work,” he says.

“What are you talking about? This is ... this is beautiful.”

He almost smiles. “When I was a little boy, I’d ride my bike up and down this road and look at the houses. It was a slight obsession. My father thought I was going to be an architect because of it.”

“Your one brother is an architect, isn’t he?”

He rewards me with a grin. “Yes. Wade. That’s correct.”

“Did he design this?”

“No. This place was built in the seventies. I’ve been in the process of overhauling it since I bought it.” He cocks his head to the side. “Do you want a drink or something?”

“A drink would be nice.”

“Follow me.”

He shoves off the wall and leads me down a hallway. A large piece of art hangs between two sconces, and I pause to look at the wild, colorful blasts of color.

Holt pauses a few steps ahead of me.

“Is this meaningful to you?” I ask, taking in the vivid stripes of primary colors. “It feels very personal in an abstract kind of way.”

“Oh, it’s personal all right. And it holds a very important meaning. Don’t leave your auction paddle anywhere near Coy.”

I giggle. “Sounds like a story there.”

“A story about me almost killing my brother for bidding an exorbitant amount of money on a piece of art that, while very nice, wasn’t worth the price of a small country’s gross domestic product.”

I bite my lip to hide my amusement as I follow him into the kitchen.

While he makes us a drink, I gaze out the windows. There are no shutters or curtains covering them. It provides a clear, unobstructed view of the pool and, beyond that, what looks like a marsh. It’s hard to tell with only the moon giving off light.

“I hope you like iced tea,” he says.

I turn around as he approaches. He hands me a glass.

“Tea is great,” I say.

“*This* tea is exceptional. My housekeeper makes it for me. It’s better than my mother’s, but don’t ever tell her that, or I’ll have to kill you.”

I laugh. “I won’t. Promise.”

He takes a drink, watching me over the brim. I, in turn, watch how his bicep ripples as he lifts his glass. I tell myself it’s because attention to detail is what I do best, but in reality, it’s probably because not one thing in the room is more attention-worthy than him.

He sets his glass on the black-and-silver granite countertop.

“I was happy to get your text tonight.” His deep voice rumbles over my skin. “I was sure you were going to wait until tomorrow.”

“I was, but Colic Baby started up again.”

“Maybe I should send them a fruit basket.”

“I think they’d appreciate a good night’s sleep instead.”

His eyes twinkle. “I hope I’ll be a little sleep deprived too by the time you leave.”

My heart leaps to life. Blood pours through my brains at a manic level. Every cell in my body goes into overdrive, hoping to come into contact with the hard body just a few feet away from me.

I shift my weight from one foot to the other as I set my glass on the counter beside his.

“I think we need to communicate a little better about a few things before I get too settled in,” I say, my voice steady thanks to years in high-pressure courtrooms.

He crosses his arms over his chest. “What do we need to communicate about?”

“Well, for one, I’m not against having sex with you. I mean, clearly. But I want to be clear that I didn’t agree to stay here just to sleep with you.”

“I don’t think that.”

“Good,” I say, forcing a swallow. “Also, let’s be clear that I do expect to stay in a guest room. It’s imperative that we keep this thing between us straightforward, so it’s not problematic when I leave in a few days.”

He lifts a brow, his jaw flexing. “You’re talking like my hospitality is something to be negotiated.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” His arms fall to his sides. “I can forgive you because I suspect that most things in your life are a contract or

agreement.”

“Aren’t all things in life?”

He rolls his eyes. “Follow me.”

“Where are we going?”

He doesn’t bother with an answer. Instead, he makes his way back down the hall, past the overpriced artwork, and to the foyer. He gathers my bags and briefcase in his large hands.

“Holt,” I say, catching up to him. “What are you doing?”

“Putting things in the guest room.”

He flashes a look my way that makes me think that was his original intent. And that makes me flush with embarrassment as I ascend the staircase next to the grandfather clock.

We stop at the first door on the right. He flips on a light.

“Here you go,” he says, setting my things on an antique four-poster bed. “There’s a bathroom just for this room through that doorway.” He motions to his right. “You can stay here as long as you want. My room is down the hall.”

I suck up my pride. “I apologize if I was rude.”

“You weren’t rude. Just ... presumptuous.”

“Well, I apologize for being presumptuous.”

He studies me. His eyes narrow as he works his bottom lip between his teeth. Finally, it pops free. “I’m going to need you to do one thing for me if you stay.”

“Oh, sure, put conditions on me now,” I say, hoping he takes it as the joke it’s meant to be.

If he does or doesn’t, I’ll never know. He simply continues to watch me carefully.

“I invited you into my home to stay with me as a friend,” he says. “Whether we’ve had sex or not doesn’t matter. I enjoy spending time with you—even when you’re a presumptuous little darling.”

“Hey!”

He chuckles. “You’re going to need to stop talking to me like a business associate and more like a friend. Okay? While I find your prowess insanely attractive and also kind of adorable, I really don’t want to feel like I’m at a business meeting in my own home.”

His words ring through my ears and bury themselves in my heart. *Do I do that?*

I try to think back to the words I use when communicating with my friends—or my family because I don’t really have a lot of friends. I have a way of getting to the point. I’m aware that I have a tendency to take over situations and impose myself in decisions.

But do I talk to people like business associates? *I don’t know.* What I do know is that I need to steer this conversation into easier waters.

“I suppose my problem is that I didn’t know we were friends,” I say, a grin tugging at the corner of my lips.

“You didn’t?”

“I didn’t.”

“That’s interesting. Do you often agree to stay with men you aren’t friends with?”

I bite my bottom lip. “Only when I need fucked.”

His eyes light up as his whole face comes alive. His tongue works around his cheek as his entire body moves with each breath he takes.

Watching him react to me—and forgetting the previous conversation—is a treat. The way his Adam’s apple bobs in his throat and how his thick neck rolls around his shoulders are things I commit to memory for later use.

He closes the distance between us in two seconds flat. His eyes bore into mine. My breathing becomes labored as I imagine his hands roaming across my body the way they did before—cupping my breasts, caressing my cheeks, and guiding me closer by pressing against the small of my back.

“Is that what you want? Do you want to be fucked, Blaire?”

I bat my eyelashes. “I’m afraid to answer you. I might not sound *friendly* enough.”

A growl rumbles from his throat as his hand reaches for my face. I hold my breath as his palm grows closer. It’s nearly to the side of my neck when the door chimes ring.

My breath exhales in one loud whoosh as his hand drops to his side. His eyes are alight with humor.

“Dinner’s here,” he says as his face breaks into a megawatt smile.

“You’re kidding me.”

He turns toward the door. “Hope you like Italian.”

“You’re just ... gonna ...”

I squirm as he walks toward the doorway. My thighs ache with an unsatisfied need. And the only way to sufficiently meet that need is on his way to answer a freaking door.

Holt pauses and turns around in the doorway. “Am I just gonna what? Leave you there? In the guest room? Where you wanted to be?”

My jaw hangs open.

The doorbell chimes again.

“I’m coming!” Holt shouts down the hallway.

“I’m glad one of us is.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “One more thing. In my house, I’m in control, Miss Gibson. Don’t forget that.”

With an aggravating, delicious wink, he disappears into the hallway. And I’m left reeling in the guest room. Just as I asked.

Dammit.

Chapter Fourteen

Holt

“I’m absolutely stuffed,” Blaire says.

She rests her head against the side of the leather armchair. Her dark hair splays against the material as she closes her eyes and sighs happily.

I finish the rest of my manicotti and then place the empty container on the coffee table between us. The meal was excellent, but the conversation was even better. Who knew that discussing criminal litigation over dinner could be so fun?

I pick up my wine and settle back on the sofa. Blaire looks right at home with her legs curled up under her. There’s a peace on her face—a look of pure contentment—that’s as lovely, or even lovelier, than when she’s smiling or laughing.

The cool, outside air breezes in through the open French doors. It’s offset by the soft warmth of the electric fireplace next to my companion.

“I could fall asleep right here,” she says, opening her eyes again.

“Do it then.”

She smiles a sleepy smile. “I’ve already been rude once today.”

The fireplace crackles next to her as she reaches over and picks up her wine glass. She takes a long sip and gazes around the room filled with some of my favorite items.

“This is my favorite room in your house,” she says. “Well, this is my favorite of the rooms I’ve seen so far. I’m not sure how many others there are.”

“This happens to be my favorite room as well. And I’ve seen all of them.”

She grins at my joke. “What makes it your favorite?”

“I don’t know. I think it just represents all the things I hoped this house would feel like when I bought it.”

“Which is ...?”

I blow out a breath and take a sip of my wine.

Gazing around the room, I try to figure out *why* it’s my favorite part of the property. I’ve wondered this a number of times and never boiled it down to a simple answer.

“It has a good vibe,” I say, figuring that’s a good enough answer. But I should’ve known better.

Blaire presses her lips together. “Good try.”

“What do you mean good try?”

“I mean, that answer is insufficient.”

I laugh. “Remember that whole conversation we had earlier about you not making me feel like I’m at work?”

“Remember that whole conversation when you told me you wanted me to feel like we’re friends?” She cocks a brow. “So answer my question. Why is this room your favorite?”

I set my glass back down and lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “This room reminds me of my grandmother’s library when I was a little boy. It had tray ceilings and these grand bookcases that she had stuffed with books. I’d stand in front of them and just revel in the colors of the spines. And she had this yellow birdcage with two finches with little orange faces.”

Blaire’s face softens. “That sounds wonderful.”

“It was. She was such a powerhouse and emitted this energy that just captured you when you got close to her. It was crazy. But then you stepped into her house, and it ... it had this calmness. This tranquility, I guess. As though she left all the craziness of the world at the end of the driveway.”

“What was she like?”

I try to imagine summing up my grandmother in an easy word or phrase. The idea is almost hysterical.

She was a firecracker. The best adventurer. The best homemade pie baker and the dirtiest joke teller I've ever met. It's impossible to condense her life and all that she was into one statement.

"Well, she was a lot of things," I say slowly. "She owned a bookstore and managed a bank. But then she got into real estate after her father died, and she inherited a lot of money." I stand and stretch my arms over my head. "She bought houses and sold them. She had a huge rental portfolio. One day, she broke down on the outside of town, and a homeless man changed her tire. It changed something in her. Soon after, she started a charity in town called Shelters for Savannah and donated all of her rentals to the cause."

"Wow." Blaire's eyes go wide. "You meant it when you called her a powerhouse."

I nod. "She was generous and kind, but make no mistake about it, she wasn't weak. And when anyone misjudged her, she made them regret it."

I walk around the sofa to burn some energy that showed up out of nowhere. Blaire watches me but doesn't move except to pull her legs up under her again.

"What was her name?" she asks.

"Annabelle Hickman. She was my mother's mother."

"This room is your ode to Annabelle."

My heart tugs at the sound of her name. "It is, I guess."

"May I ask what happened to her?"

"She went in for a routine surgery and died on the table. There was a heart problem that went undetected." I grip the back of the sofa. "Her husband, my grandfather, died before I was born."

Blaire grips the armrest. Her lips turn down. "I'm sure she's very proud of you. You know that, right?"

I give her a shrug in lieu of words because the truth is, I hope she would be proud of me. She always said her grandchildren were her most important contributions to the world. I'd hate to think she'd be disappointed in the life I've chosen.

But I don't say that.

Blaire seems to understand my need not to elaborate beyond the physical gesture.

She takes a long breath. "You still have your dad's parents, right?"

"We have Gramps. Gramma passed away a few years ago."

I walk around the sofa and sit down again.

The breeze kicks up and rocks the French doors back and forth. They somehow swing in time with the crackling of the fire.

"What about you?" I ask.

"I just have my nana."

She shrugs as if it's no big deal. I'd believe it, too, if there wasn't a brief shot of pain in her beautiful blue eyes.

"You've told me a little about her," I say. "She sounds like a powerhouse too."

"Oh, most definitely. She had to be to put up with us like she has—especially Peck and Machlan. She's practically raised them."

"Who is Peck?"

"My cousin. His mother is a real gem," she says in disgust. "But Nana raised Mach too because ..." She takes a deep breath and holds it for a long couple of seconds before blowing it out. "Our parents died in a boating accident many years ago. Machlan was still a teenager."

My heart breaks at the look on her face. Not because it's sad, but because it's trying really hard not to be.

I wonder if she's always this buttoned up about it, or if she allows herself to display the pain she has to be feeling. *Losing*

your parents? Shit. I don't know how I'd survive. But I do know I'd be unable to hold it together like that.

"I'm sorry, Blaire."

"Yeah. Me too."

"Tell me about them."

A shadow falls across her face. The vaguest grin touches her lips as she stares out the French doors. "They were amazing," she says softly. "The backbone of our family. They took care of us—all of us. My brothers and me. Nana. Peck. Any kid we'd drag over to the house who needed a meal or shoes."

I sit quietly and watch her wrestle with her memories. A softness settles over her face, her posture relaxing too, before she seems to catch herself.

She stands and stretches before bending over to pick up our food containers.

I jump to my feet. "What are you doing?" I take the two white boxes away from her.

"I'm trying to pick up our mess."

Her eyes plead with me to go along with her redirection. Even though I want to press for more—to see more of her in an unguarded, or less guarded, state—I don't. But I don't give her the boxes back either.

"I'll do that," I tell her.

"Come on, Holt. Let me help."

"You're my guest."

"It's not going to hurt to let me pick up my trash, for crying out loud."

"For crying out loud," I say, mocking her. "You really have a problem not getting your way, don't you?"

She starts to object and then stops. A laugh topples past her lips. "Yes. I do."

"Well, good. That will make this all the more fun."

I walk a wide berth around her and head to the kitchen. Her feet slap against the hardwood as she chases me through the living room and down the hallway into the kitchen.

“This isn’t how this works,” she says, a laugh in her voice.

I toss the containers into the trash can. “Is it not?”

“No.” She brushes a strand of hair out of her face. “You’re supposed to let me have my way. I’m the guest. That’s how it works.”

“Not here, pretty girl.”

Her cheeks flush the faintest shade of pink as she gazes up at me. “You’re a pain in the ass.”

“That I am.” I dip my head toward her as I walk around her again. I’m too close to kissing her already and need to put a bit of distance between us. “What are your plans for tomorrow?”

“I don’t know.” Her frustration at not getting kissed is evident. “What are you doing?”

“Working,” I say as I place our tea glasses from earlier into the dishwasher. “You can hang out by the pool. You can’t see it very well now, but the pool is pretty damn nice.”

“It won’t be weird for you to have me here when you aren’t?”

I grin to myself. “I don’t know. Are you going to rob me?”

“No,” she exclaims.

“Are you going to go through my underwear drawer?”

“Wasn’t on the agenda.”

“Then I guess it won’t be weird.”

She smacks me on the shoulder as she rounds the island. “I might go down and see the cathedral you were telling me about tomorrow afternoon. I looked it up while I was killing time not coming here this evening.”

“You were, were you?”

She nods, leaning her forearms against the countertop. “It looks like one of those places that people will ask you about

after they learn you were here. It'll make me look like a good little tourist."

I lean my forearms against the countertop too. "You might be the worst tourist in the history of tourism."

"Is that right?"

"Maybe. I better meet you down there and make sure you do all the right things. Just to be safe."

Her eyes light up. "I'll probably be there around one."

"I can probably be there around one too."

"Cool."

"Cool," I say back, making her laugh.

We watch each other in an easy comfortability. It's an odd sensation to feel this relaxed around someone I just met. Especially here.

"What?" she asks.

"What, what?"

"What are you thinking?"

I contemplate not telling her or fabricating some bullshit answer to satisfy her curiosity. But I'm fairly certain she'll call me out on it, and we'll end up at the truth anyway.

"I was thinking," I begin, "how unusual it is to be enjoying someone's company here."

She looks confused. "Why? I mean, why would you have invited me here if you didn't expect to somewhat enjoy my company?"

"I'll be honest ... I didn't really think you being here all the way through before inviting you."

The confusion turns to annoyance. "Gee, thanks. I have the warm and fuzzies about this now."

"That's not what I mean," I say adamantly. "What I mean is that I just kind of asked you because it just came out of my mouth. That's not something I usually do."

She jams a thumb over her shoulder. “I can leave.”

“And I can chase you down and throw you over my shoulder and bring you back.”

The air between us shifts. And I don’t think it has anything to do with the open French doors on the other side of the house.

She faces me and gives me her very best undeterred look. But hiding just beneath that badassery is a thin layer of excitement that she doesn’t want to show.

I take a step toward her. “You like that, don’t you?”

“I like what?”

“The idea of being thrown over my shoulder.”

She scoffs. “I think we established the fact that I don’t love cavemen at our first dinner together.”

“I think what we established is that you don’t want to like the whole caveman thing because you think it makes you weak.”

“No. I think it makes *men* weak.”

I stand in front of her and peer down. She lifts her chin to see into my eyes. To offset the imbalance of power, she throws her shoulders back.

It doesn’t work.

“I bet,” I say, biting my bottom lip, “if I touched you right now, you’d be wet.”

Her lips twist as she scrambles for a response.

“And even though you don’t want to admit it,” I say slowly, “it’s because the idea of being dominated turns you the fuck on.”

I lay a finger against the side of her cheek. She fights her natural instinct to lean into my touch.

The pad of my finger draws a faint line down her jaw. Her chest rises and falls at a quickened pace, her pupils dilating.

“Would you be wet for me, Blaire?”

Her gaze smolders. “Depends on where you touch me.”

“I—” I begin but am interrupted by the sound of two ringing phones.

Blaire’s shoulders fall as a giggle escapes her mouth. “There have to be cameras around here. This is so unfair.”

I jerk my phone out of my back pocket. I’m not nearly as entertained by the disruption as she is.

Oliver’s name is printed across my screen. I’m ready to send him to voicemail when Blaire speaks.

“This is my nana,” she says. “I should answer it.”

I want to take her phone and throw it into the pool and make her forget it ever rang. But it’s her grandmother, so I’m sure I’d go to hell for that.

“Go ahead,” I say with as much neutrality as I can muster. “I’ll be in the den.”

She flashes me a grateful smile as I press the green button and turn on my heel.

“You are such a fucking cock block,” I tell him without saying hello.

He greets me with a full-bellied laugh. “I guess I can forgo asking how you are.”

“Fucker.”

“Nah, I don’t think you are fucking her, actually.”

I run a hand through my hair as I pass through by the foyer. “Did you call for a reason? Or just to piss me off?”

“I called for a reason. Pissing you off is just a bonus.”

“Well, shut up and get to the point. I’m about to shut this phone off for the night.”

I enter the den and stand next to the fireplace. The blanket I keep on the back of the chair that Blaire was sitting in is draped over the armrest. My immediate inclination is to pick it up and put it back where it goes. But before I touch the fabric, I pull back. I kind of like it there.

“I’m taking it Blaire is there,” Oliver says.

“If you wanna gossip, call Wade.”

He tsks me.

“Tell me why you called so I can get back to what I was doing,” I say, my gaze drifting toward the doorway.

“You mean who you were doing? Or about to do?”

“Ollie ...” I warn.

“All right, all right.” He sucks in a breath. “We’re having lunch with Landry tomorrow at eleven thirty. Wade’s new drawings are spectacular. He outdid himself. Have you seen them?”

“Yes. Well, I saw them this afternoon. I don’t know what he changed.”

“They’re awesome. Anyway, we’re meeting Graham and Lincoln Landry at Picante. Keep your schedule open.”

“Will do.” I sigh. “Can I go now?”

“Yes, you can go now. Just get this out of your system so you can concentrate tomorrow. I’m getting tired of being the only one who can think around here today.”

I snort. “Phone is going off. Talk to you in the morning.”

“Goodbye.”

Blaire’s laughter filters through the house. I don’t know if it’s loud or if I’m just in tune with her.

I rub my hands down my face.

She laughs again.

My stomach twists. I tell myself it’s a case of blue balls, and I’m sure on some level, it is. *I definitely wanted to fuck*. But as I listen to her faint voice filter my direction, I wonder if it’s not something else too. Something less physical.

You just have a few days of this. Enjoy it for what it is, and then everything will go back to normal.

I’m not sure if knowing I have a few days of this left is a good thing or a bad thing. And that’s fucking scary.

Chapter Fifteen

Blaire

A breeze just strong enough to rustle the branches of the massive oak trees in Xavier Park billows around me. The chapel sits on the other side of a lazy street that gives off the impression of being in a cozy village rather than the city of Savannah.

I stroll along a path and take in the space that's more magical than mundane. People pass by, giving me a welcoming smile or a gentle wave. Others lie on blankets with dogs or lovers while some curl up with books beneath the trees.

My rush to finish my work this morning paid off. While I was sorting through Yancy's emails and the new evidence in the Lawson case, I chastised myself for agreeing to this. My butt should be in a chair, in Chicago, with my face in case files. But now, as I breathe in the fresh, clean air, my regret diminishes.

It diminishes even more when I remember Holt is on his way.

I grin.

"He'll be here soon," I say aloud.

The excitement in my stomach bubbles, and I don't try to fight it. It's futile at this point.

Hearing him get ready for work this morning—the soft steps of his feet down the hall, the gravel of his voice answering a call, the clatter of his dishes in the kitchen—made me want to get up too. I fought with myself to stay in bed and not make a fool out of myself.

I escaped the night before and maintained my dignity—mostly. It was not the easiest thing I've ever done. Especially when I ended Nana's call and looked up to see him standing in the doorway with that look in his eye. It was a glimmer of concern, presumably about something to do with his phone

call, but also a predatory sheen. And while I was totally on board for being his prey, I knew that he needed to address work. I couldn't be a distraction, so I took myself to the guest room like an adult and locked the door.

For his own good. And mine.

He didn't come for me—pun sadly intended.

My phone rings in my hand, and I jump. “Hey, Sienna,” I say.

“Hey! How are you?”

“I'm good. What about you?”

“I'm great. Walker is great. Family is good. Now talk to me.”

I can't help but laugh at the mischief in her voice. A bench sits at the entry of the park, and I make my way to it.

“What do you want me to say?” I ask, playing coy.

“Oh, my gosh, Blaire. *Holt*. Talk to me about Holt Mason. I know you're not this dense.”

My cheeks split into a grin. I sit on the bench and feel a warmth spread throughout my body.

As much as I don't want to admit it—to Sienna or myself, for that matter—being able to talk about this with her is ... nice. I'm not sure how much to say or what I should say or if I'll regret it in a week when I'm back home and Holt is nothing but a memory, but it's fun for now.

“I'm still in Savannah,” I say.

“Nana told me. I mean, I guessed as much, but she said she talked to you last night and confirmed it.”

My jaw drops. “You didn't tell Nana about Holt, did you?”

The idea of my grandmother knowing I was sleeping with a man I just met is horrifying. My sweet little Nana would probably burst into flames.

I slink down on the bench and wince.

Sienna sighs. “I know this girl thing is new to you, but the first rule in the Girl Code is no snitching.”

“That’s also the first rule in prison.”

She scoffs. “See? That’s your problem right there. You know more about prison dynamics than you do having a friend.”

“You might be right,” I say, sitting back up. I shove that idea from my brain and focus on the task at hand. “You didn’t tell Nana, right? I need a straightforward confirmation.”

“No, Blaire, I didn’t tell your grandma that you were seeing a well-to-do, wealthy, kind man while you’re on vacation. The horror.”

“Well, thank you. That was nice of you.”

Her laugh is embedded with disbelief. “Okay. Let me guide you through this process.”

“What process?”

“The process of gossip!” She laughs. “This is the point when you tell me all the sordid details from last night. And don’t leave anything out.”

My face flushes at the idea of Holt doing sordid things to me. Lord, how I wanted him to. But my body settles down at the reminder that he didn’t do anything of the sort.

I sigh.

“Why are you so invested in this, anyway?” I return a nod to a woman and her son as they walk by. “Don’t you have better things to do?”

“You’re being serious?”

“I’m always being serious.”

“Good point.” She blows out a breath. “I ... I like this side of you. I like getting to know you like this. Sure, we’ve chatted about Walker’s broodiness and Nana’s fried chicken, but that’s on a familial level. I like getting to know you like girls get to know girls. We bond over boys.”

“Huh.”

I get to my feet and mull over her words. *We bond over boys.* That sounds tragic. That sounds like quicksand under the

foundation of a friendship.

“Surely, you’ve had one friend before,” Sienna says. “You can’t have been on this island your whole life, right?”

“I had a sleepover or two growing up.”

“Or two?”

“The girls I went to school with were ...”

I struggle to find the words to describe them. I’m afraid she’ll take it personally.

The girls were obsessed with boys. They made fun of me for my grades. Then my glasses. Then my boobs.

“I had one good friend in college. It was short-lived,” I say, feeling myself auto-detach from the topic.

“Okay. That’s a starting point. What happened?”

“Jack.”

His name tastes bitter as it rolls off my tongue. The detachment that started to flow through my veins as I mentioned Lacie fully flows at the mention of my ex.

“Jack? Who is Jack?” Sienna asks.

Would it suffice to tell her I don’t think I ever knew?

My heart tugs as I think of Jack Williamson. Therapy taught me that the sensation in my chest isn’t for him, but for the time we spent together and what it represented to me—something it definitely didn’t represent to him. The pain, though, that’s because of him.

And for me.

I’m hit with a tidal wave of emotions. Guilt, shame, anger—it’s all there and so heavy. But it’s the sadness that swamps me, coming in like a tsunami and eroding the strength I’ve summoned since then. It’s a complete and utter devastation for the naïve young lady I once was who was irretrievably broken in the course of ten months. The me who lost both of my parents in a tragic accident. Who became the head of her family despite not having one iota how to do that. The woman

who then lost her boyfriend due to her dejection. The girl who just needed a friend but lost her best friend too.

Then nearly, her own life.

Tears wet the corner of my eyes. I blink them back.

“Jack was an old boyfriend,” I say. “We broke up, and he took my best friend, my only friend, with him.”

“He sounds like an asshole.”

“He is. Or was,” I say with a shrug. “I like to think that he grew up and did better. That he and Lacie had a good life, and I was worth the trade-off.”

But there could've been room in there for me too.

I shake my head. “But it’s fine.”

“No, it’s not.” Sienna takes a long breath. “It’s not okay that people you thought were friends did that to you.”

“Clearly, I didn’t need them. I did just fine in life without them.”

“It’s not about you needing them. It’s about knowing that you deserve to have good people around you and acknowledging that they didn’t deserve you.”

Her words make me smile.

“I’m going to teach you all about friends,” she says. “I’m your friend. The Douchebag and Douchebag Follower weren’t your friends. Welcome to your first friendship, Blaire.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Is this just to extract things about Holt? Because you don’t have to pretend to be my friend for that.”

“No. That’s just a benefit in this particular instance.” She laughs too. “But I would like you to know I’m available, day or night, to talk. About Holt or anything else.”

The sun shines brightly. My steps into the front of the park feel light. The smile on my face doesn’t feel too bad either.

It must be the salt in the air that gets to me because I find myself talking before I even realize it.

“Nothing has happened with Holt since the first night I got here,” I say. “We almost kissed last night, but Nana called.”

Sienna’s giddiness rolls through the phone.

“I slept in the guest room,” I say, trying to control the bubble of excitement in my belly just from talking about him. “It just felt more ... practical.”

“Practical? I would go with saintly, but you’re the intellect. Not me.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t want him to think I’m just a piece of ass. Not that he’s ever treated me like that,” I add. “Not even close. But I just want to maintain a little class.”

“Of course. I get it.”

I pick a piece of invisible lint off my shirt. “He’s supposed to be meeting me shortly for a little touristy adventure. I mean, it’s to a church, but that’s more adventurous than I usually get.”

“I love this,” she says, ecstatic. “I *so* love this. Have fun. Be excited. This is an exciting thing.”

The ball of excitement in my gut that I’ve been trying to control begins to unwind. I can feel it slip through my veins and make my heart beat faster, my palms start to sweat. It is exciting whether I like it or not.

I scrunch up my face and laugh. “I hate that I’m excited about this but ...”

“But it’s Holt. I get it. And it’s new for you. It’s vacation. You’re doing what my sister Camilla and I did—well, sort of—in high school and college. It’s normal.”

“I’m just late to the party.”

“You’re just late to the party,” she repeats. “So go have fun. Take all of that man you can while you can.”

I stick my tongue in my cheek. “Pun intended?”

“In every way.” She laughs. “Call me later. Remember, we’re friends now. Okay?”

“Okay, Sienna.”

“Bye, Blaire.”

“Goodbye.”

I end the call and check the time. My spirits are still soaring as I scan the street between the park and the chapel. There is a woman pushing a stroller and a man on the phone but no Holt.

The breeze kicks up again. The moss dangles from the trees and sways in the air. I close my eyes and sway along with it.

I should do this more often. I need to make it a habit to get outside and have non-working human interaction. Maybe it’s not so bad after all.

If I limit it to ten-minute conversations.

I laugh out loud.

Scanning the area, I notice a small ice-cream parlor tucked between two buildings on the other side of the street. I try to figure out if the building closer to me is a bookstore or a museum when my phone goes off again.

I look down.

And frown.

My heartbeat picks up in my chest as I read Holt’s text.

Holt: *Got stuck in meetings.*

Disappointment hits me full-on. My shoulders slump as I bite my bottom lip and fire a text back.

Me: *No worries. I get it.*

I wait. And wait. And after four minutes of watching the screen for a reply, I kick myself for still standing on the sidewalk and waiting on a response that clearly isn’t coming.

Dammit.

I suck in a breath and slip my phone into my pocket.

“You can’t blame him,” I tell myself. “He has a lot of work to do, and it’s not like he was planning on you being here this week. His life goes on.”

I eye the ice-cream parlor again.

“And mine too.”

I lift my chin and march across the street.

Dessert over dick.

Every time.

Chapter Sixteen

Holt

No worries. I get it.

Blaire's text sits on my phone. The words are clear. Concise. She understands that a meeting changed my plans because it happens to her all the time too.

Right?

I blow out a breath and grip the back of my neck. The muscles are taut and in need of a deep massage—something more than my also-tense palm can provide.

Oliver rattles on across my office, going into depth about the Landry deal and things I should be considering. He's done his homework, thank God. It makes me a little less worried about my failure to listen.

I should've called her.

As I glance up at my brother, I realize that opportunity has passed. I can't call her. Not now. Not with Rosie walking in any second to tell us that Graham Landry is in the conference room for our second meeting today.

Why didn't I call her?

I cringe.

The answer to this question isn't as clear as her response to me. I don't know why I didn't call her. Maybe I didn't think it would matter. I definitely didn't think her response would bother me a half hour later.

That's the problem with texts. You can't read someone's tone.

And this is why I don't do this kind of thing with women. It takes up too much damn time—time I need to be spending on other shit.

But before I can sort through it, Oliver's gaze meets mine. He lifts a brow, silently chastising me but also throwing a bit of concern my way.

I get it. For sure. I don't mentally check out—especially when the topic at hand is worth hundreds of millions of dollars. He must think I've lost my fucking mind.

But I haven't. I'm still here. Just ... distracted.

Really fucking distracted.

Is Blaire pissed? Does she think I'm blowing her off? Does she think my whole let-me-show-you-around-Savannah line was a lie to get her to stay with me?

Fuck.

"I know," I tell my brother, dropping my hand. "I'm sorry. Go on."

He furrows his brow like our father does when he's trying to decide whether to ask Coy about something he allegedly has done or not.

"I'm fine," I insist. "Everything is fine."

"I hope so. We've been working on this deal for months. I'd hate to blow it now."

"We are *not* going to blow it." I narrow my eyes as I tap the side button on my phone to turn off my screen. "Now, what were you saying?"

He lets his eyes linger on me a second too long before he looks back down. It's a subtle warning to shape up or ship out—something Gramps used to say. I wish I could tell him to mind his own business.

But this *is* his business. It's the Mason family's business. We all depend on it, and we all depend on me to steer the ship in the first place.

And steer it I will because the only other option is failure. And if there is one thing in my life I can never do, it's look my father in the face and tell him I let him down. I won't lose everything our family has worked for over generations.

I refuse.

I clear my throat and adjust my tie. “You were saying that you were talking to Boone ...”

“Right.” He clears his throat and settles back in. “So Boone brought up the potential that Landry will want a future stake in the project. What if he wants first right of refusal for occupancy?”

“The Landrys aren’t into retail. Or hotels.”

“No, but they like money. And there’s a lot of money to be made here.”

I look at the ceiling and absorb his point. Because, again, the fucker is right. Or Boone is right. And that’s even more confusing.

“Boone thought of this?” I ask.

Oliver laughs. “Yup.”

“Huh. Maybe he’s decided to be a grown-up, after all.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it. Mom found out that he’s been charging her credit card for his video game subscriptions for a year.”

My head levels, and I look at my brother. “Are you kidding me?”

“Could I make that up?”

I shake my head. “Well, the gamer has a point, I guess. Landry could counter us with that. How do you feel about it?”

“Well, I—”

A buzz from my desk phone cuts off Oliver.

“Holten?” Rosie calls.

“Yes.”

“Larissa is here to see you.”

I head to my desk. “Send her in.”

Our cousin knocks once before opening the door. Her blond curls bounce as she enters. It’s one of the only traits she got from her mother. The rest of her is Mason through and through

with her green eyes and tan skin that she inherited from my uncle Howard.

She gives Oliver a one-armed hug from behind before setting her sights on me.

“Hey, Holtie,” she sing-songs.

“When did you start having Rosie buzz you in?”

She comes to the front of my desk and plops down in one of the leather chairs. “Since you guys almost fired her and now she acts like she has to treat this place like Fort Knox.”

“We didn’t almost fire her,” I say, looking over her head at Oliver. “We were ...”

“Moving her,” Oliver says.

I nod. “We were moving her to Wade’s office.”

“Well, news alert—Rosie doesn’t want to work for Wade. She wants to work for you guys.”

“She’d love Wade. Eventually,” Oliver jokes.

I laugh again. “What brought you here? Don’t you have class today?”

“You do know I have a father who’s perfectly capable of interrogating me, don’t you?”

“I do. But I thought I’d ask in case he’s slipping.”

It’s her smile that makes my stomach twist. Her lips part, foreshadowing mischief.

She scoots around in her chair before finally sitting on the edge and gripping her armrest with both hands. Her nose wrinkles.

“I’m glad we’re asking questions today,” she pokes. “Because I have one for you.”

“Don’t. Please don’t,” Oliver whines. “We have a ... thing to do ... and ...” He sighs, falling back in his chair. “Please just let me keep him focused.”

Larissa looks satisfied. “Well, even though that didn’t come from you, and I didn’t ask my question, I think it answers it.”

Ignoring the glare from Oliver is harder than it should be.

I tuck my tie into my jacket and sit across from Larissa. I ignore her eyes too.

“So ...” She prods. “The fam is saying a real live woman is at your house.”

“Thanks, Oliver,” I say, blowing out a breath.

“Oliver?” Larissa looks over her shoulder at my brother before turning back to me. “Wade told me.”

“Wade?” I must look surprised because Larissa laughs. “*Wade* told you?”

“I mean, he wasn’t celebrating it or anything. Actually, he said you were a ... fool, I think was the word he chose. I’m just excited that it’s true.”

I dig around in my desk and find the envelope Larissa came for. Hopefully, she’ll take it and leave.

“Well, you need to settle down a little bit because it isn’t nearly as exciting as you’re making it out to be,” I say, giving her the package.

Her eyes light up as she takes it from me.

“I think the fact that Wade, of all people, brought it up means that it’s a little more exciting than just some ditz you’re bringing to an event,” she says.

I rock back in my chair. “I bring those ditzes, as you so affectionately call them, with me to places oftentimes as a favor. Someone needed a ticket to something or wanted to network a little bit. I’m not bringing them for me.”

“He picks the ones for him up at airports these days,” Oliver chimes in.

“That’s enough from the back of the room,” I say.

He laughs. “He met this girl at an airport, Riss.”

Larissa’s face breaks into a wide smile. “It’s like a movie!”

“It’s not,” I say with just as much gusto. “It’s a woman I met who can’t go home for a few days because her apartment is

being renovated. And I offered my home out of kindness.”

She gets to her feet and tucks the envelope in her pocket. Half of it sticks out the top.

“That’s all well and good,” Larissa says, “but she’s staying at *your house*, Holtie. You’re practically marrying this girl in my book.”

“Oh, please,” I hiss, my stomach twisting tighter. “This is nothing more than ... a business arrangement. She’s family of the Landrys, and this helps our situation—something Oliver has also forgotten about.” I look at him pointedly.

He rolls his eyes.

Larissa says nothing but doesn’t have to. Her smug little grin says it all.

I sigh.

“This is *not* a business arrangement,” Larissa says.

“How do you know?” I ask. “You just found out about this—from Wade, no less.”

“I know,” Larissa says, heading toward the door, “because I found out from Wade. If it wasn’t a big deal, Wade of all people wouldn’t have told me.”

She throws me a wink as if her point has been made.

“Riss, you need to be going. Oliver needs my help,” I say.

“Yeah, but I’ve needed your help all morning, and you’ve been as worthless as tits on a boar.”

“Gee, thanks,” I say.

He shrugs. “I think Riss needs to stay, and you need to ... get this out of your system. Do it with her so I can get the Holt I know and need back, and we can go make money today.”

Larissa pats Oliver’s shoulder again. “I love your support of my nosiness.”

“It’s really just self-preservation,” he tells her. “I’ll see you at the concert?”

She taps the envelope in her pocket. “Yup. Are you bringing your new babe, Holt?”

I clear my throat.

The room gets hotter as I war mentally with her very, very simple question. The answer should be no. It should be a quick response that doesn’t require stumbling or thought.

I don’t bring random women to family events. My family isn’t a normal family, and they can overwhelm people. They can attract the wrong people. They can become a pass to all the glamorous events in the South—and elsewhere—and that doesn’t bode well for relationships.

In any case, Larissa’s question shouldn’t still be lingering in the room.

And Oliver, Larissa, and I all know it.

Oliver shakes his head.

“What?” I ask, my question bordering on hostile.

“Just answer the damn question,” he says.

“I did.”

“No, you didn’t.” Oliver stands. “And I don’t actually care, but now I’m curious. And I like watching you squirm.”

Larissa leans against the door, her head resting on the wood panels. “I think he answered it, Oliver.”

“I’m not bringing Blaire to the concert,” I say. But as soon as I do, I regret it.

It’s none of their business.

Fuck them for putting me in this position.

“Suit yourself,” Larissa says, exchanging a grin with my brother. “But may I remind you that you’re getting old. You might wanna settle down and have kids while you still can.”

“What?” I ask, my jaw dropping for her benefit.

She laughs. “Thanks for the tickets. I’ll see you two later.”

“Bye,” Oliver calls after her.

I give her a wave before heading back to my desk.

My heart pounds in my chest as I sit back at my seat and overtly ignore my phone. I rifle through my drawer as if I'm searching for the meaning to life when, in reality, I'm just searching for my fucking sense.

This situation shouldn't screw with my head like this.

But my whole family shouldn't know about Blaire, either.

It's not a big deal, and even if I wanted to bring her to the concert, what would it matter? Would it really be that different than if I'd bring Daphne Monroe or some other debutante?

I pull out a peppermint, then slip the wrapper off and pop it into my mouth. My mind tries to rationalize the last few minutes when I lift my head and my eyes meet Oliver's.

He's staring at me with a smug smile on his face.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing." He shrugs and looks back down at his papers. "You're just so full of shit."

Before I can respond—before I can get my head wrapped around what he's insinuating I'm full of shit about, exactly—Rosie knocks on the door. Her head pokes around the corner.

"Boys, Graham Landry is in the conference room," she says.

"We'll be right there," I tell her.

She nods and disappears, pulling the door softly behind her.

Oliver shuffles his papers into a neat stack. "I need to get one more file from my office before we go in."

"You go ahead," I tell him. "I'll meet you there in five."

He nods and disappears out the door too.

I tuck my tie in my jacket once again before pulling at the knot around my neck. I'm not sure if it's too tight today or if my office is unusually warm. Either way, it's uncomfortable.

My lungs fill with air as I step around my desk. But before I can get all the way to the other side, my gaze falls on my phone.

I stop.

No worries. I get it.

“No worries, huh?” I mutter.

Shaking my head, I pick up the phone and glance at the clock. After a quick mental calculation, my fingers fly across the keypad.

Me: I apologize for bailing on you today. I should've called. Meet me at The Carriage House tonight at six. It's on Harrison Street. I'll make it up to you.

Before she can respond, I turn my phone off and toss it on my desk.

“Now, let's go make some money,” I say as I march out of my office.

Chapter Seventeen

Blaire

The evening air is crisp and smells faintly of rain.

When rain is on the horizon in Chicago, the city takes on the odor of a rich stew saturated with gasoline. But here, in a cozy section of Savannah, it's different. The air hints of the earth and sea. It's evocative.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep lungful of air and am whisked back to summers on Lake Michigan with my family. I can almost hear my family's laughter and smell the barbecue pit that Dad tended with the care of a surgeon.

"I'm glad you're still here."

I whirl around at the sound of Holt's voice.

He tugs at his tie, his forehead wrinkled as he approaches me on the sidewalk in front of The Carriage House. He looks divinely handsome in his tailored suit and freshly shaven face. The air of sophistication mixed with the razor-cut jaw and wide, strong shoulders make me forget about everything but him.

"A horse-drawn carriage?" I lift a brow. "I wasn't about to miss my chance at being a princess."

He grins. "You being a princess is an interesting concept."

"And why is that?"

Holt stops in front of me. His tie is slightly askew, and it's all I can do not to reach out and straighten it. I grip my sweater harder to keep myself from running my fingers through his rumpled hair.

"Which princess would you be?" he asks. "The one who waits for a knight in shining armor to rescue her from a tower? Or the one who needs a kiss from a prince to awaken?"

I half-laugh. “How about the one who rescues herself?”

“My point.”

He narrows his eyes, and I can see the stress he’s trying to hide with his slow smile. It’s the aftermath of a day of battling at work. I’d imagine his body aches and his brain feels like a pan of scrambled eggs too. And suddenly, I wish he wouldn’t have offered to bring me here and would’ve gone home instead.

“I didn’t think you were coming,” I say. “I was about to leave.”

“Of course, I was coming,” he says, his eyes searching mine. “I’m sorry about earlier and for making you wait now. Things got a bit hectic at the office.”

“You don’t have to entertain me, you know. You didn’t have to do this.”

His grin is beautiful if tired. “I never do anything I don’t want to do.”

He allows his smile to speak for him. It lingers my way for a few long seconds. The hesitation I felt before melts away, and I realize how happy and relieved I am that he showed up.

And how even happier I am that I believe he wants to be here too.

“Hello, Cassius,” Holt says, dragging his eyes away from me. “Thank you for helping me out tonight.”

“Absolutely, Mr. Mason. It’s my pleasure.”

Cassius, the man who introduced himself to me when I arrived, shakes Holt’s hand. He leads us to a shiny black carriage with oversized, white-walled wheels. The grandest horse I’ve ever laid eyes on stands in command in the front.

Holt’s hand presses lightly against the small of my back as he guides me toward the carriage. I ignore the zip of his touch and climb inside.

The interior is lined with a pristine red velvet. The seats are covered with a matte black material, and when I sit, I feel like royalty.

Holt exchanges a few quiet words with Cassius before climbing in next to me.

Our shoulders brush together as he gets situated. His knee bumps mine in the slightest way. Even so, it feels like a fire is lit in the bottom of my core.

Rolling up the sleeves of his shirt, he exposes his thick, muscled forearms.

I look away.

“If you have any questions as we continue, please don’t hesitate to ask,” Cassius says over his shoulder. “Otherwise, I will leave the two of you to enjoy your own company.”

“Thank you,” Holt says.

The carriage pulls forward and the *clip-clop* of the horse’s shoes against the street soothes the nugget of nerves building in my stomach. It’s an odd anxiety—one not from uncertainty or an unwelcome advance. It’s from anticipation.

As I look at Holt sitting next to me, watching me with dark, inquisitive eyes, I wonder if he knows this and is doing it on purpose.

I clear my throat and look at the sky. “It’s so beautiful here. Everything from the painted sunset to the foliage. I wish it were more peaceful like this in Chicago.”

“I’ve never been there.”

“It’s nothing like this,” I say, taking in a small building with stained glass windows. “It’s all skyscrapers and people and hustle.”

“Do you like it there?”

The question catches me off guard for some reason. I look at him.

“I like that I’m close to my family. I like that I can walk to most places, but I can have a car too. And our pizza is the best,” I say, adding the last bit on but internally cringing as soon as it’s out of my mouth.

He fights a smile. “Pizza, huh?”

“What? I like pizza.”

He stretches his arm out behind me and rests it along the back of the seat. Every cell in my body is hyper-aware of his proximity, and it takes all my strength to ignore it.

“I miss Savannah when I’m not here,” he says.

“I can see why.”

The horse neighs as our procession slows. Holt and I are bumped toward each other. Our eyes snap together but neither one of us mentions it with anything more than a grin.

He twists his lips together and readjusts in his seat.

“Do you see that building over there?” He motions to his right with his index finger toward a brick building. A blue-and-white striped awning hangs overhead and advertises a discount store. “That is where my great-grandfather started the first Mason company.”

“Really?”

He nods triumphantly. “It was a landscape company, to be exact.” He looks at me as we slip past the storefront. “He met my great-grandmother at a potluck dinner. She made the best oatmeal pie he’d ever eaten, and he asked her to marry him on the spot.”

“He did not,” I say with a laugh.

“That’s how the story goes.” His eyes sparkle. “He said he actually knew he was going to propose as soon as she walked in, but he needed an excuse to seem sane.”

“Well, if he thought that marrying someone because they baked a great pie is sane, then okay.”

Holt’s chuckle is low and deep. “I know. It’s crazy to me too.”

The horse marches along the street in a leisurely yet steady pace. The rhythm steadies my heartbeat, and I relax for the first time since Holt left for work this morning.

I turn my head to see him. “Have you ever been married?”

“Me? No. What kind of question is that?”

“A completely logical one. Most people our age have been married once or twice by now.”

“Well, okay. No, I haven’t been married. I’ve never been engaged either.”

“That surprises me.”

He chuckles. “It surprises my mother too.”

I return his smile. “Do you think you’ll get married someday? I can see you sitting in your living room by the fireplace with a horde of children at your feet.”

“Oh ...” He winces. “I don’t know. Does it make me a terrible person to admit I’m not sure I want kids?”

“No, not at all.”

“With my office hours and travel schedule, it would be impossible to have a life like that. And I think, to do either well, you have to choose. I’m already pretty good at one, and it’s important to me. So why take a chance by adding the other?”

I nod. “Makes perfect sense.”

He angles his body so that he can face me more head-on. “Have you been married?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“What kind of question is that?” I force a swallow as I repeat his question. “I got ice cream from there today,” I say, pointing at the parlor across from Xavier Park. “It was really good.”

When I look back at him, he’s still looking at me. The intensity and curiosity make me squirm.

“Why not?” he repeats.

Because I thought I was going to get married once, and I’ll never go through that again.

The *clip-clop* of the horse’s hooves doesn’t even begin to drown out the sound of blood pouring across my ears. I mentally smack myself for bringing this up in the first place.

I feel pressured to tell him the truth—mostly because I know he would be open with me. But if I do that, if I spill my guts all over this beautiful velvet carriage, the picture that I paint won't match the Blaire he thinks he knows. And I'll have a hell of a time getting out of that mental space.

Jack is intrinsically tied to that time in my life. I cannot uncouple the two. I've tried for years.

I clear my throat and avoid his piercing gaze.

What would Holt say if I told him that Jack left me because I almost got kicked out of law school? Would he think less of me, of my family, that I was going to Linton to bail Machlan out of jail at least once a month after our parents died? Would he think I'm an irresponsible disaster if he knew all of the financial holes I found myself in back then? Some of which I'm still digging myself out of now?

“Blaire ...”

“I've not found the right person, I suppose.”

“Are you looking for him?”

My laugh is silent, but my body moves with the force of holding it back.

Holt's brows furrow. “What does *that* mean?”

“It means I'm not looking for him.”

My response is clipped and to the point, and I hope Holt takes it at face value. But when I glance at him across my shoulder, I see that he doesn't.

His gaze challenges me. The look he wields my way tries to worm its way inside me and extract all the ugly things I don't want him to know.

I do my best mirror of his expression—a trick I learned in law school, but he doesn't bite.

“Why do you do this?” he asks.

“What am I doing?”

He fights a grin. “You're trying to redirect this conversation.”

“I answered your question.”

A breeze shoots through the carriage and ruffles the end of my sweater. I pull it tighter to my body as we take a slow, wide turn next to a stately fountain. Kids stand around it and toss coins into the water.

When I look back at Holt, he’s still watching me.

“I heard from Yancy today—my assistant,” I clarify. “She said that we should be back in the building this week.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll be out of your hair soon.”

He reaches forward and brushes a strand of hair out of my face. The tenderness of his gesture makes my heart swell.

“I’m more concerned about something else,” he says.

“What’s that?”

He pulls his hand back and relaxes back against the velvet. His tongue swipes across his bottom lip as he eyes me carefully.

“Why do you have such a hard time opening up?” he asks.

“I didn’t know I do.”

He cocks his head to the side. “Yes, you do.”

“No, I don’t,” I insist. “I just choose not to spill all the details about my life to anyone who will listen.”

“I’m not just anyone who will listen, Blaire. I want to get to know you.”

“You do know me.”

He’s not impressed.

“I’m not as interesting as most people,” I say. “I spent my time in the office, in a courtroom, or at home. I don’t have a lot of hobbies. I don’t have a lot of friends. There’s no time for it in my life. I told you this already.”

“You did. You told me all of that—all of that superficial, first-date bullshit that doesn’t say anything about *you*. You know this. You aren’t stupid.”

His tone cuts through me.

My chin lifts, my heart beating in a well-practiced rhythm. It's my go-to, my auto-response when I'm at work and being haggled by a judge or attorney. I don't let them see me sweat.

I won't let him either.

"You're right," I say. "I'm not stupid. What I am, however, is intentional."

"So you're intentionally choosing not to share anything about yourself with me?"

"In a way, yes."

He sighs and shakes his head.

"What does it matter?" I ask. "I will be gone in five days, tops. Does it matter how I feel about marriage? Or what flavor ice cream I like best? Or ... anything? No, Holt. It doesn't."

"Someone really burned you, didn't they?"

I roll my eyes and look at the back of Cassius's gray-haired head.

"Look, I don't want to press you," Holt says. "I don't want you sharing anything with me that you're uncomfortable sharing. But is it totally absurd to want to be friendly? If I'm in Chicago, we could meet for drinks. If you're back down here, we could have dinner. Is it so wrong?"

A sigh leaves my lips well before I intend. "Why does everyone keep saying this to me?"

"Who is everyone?"

"Okay, two people," I say with a slight smile. "You and Sienna Landry."

"She's a nice girl."

"She's nosy like you," I say, elbowing him in the side. "Must be the Savannah in you."

He laughs. "I won't point out that you're changing the topic again."

The carriage comes to a stop beneath the sign that reads The Carriage House. I glance up and smile.

“Saved by the bell,” he says.

He stands and straightens his tie before stepping down the steps. Cassius greets him, and they chatter about the ride. Holt keeps a side-eye on me as he extends a hand my way.

I place my palm in his.

The warmth and familiarity of his grip trickles across my skin. His fingertips press against the small of my back as my feet hit the pavement.

“I hope you enjoyed your ride,” Cassius says to me.

“I did. It was lovely. Thank you.”

“Anything for Mr. Mason.” He looks at Holt and nods. “Give me a call if you need anything else.”

“Will do, sir. Have a good evening,” Holt says.

“Good night.” Cassius turns and tends to his horse.

The air is much cooler than it was when we began. The overhead clouds are a dark, menacing navy blue as we head to our cars.

We walk silently down the tree-lined sidewalk, and I wonder what he’s thinking.

Raindrops begin to fall from the sky as we make it to my car. He tugs the door open and holds it as I climb in.

“That was really nice,” I say. “Thank you for taking me.”

He studies me. Water droplets fall on his hair, making the locks appear darker and silkier. They drip onto his face and shoulders as he stands with one hand on the car door and the other on the roof.

My heartbeat thunders in my chest. The uncertainty of what he’s about to say eats at me. With each second that passes, my anxiety grows.

Is he going to tell me I’m too much trouble and that I should go? Is he going to say that my refusal to answer his questions

is rude? Is he going to go back to the office and send me to his home alone?

I open my mouth to say something, anything when he speaks.

“I’m sorry if I made you uneasy by asking questions,” he says. “I find it too easy to open up to you, and it never occurred to me that maybe that doesn’t work both ways.”

I sigh. “No, Holt—”

He cuts me off with the crook of his brow. “You are absolutely right. Never compromise yourself because someone pushes.” He begins to close the door. “I’ll see you at home. Drive carefully.”

Before I can even open my mouth this time, he closes the door.

I watch him jog across the street and back to his car in the rain. Water presses against the white linen, and it molds to his frame. I see his rear lights flip on a few cars down and watch him pull away.

Still, I sit and let the events of the evening settle into my soul. After a few long minutes, I start my car and pull onto the street.

“And I thought the hardest thing would be not having sex with him,” I say aloud. “I had no idea it would be this.”

I take a right at the end of the park and head back to Holt’s.

Chapter Eighteen

Holt

The lamp on my desktop shines a warm, yellow light onto the papers spread out in front of me.

My back aches from sitting for four hours and delving deep into the Landry offer. I always work at night but never at my desk for hours on end.

I sit back and stretch my arms overhead. My muscles scream at the sudden movement. My brain, though, cherishes the opportunity to stop analyzing numbers.

The reprieve doesn't last long. It just changes topics.

Blaire arrived a few minutes after me. I made us a drink while she went upstairs and retrieved her briefcase. Then we sat in the living room—her with her briefcase and me with a book.

It wasn't as awkward as I thought it might be, but I do think I pissed her off. She shied away from making eye contact and pulled away when I reached across her to take her empty glass. It wasn't our usual flirty interaction. It wasn't nearly as easy either.

And I hate it.

It's because I walked away from her on the street. I know that. But I had to.

It was clear she didn't want to talk. Even though I was curious and wanted her to open up, I was exhausted. I'd pushed all day. I've pushed people and things and schedules for weeks. I don't want to have to push with Blaire, too.

My stomach tightened as she snapped her briefcase shut and announced she was going to bed. I absorbed her grin and little wave good night—neither cold, exactly, but also not filled with the warmth I've come to expect—and told her good night. But after a quick workout, a long shower, and too much

time to think, I ended up in my office. The place I should've been for longer today anyway.

What makes this woman tick?

The question has rolled around my mind all damn night. Hell, since the moment I met her I've wondered this very thing. But the more time I spend with her, the more I should know about her and the less I do.

I'm getting tripped up. I'm caring. I'm giving a fuck on a plethora of levels.

Her refusal to open up to me is irritating. The fact that I want her to is downright infuriating. Me pushing her makes me a dick, but if I don't, that feels wrong too.

How did I get myself into this position?

I bend my neck side to side to relieve some of the tension before turning back to Wade's plans. I pick up my pencil when I hear something behind me.

Looking over my shoulder, I see her. Blaire is standing in the doorway in an oversized T-shirt. Her hair is messy, spilling all over her shoulders, and her eyes are heavy yet clear.

"Everything all right?" I ask.

She walks across the room and stops a few feet away from my desk. Her features are sober.

I turn in my chair to face her.

"I'm sorry," she says, her voice just above a whisper.

It's soft and delicate and void of the confidence she usually oozes into everything. While it's beautiful to see her stripped of the mask she wears, it's painful too. Because I'm convinced this isn't easy for her.

"What's going on?" I ask. "What are you sorry for?"

I want to reach for her, but I don't. After tonight, I'm not sure what she'll do.

I wish she'd fall into my arms and bury her head in my chest. My hands want to squeeze her body and reassure her of my

presence and my ability to protect her from whatever is troubling her.

Because I can. I can help her with anything. But I'm not sure she'll let me.

She's a strong, gorgeous woman on an island by herself by her own choice.

But why?

She lifts her chin. "You've been so kind to me. You've opened your home and given me your time, and I've ... I've not reciprocated any of that."

"You don't have to reciprocate anything. I offer what I want to offer you. It's not predicated on anything else."

Her nod is subtle.

She blows out a deep, haggard breath. "I know. But—"

"But do you? Because it's important to me that you know that."

The chair squeaks as I move to the edge. It's the only sound besides her wispy breaths that gives away how nervous she is.

I hold up a hand when she starts to speak again.

"I'm sorry if I pressed today. I just want to get to know you. You're smart and funny and observant. It feels natural to want to learn more about what makes a woman like you tick. But maybe I shouldn't. I ..."

I don't know. If she doesn't want to go there with me, then that's her choice. It's one that I will, without a doubt, honor.

But it doesn't feel wrong to want to get to know her more deeply. And that's what's worrisome.

She forces a swallow. "This has nothing to do with you and everything to do with me."

I stay quiet. I can see a hundred different things sitting on her tongue and how hard it is for her to choose which thing to say.

"You aren't wrong to ask questions, Holt. It's a nice thing to want to get to know someone."

“I’d love it if you wanted to get to know me.”

She smiles but it falters quickly. “I ... I do. You know that I do.”

“I hope so.”

She takes another deep breath. “I’ve been lying in bed tonight thinking about you and what you said and what Sienna has been saying. And ... I know I have vulnerability issues.”

I lock my hands together in front of me and rest my elbows on my knees.

“Letting people inside my world ... scares me.” She looks at the ceiling. “I feel like such an idiot for saying that. But it does. You aren’t even asking me anything deep, and I still ... shut down.”

“You know what? It scares me too. It scares me to let people into my inner circle, and it scares me to be inside someone else’s.”

She drops her head and levels her eyes with mine. “Really?”

I get to my feet. My hands find my hair. My fingernails drag across my scalp, the bite feeling good despite the pain.

It’s my turn to take a deep breath as I try to decide if going into all of this is worth it. I’m two seconds away from telling her it’s okay and that I see her point about keeping things superficial between us, but then I look at her face.

The pain there is unmistakable. The fear, too, is obvious.

That’s when I know: I have no choice.

If this walled-off woman is opening up to me of all people, it’s my responsibility to help her.

I want to.

“I had a girlfriend a few years ago,” I say. “It started out innocent enough. She stayed here a few nights here and there, and eventually, she lived here. I didn’t even realize it at the time. I guess, in retrospect, I wasn’t around a lot and didn’t really question why she was here when I got home. I figured she just wanted to see me.”

“Makes sense.”

“But she didn’t. She’d pretty much just moved in. And when it got to be too much for me—when things settled down a bit at work, and I was home more and kind of put two-and-two together, it got bad.”

“How do you mean?” she asks.

“Well, we weren’t compatible. Not to be living together twenty-four seven. But I knew that. She was never that kind of person for me, and my lackadaisical approach with her was the wrong and irresponsible way to handle it.”

“Surely, she knew that, though,” Blaire says.

I shrug. “I don’t know. I don’t know if it matters because even if she did, it doesn’t change what happened.” My lip hurts as I bite down to brace myself for the flood of memories. “Kendra was really big into the social aspect of Savannah. Her parents are deeply embedded in the clubs and charities and all that shit that goes down behind the scenes.”

“Are you? I mean, are you a part of that scene?”

I try hard not to roll my eyes. “Yes. I am. Mostly because I grew up in it and operate a business here. It’s good for networking and for giving back to our community. But I don’t care about the rest of it—the balls and cocktail hours and all that shit.”

“But Kendra did.”

“She did. And because she assumed, I guess, that we were a permanent thing, she positioned herself as such. I had no idea.”

I run a hand down my face as I remember the night I realized what happened.

“I got an invitation in the mail addressed to a Mr. and Mrs. Holt Mason. Needless to say, I was confused. And I was downright shocked when she sort of offhandedly mentioned that it was from one of her friends in New York. I started putting different pieces together.”

My chest squeezes as I recall the events of the next twenty-four hours.

The black stains that marred her face. My utter confusion. The ugliness of the words thrown back and forth.

“Unbeknownst to me, she had moved in. Let her apartment go. Started getting mail at my house. I’d never saw us like that, but she obviously did.” I blow out a breath. “I tried to rationalize with her, but she wasn’t having it. And it just ... devolved from there.”

My heartbeat quickens as freeze-frame images flash before my eyes.

I force a swallow down my throat. The passage is constricted as a wash of emotions reminiscent of that day flow through me.

A chill rips down my spine.

“When I got home from work the next day, she was gone,” I say, the words tinged with an anger I choke back. “And my house was a disaster. Paint in the bed. Broken windows. My clothes and belongings strewn around the house and in the pool. It was ... it took weeks to clean it up.”

And even longer for me to trust anyone again.

“I sat in the bed, in the middle of the paint and broken glass, completely numb. It felt surreal. A complete violation of my trust. I questioned everyone and everyone’s motives for a long time after.”

Maybe I still do.

My eyes find Blaire’s again. She’s watching me carefully.

“Wow,” she says. “I’m sorry. For you both, really.”

“She didn’t come around for a long time. She didn’t show up at the events that she never missed even before all of this. No one heard from her, and her parents wouldn’t talk to me when I tried to check on her. They still won’t speak to me when I see them around.”

“That’s not your fault, though,” she says. “You didn’t make a commitment to her.”

“But I didn’t take care of her as I should’ve. I should’ve been clear from the start. I guess I assumed too many things too.” I sigh. “My life goes a million miles per hour sometimes. I’m responsible for so many people, so many families. It’s all I can do to keep my head above water most days—but that’s my choice. I love it. Kendra got sucked in and spit out, and I blame myself for that. Even if I didn’t mean to do it.”

I push my chair under my desk and then lean against it.

Blaire stands in front of me, her hands wrapped around her middle. She’s less rigid than she was when she first entered but still too tense to make me relax.

“I have a hard time letting people in because of that,” I say softly. “I generally don’t like being too incorporated into someone else’s life, either, because then I have a responsibility that I don’t have time to take seriously. I miss stuff. I miss signs. I can’t do things the right way, and the right way is the only way I want to do everything.”

She leans against the bookshelf and watches me out of the corner of her eye. I think she’s mulling what I just said over and trying to make sense of it.

I know I sound pretentious—as though I have some crazy pull on women—but that’s not at all what I mean. I hope she understands that.

“Can I ask you something?” she whispers.

“Sure.”

“Why did you ask me to stay?”

Her eyes shine with some unnamed emotion. Whatever it is staring back at me is raw and unfiltered. This moment, beneath the harsh yellow light and in a plain white T-shirt that hangs mid-thigh—Blaire Gibson is the most beautiful I’ve ever seen her.

“Honestly? I don’t know,” I say. “You’re strong. You hold your own. You’re gorgeous and intelligent, and I enjoy talking

to you. And it probably didn't hurt that you live a thousand miles away."

She almost smiles. "I figured that helped."

"At least I'm honest."

She blows out a breath and paces a little circle. Her fingers tug at the fabric of her shirt—clenching and unclenching it on repeat. Finally, she stops and looks at me with a resolution that makes me hold my breath.

"I have trust issues," she says.

"I'm aware."

She cracks a grin. "I'm serious. I really do. I don't think I even understood the depths of it until I got here."

"Why here?"

"I'm out of my wheelhouse," she says, looking around. "I'm out of my routine. The people in my life know what to expect, and none of them pushes the agenda. But then I come here and meet you, and you don't know the lines I've established. And then Sienna, bless her heart, somehow feels like I'm on her turf down here, and now we're going to be best friends."

"She's a good friend to have."

Blaire's shoulders fall. "I don't ... I don't know *how* to be a friend, Holt. I don't know how to tell you things about me and know you won't ridicule me for them."

I push off my desk. "Do you think I'd do that? Because, if you do, I've done something wrong."

"No," she rushes, sticking a hand in front of her. "That's not what I mean."

"I would never ridicule you for anything you say or choose to share with me. Unless you think Boone is a genius. In that case, prepare yourself."

This gets a little laugh out of her.

She's gathering her courage as I watch her from a safe distance.

“When my parents died, I was a wreck,” she says, her tone monotone and as if she just needs to get the words out. “They were my lifeline. My safety net. Having them pass away like they did just pulled the rug out from under me.”

I nod.

“I had a boyfriend. Jack was his name. And a friend named Lacie. And, at first, they were supportive.”

My jaw clenches. *I don't think I like where this is going.*

She ignores me. “I couldn't pull myself together. It was ... months before I could even function for a whole day. I had their estate to settle. I had to keep my youngest brother from landing himself in prison. Walker ... I don't even want to go there, and Lance had a health crisis that I had to get him through because if I didn't, it would fall on our nana.”

She paces back and forth across my office. The words tumble past her lips in quick succession. It's as though she's afraid that if she stops, she'll never restart.

“That's a lot,” I say softly, wanting to offer support but not interrupt.

She stops walking and looks at me. “It was so much.” Her voice cracks. “And, like you, I looked up one day and realized that decisions had been made without me being asked. Only, Jack and Lacie had decided to move on together, and I was left holding a bunch of broken pieces of a life I had just a few weeks before.”

I was right. I don't like where this is going.

“I remember asking him why he did that to me. How could he do this to me? And he said I was so self-absorbed with my own shit and that I wasn't there for him. That he needed my support to get through law school, and if I wasn't going to give him that, then he didn't see why he should waste any time on me.”

A single, solitary tear slips down her cheek.

My heart breaks for her. Watching her cry feels like someone kicked me in the gut.

I reach for her, but she backs away.

“He told me I was weak and too emotional, and I would never make a good attorney. He threw all the things I’d confided in him back in my face and made me sound like an impulsive train wreck.” She wipes her eyes with the back of her hands. “Maybe I was.”

“You just lost your parents, Blaire. You’re entitled to be a mess. But you’re also entitled to have the support of your friends when you’re going through things like that.”

It takes everything I have to be kind and patient. What I really want to do is give in to the burst of adrenaline shooting through my veins and demand to know who this guy is and where I can find him.

But that won’t help her. And, for what might be the first time in a long time, she needs someone to put her first.

She sniffles. “I was staying in his apartment. I was on his phone plan. I had everything of mine tied up with his, and when he kicked me out, I had nothing. I controlled nothing in my life. I had to threaten to have the police come and let me get my things because he wouldn’t let me in.”

I take her hand in mine and pull her closer.

We stand with a few feet between us. The fear in her eyes from before is faded. A strand of hair is stuck to the side of her face with a tear. I use my free hand to brush it away.

The contact breaks an invisible wall. Her eyes fill with unshed tears.

“I broke down, Holt,” she says through a lump in her throat. “I sat one night in the bathroom of this shitty apartment that I found for next to nothing and told Machlan how he had to straighten up. How his future depended on it. How I expected him to make good choices. I hung up the phone and just cried.”

Tears flow down both cheeks. She tries to slip her hand from mine, but I hold it tight.

“I sat there that night with a piece of glass in one hand and a bottle of tequila in the other and a letter from the university that said if I didn’t get my shit together, I was out. I probably cried enough in that one sitting to fill the bottle up with tears.”

She lowers her eyes from mine.

“And I thought about just ending it all.” She hiccups through her tears. “I figured I could drink enough and then just do it and never wake up or feel anything again. I was so tired of feeling like I was drowning and that no one fucking cared.”

I pull her to me. She resists at first, but then melts in my arms.

My hands clasp at the small of her back as I rest my chin on top of her head. I squeeze my eyes shut and feel the sting of her words in my chest.

Her body goes limp in my arms as she succumbs to the emotions she’s been holding in for God knows how long. Her cries are quiet—her fists balling my shirt up and holding it tight.

I try to imagine her pain. I attempt to piece together a life without my parents, without my work, without my brothers who are my best friends.

The thought alone is enough to make me want to lose my mind.

We stand in the middle of my office for a long time, swaying back and forth. I hold her tight until her cries soften and then stop. My body doesn’t separate from hers until her fists let go of my shirt and her body stops shaking. Only then do I look down.

She peers up at me with a timid look on her face.

“I’m sorry I spewed all of that out like that,” she whispers.

“I’m sorry you held it in for so long.”

She grins. “Thanks for listening.”

“Thanks for trusting me.”

She steps back.

I let her go because I have to, but I hate that I do. I miss her in my arms almost immediately.

We watch each other with a heavy dose of hesitation.

I want to tell her how strong she is and that I'm honored she shared all of that with me. I also want to tell her that I want to take her to bed and kiss her and show her how amazing she is until the sun comes up.

But none of that feels right.

I look over my shoulder at the work I still need to do. It only takes a second to realize it can wait—or *it will wait*, even if it can't.

I'll figure it out tomorrow.

"Come on," I say, taking her hand and tugging her behind me.

"Where are we going?"

"You said you like pizza, right?"

"Yes."

"Good. I have some pizza in the freezer with our name on it."

She laughs. "This one time in college, we ordered this pizza ..."

As we round the corner into the hallway, I mentally check out. I don't hear her words, just her voice and the way it's less bogged down. It's airier and freer ... and music to my ears.

Chapter Nineteen

Blaire

“I feel like food is your love language,” I say, stretching my toes out in front of me.

Holt sits on a wicker chair across the little round table between us and smiles over the rim of his glass.

“There have been worse things said about me,” he says.

I close my eyes and listen to the crickets chirp all around us.

The screened-in porch off the kitchen feels like a cocoon. A fire burns in the large stone fireplace along the far wall. From our perch, you can see the pool and spa to the left and to the right, a vast field of green that I gazed at while eating my breakfast this morning.

Man, how that feels like more than almost a day ago.

I’m not sure if it was the bourbon or if opening up to Holt relaxed me so much, but something did. I could close my eyes and drift to a peaceful sleep. Instead, I let my eyelids fall, and I remember the safety of his arms as I cried.

It’s been a long time since I felt that—the support. And just that someone gives a damn.

“If you don’t want any more of this, I’m going to take it inside,” Holt says with a yawn.

I open my eyes. “I had two pieces. It’s two in the morning. If I eat any more, I’m going to be sick.”

He chuckles as he gets to his feet. “Then I’ll take it inside.”

“Here, I’ll help you.”

We gather our plates and napkins and the rest of the pizza and head inside.

“So, honest opinion—was that better than Chicago pizza?” he asks.

“Close but no. It’s the crust.” I shrug. “It’s just not the same.”

He holds a paper plate over the recycling container. “You just ate two pieces.”

“What is your point?”

“That you must’ve liked it a little bit.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t. I just said Chicago pizza is better.”

“You’re wrong,” he teases as he deposits the plate in the bin.

I walk behind him and ignore the way my body is pulled in his direction. It’s like a magnet—tugging me toward him no matter where I am.

I’ve noticed it all night. We might start on opposite sides of the kitchen, but we end up side by side. Even when we moved to the porch to eat, our chairs drifted closer and closer.

It’s a weird occurrence, but one I don’t mind.

I don’t think he minds, either.

“At least I don’t have thirty frozen pizzas in my freezer,” I point out as I wipe the counter off. “That’s overkill, don’t you think?”

“Rosie’s granddaughter was selling them for her softball team.”

I shake my head.

“What?” He laughs. “They were ten bucks for a large one-topping. It was a good deal, and it supported a good cause. What’s not to love about that?”

I can’t help but laugh too. It doesn’t take long before it turns into a long, sleepy yawn.

“Tired?” Holt asks.

“Yeah.”

“It’s been a long day. Let’s head to bed.”

“I hope I can sleep,” I say as he flips off the overhead lights.

He nudges my elbow toward the doorway. “I thought you said you were tired.”

“I am. Terribly. But sometimes being this tired makes me toss and turn. It’s counter-intuitive, I know.”

We enter the hallway. It’s lit only by a small light hanging above the artwork I noticed on my first day here. The house is entirely quiet; the floorboards don’t even creak as we transverse the area.

There’s a peace about this house that I feel in my bones. It might be the darkness, and it might be the solitude, but something about being here lets my mind reset. I can think. I work more efficiently. The bubble inside my stomach that always feels like it’s ready to pop and spur a thousand things to come racing my way is less powerful here.

“I’ll tell you what,” Holt says as we ascend the stairs. “I have a sauna that will relax every muscle in your body. Ten minutes will knock you out. Guaranteed.”

“Ooh, sign me up.”

I follow him up the stairs, past my bedroom door, and down the hallway. We take a left at the end and into a cozy master bedroom.

“Oh, wow,” I say, turning in a full circle to take it all in.

The walls are painted the softest of grays, and the trim is bright white. Gold curtains frame floor-to-ceiling windows that face the back of the property.

A large, king-sized bed with a gold and black bedspread sits against one wall. The furniture is grand but not overdone and complements the large yet quaint space perfectly.

“This is exactly what I would’ve pictured for you,” I tell him as I come to a stop in front of him.

He grins. “You’ve been thinking about my bedroom?”

“No. I said *would’ve*. Listen when I speak.”

I turn away so he doesn’t see my smile.

“Lies,” he whispers from a position close to my back.

I shiver at the proximity and the heat of his breath on the back of my neck. But before I can anticipate anything else, he speaks again from a more distant range.

“What’s your bedroom like?” he asks.

“What do you think it’s like?”

I turn to face him. He presses his lips together in thought.

The soft glow of the bedroom lights blur the sharpness of his features. His eyes are mossier and less jade, his jaw blunt and less defined. Still, he’s beautiful in every way.

“I’d say your bedroom is black and white with pink details here and there. But not too much,” he adds. “Can’t let anyone think you have girlish whims or anything.”

I shove his shoulder as I laugh, knocking him off balance.

“But am I right?” he asks.

“Yes,” I mock, rolling my eyes.

He rewards me with a bright smile. “There’s a difference between you and me, though.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ll admit that I’ve been thinking about your bedroom.”

My stomach clenches. Fire rockets from my core down my thighs. Holt watches me as if he can see my inner workings and just what he does to me.

His eyes darken, his lids hood, as he takes in my reaction to him. My breathing becomes uneven as our proximity and location come together in one fluid, perfect moment.

I wait for any sign that he’s finally going to touch me. The longer I watch him, the more I want him. *I need him*. I’m dying for him to break the barrier between us.

He shifts his weight, and my breath catches in my throat. My body tingles with expectancy at his next move.

He runs a hand down his jaw and over his chin as he watches me from just a few feet away.

“The sauna is in here,” he says and turns away.

My insides scream as the pent-up desire I've had building for days now threatens to spill out. I force myself not to shout at him, not to reach for him, not to make any mention of how irritating he is when he does this.

It takes a full two seconds to get my feet to move to follow him.

I consider that maybe he didn't feel the same way after the night at Picante. But then I remind myself that he pursued me. He wanted to see me. He wanted to meet for brunch.

But that was before I snotted all over his shirt tonight.

We step inside a brightly lit bathroom that's as beautiful as the rest of his house. The cabinets and built-ins are white, as is the claw foot bathtub. The only pops of color come from the wooden sauna door tucked into a corner and the turquoise-colored tile in the shower.

He ignores me and heads straight for the sauna. Dials are adjusted, and buttons are pressed.

I bite my lip as I watch him focus on everything except me. Each second that passes and he's still ignoring me makes me more anxious.

The thought of his naked, sweaty body being in a small enclosure next to mine makes every muscle in my body twitch. My nerves are heightened as he turns to face me.

"Have you used one of these before?" he asks.

I shake my head.

"You can get inside ..." He looks me up and down. "In any state you want. Dressed, undressed—it's all fine. The timer will go off in ten minutes."

I try not to look shocked.

"A bucket of water and a ladle are inside as well as a few essential oils. Just add some water to the rocks in the basket beside it to increase the moisture. And add the oils if you want."

“Oh, okay,” I say, taking my eyes from him and to the sauna.
“I got it.”

“You can stick the ladle through the door handle inside to lock it if you want. Just ... saying,” he adds.

My hackles are raised.

Even if he doesn't want me now that I've cried like a baby in front of him, he could be a gentleman and not lead me on.

Dressed, undressed—it's all fine.

Damn you.

“Will do.” I press my lips together. “Anything else I need to know?”

He presses his lips together too. I think his is to hide a smile and not from annoyance. It only irritates me further.

“Nope. I think that's it,” he says. “Enjoy.”

And with that, he slides out of the room.

I wait until I see him leave the bedroom before I turn back toward the sauna.

The tension in my body proves my need for the tool in front of me. But it's the same tension that almost has me walking out and into the guest bedroom and locking the door behind me.

“How can one man be so frustrating?” I whisper as I slip out of my T-shirt.

I take off my panties and leave them lying on top of my shirt on the floor. If he comes back inside and sees them—oh, well. It's not like it's a new threshold for us.

It's more like one I'd like to revisit.

The sauna is already hot when I enter. It smells faintly of a distinct type of wood. I locate the rocks in the corner and the little bucket Holt mentioned. I ladle a bit of water over them before sticking the oversized spoon through the door handle.

I take a towel off a rack by the door and place it on the lower of the two benches. I'm thankful I didn't drink anything but

water at our little pizza party because the heat of the room is enough to make me lightheaded on its own.

I sit on the towel and breathe in the thick air. My skin is damp. Beads of sweat dot my body.

Next to the rack of towels is a thin, rectangular window. Through it, I can see the vanity in the bathroom and the mirrors hanging above it.

I imagine Holt lying on the bed in the other room. He's probably grinning smugly, knowing I'm in here hot and naked and wishing he was with me.

He wants me too. I'm certain. I can see it when he looks at me. I can feel it in the zing of his touch and how his gaze flips to mine as if to ask if I felt it too.

I can hear it in his voice when he speaks and see it, too, in his actions.

Except that he hasn't tried to sleep with me since the night at Picante.

I sigh.

I appreciate the conversations we've had and the simplicity of being with him. And how he was so kind and gentle with me tonight as I told him about the night with the glass—something I've never told anyone except my therapist. I love all of that. I do.

But I'd also like to be touched.

"I guess I'll have to do that myself," I say out loud.

My body already hums from the events of the night—from being in Holt's midst and getting slight touches here and there. It's maddening that he works me up with only the vaguest brush of his hand, but here I am.

I stretch my legs out in front of me. Droplets of sweat roll down my torso. Some course off my back and land on the towel; others travel all the way down my legs.

My core burns and not just from the heat.

The timer reads that I have seven more minutes to go. I could wait and take care of myself when I get back to my bedroom ... or I could do it now.

My heart thunders in my chest at the prospect of getting myself off inside Holt's sauna.

I bite my lip and bring my hands to my stomach. I part my legs. My hands slide down my abdomen, my brain conjuring up memories of what Holt's hands felt like on my skin on the balcony.

I pant as my fingers hit the apex of my thighs, and my head falls back.

My back arches as my fingers hit the swollen bud that's begged for relief all evening. I gasp as I rub it with my fingertip and feel my body respond.

"Dammit," I whisper.

I take a deep breath and raise my head to check the timer again.

I freeze.

Despite the raging inferno both inside the sauna and my body, a flood of shock hits my veins in a quick, unanticipated dump.

Holt is standing in front of the window. He's watching me with hooded eyes and a grin that I'm not sure how to read.

He jiggles the door handle.

I don't move my body ... nor do I move my hand.

The temperature increases swiftly, but I think it's more from his heated gaze than the thermostat.

I'm not sure what to do.

He jiggles the handle again. This time, though, it's quicker. More frantic. And I realize I have him in the position he's had me in for days.

A knowing look flickers across his face. I smile at him.

Busted.

I touch myself again. My jaw falls open as I gasp a quick breath that's not as dramatic as it is necessary. Every fiber of my being is screaming a different warning, a different plea as Holt's eyes are glued to my hand.

He jiggles the handle again.

I press harder into myself, urged on by the pure desire in his eyes. The contact makes my body pulse, and his gaze is snapped up to meet mine.

"Open the door," he says. His tone is my favorite of his. It's confident and strong. But I've heard it enough to be able to pick out the underlying thread of exasperation, and that's what I choose to act on.

I grin, biting my bottom lip. My fingertips slip across my clit. They're aided by my sweat and how turned on I am by the intensity of Holt's gaze.

"Open up, Blaire."

My legs fall to the sides. "Open like that? Is that better, Holt?"

"Be sure you know what you're doing."

I refuse to break eye contact. If I do, he'll know that I don't, in fact, know exactly what I'm doing, and if I pause to think about it, I might stop.

"Don't you have something else to do?" I ask.

He remains perfectly still. "This isn't funny."

"Nope. It's not," I say, flicking the bud again. "Ah!"

"I will take this door off the motherfucking hinges."

"Not before I come."

He disappears.

I want to go to the window and see if he's still here—not that I want to know if he is or isn't. This is a twist in the scenario I didn't think through. I'm not even sure who I am right now. I don't act like this.

Before I can convince myself to slide out of the sauna and run to the guest room, I hear the sound of a motor. The door vibrates. The ladle shakes against the metal handle.

I realize what he's doing.

"Oh, shit."

I sit upright and wait with bated breath.

It takes thirty seconds. The sauna fills with cool air. The doorway, though, fills with Holt Mason.

He. Took. The. Door. Off. The. Hinges.

Shit.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Coming after you."

"You most certainly will come after me," I say with a raised brow. "Because I'm *this close* to getting there myself."

He lunges forward and scoops me up. My legs are over one arm, and my back is supported by the other. He carries me into the bedroom and tosses me onto the bed.

"Holt," I squeal. "I'm sweaty. Don't put me on your bed."

He pins me in place with his gaze as he strips out of his clothes. "I'm not worried about the fucking bed."

Before I know what's happening, he's crawling over the bed and hovering on top of me.

My breathing is shallow. I can feel the blotchiness in my skin and the stickiness of my perspiration. But, more so, I can feel Holt's energy rippling off him.

I'm so fucked.

I hope.

Chapter Twenty

Blaire

“You are a damn conundrum. Do you know that?” he asks from above me.

“I don’t know. I think I’m pretty easy to figure out.”

He tilts his head to the side. “I’ve tried to give you space. I’ve gone out of my fucking way to make sure you don’t think I asked you here so that I can have sex with you.”

“I noticed.”

He almost grins. *Almost*. “And then I catch you in my sauna thinking you’re going to touch yourself with me right here.”

I lift my head off the blankets. “Because you won’t.”

“Oh, sweetheart. I most definitely will.”

My head hits the blanket as he shows me the tie he had on earlier clenched in one of his large fists.

“Give me your hands,” he demands.

“What for?”

He sits beside me. Women would pay big money to watch his muscles flex like this.

He takes my hands and jerks them above my head. The silk slips across my wrists. In a moment, they’re pulled together and bound.

My blood pressure spikes as my heart pounds inside my body. I’m not sure if I like this or if I don’t.

But I am sure of one thing: *I trust him*.

The realization takes me out of the moment as I process it.

Only one person has ever tried to do something like this to me, and I laughed in his face. But with Holt, it’s hot. It’s safe. And

as he springs off the bed and rustles around a drawer, I don't have any reservations at all except I wish he'd hurry.

I squirm. "What are you doing now?"

"Finding a condom."

"Good plan, good plan."

He grins at me over his shoulder. "One of us has to think."

"Hey, I'm thinking. I've been thinking. I thought out an entire plan."

Kind of.

If he tries to keep me from hearing his chuckle, he fails.

He turns toward the bed and makes his way to me. He climbs on the mattress and stops between my legs.

I pant as he intentionally doesn't touch me. "Holt, come on."

I try to reach him with my foot, but he pulls away with the dirtiest, sexiest grin.

"Your hands are up there for a reason," he says. "So you can't touch me. Or yourself."

"Holt ..."

"I mean it," he says, his eyes smoldering. "If you touch me, I'll stop."

"You can't stop if you don't start," I say, wiggling around again.

He places a hand on my stomach to hold me in place. "Bend your knees."

I do as instructed.

His hand comes around my waist and dips beneath me. He cups my ass cheeks in his palms and raises my hips.

I tremble without being touched.

He holds my gaze as he presses kisses up the inside of my right leg. Each touch of his lips feels like it's being imprinted on my skin forever. As he nears my opening, he stops.

“Holt, I’m going to kill you,” I groan.

His eyes twinkle with mischief. “Paybacks are a bitch.”

He blows across my vagina. The air is cool against my wet, amped-up flesh, and I squirm again. I start to bring my hands down to help guide him along but then remember his command.

The side of his face is roughed against the inside of my thigh. His stubble bites into my over-sensitized body, and I moan in pleasure.

My head feels like it’s going to explode. I’ve never been this turned on and in need—need—of getting off. I can’t take the little bits he’s giving me.

I need it all. *I need him.*

He pulls his hands from beneath me and uses them to spread my knees wider. I’m totally exposed in every way, and I don’t give a damn.

It’s the wildest, most freeing sensation. It’s one I never thought I’d experience.

He whisks his fingers across the outside of my slit. I hold my breath. But instead of making any kind of contact that would give me relief, he instead runs his fingers along the crease where my leg meets my body.

It’s so good, so intimate, but totally screws with my head.

“You could’ve just asked me to fuck you,” he says like he has all the time in the world.

I lift my head off the bed. “If my being displayed like this in front of you isn’t asking you to fuck me, then I don’t know what to do.”

He grins devilishly. “This is me telling you I’m going to fuck you. This isn’t you asking.”

I smile as sweetly as I can manage through gritted teeth. “Holt, *please fuck me.*”

“In due time. Patience, sweetheart.”

My head falls back to the blankets again. “You can take your sweetheart and—oh!”

He places a kiss on the outside of my pussy. Then another on the other side. Then another, casually, as if there’s no hurry whatsoever.

I start to reach for him again but stop myself.

He’s in control.

And like a lightbulb went off inside my head, I realize what he’s doing.

He’s showing me I can trust him.

I look down at his head between my legs. He’s watching me, framed by my thighs, and holds my gaze as he licks a deliberate path up the center of my body.

“Fuck,” I hiss, my knees falling apart even more.

He sticks a finger into my opening and uses his thumb to rub the exterior. But what he does not do is go anywhere near my clit. And the harder I try to move to make contact, the farther away he stays.

“Does this feel good?” he asks with a cocky lilt to his voice. “Better than when you were touching yourself?”

“At least I knew where to touch myself.”

He laughs, working his fingers deeper inside my body.

I raise my hips to make it easier for him.

“I know where to touch you too,” he says. “I’m just choosing not to yet.”

“Why? Tell me why,” I whine.

“Because that’s what you’re trying to get me to do, and you don’t need to be in control all the time.”

“Yes, I do.”

His thumb gets close to my swollen bud but doesn’t make contact.

I squeeze my eyes shut. I think I might cry.

“It’s good to let someone else take over things sometimes,” he says. “Even I give up power on occasion.”

“I’d like to see that.”

“I do it all the time with you.”

My eyes fly open.

He’s watching me in that crazy way of his. It makes me feel like the only person in the universe who matters at this moment.

His irises are a mixture of greens and almost blues, and I can’t see clear enough to make sense of what’s happening in there.

He dips his head, his eyes still lasered in on mine, and licks my pussy. Sparks shoot through me like a live wire. I shake as bursts of energy fire through my veins.

He cups my ass again as his tongue finally finds my clit.

“Oh, my God ...” I say, each word punctuated with a groan.

My legs stiffen. I can feel the stickiness of my juices on the inside of my thighs. My breasts swell as I press my body against Holt’s face.

He licks and sucks and gives one hundred percent of his attention to my engorged pleasure point. He treats it like an oasis in the middle of the desert—as though he can’t get enough.

I can’t think anymore. I can’t give him hell, or tell him how amazing it feels, or beg him to keep going. My teeth clench together as the pent-up sexual tension builds and builds and ...

I explode all over his face.

I shriek at the almost pain of the orgasm. He responds to my cues and continues to suckle my body. I feel full, *so full*, and so very wet.

My body hums with total satisfaction. Completely spent, my head falls to the side.

Holt places a final kiss against the inside of my thigh before pulling away.

I shudder as the intensity takes a few moments longer to wane.

“Are you all right?” he asks.

I look down. He’s standing at the edge of the bed, wiping his face with his discarded shirt.

“It was worth the wait,” I say.

He grins. “Good to hear. Now come here.”

“I’m too tired.”

He grabs me by my ankles and pulls me to the edge of the bed. He makes quick work of putting on a condom.

“I could fuck you all night,” he says, “but I think you’ve had enough.”

“I don’t want to have had enough.”

He chuckles. “You sure? Because I can put you to bed and call it a night.”

“Not yet,” I say. “Just a little more.”

He flips me over onto my stomach and gets behind me. I’m so wet that he slides into me with ease.

My body spasms around his rock-hard length. “Holt ... *Shit!*”

“Damn, baby,” he groans as he presses into my body.

He fills me, taking a moment to let me adjust to his size. It’s deliriously wonderful and the feeling of his hands gripping my waist is inherently sexy.

He wants me as bad as I wanted him. I can feel it in the way he moves me and the way he watches me. There’s something so heady about it that I can’t help but feel a bit seductive.

My hands are extended in front of me. My ass is up in the air. My brain is, for the first time in a long time, unable to overthink anything. It’s in a muted state of bliss as Holt fucks me from behind.

“Do you want to come again?” he asks through gritted teeth. “Because, if not, this is going to be over soon.”

“I can’t.”

I've basically never stopped.

“Okay then.”

It takes just a few more strokes before I hear him growl. He grips me for dear life as his cock swells inside me. I keep my ass tilted up for him.

Finally, he pulls out. I fall to the mattress immediately, my body and mind depleted from the day. The clock beside the bed shows that it's well after three in the morning.

I hear the rustle of the trash can and the sound of running water. I'm nearly asleep when Holt comes back in again.

He picks me up and lays me properly on the bed. The mattress dips as he climbs on beside me.

I jump as a warm washrag touches my still-sensitive slit, and my eyes dart open.

He grins. “I can't let you go to sleep all dirty.”

“I need a shower,” I say, my eyes filling with sleep again.

He tosses the rag onto the floor and curls up behind me. Through my haze, I think he presses a kiss to the top of my head.

“Sleep, sweetheart,” he whispers in my ear.

And that's the last thing I remember as I doze off.

Chapter Twenty-One

Holt

Moonlight drifts through the drapes that didn't get closed.

I've told myself for the past hour that I'm going to get up. I need to clear my head and get myself together. That won't happen as long as I lay next to Blaire and continue to run my fingers through her long, silky locks.

But I don't. I can't quite force myself to leave her in my bed.

Her hair is tangled from sweat and sex. Every time my fingers find a new little knot, I gently work it out ... and wonder what the fuck is happening.

What am I doing?

I sigh, letting my head sink farther into the pillows.

Blaire rustles next to me. Her cheek moves against my chest, her arm rubbing against my abs as she rearranges her position. I hold my breath and hope she doesn't pull away. Because while I know this isn't where I need to be, it's where I am.

It's where I want to be. And I don't know how I feel about that.

What is it really hurting? I'll have plenty of time in the morning with Oliver to make up for lost time.

My head is murky. My thoughts are a complicated web of logic and emotion—the latter clouding the first. This is precisely why I don't do this. It leads to disaster.

So why am I doing this with Blaire? Why am I pointedly not following my own rules?

Not only that, but why am I instigating it?

It's usually a woman's behavior that confuses me. *This time, it's my own.*

My motivations are typically social or sexual. *This time, it's not.*

I want it to be. Damn, do I want it to be. And maybe I even thought it was when I invited her to stay with me. But it's beyond that now.

Now, wanting her to stay here isn't just about sex. I want to talk to her just as much as I want to fuck her. I want to see her various smiles, hear her laugh, and smell her perfume in the mornings. It's fucked up. But I don't know what to do about it.

My fingers slip through her hair. The weight of her body against mine feels like an anchor. But instead of presenting like a ball-and-chain, it feels more like a reprieve. It gives me a moment to breathe.

There were definitely ideas that we'd work, then fuck, then go to bed. It was supposed to be an easy few days with a woman who lived a thousand miles from here—a woman who had class and her own sense of detachment.

It was perfect.

Blaire wouldn't show up at my house once our time together was done. She wouldn't call me to come over when I was working. There would be no assumptions that we were attending any event together.

It was a week cut-and-dry. It sounded like heaven.

Now I find myself counting the days until she goes home. And not because I'm looking forward to it.

"Fuck," I whisper angrily into the night.

I slip out of bed. The air is cold and almost assaulting. Blaire stirs but settles again with her head on my pillow.

The sight leaves me with a knot in my stomach as I tuck the blankets around her naked body. She smiles in her sleep—a lazy, unguarded gesture that twists the knot inside me harder.

I turn away and pluck my robe off a hook on the bathroom door.

The house is quiet as I make my way through the hallways. I wander aimlessly through the rooms until I wind up in the den.

I flip on the fireplace and take a seat on the sofa. The flames flicker, giving both heat and the illusion of company.

“What are you doing?” I ask myself.

I rest my head on the back of the sofa and fill my lungs with oxygen. It’s an attempt to clear my mind.

What’s surprising is that I’m not thinking about her body, or how hard I got off, or that she’s still in my bed and I could, theoretically, go back up there for another round. Those thoughts are there—I’m a hot-blooded man, after all—but they’re a definite back seat to other matters.

I blow out the breath. The hiss of air leaving my body is the only noise in the room.

This is going to end badly if you don’t stop it.

I groan, knowing it’s true. I also know that if I don’t get my head out of my ass and finalize the Landry deal, more things than my situation with Blaire are going to end in destruction.

Our current projects are wrapping up, and we have nothing else on the table. We have to get this property. I have to get it. Everyone put their faith in me, and I can’t let them down.

I can’t fuck this up.

Yet here I am. Sitting in the den and not at my desk. Not getting ready to go to the office early like I should be.

Shit.

My brain feels like a room with a bunch of open boxes. The contents of which are spewed around my mind. The harder I try to sort them back neatly, the more they fall apart.

What is Blaire going to think in the morning?

This is not like Picante. This isn’t a spur-of-the-moment fling that neither of us thinks much about.

She’s in my home.

We've shared intimate things about ourselves.

She's in my damn bed.

She has every right to wonder if I'm pursuing her for a reason.

Am I?

I grimace. "No, why would I be? She's leaving in a few days. She doesn't want something serious any more than I do."

But as my words settle in the air, hanging around like they're taunting me, I realize how bitter they taste.

I look at the chair she sat in this evening. She was still annoyed with me for pushing her on the carriage—something I shouldn't have done. Yet her opening up to me and sharing things about her life is something I'll never forget.

It was real. Raw. Profound, in a way.

I've never experienced that kind of intimacy before.

So why her? Why now? Why at the worst possible time in my life?

Still, I watch the fire crackle softly and have half of a notion to wake Blaire. I think she'd like the peace of this moment.

"Maybe that's precisely why it's her and now," I whisper into the night. "I'm only feeling these things for her because it's what we both need right now. It works. There's a freedom for both of us because she's going to leave. And neither of us will be worse for the wear."

I hope.

* * *

Blaire

The coffee maker hisses as the final drips of java flow into my cup. I take it from the tray and inhale the decadent aroma.

Holt's robe is soft and warm. I found it draped across the bottom of the bed when I woke up and couldn't help myself from putting it on. It smells like him.

I tug the tie together at my middle before leaning against the kitchen island and gazing across the backyard. The peaceful view helps to settle the wildness that's still present from last night.

"What am I doing?" I ask the empty house.

It's almost lunchtime, and I'm just having coffee. There are three missed calls from Yancy on my phone that I intentionally left in the guest bathroom. I haven't bothered to check my work emails yet.

It's irresponsible despite the fact that I know everything at the office is taken care of. Yancy is handling everything because that's what she does even though I'm usually too anal to let her. But I should be checking in. I need to ensure that all my court dates are extended due to the asbestos and that nothing has fallen through the cracks.

Instead, I'm standing in Holt's kitchen drinking coffee.

Maybe this is what it looks like when someone just throws in the towel.

Is this how lives begin to spiral out of control?

I take a tentative sip of my drink and give that a thought.

Today looks so different than my life did this day a week ago. Then I was sitting at my desk in my business suit, probably lecturing someone about the ins and outs of the law. I'm certain I was irritated and probably ready to have a heart attack—that and wondering why I picked a career that keeps me surrounded by overbearing men.

Then I took a vacation.

Now I stand in a business mogul's luxury kitchen after a night of delicious sex in his multi-million-dollar house near the beach.

I pace around the kitchen, taking in the insane attention to detail in every element of the house. The handcrafted molding around the doorways. The rounded edges of the marble countertops. The way the windows bring in so much light, yet the sun never shines directly in.

It's not surprising, though. That's Holt, and it's one of the things I love so much about him.

My feet stop moving as the last sentence flows through my brain.

I hold my mug with both hands and smile.

I do enjoy so many things about him.

He's so kind and thoughtful. No detail gets by him. We can talk about anything, and his ideas are so thought-provoking. And he cares.

I lean against the counter and think back to last night. How he pushed me on the carriage to open up about myself. Even then, it was as if he was prodding me gently for my own good. As though he knew I needed to get that stuff off my chest.

What's funny is that I didn't even know I needed to share all of that. But waking up this morning felt ... different. Lighter. Less weighed down by the world.

It's probably all the sex.

I laugh at myself.

I grab a seat next to the windows that look across the pool and let my mind float back to Holt's office. My intention wasn't to spill my life's story. All I wanted to do was to admit that he was right—that I do hold things in—and acknowledge that I might need to work on it.

Yet when I experienced the tenderness in his eyes, the attentiveness, my guard slipped.

For once, talking about Jack and the night I started to lose control didn't feel like a shameful blemish on my soul.

I take another sip of coffee and remember how safe I felt in his arms. It was such a relief to tell someone my secrets and not be judged. His arms help put the pieces of me back together.

I sort back through various men I've had semi-relationships with over the years. Never once did I come close to telling any of them.

Why?

Why Holt?

The coffee burns my stomach as the acid sloshes around. I tug the robe even tighter.

My throat cinches, and I take a deep, calming breath.

"It's because you're leaving," I tell myself. "It doesn't matter what he knows about me. He's safe."

He's safe.

My heart sinks as I realize the truth in that.

Holt is safe. He makes me feel protected.

And it's a shame I'll only have this one time in my life.

I put my cup in the dishwasher and head upstairs to check my emails.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Holt

“We have four days to figure this out,” Oliver says.

I sink into my office chair and look at him.

Wade’s plans are displayed between us. A binder sits open with calculations from the accounting department. A file full of legal paperwork from our attorneys—things to consider, things to incorporate in the final contracts that might affect our negotiations—is bursting at its seams. Next to that mess is a stack of papers Boone dropped off with information regarding potential occupants of the retail space.

It’s a lot. In every way.

“This is a nightmare,” I tell him.

“As if I don’t already know.”

“What did Landry say in the voicemail again?” I ask.

“Which one?”

“About the ballpark offer I threw their way.”

Oliver snorts. “*You are out of your fucking minds.* That’s verbatim.”

“Shit.”

My brother leans forward. The plans crunch beneath his arms. His face shows signs of sleepless nights and an abundance of stress. It makes me feel guilty.

Very fucking guilty.

“Okay,” I say, pointing at a spot on the plans near the beach.

“This is wasted area. Could we go higher here? Use this space better? I mean, if we do, we could double, maybe even triple the storefront. I know that’s adding a ton of shit on Wade and

on Boone to sell later, but that makes me feel a whole hell of a lot better offering Landry what we're gonna have to offer."

"I keep looking at that space too. It's the only one with the ability to return more revenue. But if we go higher, are we blocking the view from the tower in the back? That will make it less desirable."

I sigh. "I don't know. That's why we have Wade. I'll call him and see what he thinks."

Oliver nods. "Yeah. Let's try it. We've spent so much time and money on this thing already. If we wind up not making this deal ..."

We exchange a look.

I know what he's thinking. It's the same thing that I realized might be an actual possibility on my way here this morning.

The numbers aren't quite adding up to justify offering what we will have to in order to get Landry to sell. It's absolutely worth it, though. It will trigger a tourism boon to that part of the city, and we'll already have our foot in the door. We just need the final puzzle piece to make it all gel. I just have to find it.

I will. I know I will. I have to.

I just didn't expect to be distracted right in the middle of this.

My mind goes to Blaire—the best distraction I've ever had. It occurred to me on the way here that I'm so distracted for the same reason I shouldn't be: she's leaving.

I can't win.

Focusing on work should be easy because things with Blaire don't matter. She'll be out of here soon. But focusing on anything but her is impossible when I know she'll be gone in a handful of days. It's a double-edged sword.

"Are you okay?" Oliver asks.

"I'm fine." I ignore the burn in my throat. "Let's see what Wade thinks and reconvene this afternoon."

Oliver blows out a breath and sits back. He watches me with the skilled eye of a little brother—one whose job is to pick up

on bullshit and call you out on it.

“I can’t decide if I liked you better then or now,” he says, amused.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He smirks. “I just mean that you’re a different guy since Airport Girl came to town.”

“*Blaire*,” I say, emphasizing her name, “will be leaving soon. So no worries.”

Even I can hear the irritation in my voice at having to say that.

Oliver nods, obviously enjoying my predicament.

“She’s leaving, huh?” he asks.

“Didn’t I just say that?”

“You did. I was just repeating it.”

I make a show of sighing. I don’t know why. He’s not going to let this go.

He rocks his chair back on two legs and grins. “No. I definitely like you better now.”

“I don’t really want to do this with ya, Ollie.”

“Yeah. I bet you don’t.” He laughs. “And it’s for all the reasons I like you better.”

I get up from the table by the window and head to my desk. His eyes are trained on my back. I can feel them boring into me.

Whatever he’s talking about, I don’t want to hear. It’s probably just a button he thinks he can push and get a few minutes of amusement at my expense.

“I’m not a fucking monkey here for your entertainment, you know,” I say, sitting in my chair.

He laughs. “Nope. You’re a mortal like the rest of us.”

I don’t respond. Instead, I try to wait him out in hopes he’ll give up and leave.

He doesn’t.

“If today was last week, you would’ve already figured out this Landry shit,” he says. “I would’ve been sitting here, twiddling my thumbs, wondering what I’m supposed to do since you do everything.”

“Are you admitting you’re lazy?”

“Ha.”

I look at him and wink. Oliver is the farthest thing from lazy, and we all know it. We also know that I’m ignoring where he’s going with this.

He taps the end of his pen against the table. “I’m just saying that it’s nice to see you doing something other than work for once.”

“Yeah, well, I’m still working, and I will until I get it all figured out.”

He smiles smugly. “Which thing? Blaire or the project?”

I’m about to tell him that he’s walking a fine line and better watch his step when the door opens. The room fills with the scent of lilies as our mother waltzes in the room.

Sigourney Mason has the grace of a ballerina and the smile of a queen. My father said he was scared of her the first time he met her. She was so beautiful and quietly powerful that he never dreamed a girl like Siggy would talk to a man like him.

Her eyes light up as she takes in Oliver and me.

“Well, I didn’t expect to see you both this morning,” she says. “What a treat!”

“Hi, Mom,” Oliver says.

“Hello, Mom.”

Oliver and I get to our feet. She hugs my brother before making her way to me. She wraps her arms around me and kisses my cheek.

“Oops, I left a lipstick mark,” she says, wiping the side of my face with her hand. “What are my boys doing today?”

“Going over this Landry project,” Oliver says.

“Still?” Mom turns around to face him. “Want me to take his mother out for lunch? I just love Vivian Landry.”

I laugh. “No, Mother, we don’t need you to take Vivian Landry out to lunch on our behalf.”

“And why not?” She puts a hand on her hip. “You do know who holds the power, right?”

Oliver chuckles. I fire him a warning glare.

If he segues this conversation into something about Blaire ...

“Holt has been demonstrating that point lately,” Oliver cracks.

“Ollie, I’m gonna kill ya.”

All he does is laugh.

My eyes flip to my mother. A knowing look is painted on her face.

“I actually have a lot of work to do today, you two. So if you don’t mind ...” I say, sitting back down in my chair.

Mom scoffs. “Don’t think you’re going to throw me out of your office because your brother is irritating you.” She looks at Oliver. “Stop annoying Holt. Be nice.”

“Sorry, Mom,” Oliver says, trying his best to hide his smile. “I forget he’s sensitive now.”

“Oliver ...” I warn.

“It’s not a bad thing to be sensitive, sweetie,” Mom says. “You don’t have to be hard as nails all the time.”

Oliver watches me over Mom’s shoulder and taunts me. I can see the words sitting on his lips and the joy he’d get out of projecting them into the world.

And to my mother’s ears.

Please don’t.

“Also,” Mom says, spinning around to face Oliver, “I know what you’re insinuating. I heard all about Blaire.”

My jaw drops to the floor just as Oliver’s brows rise to the ceiling.

The clicks of Mom's heels clamor through my office as I try to figure out what this means. She stops next to my brother and faces me.

"Boone told me," she says proudly.

"What the fuck?"

She gives me a look. "He and Larissa were talking about it at dinner last night. I gave them a bottle of wine, and the next thing I know, they're telling me all about her."

I rub a hand down my face and wonder how this happened. Why it happened. Why my family thinks my life is fair game.

Because it's not.

They are so ready to love people and bring them into our world that it makes for uncomfortable situations when *you* aren't ready for any of that.

"Were you going to tell me?" Mom asks.

I drop my hand to my side. "You know what? I wasn't."

"Holton!"

"Well, I wasn't. Because it's just a temporary thing, Mom. I'm not marrying her."

Oliver sits up. "You know, if you—"

"Shut up." I glare at him before turning back to my mom. "She's a friend of the Landrys. We're just ..."

We're just what?

Fucking? Talking? Eating pizza in the middle of the night?

I don't even know anymore.

Mom grins. "You are bringing her tonight, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Oliver says. "You totally should."

I ignore them both and mess with my tie instead.

I'd forgotten that tonight was our family outing. It must've slipped my mind. Now that Boone has told my mother all about Blaire, it's no surprise Mom wants me to bring her. But

if I do that, this whole thing between Blaire and me gets trickier.

I think.

Actually, fuck if I know.

“I’m not bringing her,” I say even though I’m not sure. Better to not get her hopes up. “Why do we keep having this conversation?”

“We haven’t had this conversion before, Holton.”

“No, but I’ve had it with everyone else, it seems.”

Mom looks offended. “Well, pardon me. I only want to get to know her. If she’s a friend of the Landrys ... Wait. Which Landry?”

I sigh. “Does it matter?”

“Yes. If it’s Camilla or Sienna, that’s wonderful news. If it’s Lincoln, then I have reservations.”

“It’s Sienna,” Oliver chimes in.

“Great. Bring her. That’s an order, dear.” She flashes me one final, epic smile and heads to the door. “See you boys later. Love you tons.”

And with that, she’s gone.

Oliver gathers his things from the table. He keeps the corner of his eye trained on me as if he thinks I might bolt across the room and tackle him.

It’s not a terrible idea, really. It would definitely expend some of this energy that’s making it hard to stand still.

“Don’t forget to call Wade, okay?” Oliver asks, heading for the door.

“I’ll call him now.”

Oliver nods. He takes a breath and starts to speak but doesn’t. Instead, he blows the air out.

The moment reminds me of when we were kids. It was always Oliver and me. We’d fight. We’d get into stupid trouble that never amounted to anything serious. We’d skip school, sneak

liquor from Dad's cabinet, and blackmail Wade into doing our homework. But no matter what we did or who got caught, we always had each other's backs. Without fail.

"Thanks," I tell him.

"What for?"

"For picking up the slack around here."

He shifts the papers from one hand to another. "I was giving you hell earlier, but I honestly am glad that you're ... doing whatever it is you're doing." He grins. "Does that work better? Does it make you more comfortable that I didn't define it?"

"Yes."

He laughs. "I don't know what you're doing in your private life, and I don't really give a shit, either. I'm just happy to see you relaxing a little." He opens the door. "But it's totally self-centered on my behalf. If you relax, that means you won't die of a heart attack anytime soon, and I don't have to worry about running this place."

I throw a pad of sticky notes at him as he ducks out the door. They hit the spot where his head was.

Chuckling, I sit down in my chair again and lean back.

I'm really lucky to have my family. As nosy and maddening as they are, they're also generous and loving and loyal.

They'd love Blaire.

The thought comes easily. The idea of having Blaire around my siblings feels like the most natural thing in the world. I can imagine her conversing with Wade and blushing at Boone's jokes. Oliver would adore her. Coy would try to charm her.

A ripple of uncertainty flows through my veins.

Great. Bring her. That's an order, dear.

Do I? What would be the point?

"There wouldn't be one," I mumble and get back to work.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Blaire

“So that’s it?” I type out a few final notes from my conversation with Yancy. “There are no more loose ends?”

“No. Just the hearing for the Lawson case next week. If you aren’t back, Mr. Jameson said he would show up on your behalf.”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll be back even if I have to get a hotel room. Please send the updated files to my email.”

“I will do that as soon as we get off this call,” Yancy says. “They’re saying they’re on track for reopening the building by the end of the week. Fingers crossed.”

I start to say it back to her but stop. I’m afraid she’ll hear the reservation in my tone.

“Let’s hope they reopen when it’s safe,” I say instead.

“Oh, absolutely.” Computer keys click in the background. “That does it for me. I’ve rearranged everything else in order of precedence. You’ll be slammed for the first week back, but if I know you, that makes you happy.”

I close my computer and relax against my chair. The late afternoon sun warms my face. The rays are amplified by the pool rippling in front of me.

The fresh air helped clear my head. After I worked outside all day with my computer on my lap, I felt like I was in high school again. All I needed was a boom box.

“I appreciate your help in moving all this around,” I tell Yancy.

“Of course, Miss Gibson.”

“We’ll talk soon.”

“Goodbye.”

I end the call.

My eyes fall closed in the bliss of a workday well done. There's nothing like it.

I grin.

Except for the bliss of a night well done with Holt.

A laugh escapes my throat as I think about how stupid that is. Yet it's true.

My phone rings from beside me. I pick it up and look at the caller ID.

Sienna.

"Hey," I say, shielding my eyes from the sun.

"Well, don't you sound chipper?"

I shrug. "I've had a good day."

"And ...?" she prods.

"Well, I slept in. Had a great cup of coffee followed by a long, hot shower." I hold back a laugh about how much I needed said shower. "Then I worked all day by a gorgeous pool and listened to the birds chirp, and I got a ton of stuff done. It's been a good day."

"Better," she says. "But you left out all the Holt stuff."

I shift in my chair. "I actually haven't seen him since about three this morning. I'm guessing he's been at work."

"So this happiness is residual. This is a good sign, Blaire."

Is it?

Of course being happy is a good thing. It's much better than the alternative. But is being happy in this situation truly a good thing?

I don't know.

"I don't know about it being a good sign," I say. "But it feels nice not to feel like the world is sitting on my shoulders for once."

"That's how I feel with Walker."

I snort. “He could barely write checks to pay his bills before you came along.”

“Well, I do it for him now, so he still can’t do that,” she admits with a laugh. “But being around him makes me feel safe. I can mess up—you do remember how I met him, right?”

I laugh as I remember Lance explaining how Sienna damaged Walker’s truck. “I do.”

“So, yeah, you get it. You know what I mean.”

I think about my time with Holt, and I do kind of get what she means. If I feel anything around Holt, it’s ... that. Confident enough to be myself. To speak my mind. To share my wounds.

To be me.

Still, I don’t know if it’s a good thing.

“When are you coming home?” she asks.

“I just got off the phone with Yancy. She said my building should be opened by the end of the week.”

“What’s the plan?”

I wiggle my toes.

“Blaire?”

“I ... don’t know. I mean, I’ll go back to Chicago. He’ll be here running his empire.”

The words hang in the air. It’s not a new concept. It’s been the plan from the beginning. It’s life. Even so, it feels different today. It feels ... sad.

How did I get myself into this mess?

Because it’s a mess. Or it will be if I don’t get a hold on things now.

“Maybe a long-distance relationship will work,” Sienna offers. “Have you thought about that?”

“No. And I think you’re thinking too seriously about this.”

“Tell me this—do you want to do a long-distance relationship with him? Would you if he wanted to?”

I bite my lip.

I don't want to answer her. I want to avoid this topic and move on to something less intrusive. But last night's events roll back through my mind. Holt's words about Sienna do too.

She's a good friend to have.

As nervous as I am to admit—I want to have a friendship with Sienna. I'm not sure what that looks like, really, but it's been fun talking to her without any pressure. It makes me feel more connected to my family too.

It would be fun to have a girlfriend to talk to about things like men too. Maybe we could grab lunch sometimes. We could even make Christmas cookies like my mom used to do with her friends.

Right?

If I want to have that type of rapport with her, I'm going to have to share things about my life.

Things like this.

I take a deep breath. It feels like my chest has been cracked open, and I'm just waiting on someone to check out my insides and decide if it's worthy or not. All of a sudden, I'm transplanted back into elementary school and wondering if the girls will like me.

It's ridiculous. I know that. But I can't help it.

“Would you?” she asks again.

Would I?

Despite the impracticality of making a long-distance relationship work with Holt, I know I would try. I'd at least commit to giving it a trial period to see what would happen.

The idea makes me squirm.

“If he wanted to have that sort of a relationship with me, I would,” I say slowly.

My cheeks heat as I look up at the sun and wonder if I just jinxed myself. Even if I didn't, I'll probably recall this moment later in a rush of humiliation when it becomes apparent that he wants nothing of the sort or doesn't want to work it out.

"I would try," I say hurriedly, building in an out for later. "I don't know if it would work. It doesn't seem feasible."

"You never know until you try."

"True," I admit. "Which is why I said I'd give it a shot. But this whole conversation is pointless to begin with because we aren't in a relationship now. We're just ..."

My voice drifts off as I fail to come up with the proper term.

What are we doing?

Saying that we are having a multi-night stand doesn't seem accurate anymore. I don't recall having that kind of pillow talk we shared last night with other men I slept with.

But I don't know what to call it.

"It's okay not to know," Sienna says. "Sometimes things get super messy before they get cleaned up. I mean, Walker practically hated me at first."

I laugh. "I don't think he hated you."

"Eh, I think he did." She laughs too. "And then we had the whole thing that had to get taken care of—which we don't need to talk about."

I wince at the bitterness in her tone.

"Anyway," she continues, "I think you're in a good spot with him. It'll work out if it's supposed to."

"Yeah."

She sighs. "Listen—unless you're fucking like rabbits and not doing anything else together, he must like something about you, or he would've asked you to leave."

"I ... Well, we've only slept together once since I started staying here. While that feels like a travesty, maybe it's a good

thing.”

“Oh, wow.”

“I don’t know what that *wow* means, exactly,” I say, wincing.

She laughs. “It’s a good thing. It means that he’s not just using you for a booty call.”

“If he is, he doesn’t need a lot of booty.”

She laughs harder. “Now that would be a travesty. If you can hook up with a man like that, he better want *all the sex*. Otherwise, it would almost be rude.”

I shake my head and grin. “You’re right. But you know what? I like him more because he doesn’t want all the sex despite going to bed every night completely frustrated sexually.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine.”

“But that’s why I’m in this predicament,” I say. “I can walk away from sexual encounters like nothing. There are no strings, no attachments. If they cop an attitude the next day or never want to see me again—what do I care? They’ve served their purpose. But with Holt ...”

Sienna sighs softly. “You like him, don’t you? As in, really like him?”

My heart thunders in my chest.

I know the answer to this question. There are many things I like about Holt. The fact that I’m still here, at his house, was my first clue. I couldn’t stand most men this long.

But if I admit it out loud, would it change things? Would I look at him and think about confessing it to Sienna? Would he notice something different and back away?

“I just ...” I clear my throat. “He’s pretty great.”

“I’ll say it for you. *Yes, Sienna. I like Holt.*”

I roll my eyes. “You’re such a brat.”

She giggles.

“Look,” I say, moving around in my seat again, “I don’t know what he’s thinking. We had an interesting night last night. We

talked. We talked about a lot of really personal things, and I think it's warped my brain a little bit. I'll get it all situated inside my head today, and everything will be fine."

"You don't have to rationalize yourself out of this, Blaire. It's okay to like him."

"I know. It's just not ... feasible. And I think he thinks the same thing. I mean ..."

I think back to the things he said about Kendra. And how his work always comes first and he doesn't have room in his life for a relationship.

"Why did you ask me to stay?"

"Honestly? I don't know," he says. "You're strong. You hold your own. You're gorgeous and intelligent, and I enjoy talking to you. And it probably didn't hurt that you live a thousand miles away."

Yet here I am, like a stupid girl, pining for him in my own quiet way.

So foolish.

"I need to go, Sienna," I say quickly.

She must read my tone because she sighs. "I'm here if you need me."

"I know."

"I'm going to say it once more—I'm here if you need me. You can call me at any time. You can text me. Or email. Or send a smoke signal, but I don't really know how to read those."

I grin. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

"It's what friends do." She pauses to see if I'll respond, but I don't. "Bye, Blaire."

"Goodbye."

I hold the phone in my hand and look at the water. It ripples back and forth with a levity that I wish I could absorb.

"Don't get yourself all messed up," I whisper. "You're a grown woman. You're capable of enjoying this week and

going home and resuming your life in Chicago. You are in control.”

Saying it aloud helps.

I turn to pick up my computer to go inside when my phone buzzes in my hand. I look down.

***Holt:** Want to do something fun tonight?*

Holt’s words are printed across the screen.

My heartbeat quickens as I type out a response.

***Me:** Depends on how you define fun.*

***Holt:** I might have tickets to the Kelvin McCoy concert.*

I gasp.

***Me:** You do not.*

***Holt:** I might.*

***Me:** I might be jealous!*

***Holt:** I won’t be out of the office in time to see the opening acts. But if you want to see the headliner, I’d love to take you.*

***Me:** Are you sure?*

***Holt:** Yes or no, Blaire.*

***Me:** YES*

I dance around the chair in a very un-me-like move. I’ve never been to a concert before, and if there is one band I’d like to see, it’s Kelvin McCoy.

Holt: Great. I will pick you up around eight. If you want to see the openers, my cousin Larissa would be happy to let you go with her and I could meet you at the stadium later.

Me: I'm happy just to see Kelvin McCoy!

Holt: ... with me. You're happy to see Kelvin McCoy with me. Right?

Me: Yes, with you. But Kelvin McCoy!

Holt: I heard he's a dick in real life.

Me: Don't ruin my vision.

Holt: Be ready at eight.

Me: I will. Thank you!

Holt: You're very welcome.

I grab my computer and race to the shower.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Blaire

Berridge Stadium is boisterous.

Throngs of people are packed into the baseball stadium. Chords of music play intermittently over the speakers set up on either side of the stage in the outfield. A giant screen, black for the time being, is stretched out behind the platform that Kelvin McCoy will take in a matter of minutes.

Holt leads me down the aisle toward a baseball field that's been turned into a country music concert. I dodge elbows from inebriated attendees and dirty looks from women who see Holt first, only to realize that I'm right behind him.

He looks and smells incredible. How a man can look this good after working for twelve hours—or more—is beyond me.

His ass fills out the back of his tan dress pants. Broad shoulders stretch the fabric of his blue and white striped shirt. The collar is undone, and his tie is missing, and I can't imagine how women get any work done around him all day.

I'm watching him and not where I'm going when a foot juts out in front of me from the side. The edge of my heel catches on it, and I plummet forward.

"Ah," I squeak as I slam into Holt's back.

He turns, surprised, and quickly wraps one arm around me.

I look up to find him searching the area around me.

"What happened?" he asks. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry. I wasn't paying attention."

His eyes find mine, and he grins. "Well, pay attention before I get into a fight."

My skin burns with the intensity of his gaze. It's almost electric tonight.

Our conversation on the way over was friendly and fun. He gave me crap about my love for Kelvin McCoy and Beau McCrae, a country music singer who'd just finished his set. I teased him about being jealous. Despite the airy banter, something was different.

I felt it. I think Holt did too.

My brain told me it was because I put it into the universe that I would consider something more serious with him. I'm seeing things I want to see. But then he brushes his hand against mine or dips his fingers into the small of my back, and I swear I feel an intimacy to his touch that I haven't felt before.

"Don't get into a fight until after we watch Kelvin McCoy," I tell him. "I don't want to be thrown out of here too soon."

His grin turns mischievous. "What do you like about him so much?"

It's a simple question that has an easy answer. But it's hard to think about anyone else while my body is pressed into Holt's. Despite being in a stadium full of people, it feels like just the two of us.

I bite my lip. "His voice is dreamy."

Holt rolls his eyes. "He sounds like a cocky teenager."

I slap his chest and ignore the way it doesn't give. It only makes it worse that I know how spectacular it is undressed.

"Let's get to our seats before you miss the show," he says.

He sets me back on both of my feet. But before he turns around, he grabs my hand.

My eyes flip to his. He looks as surprised as I feel.

"Just so you don't fall again," he mumbles.

"Right."

His hand is large and warm. His grip is sturdy and reliable, just like I know him to be.

Don't get swept up in this.

I ignore the legions of music fans on either side of the walkway. I block out the way my hand tingles from being tucked into Holt's. I do my best to activate my guard and not read too much into anything—but it's difficult.

It feels so natural.

Holt shows a uniformed man our tickets before we descend the last few steps. The man nods as I pass.

We stop at the bottom row. The only people closer to the stage are the people standing on the field.

"Oh, wow," I say. "How did you get these tickets? They're fantastic."

He drops my hand and runs his through his hair. "Connections, I guess."

"You must have some good connections."

"You could say that." He looks over my shoulder. "Whatever is said tonight, please understand I have no control over them."

I furrow my brow. "What? Who? What are you talking about?"

I'm not sure if he's going to laugh or wince. Either way, he slips by me and into the row of seats. I follow along and sit in the empty seat next to him.

"We didn't think you were coming," a familiar voice says from the other side of him.

I peer down the aisle.

The man I met at the Landry's the first night I met Holt—Oliver, I think it was, sits beside Holt. A young woman with gorgeous blond hair is seated next to him. Two men who are variations of Holt and Oliver smile back at me from the other side of the girl. An older man and woman sit at the end. The woman looks regal in an approachable way with her large pieces of jewelry and plain black T-shirt. The man is dressed like Holt and has the same warm smile.

"You brought her," the woman says, clearly thrilled to see me.

My cheeks heat as I take in this ... situation.

These people are his family.

My attention shifts away from the curious faces to the man who brought me here.

Holt looks at me and forces a swallow. His Adam's apple bobs in his throat. The look on his face is half-smile, half-wince as he tries to read the look on mine.

I lift a brow and try not to look as shocked as I feel.

"I should've warned you, huh?" he asks.

"Maybe a word or two would've been kind."

He wrinkles his nose. "Sorry?"

That does it. I can't be irritated with him when he looks at me with a mixture of adorableness and heat. It dissolves my anxiety and confusion and leaves me laughing.

He turns to his family. "Everyone, I'd like you to meet Blaire Gibson. Blaire, this is Oliver, Larissa—our cousin—Boone, and Wade. At the end is our mother and father, Siggy and Rodney."

"Darling, it is such a pleasure to meet you," Siggy coos. "I'm sorry I'm so far away. I'd love to welcome you with a big hug!"

"Oh, a wave will do," I say, giving her my best smile and thanking the heavens I don't have to hug her.

Hugs are awkward and not all that enjoyable if you're meeting a stranger for the first time. They're reserved for people you know and like. And while I'm sure she's lovely, a hug seems a little overkill.

Holt chuckles beside me.

"We're glad you could make it, Blaire," Rodney says.

"I'm happy to be here."

"We're happy you're here too." Larissa sticks a hand across Oliver. "You can call me Riss."

I give her hand a gentle shake. "It's nice to meet you."

My shoulders relax as I take in Larissa's genuine friendliness. I wasn't expecting it, but maybe I should have.

She's about Sienna's age and is as cute as a button. She has the same disarming way about her as Sienna too.

I instantly like her, which is weird for me.

"I'd shake your hand, Blaire, but—" Boone begins, but Holt cuts him off.

"But I'd kick your ass."

"Oh, the hell you would."

The entire family laughs except for their parents. They're engrossed in a conversation with a couple sitting behind them.

I try to ignore the way my heart hiccups as Holt takes my hand again. I'm not even sure he realizes that he's done it, but I'm sure as heck not going to pull it away.

"I think Holt would take you, Boone," Wade says. He takes off his black-rimmed glasses and looks at his younger brother. "You don't have a whole lot going for you besides a lot of mouth."

"What?" Boone's jaw drops. "You're supposed to be on my side here, fucker."

"Everyone's money is on Holt," Oliver says. "Shut up, Boone."

Boone looks at me with the biggest puppy dog eyes I've ever seen. It's ridiculously adorable.

"You know what?" I say with a laugh. "It doesn't matter because we can't reach each other to shake hands anyway."

"They're always like this," Larissa says. "They're a lot to deal with."

"I have three brothers and two boy cousins that are a lot to deal with too," I say. "This doesn't bother me."

"You should see it when Coy is around. It gets ridiculous," she says.

"He must be like my cousin Peck. The instigator."

“Totally.” She laughs. “He threatened to have me come on stage tonight and dance. I told him I will flat-out refuse and ruin his show.”

Ruin his show?

I don’t know exactly what my face does, but Larissa balks.

“Oops,” she groans.

“I ...” I look at Holt, who is pointedly not looking at me. “Do you want to explain why your brother would ask your cousin to come on stage?”

Holt bites his bottom lip. The lines around his eyes crinkle, making him look more like his father.

My heartbeat quickens.

He doesn’t say a word. Just works hard not to smile.

“Fine.” I peer around him again. “Larissa, why would your cousin Coy ask you to come on stage tonight?”

She looks at Holt. Then at me. Then at Holt again.

“Hey, kids,” Siggy calls from the other end of the aisle. “I forgot to tell you. Coy has to leave town earlier than expected tomorrow. Can you all come at ten for brunch instead? I know you all have lives and things, but it would mean a lot to have you all at home for a quick meal.”

Oh my God.

They all turn to their mother except Holt. I think he’s too afraid to look away from me.

“So, Kelvin McCoy is my brother,” Holt tells me.

“What?”

I put it all together before this, but to hear it out of his mouth is insane. My brain chooses this exact moment to replay all the things I’ve said about the band and the music and ...

Shit.

“You jerk,” I say, my brain still processing all this.

I'm not mad about this, just shocked. It's kind of funny that I didn't know because everyone probably does.

Everyone but me.

Damn him.

Holt grins like the cat that caught the canary.

"His name is Coy Kelvin Mason," he says. "He goes by Kelvin McCoy, which is also the name of the band—which is weird to me, but I'm not in charge."

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. "I'm so embarrassed."

Holt's body rumbles beside me.

"I mean it," I tell him. "Why did you let me go on and on about him?"

"It was funny."

"It's totally not funny at all," I say with a laugh.

He lifts my chin with his finger, and I open my eyes. He's peering into my face with a sweet sincerity that makes my stomach flip-flop.

"Maybe I should've told you," he says softly. "But it was adorable that you didn't know. Besides, if I told you, I wouldn't have anything to tease you about."

I study him. His eyes are sweet and concerned yet have the hint of trouble that I love so much. His thumb brushes over my knuckles.

"It's fine," I tell him. "Just know that I might've chosen my words differently had I known he was your brother."

"I know. Which is why I didn't tell you. I wanted the truth."

I grin. "I would've given you the truth either way. I just might've selected different details to share."

He turns his body so that he's only facing me. "Is that so?"

I nod. "I might've told you that his voice is sweet like honey and puts me in the mood to ..." I lean closer. "Do things to you when we're not surrounded by his adoring fans."

Holt's eyes sparkle. "Keep it up, sweetheart, and you'll miss the show."

"Only if you can put on a better one."

His lips part to say something when Oliver elbows him in the side.

"Don't worry about calling Wade—" Oliver says.

"Shit." Holt whirls around to face his brothers. "I forgot. I'm sorry."

"Oliver called me anyway, and we worked it out," Wade says. "I have a solution. Never fear ..."

His voice drifts off as the lights fade, and music begins to play.

The crowd roars to life. The giant black screen behind the stage turns on, and the words Kelvin McCoy flash in green.

I settle back in my seat, but not before Holt leans over the armrest. With his mouth hovering over the shell of my ear, he whispers, "I will give you a show tonight that you won't forget."

My skin erupts in goose bumps as I look at him. His eyes are hooded. His lips damp. His cologne chooses this moment to trickle through the air and attack my senses.

"Promise?" I ask.

It's all I can say. One word is my max.

Holt's grin turns devilish before the lights fade to black, and Kelvin McCoy comes on stage. Anything either of us would say would be deadened by the noise filling Barridge Stadium.

Instead of talking, I rest my shoulder against Holt's. He rests our locked hands on my thigh. And as I listen to the opening lines of Kelvin McCoy's hit song, "Backroads," I wonder if maybe it's not wrong to have a little hope that things might work out.

Crazier things have happened in life.

Right?

Chapter Twenty-Five

Holt

The sound of the shower is soothing.

I sit on the edge of my bed, a towel wrapped around my waist, and listen to water cascade off Blaire's body in the other room.

I'm so tired.

The concert was entertaining. Coy put on a hell of a show. It was fun being in the middle of the chaos and watching Mom cheer on her son as he danced and sang his way across the stage. It was more exciting to sit next to Blaire.

She watched every piece of the performance with rapt attention. A smile sat permanently on her face. She cheered, sang along to a few of the songs, and looked the part of a happy concert-goer. And then, after the show, we raced back home.

My heartbeat picks up as I remember the sound of her back hitting the foyer wall. The way she moaned into my mouth as I pushed into her tight body. The feeling of her smile against my neck before I put her feet back on the floor.

"Fuck," I whisper.

Tonight was too much—too much of *everything*.

Mom and Blaire had a conversation I couldn't follow about dishes. Apparently, Blaire's grandmother collects the same type as my mother. Wade fell into a conversation with my date about bridges. She talked whiskey with Boone and chatted away with Larissa about country music all the way back to the car.

It was surreal—not because Blaire could hold an effortless conversation with everyone in my family, but because it seemed right.

She fit in. She blended right in with the familial dynamics, even going as far as to silence Boone with a look when he started to get out of hand with a story about a woman named Gia. She acted the part of a member of the Mason family, and I liked it.

“You’re getting in so deep,” I warn myself.

I know she’s leaving and going back to her career. It’s more than a job to her. It matters. She has a fucking degree to practice law. She’s not going to throw all that into the wind and stay here.

I don’t even necessarily want her to stay.

Do I?

I don’t know what I want.

I know that having her in my home makes me want to come home. I know that seeing her hanging out with my brothers settles me. I know that the idea of curling up in my bed next to her in a few minutes is something that I’ve looked forward to since I left this morning.

But I also know that all of this shit has caused my work to slip. And I can’t have that.

“And that brings me right back to reality.”

I tug on my wet hair and feel the burn in my scalp.

There are a million things I need to be doing tonight instead of going to bed with Blaire. I need to go over our proposal to Landry. I need to call Wade and see what he decided to do today. I need to pore over the dollars and cents and make sure I’m investing my family’s wealth in the right way.

No woman is worth losing millions of dollars over.

Period.

I can’t risk it.

My heart sinks as the water shuts off.

Just enjoy it while you can.

Blaire comes around the corner with a white towel wrapped around her body. Her hair is still wet, but towel-dried enough that it's not dripping. Her skin is flushed from the heat of the shower, and I want nothing more than to pause time.

"Hey," she says softly. "I figured you'd be asleep by now."

"I have to go downstairs and work a little bit first."

"I get that."

She walks across the room and stands in front of me. Her lips twist around as if she's trying to figure out what to say. It's only when she glances over her shoulder and then back at my bed that I realize what she's thinking.

She doesn't know where to go.

"Come up here," I tell her as I scoot back toward the headboard.

A few seconds later, she's crawling across the mattress. I stretch out and open my arms so she can curl up next to me.

She doesn't hesitate. Her body molds to mine as her head rests on my shoulder. My fingertips trickle down the length of her arm, taking in the softness of her skin.

The room is quiet. The air is humid from the shower but cool. I kick the blanket folded on the edge of the bed up and tuck it around us.

Blaire yawns. It's a quiet, sweet sound that lulls me into a state of relaxation too.

"Thank you for taking me tonight," she whispers. "It was a lot of fun."

"It was, wasn't it?"

"I'd forgotten what it was like to have fun."

Her body moves as I chuckle.

"How can you forget how to have fun?" I ask.

"I don't know. I remember doing fun things a long time ago. I guess it's been so long that I forgot how."

"That's sad, Blaire."

“I know.” She burrows closer. “But tonight was fun. That’s what matters.”

I bend my face toward her hair and breathe her in.

I know she has to leave, but I’m going to miss this.

“Your brothers remind me of mine,” she says. “Yours are better mannered. Aside from that, they’re really cut from the same cloth.”

“You mean they’re all heathens?”

She laughs. “Yes. Except Wade. I like him a lot.”

“You don’t like the others? Wait until Boone hears this.”

“That’s not what I meant. I just mean that Wade is really interesting. We had a nice conversation.”

She traces the lines on my stomach. Each stroke makes me shiver.

“I had a thought while I was in the shower,” she says cautiously.

“What’s that?”

She leans back and looks at me. “I don’t know anything about what you guys do. I want to make that clear.”

“Go on ...”

“Well, Wade was talking to me a little bit about your Landry project and how you need to maximize the revenue to justify the cost.”

I pull my brows together.

Is she actually going to talk shop with me?

“I read an article on the flight here,” she says. “It was saying how the Observation Decks create more revenue for the Empire State Building than the office space. I understand that the views won’t be the same. I mean, the Empire State Building has views of New York City. But, Wade mentioned needing an environmentally-friendly design, and I just thought that maybe you could implement something like this ...”

I stare at her. My jaw is probably dropped.

Holy shit.

“Do you think that could work?” she asks.

“Oh, absolutely.” I twist in bed so I can see her better. “You might be on to something. Depending on how we position the buildings ...” I imagine Wade’s latest set of plans. “If we move the one structure to the other side, there would be a clear view of the ocean. If we raise the building a few more stories ...”

We could use the roof space like an observation deck. Maybe even turn it into a venue for events. There’s nothing like it in Savannah.

Wow. *Why didn’t I think of this?*

Blaire lays her palm flat on my chest as she watches me think. Thoughts pour through my brain like an open faucet, and all I see are dollar signs in our pockets and my father’s smile at a job well done.

“You might have just fixed our problem, sweetheart,” I tell her.

She grins. “I hate to tell you, but it wasn’t that hard.”

I take her hand off my stomach and press it against my cock.

“Say it isn’t hard again,” I tease.

Her eyes grow wide as she palms me. “I stand corrected.”

I brush a strand of hair out of her face. “You, Miss Gibson, are the total package.”

She tries to look away, but I don’t let her. Instead, I take her chin and tug it gently toward me.

When I look into her eyes, the strangest feeling comes over me. I want to make her feel good, to know how amazing she is. I want to protect her from the assholes of the world that might try to make her feel less because *they* have low self-esteem.

I can see all kinds of things hidden in the depths of her gorgeous blue eyes. Summers in the sea. Winters in Aspen beneath the giant Christmas tree my mother sources and has

decorated before we ever show up to the ski lodge. Falls walking through the city, drinking apple cider and handing out candy on the front steps at Halloween.

I can see so much by looking in her eyes that it terrifies me.

How all of that would ever fit into my life, I don't know.

To do something well, you have to focus on it. Dedicate yourself to it. You can't expect something to have a one hundred percent result when you put in only a partial effort. Life doesn't work that way.

What would happen if Blaire and I extended this arrangement?

Would she come and go from my house freely? Would it interrupt my schedule? Would she read too much into it and end up broken?

And knowing how hurt she's been in the past by not being heard and supported, do I have the faculties to supply her with what she needs?

I don't know.

Blaire pulls away from my hand and places her cheek against my chest again. I pull her as close to me as I can.

"Are you sleepy?" I ask.

She nods.

"I do have to go downstairs for a little bit." I bend down and kiss the top of her head. "I need to call Wade and give him your ideas."

"Make sure you give me credit," she jokes.

"Of course."

She yawns. "How is your project going besides the part you needed my help with?"

I chuckle. "It's going pretty good. It's been a family affair, for sure. We've all had to put our heads together."

"If my brothers had to put their heads together, there would be bloodshed."

“Well, Coy isn’t involved, so that helps.”

I can feel her smile against me.

“I like it when we all work together,” I admit. “The camaraderie is nice.”

“When will you know if it all works out?”

“We’re waiting on confirmation, but in two or three days. Graham was going out of town this week and wasn’t sure when he was coming back.”

She swallows hard. “So about the same time as I go home?”

The words hang in the air. It’s a simple question with a simple answer. But saying it out loud feels like I’m shoving a boulder off the side of a cliff.

“I need to check with Yancy and see if she’s bought me a ticket,” she says softly.

Instead of replying, I snuggle her tighter.

Moonlight floods my room. Shadows cast across the walls and dance as the tree branches move in the breeze outside my window.

Imagining Blaire not being here in a couple of days already feels lonely.

I’m not ready for that yet.

“Hey,” I whisper, unsure if she’s asleep or awake.

“Yeah?”

I force a swallow. “I’m meeting my family at my mom’s tomorrow for brunch. Would you like to go with me?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Yes.”

She moves one of her legs across mine, locking her heel around my ankle.

“Then yes,” she says.

I kiss her head again.

I hold her in my arms and imagine the conversation I'll have with Wade. But instead of getting up and giving him a call, I fall into a deep, blissful sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Blaire

Holt needs a ceiling fan.

The air feels stagnant inside the bedroom. He cracked a window sometime during the night but closed it before he left for work this morning.

Watching him prepare for a day in the office was a treat.

If I thought watching him undress was a sight to behold, I didn't anticipate how sexy it would be to watch him dress. The way his legs and ass fill out a pair of pants is on display when he's not wearing anything else. I love the next layer—a shirt unbuttoned, hanging open. And watching him put on a tie is basically foreplay.

Goodbye kisses are now my favorite thing.

Except for the one I'll be getting in the next day or two. That one is going to suck.

“What am I going to do?” I ask Holt's bedroom.

It doesn't answer.

I pick up my phone and scroll through social media, hoping something will pop up and take my mind off Holt. Not surprisingly, nothing can hold a candle to him.

I'm in trouble. I know it. I just don't know what to do about it.

My contacts list opens with the press of a finger. I hover over Sienna's name.

“I shouldn't do this,” I tell myself as I contemplate doing it anyway. “Ugh.”

My head falls back against the pillows as I war with what to do.

The first step in this ridiculous process is admitting outright that I like Holt. *Check.*

The next step is figuring out if I can, and if I should, pursue it. *Not check.*

I groan, holding my phone in front of my face. I don't want to ask for help with this. It's stupid. Women are supposed to know how to do these things and, besides, I'm certain that not sharing my business with others is the way to go.

But still ...

I want to talk to Sienna. I'm partially embarrassed by this little fact and fight the urge to hide beneath the covers. Regardless, the idea of hearing her take on what's happening with Holt and me and hearing her opinion seems helpful.

And maybe even fun.

“Who am I these days?”

I give in and scroll to her name in my text app.

I need your help.

It takes a whole three seconds for my phone to ring. When I answer, I'm laughing.

“Were you just sitting around waiting on my call?” I ask.

“Would it be weird to say yes?”

“It would absolutely be weird.”

She laughs too. “Then no. I wasn't. I was sitting in Crank watching Walker fix a tractor through the window and hoping that a friend who's sleeping with a super-hot millionaire would call me for advice. Better?”

“Not really.”

“Figures. So, what's up?”

I chew on my nail. Because if I'm completely reinventing myself on this trip, why not add being a nail-biter to it?

“Sienna ...” I take a deep, shaky breath. “I like Holt.”

“I know.”

I scramble to a more upright position in the bed. “No, I mean, I really think I like him. I think I’m in trouble.”

“You aren’t in trouble. You’re in love.”

“What? I am not.”

I slow blink at her loose use of the l-word.

The only man I’ve ever told I loved was Jack, and I’m not sure I ever really loved him. I think we were both struggling to make it in college, and we leaned on each other. It became a co-dependent relationship. I relied on him for my identity and for approval, not for love.

Certainly not for love.

“Blaire, calm down,” Sienna says gently. “I can feel you spiraling from here.”

“I am not.”

She laughs. “You’ve said that now twice.”

“I said I liked him. Not loved him.”

“Okay. Pardon me. I shouldn’t have tossed that weapon out there like that.”

“Exactly.”

“I was kidding,” she snorts. “It’s not a weapon. It’s a positive thing.”

I roll my eyes and go back to the nail-biting again.

This isn’t helpful. I just needed to know what to do about leaving here and potentially never seeing him again.

But do I tell him that? Or do I just let things go and see what happens?

What’s a girl to do in these cases?

“You like him,” Sienna says. “This is a good start. Now, what do you need help with?”

I drop my hand. “I don’t know what to do now.”

“Oh, Blaire ...”

I sigh. “I know I sound like a child, but I’m really confused.”

“You don’t sound like a child. You just sound like a woman who hasn’t been here before. And, you know what? I’m glad you called me.”

“You are?”

“Yes! Of course. This is what friends do. This is such good progress.”

“Before you know it, we’ll be shopping together on the weekends,” I say, my tone full of sarcasm.

“Really? That would be amazing.”

“I was kidding.”

“Oh.”

I sigh again—louder this time. “Maybe I should just forget this.”

“You absolutely should *not* forget this.” A chair squeaks in the background. “So, what changed? What made you know that you want to try something with Holt?”

I consider her question. *How do I know?*

How do I put how I feel into words?

Maybe that’s the point. Maybe it’s the fact that I have feelings for Holt that’s the answer to her question.

A part of me has opened up since I got to Savannah. There’s a layer to me that I never explored. Maybe I was too scared to open up to someone after Jack. It could be that I didn’t want to access the vulnerability it takes to connect with another human while eating pizza at two in the morning. And I’ve gotten away with it.

Until now.

Holt challenges me. He makes me think about who I am and how I want to be. He pushes me and asks questions, and I like

this version of myself better than the Blaire I was when I ran into him at the airport.

Being with him doesn't feel weak. Or dangerous. I don't feel like I'm carrying a shield around all day to fend off the enemy.

I can breathe. *But how do I say that to Sienna?*

I don't know.

I don't even know what all of this means. I'm just not ready to go back to Chicago and think of this whole thing in the past tense.

"We talk like friends and kiss like lovers," I say wistfully. "It's usually one or the other."

"I understand."

"I can see myself differently around him. I see my strengths but also my weaknesses without feeling judged. I'm a better version of me." I smile to myself. "He walked into my life as if he belonged here. Imagining him not being here hurts."

Sienna sucks in a breath. "Blaire ..."

"Does that sound ridiculous?"

"No, friend. It doesn't. Not at all."

I tug the blankets back over me and nestle down in them. If I lay in Holt's bed and imagine him coming home, to me, everything feels right.

But it's trickery. And I know it.

"You need to tell him," Sienna coaxes.

It sounds so easy.

My heart constricts as I think about doing that—telling Holt that I want to explore something more with him.

"My life is in Chicago," I remind her. "I have a career there. His world is here."

"So?"

"So, isn't it practically impossible even if he agrees?"

“Nothing is impossible when it comes to lov—things like this.”

I grin at her slip-up. “I love your romanticism, but I’m still pragmatic. It’s not that easy.”

“Maybe not, but you’ll never know if you don’t try.”

What if I try ...

He could say he’s thinking the same thing and we could attempt to make a long-distance relationship work.

Or he could say it’s not in the cards for him, and he thinks it’s a disaster in the making.

The second option sends a chill ripping down my spine.

“What are you thinking?” Sienna asks.

“Just that I’m not sure what he’ll say. You know, he could say he’s not interested in trying something like this with me, and then what happens?”

“I don’t know. What do you think happens?”

I mull it over.

We’re still operating on an extended one-night stand. But it doesn’t feel like that anymore.

Not with us holding hands. And kisses to the top of my head. With me sleeping in his bed and accompanying him to family events. That’s especially true when I know he doesn’t bring random women to things like that—both his bed and events.

Surely, that means something.

I chew on my bottom lip.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Sienna asks.

“That he laughs in my face.”

“Do you really think he’d do that?”

“I hope not.”

She sighs. “You know that’s not going to happen. Take that option off the table.”

I shrug. “I guess he could just tell me I’ve seen something between us that he didn’t, and I should just go home.”

“Do you think that’s true?”

I don’t. I really don’t.

Even with my overthinking brain and paranoia, I don’t think I’m seeing something that’s not there.

His touch is too tender. His actions too considerate. His kisses too sweet.

“I’m confident that he feels the same way that I do,” I say. “There’s just too much evidence to support it.”

“We aren’t in a courtroom.” She laughs. “But go on.”

I twist my lips into a thin line as I think this through.

“He asked me to brunch this morning with his family at his parents’ house,” I say. “And I got to know his family last night at the concert.”

“Oh, my gosh! You went to Kelvin McCoy, didn’t you? Did you see Beau McCrae too?”

I laugh. “No, we missed Beau. But we did see Kelvin ... who is Holt’s brother? Did you know that?”

“Um, yeah. Everyone in Savannah knows that.”

“Well, I didn’t. Imagine my surprise when I’d gone on and on about him to Holt. I was so embarrassed.”

Sienna giggles. “That’s hilarious.”

I sit up in bed again and feel the sunlight on my shoulders. It warms the air and makes it possible to consider climbing out of bed.

“You need to lay your cards out with Holt,” Sienna says. “You can’t come back here and not know where things stand. And I think—and you do, too, that he probably feels the same way.”

I close my eyes and fight the urge to put my feelings into the universe. It’s too risky.

“You guys can take it slow,” Sienna says. “It’s not like either of you are looking to get married next month or something.”

“True ...”

Her voice softens. “Just believe in yourself and the possibility of love. I believe in you.”

“You know what?” I get out of bed. “This whole being friends thing was working out pretty well. But now you’re acting like we’re in a sappy movie, and I’m rethinking my decision to call you about this stuff.”

She laughs. “You love me.”

“Stop with the l-word. Geesh.”

Her laughter grows louder. Eventually, mine mixes with it.

The sound makes me feel full in a way I’ve never experienced. I feel supported in a way that’s new to me. Sienna likes me for who I am—my difficulties and all.

Maybe this friendship thing isn’t too bad. And maybe she’s right. Maybe I do love her.

I stretch my arms overhead and feel my muscles pull. The knots in the back of my neck from being bent onto Holt’s shoulder all night scream for me to take a hot shower.

I glance at the clock. I have time before Holt comes to pick me up for brunch.

“I gotta go,” I tell Sienna. “I need to get a shower and then get ready.”

“You go and have fun. And Blaire?”

“Yeah?”

“You can do this. Trust me.”

I grin. “Thanks ... friend.”

I know she’s smiling on the other side. It makes my grin grow wider.

“You’re welcome ... friend.”

I end the call and head to the shower.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Holt

“After you,” I say, holding the door open for Blaire.

The chaos from my parents’ house slams into us as soon as we enter. It’s the sound of home to me—family and food and fun all blended together into one crazy cacophony of the life that I love.

I watch Blaire out of the corner of my eye. This scene can be a lot to absorb, but she looks unfazed.

Larissa is in the kitchen with my mother. Steam rises from the sink as they put together a “quick brunch,” as my mom called it. It’ll be a full meal. It always is. My father and brothers sit at the dining room table off the kitchen with cups of coffee in their hands.

They greet us with waves and hellos.

Except Coy. He gets to his feet.

“Hey, Lover Boy,” Coy calls as he walks toward us. His cocky smile is tinted with just enough kindness to keep me from punching him in the face. “I thought Boone was lying when he said you brought a woman to my show last night.”

Blaire reaches for my hand. I let her take it and hope that it’s a show of solidarity between us and not to keep herself steady because of Coy.

He stops in front of us. His hair has been lightened and sticks up in a complete mess that I think is intentional. His jeans are ripped. I know Mom doesn’t understand the phrase on his shirt because she’d never allow it in her house.

It’s Coy, pure and simple. The ornery one of the bunch. The rule-bender and boundary-pusher that he’s always been.

Despite his don’t-give-a-fuck vibe and history of bad decisions, I still have a ton of respect for him. He has an innate

business sense like Oliver and me. He just uses it in a different way.

He slips his hands in his pockets and fires Blaire a grin. “I hope you liked my show.”

“It was very entertaining,” she replies. “Your fans certainly got their money’s worth.”

“Two of them did.” He wiggles his eyebrows. “Anyway, it’s nice to meet you. Good to see you, too, big brother.”

“Nice to see you too. How’s tour life?”

“Not bad. I have one more stop in Miami, and then we’re done.” He runs a hand through his hair. “It’ll be nice not to live out of a suitcase for a while.”

“Ah, rock star problems,” I joke.

His grin is cheeky. “What can I say? It’s a hard life, man.”

“When do we get to meet Willa Welch?” I ask.

Blaire looks at me. “The actress?”

“My brother somehow landed the biggest upcoming actress in Hollywood,” I tell Blaire. “Can you imagine that?”

Her cheeks flush. “Well ...”

Coy bursts out laughing. “Of course, she can. Have you seen me?”

“Yeah. I have. And I’ve also seen you put a Sparkler in your ass and light it on the Fourth of July. So, color me surprised that someone with class might want to hook up with you,” I say, much to both of their entertainment.

“I remember that!” Boone calls from the table. “I think I have it on video somewhere.”

Blaire’s giggles beside me are all I hear.

“Nah, that shit with Willa is fake,” Coy says. “She’s really dating the drummer from Wrecked. My label wanted me to clean up my image a little bit. And her agent wanted to dirty up hers. So they tell us where to be together and when. We show up, follow the script, and go on our merry way.”

“Contractual relationships. Makes a lot of sense,” Blaire says, side-eyeing me with a grin.

Coy shrugs. “I just try to keep everyone happy.”

“That’s what you said on Christmas the morning you tried to start breakfast before Mom woke up,” Wade says.

“And you about caught the kitchen on fire,” Boone says, laughing.

My brothers discuss the tales of holidays gone wrong while I just look at the woman holding my hand.

She glances up at me, ignoring the craziness around her, and smiles. It’s an easy, sweet, supportive gesture that silences any concern I had for bringing her here. I wasn’t going to ask her. Why bother introducing her to everyone when they’ll never see her again? But it didn’t feel right coming without her either.

Now that we’re here, I know I made the right call.

I don’t know what that means exactly. But I’m not going to overthink it.

“I’m sorry. I had to get that mess cleaned up, or it would’ve sat there all day.” My mother comes rushing toward us—meaning Blaire. “How rude, I know.”

“Mrs. Mason, really, it’s fine,” Blaire says, accepting a hug from my mom. “Thank you for inviting me over this afternoon.”

My mom runs a hand through the air. “First, it’s Siggy, darling. Second, you have no idea how excited I am to have you here. I’m thrilled.”

“Are you thrilled to see me too?” I ask.

Mom laughs. “You know I always love to see your sweet face.”

Blaire looks at me and makes a face. I laugh.

“Okay,” Mom says. “Come. Sit. Let’s eat.” She turns toward the dining room table. “Come make your plate, boys. I’m your mother, not your servant.”

Chairs push back against the tile as my family makes their way into the kitchen. Coy and Boone tease Larissa about something that earns them a smack from Mom.

“Holton, how is the Landry project coming along?” Dad asks, joining Blaire and me near the sofa. “Oliver was just saying that you had an epiphany last night.”

I look down at Blaire and smile. “I didn’t. She did.”

Dad’s brows shoot toward the ceiling. “Is that right?”

“It was nothing,” Blaire says, beaming. “I had just read an article that gave me an idea. I’m glad it worked out.”

“Worked out? It’s fucking brilliant!” Oliver shouts from the kitchen. “And Holt didn’t tell me it was your idea.”

Blaire gasps in faux shock.

“I did too,” I fire back.

Oliver just chuckles and goes back to making his plate.

The ice cubes in my father’s drink clink together as he examines Blaire. “Do you have any other brilliant insights to share on easements? Because I’m having a legal dispute with my neighbor to the right.”

Blaire’s eyes light up. “I don’t know. Try me.”

“Holt! Can you help me with this?” My mom shouts from the kitchen.

I look down at Blaire. I don’t want to leave her here if she’s uncomfortable, considering she’s spent exactly thirty seconds with my father. But the shine in her eye and the wide grin on her face tell me she’s perfectly happy talking legal bullshit with Dad.

“Go on,” she says. “This is my wheelhouse.”

“Good luck to you. Dad will talk your ear off,” I say, earning a clap on the back from my father.

I make my way into the kitchen, slipping in a quick hug from Larissa as I walk by. She jabs me in the ribs in an apparent ode to Blaire coming to a family event again, but I ignore it.

My mother points at a box on the top shelf. “Can you grab that?”

“You couldn’t have one of these assholes get it?”

“They’re filling their plates,” she says. “Besides, I wanted to talk to you.”

I know. I knew it when she pretended to need my help.

The cereal box that has nothing to do with brunch is retrieved from its spot next to the crackers. I hand it to my mom.

“She’s lovely,” Mom whispers. “She’s so, so lovely, Holton.”

“*She’s lovely,*” Boone whispers sarcastically as he walks by.

I glare at him. He laughs.

“Should I get used to seeing her around?” Mom asks. “We’re having the Champagne and Crudites event at the Country Club next week, and I’d love to invite her.”

I glance at Blaire over my shoulder. She’s engaged in a conversation with my father, who looks captivated by her.

I get it, Dad. Me too.

“She’s going back to Chicago in a couple of days,” I say before turning around to face my mother again.

She looks confused. “To get her things? To see her family?”

“To work.” I blow out a breath “She’s ... She doesn’t live here. And she’s not going to. Her life is in Illinois.”

“But I thought ...”

Oliver approaches us from the table. He looks between my mom and me.

“Hey, I need to talk to you for a second,” he tells me, motioning toward the hallway.

“We *will* reconvene this conversation later,” Mom warns.

I roll my eyes and follow Oliver into the hallway next to the dining room.

My back hits the wall as I exhale all the stress that was just heaped on my shoulders.

“I figured you needed a reprieve from that bullshit,” Oliver says.

“Thanks.”

I run my hand through my hair as I hear my mother calling Dad and Blaire to the kitchen. It sounds so normal and something I could totally get used to ... in a perfect world.

One we don't live in.

“You've gotten yourself in deep with all of this Blaire stuff,” Oliver says quietly. “I know it. But you're going to have to block out Mom and Dad and whatever else and focus. I need you, bud.”

I blow out another breath.

“I know. I'm here. I promise,” I tell him.

He leans against the wall next to me. We stare out the windows and into the front yard. The ferns my mother hangs off the porch every year sway in the breeze.

“You can do both things, you know,” Oliver says.

“What two things?”

“You can work and have a relationship.”

My head hits the drywall.

I can't have both. I can't have both for so many reasons.

“She's going home soon, right?” he asks.

I nod.

“Do you know where you stand with her?” he asks.

“Yeah. She's going home.”

The words fall flat into the air.

Oliver sighs. “Is she going home because she wants to? Or because you didn't give her the choice?”

I roll my head to the side and look at my brother. “Are you a relationship expert now?”

“No, but I don’t have my head clouded by Blaire’s pussy either.”

I groan.

He’s right. Of course. And I hate that he’s right this time more than ever.

My head *is* clouded. I do feel pulled. Two things I hate even more than Ollie being right.

“Listen, I—” I begin, but Oliver’s chuckle stops me. “What?”

“You’re getting ready to talk in a circle and give me a bunch of excuses as to why you can’t do what you want.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m not fucking you when she leaves.” He turns his body so we’re facing head-on. “Because she’s gonna leave you, Holt. Are you ready for that? If you think you’re distracted now, think about what that’s gonna be like.”

My blood boils from the tone of his voice and the words spilling from his mouth.

“She has to leave me.”

“Oh, wise one. Please explain.”

“You know how our lives work,” I tell him. “I need to be in the office for twelve fucking hours a day. Sometimes, fourteen. Fuck, isn’t that why you just pulled me in here? Your first words were that you need me to focus.”

“Yes, but—”

“Then fuck you, Ollie.”

I blow out a breath that’s red-hot. My brother’s features darken as he takes the start of my wrath.

“I have to be ready for her to leave because she’s going to,” I say. “And she should.”

“How can you say that?”

“How can you say anything differently? You don’t know the ins and outs of our relationship.”

“But you’re admitting you have a relationship, right?”

I roll my head around my neck. The bones pop from stress.

He doesn’t understand that being with me will kill her. It will ruin her life. If she thought Jack didn’t have time for her, she’d end up hating me.

I’d rather have her and the sweet memories from this week than have her loathe me in the future. And there’s no way at all that I will risk causing her pain by not being the man she needs—the available, present, considerate one.

Not even if it’s what I want to do.

My chest heaves a breath to keep from cracking apart.

“Look,” Oliver says, “I’m letting you know what I see. And I’ve seen you walk around with this frivolity that’s nice to see. You’ve eased up. You came today without a fight.”

“Because Coy is here.”

Oliver looks unconvinced. “Do you realize you had a ten-minute conversation with Boone last night about Christmas in Aspen?” He grins. “You refuse to discuss the holidays until at least Halloween.”

He’s right. A-fucking-gain. But it doesn’t change anything.

How I feel doesn’t change what I know to be true—I cannot be what Blaire needs. She’s already been let down by one guy who couldn’t be there for her. I don’t want to be the same.

I won’t.

It’s as simple as that.

It’s as frustratingly, heartbreakingly simple as that.

I sigh. “Where do you think I’ll find the time to take care of someone’s emotional needs?”

“She’s not a fucking dog, Holt.”

“No. She’s a human being who needs support and time and energy. She deserves that. And unfortunately for all of us, I don’t have that to spare.”

He sighs, seemingly as frustrated as I am. “I get it. I do. I just ... I like what she’s done to you. And she seems like a pretty great girl.”

“Yeah, well, she is.”

He frowns.

Doesn't he understand that I want to make things work? Doesn't he realize how hard it's going to be to watch her pack her things and pull out of my driveway?

Doesn't he know I'll think of her every evening when I come home from work and miss the fuck out of her? Doesn't he know that I'll never be able to see a horse and carriage and not be reminded of the beautiful woman who gave me a piece of her life?

But that’s all I get. A piece of her life. Because if I ask for more, I’ll ruin her.

“Holton! Oliver! Let’s eat,” Mom calls from the dining room.

Oliver watches me, giving me one final chance to correct myself.

But I don’t.

“Coming,” I say, walking around him.

Blaire is standing next to the wall with her hands on the back of a chair. Two plates of food sit in front of her.

She turns to face me, and I stop in my tracks.

There’s a hurricane building in her blue eyes.

What's this all about? Who said something to cause this?

“Take your seats, kids,” Dad orders.

I pull out Blaire’s chair, and she sits. I take mine beside her.

Before I can ask her what’s wrong, Dad has us bowing our heads to pray.

I take her hand beneath the table and give it a squeeze. I also add a little line to the prayer for God to help Blaire and me figure this out.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Blaire

Trees whip by the windows as Holt flies down the highway.

I sit, buckled in, and try to summon the shield I use in court when things get emotional. It's never too far away, and I can always find it when I need it. Yancy says it's probably an indicator that I'm emotionally detached, but I quite like the ability.

When it works.

It turns out, it's easier to do when Holt isn't involved.

He pilots the car onto an exit ramp and winds us through town. It's a quiet ride, just like brunch.

The absence of communication between us probably wasn't evident to anyone but us. The stories and laughter from the family made up for the silence between Holt and me.

The tires hit Cobblestone Way, and our speed slows. I remember coming down this street for the first time a few days ago. I was so confident that I could control this situation.

What was I thinking?

Now I'm going to pay the price, and it's my own damn fault.

A lump settles in my throat as Holt's words filter through my mind.

"She's a human being who needs support and time and energy. She deserves that. And unfortunately for all of us, I don't have that to spare."

I didn't mean to hear it. I was just going to tell him and Oliver to come to eat at their mother's request. But his voice hit my ears before my feet could hit the doorway, and I backed away.

My lips part as I try to drag more oxygen into my lungs.

I need to calm down.

Naturally, as if he knows I need consoling, he chooses this moment to place a hand on my knee. I want to push it away. I want to tell him that despite what he said to Oliver, I'm not needy.

His hand remains on my leg because I don't have the strength to remove it.

"You're awfully quiet," he says.

I hum in agreement instead of using words.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I nod, tearing my eyes away from his hand and staring out the window instead.

"I'm fine. Just a bit overwhelmed," I say.

It's not a lie. I am overwhelmed. Just not like he'll assume I am.

The sound of our voices stirs up my emotions again, and I feel the unwanted sting of tears. So many emotions flood through me.

I'm embarrassed that I was going to talk to him tonight about meeting up in a few weeks. There's anger with myself for not sticking to my guns when I told him I didn't want to go to dinner that first night. And there's so much freaking pain from knowing that I told Holt about my ugliest moments and now he's decided he's walking away.

Even though that was always the plan—for me to leave—it still feels like he urged me to open up, to be vulnerable, and then he assessed my emotions and bailed.

Like Jack.

He took my greatest weakness and turned it against me.

I laugh quietly at the irony. The sound surprises me. I feel Holt move around in his seat, but I don't look at him.

We pull through the gate at the end of his driveway. The sun is high in the sky, welcoming us with its full rays. It feels good

on my skin and helps dissolve the water droplets gathering in the corners of my eyes.

The car rolls to a stop in front of his house. I grip the door handle.

“I have to head to the office,” he says.

“I know.”

Please want to talk to me. Please care.

“I have a meeting in a couple of hours with an investor that Boone set up. I don’t know how long it will last,” he says.

I turn and look at him over my shoulder. He’s so handsome despite the lines around the corners of his eyes and the bags beneath them. And I realize the truth of the situation: there’s no room for me in his life.

My heart cracks in my chest.

“I understand,” I tell him.

He bites his lip. “I’ll be home late.”

And I’ll be gone.

I have to leave. I have to do it now before my emotions get any more volatile. I was a fool to have let it get this far. Letting it continue would be insanity.

My lips tremble as I lean over and press a kiss to his cheek. This will be the last time I feel his skin against mine and smell the warmth of his cologne. I want to cling to this moment and relish every bit of comfort I can find because as soon as this moment is over, I’ll never have it back.

It will be as close as I’ll ever get to love.

It hurts too damn much.

“Good luck,” I say, hoping he doesn’t hear the frog in my throat. I open the door and hurry out of the car. By the time the door shuts, I’m already on the steps.

I don’t look back. Whether it’s my subconscious telling me to keep going forward or simply because I don’t want to torture myself anymore—and that’s what I’d be doing if I look back

—I'm not sure. But I press on and open the door using the code on the keypad and slip inside the house.

Cool air kisses my cheeks, making the drips of my tears cold.

I slide my back against the wall of the foyer—the same wall Holt held me against after the concert.

I was different then. Full of hope. Teased with the taste of having someone who thought I was worth their most valuable commodity: time.

I was fucking stupid.

Tears fall steadily down my face as I look around Holt's home.

“I'll be honest—I didn't really think you being here all the way through before inviting you.”

My hands are smeared black from mascara as I wipe my face. It's a physical show of what a mess I am. I turn to go up the stairs when the front door opens.

My head spins to the right, and my breath catches in my throat.

Holt stands in the doorway.

He slides his sunglasses off his face and takes in the sight before him.

Shit.

“Blaire ...”

I lift my chin and straighten my shoulders. I give him my best unaffected smile.

Clearly, my cheeks are stained with mascara, and my lips are swollen like they always are when I'm upset. But I pretend none of that exists.

“What's going on?” he asks carefully, silencing his phone as it rings in his hand.

“I'm just getting ready to take a bath.”

He furrows his brow. “That wasn't what I was asking, and you know it.”

“Did you forget something?”

My heart pounds in my chest as I feel my way through this conversation. I thought I’d have a better handle on myself before I had to speak about this whole mess.

Who am I kidding? I’d hoped to be gone and never have to talk about it at all.

Concern sweeps across his features.

“Cut the crap, Blaire. What’s going on?”

“I’m fine. Things just got the best of me today.”

He steps farther inside the house and closes the door behind him. The latch is loud and crisp.

I start up the steps as though I didn’t just get caught on the cusp of breaking down.

“Blaire. Stop.”

His tone is rough; the edges of his words bristling with irritation. It’s not at all the tenderness I’d hoped to hear. But what it does do is confirm what I overheard at his parents’ house.

He has no intention of giving me any piece of his life.

I’m a distraction to his work, a needy woman who demands too much of his time. And now, after seeing me cry, he’ll think I’m an emotional train wreck just like Jack said too.

I will never, ever share my emotions with a man again.

I place a hand on the rail but don’t move again. Instead, I stand there and gaze up at the landing and wish I’d have gone straight to pack my suitcase instead of stopping in the foyer.

“I need you to go to the office,” I tell him. My words are muddled through the constriction in my throat.

Speaking is hard. My chest burns. A bubble of emotions sits at the base of my throat, and I don’t know what to do with them.

“I don’t want to go to the office,” he says slowly. “I want to talk to you.”

“You shouldn’t have come back.”

“I never left.”

Against my best interests, I turn my head. He’s standing in the middle of the room, framed by the elaborate door behind him. There’s a war happening in his bright green eyes.

“I don’t have time to do this with you right now and get to the office before the investors show up,” he says, blowing out a breath. He looks down as his phone rings again. The lines in his forehead deepen. “I’m worried about you. Will you just talk to me?”

“There’s not a lot to talk about. I got a text from Yancy, and the building is open again,” I tell him. “I’m going to catch a flight tonight.”

He runs a hand down his face. “I have a ton of shit on my plate right now. But I want to talk to you, and I don’t want to leave if you’re upset.”

“I’m fine, Holt.”

It’s a lie. Maybe the biggest lie I’ve ever told because I’m not all right.

My heart is broken. My confidence is wounded. My soul hurts from having been led to paradise but being forbidden to enter.

His phone breaks the silence with its shrill ring. Again. He looks down at the screen and glares as he silences it.

“You better go,” I tell him. *So I can go.*

He sighs. “I can’t do this right now, Blaire. I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t ask you to do anything. As a matter of fact, I asked you to leave. Multiple times.”

“No, but you’re a guest in my house, and I want to make sure you’re okay.”

The way he says *guest in my house* sends a rush of cold water through my veins.

What does that even mean? Does it mean while I thought we were forging an emotional connection that he was just toying with me in his free time?

What the fuck?

My jaw sets. “Well, on that note, I’m sorry for being such a distraction and taking up so much of your energy. I’m aware you don’t have any to spare.”

His eyes light up as he puts two-and-two together.

There’s no need to confirm his suspicions. He knows I heard him and Oliver.

“Fuck,” he says under his breath.

“It doesn’t matter,” I tell him. “I’m leaving anyway.”

“Don’t say it like that,” he says.

“Like what?” I swallow hard. “Like you said it?”

I bite my lip as a form of self-protection. I don’t want to cry in front of him any more than I already have. I don’t want to get angry. I want to remain as calm as I can and then extricate myself from this situation.

Hopefully, in one piece.

“That was all ...” He looks at the ceiling. His nostrils flare as he pushes out a hasty breath. “That wasn’t for you to hear.”

“Trust me. I didn’t want to hear it.”

His shoulders fall. “Let me explain.”

“You have explained enough.” I fight the tickle in my nose that comes before tears. “I know I’m a time suck and—”

“Blaire.”

“And my emotions are such a burden. It’s been said before,” I say through the rivers streaming down my face.

He starts toward me, but I hold up a hand.

“What do you want me to do?” he asks, holding his arms out the sides. His phone rings again in his right hand.

“I don’t want you to do anything.”

“No. Clearly, you do. What is it? Do you want me to cancel this meeting? It’s for a project I’ve worked on for months. My family and multitudes of other families who work for us all

depend on me. Do you have any idea what that pressure is like?”

“Nope. I just keep people from going to prison for their entire lives when they’re innocent. I have no idea about pressure. Talk to me about it.”

He stares at me as though he’s unsure what to say.

I raise a brow. “Okay. I’ll be honest. You know what I wanted from you? I wanted you to want me, okay?”

My words crack. I grab the railing with all my might.

Holt’s phone rings *again*. “We don’t have time for this conversation.”

“Of course, we don’t.”

“Dammit, Blaire. I’m trying here. I can’t be everything to everyone. I’ve been telling you that all along. It’s why I don’t bring people here. It’s why I don’t have relationships because this shit happens, and I have to let someone down.”

I get it. He’s right. He has to let someone down. But I would’ve been happy to wait for him to come home later and have a conversation about our future.

Except he doesn’t want one.

“It’s clear that you’re not going to be anything to me and my emotional baggage,” I say.

“Can we just do this later? Please,” he asks as his phone buzzes in his hand. His nostrils flare as he presses the button to silence the noise. “I cannot manage all of this right now.”

“Again, I didn’t ask you to stay. As a matter of fact,” I say, feeling a surge of energy pass through my body, “I didn’t ask for any of this. *Any of it*. You asked for my number. You pressed me into dinner. You invited me to your home, and you took me to meet your family. And you asked me, implored me to share my feelings with you. That’s all on you, Holt. Every bit of it.”

The words strengthen my resolve. The pain turns to anger as I peer down at him from my perch.

“If you didn’t want me to fall in love with you, then you shouldn’t have ...” My voice trails off as I realize what I’ve said.

Holt’s eyes go wide.

“I didn’t realize ...” He starts toward me but stops. “I didn’t ... *Oh, fuck.*”

“Yeah. Well, now you know.”

He glances so quickly at his watch that I would’ve missed it if I wasn’t paying acute attention.

“Just go on,” I tell him.

“This conversation isn’t over.”

Tears sting my eyes again. “I think it is.”

He throws his hands up and growls into the air.

I can feel his frustration rippling through the room. I want to tell him we’ll talk about this later.

But we won’t. Because there’s nothing left to be said.

Even if there was, I wouldn’t begin to share it with him now.

“It’s fine,” I tell him, my voice softer. “And if it makes you feel any better, I don’t think you ever lied to me. I just ... hoped.”

His body stills in the doorway. He worries his bottom lip between his teeth as he watches me with an expression I can’t name.

“I’m sorry, Blaire. Just ... tell me you’ll be here when I get back. *Please.*”

He backs away slowly. My heart breaks as I accept his final answer. Whether he wants to admit it or not, this is over.

Maybe it never started.

I’ve never felt smaller. I’ve never felt as vulnerable and raw as I do standing in front of this man.

It won’t happen again.

“Please be here when I get back,” he repeats.

I know he needs to go, and that his decision has already been made, so I nod.

I only hold back the tears long enough for the door to close behind him.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Holt

Every muscle in my whole fucking body hurts.

I loosen my tie as I speed too fast down Cobblestone Way.

Blaire hasn't answered my calls or texts all day. It's unusual for her, and despite knowing that she's pissed at me—rightfully so—I'm surprised. I almost sent Larissa to my house to make sure she didn't leave, but I don't really think she would've.

She said she loves me. She couldn't leave after that. *Could she?*

I shiver as a chill blasts through my body.

I step harder on the gas pedal.

I'd hoped some time apart could give us some space to figure this shit out. How it got so convoluted, I'll never know.

That's what I tell myself, anyway.

It got convoluted the moment I saw her.

I slow down for a man on a bike. He gives me a wave, and I wave back. He seems so carefree as he pedals down our street and enjoys the evening sun, and it pisses a part of me off.

Why does he get to enjoy his night when I don't?

“Because you're a fucking idiot,” I say aloud.

I don't know how our conversation will go when I get home. I also don't know how much of my chat with Oliver she heard. But what I do know is that I need her to understand the context. I need her to know why I said those things—because I don't want to hurt her.

Which I inadvertently already did.

I slam my palm against the steering wheel.

My stomach twists as I think about her overhearing any of what I said to my brother. I can't even remember all of what was verbalized in the hallway. I only know that I made it clear that I can't be what Blaire needs.

And that remains true.

"If you didn't want me to fall in love with you ..."

Surely, she didn't mean that. She couldn't have. Blaire Gibson wouldn't fall in love with a guy like me—a man so busy in his own life that he can't take care of hers.

She has to know she deserves better. *How could she not realize how special she is? How could she not demand more for herself?* She needs someone who won't walk out on her like Jack.

And like me.

A bubble of rage fills my stomach as I acknowledge what I've done.

I left her when she needed me. And whether I had something else to do or not, I shouldn't have done that. I don't know what my options were, but I should've figured something out. There were too many irons in the fire, too many people calling. Too much to handle all at the same time.

I grip the steering wheel.

My phone rings through my car, and I answer it without looking to see who it is.

"Hello?" I say.

"Just heard from Graham Landry," Oliver says. "Tomorrow morning at ten. We're heading to their offices. He wants our final offer."

I've waited for this day for weeks. It should feel like a milestone getting to the finish line.

I sigh.

Oliver, Wade, Boone, and I killed it today. Even though I was distracted as fuck, I was able to promise myself I'd have time to make things right with Blaire later and focus. We filled

every potential hole, came up with a viable solution to every argument Landry could make, and secured an investor who will make things much smoother.

Every time my brain flipped to her, I told myself to set it to the side until I got home. Then she gets my undivided attention, and we can figure this out.

“We’re ready,” I say to Oliver, removing my tie altogether and tossing it onto the passenger’s seat. “I feel really good about this.”

“The deck area Wade added in from Blaire’s suggestion is the feather in our cap.”

“Yeah.”

“Landry will love that. And so will we in the long run.”

“For sure.” I work my neck back and forth. “I’ll be in the office early. Around four thirty in the morning. Maybe five. If you want to come in and do a last-minute run-through, I’ll be there.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

My house approaches. With every inch I get closer, the harder my heart pounds.

“I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later, Ollie.”

“Hey, real quick.” Ollie takes a deep breath. “I’ve not brought up the whole thing at Mom’s because I can tell you’re dealing with something else. But I want you to know that I always have your back. And I’m sorry if I pissed you off. I just want what’s best for you, Holt.”

I slump in my seat. I didn’t know I needed to hear that today, but I did. It’s apparent.

“Thanks, Ollie. I ... It’s been a day.”

“And we can hash it out whenever you’re ready. Or not.”

I grin. “Thanks, brother.”

“Anytime.”

“Bye.”

I end the call and turn sharply into my driveway. As I fly toward the house, I scan the area for Blaire's rental car.

It's gone.

Shit.

My car barely comes to a stop before I jump out. I leave the door wide open as I jog up the stairs, punch the keycode in, and step inside the foyer.

I can still see Blaire standing on the stairs with those tragic black streaks running down her face.

My heart squeezes so tight that I brace my chest with my hand.

She's gone.

I don't have to go to the guest room to see if her suitcase is there to know it isn't.

It's as if the house itself knows she's left and is mourning. The sun fails to stream in the windows and is instead disturbed by a host of clouds. The usual warmth of the space has faded into a tempered blur.

I walk the hallway to the kitchen. Her laughter fills my mind as I pass by Coy's painting that hangs on the wall.

I pour myself a drink and sit at the kitchen island. The room feels bigger than I've ever noticed before. I wonder why I ever wanted a house this big just for me. There was a reason. I just can't remember it.

There's a hollowness in my chest that I can't escape. No rationalization or excuses will make the void disappear.

I fucked her over, even if I didn't mean to.

Just like I did Kendra.

And just like Jack did her.

The bourbon bites at my throat as I drink. I welcome the burn.

"If you didn't want me to fall in love with you ..."

Her words keep coming back to me. It hurts a little more each time.

Many women have told me they loved me over the course of my life, but I never felt like any of them actually did. They might have been infatuated with me or in lust with me, but none of them loved me. Not really.

But none of them said it like Blaire, either.

It wasn't moaned in the heat of passion. It wasn't armed as a weapon. It wasn't used in an attempt to manipulate me into doing something.

She said it from a place deep inside her. It didn't give her joy to say it. It caused her pain.

It caused her pain because I didn't say it back.

I tip up my glass and take another long swallow.

My phone rings on the counter. I plan to let it go to voicemail, but my curiosity gets the best of me, and I glance at the screen.

"Hey, Riss," I say, my voice slower and heavier than usual.

She sighs. "It's as bad as he said, huh?"

"Who?"

"Ollie."

I take another drink. The ice cubes clink in the glass.

"Are you drinking?" she asks.

"Yup."

"Oh. Grand. This should be fun."

I chuckle. "What do you want, you little pain in my ass?"

"I want to offer my services."

"Um ..."

"Oh, no! Not like that. Ew. Gross. No. Forget I said that." She gags on the other end for my amusement. "What I meant was that I'm calling to see if you need a female brain to help make your man brain work."

"My man brain works just fine, thank you very much."

"Eh," she says. "I'm voting no on that."

I stand and head to the counter. The bourbon is still sitting next to the ticket stubs from Coy's concert and the gummy bear wrapper Blaire finished off last night.

I pick up the tickets and hold them in my hands.

I'm taken back to that night with Blaire and my family. I was so nervous about taking her around my brothers. Every time I pictured it in my head, they'd say something stupid, and she'd be offended. Or she'd realize my mother has been trying to marry me off for the past ten years and bail. But then I realized I didn't want to go without her.

I was so damn proud to be there with her, to show her off to my parents and brothers. And not because she was some kind of physical trophy, although she was a knockout in that tight black shirt, but because she was classy and smart. And just for that night, she was mine.

She was there with me as a man she met in the airport. She didn't give a shit about my money or what my last name means here or that Coy was my brother—hell, she didn't even know. She was just attending an event with a guy who she deemed worthy of being with.

Me.

My spirits fall.

“Okay, so, Oliver said that you're all messed up today. Wanna talk about it?” Riss asks.

“No, I don't wanna talk about it. I want to go drink some more and try to forget it.”

“Big mistake, buddy.”

“It was a big mistake to answer your call.”

I pour myself a drink and wonder if I can hang up on her. I don't because she'd just show up at my house and let herself in.

She's done it before.

“Blaire left,” I say.

It comes out harsh and cold, but I don't know how to make it sound less blunt.

Riss sucks in a deep breath that doesn't go unnoticed by me. "Well, this puts things in perspective."

"Yeah."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

It's a lie. I'm not fine. But I don't know what else to say. Do I admit I'm the fucking disaster I feel like I am? That won't help anyone.

"Sometimes, it's easier to pretend that you don't care than to admit that you're dying inside," she says.

"That's poetic."

She sighs. "Well, I guess I see why Blaire left now."

"Oh, do you?"

"Yes. You're an asshole."

"True enough." I take a long drink before smacking my lips together. "Is that all you called for?"

"Sure. That's it. Good luck recovering from this one."

I lean against the counter and shake my head. "This will go away. I just need to put some time and distance between Blaire and me."

"Sorry to break it to you, but real feelings don't go away."

"You're on fire tonight with the inspirational bullshit."

"Just here to help."

"Well, you're not."

I walk to the window and look out at the pool. Blaire's favorite chair sits empty. All that remains from her time sitting out there is a bright red hair elastic on the deck.

It takes everything I have not to go get it.

I turn away. I can't look at it.

“Let me ask you something,” I say to my cousin. “What is love?”

She laughs.

“Forget it,” I say.

“No! No, no, no. I just didn’t expect that.”

“What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. Maybe that you were going to ask me why you should go get her? I was totally ready to convince you. I had a speech queued up and ready to go.”

I grin. “I’m not going after her.”

“May I ask why not?”

I down the rest of my drink before answering her.

“I don’t have the energy to fight at work and fight when I get home, Riss. I can’t afford to chase her down—especially when I have so much shit happening right now.” I set the glass on the counter. “And you know what? She needs someone who can spend the weekends walking around town with her and not feel guilty. She deserves someone who can have a fucking conversation without their phone going off fourteen times. That someone is not me.”

“But you asked her to stay, right?”

My silence speaks for itself.

“Holt ...”

“She has a full life in Chicago. I have a full life here. We both are so busy that it would never work anyway, even if it were a good idea.”

“I’m assuming you got her opinion on the matter. Right?”

“She’ll agree once she gets home and thinks about it.”

She groans. “I could kill you right now.”

“For being kind? Thoughtful? Mature? Okay.”

“For being a fucking idiot. How can someone so brilliant be so dense at the same time?”

The alcohol begins to do its job. My veins pulse with an unnatural warmth. My head fogs with a welcomed haze. I'm still well aware that Blaire is gone and that I'm a well-intentioned asshole, but the sharpness of the pain is muted.

Thank God.

"Tell you what," I tell her. "I'll try to call her again. If she doesn't answer, I'll assume that's her way of telling me to go fuck myself. And if that's the case, I'll agree with her methodology."

"Please, Holt—please think about this before you make it worse."

I laugh sadly. "How worse could it get? She's gone."

"Because you let her go."

"Because I had to."

I eye the bottle of bourbon again.

"I gotta go, Riss. Thanks for calling and checking on me."

She sighs. "You're welcome. Just ... remember that it's okay to be happy. It's not a character flaw."

"Sure. Talk to you later."

"Goodbye."

I end the call and pour myself another drink.

Chapter Thirty

Blaire

My apartment is so cold.

I shiver as I pull the shades down over the windows. The thermostat says that it's not as frigid as it feels, so I wonder if the chill is somehow coming from me.

By a stroke of luck, Yancy texted me as soon as my plane landed. The Grimrose Building was open again, and I could go back home. It was like the universe took pity on my poor self and couldn't stand to watch me struggle anymore.

My face is swollen from crying for the past three hours. As soon as I walked through the door, I started crying and couldn't stop.

I'm sure Sienna thinks I'm a complete lunatic because she called in the middle of it. It was all I could do to reassure her that I was fine.

I just wish that I felt reassured too.

My stomach growls, but the idea of food makes me want to hurl. I want to crawl in Holt's bed, under one of his strong arms, and listen to him tell me about his day.

I wince as the fibers in my heart rip even further apart.

"It was never meant to be," I tell myself.

Maybe not, but it feels like it was.

No matter what affirmation or sentence of strength I say aloud, it doesn't resonate inside my brain. My inner monologue is much different and just as insistent.

I flop down on the couch and look at my phone. He's called me three times tonight.

I close my eyes and hear his sweet, Southern voice saying my name. His smile is imprinted in my mind for the rest of time.

My skin tingles as I remember the heat of his touch.

Even if it was all in my imagination, I liked it. And I'll treasure it for the rest of time because I'm not answering his calls. I'm not listening to his voice messages. There's no need for him to try to explain why he doesn't want me.

A knock raps on my door.

My heartbeat quickens as I get to my feet. I'm too nervous to ask who it is.

Before I can get across the room, I hear Sienna's voice from the other side.

"Blaire? It's Sienna. Open up."

I flip the lock and open the door. My brother's girlfriend is standing on the other side with a bag in each hand. Her eyes are filled with concern.

"Hey," she says softly.

I try to speak but end up opening my mouth and making a sound that's half-laugh and half-sigh.

Sienna steps into my apartment and places the bags on the floor. She then pulls me into the biggest hug.

I'm taken aback at first. Sienna and I have never hugged. But as she holds me tight and fills me with good energy, I find myself hugging her back.

Finally, she pulls away.

"It took all of this to get me an invitation to your apartment," she jokes.

"I would've invited you without having to endure all of this." I walk toward the living room. "Come on in."

"I brought things."

"What kind of things?" I ask, sitting on the sofa again.

She sits next to me and places the bags on the coffee table. She reaches inside and pulls out a bottle of wine, a giant bar of chocolate, and a bag of microwave popcorn.

“If I failed to be clear, this isn’t a slumber party,” I tell her, laughing. “I have to wallow tonight. I must *feel to heal*.”

“What the heck is that? *Feel to heal*.”

“It’s a thing I learned in therapy.”

She rolls her eyes. “Well, no worries about this being a slumber party. If I tried to stay here, Walker would come and get me. Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if he showed up anyway.”

I fall back into the pillows and fake cry. “Does he know about Holt?”

“I tried super hard not to tell him anything. I told him it was your business and your story to tell—or not. But you know how he can be.”

I stick out my bottom lip. “Is he on a plane to Savannah right now?”

“He probably would’ve been if I hadn’t taken his credit card.” She winks. “But no, really, he’s worried about you. He wants you to call him.”

“I’ll get right on that.”

She laughs. “Do you want some wine?”

“Only if you’re going to pour it.”

She looks around my apartment. “Is the kitchen through there?”

I nod, and she gets up and disappears around the corner.

My chest feels like there’s a hole where my heart used to be. It’s like someone used a spoon to scoop out my organ and throw it away.

I close my eyes and imagine how long it might take me to feel better again. *Days? Weeks? Months?*

Ever?

Sienna reappears with two coffee mugs. She shrugs. “It was all I could find.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I actually have wine glasses.”

She sits down and looks at me like I'm crazy.

"What?" I ask, watching her open the bottle. "I don't drink a ton. I have to stay sober to keep people out of prison."

She hands me a glass of a deep, burgundy-colored drink. "That's so noble of you."

"I'll be able to tell my nieces and nephews one day that I was an honorable, noble woman until I met this guy on vacation, and he ruined my life."

She shakes her head. "You know, you're much more dramatic than I would've guessed."

"I don't know why you're surprised. I am Lance's sister."

We both laugh.

I take a sip of my wine and then rest my head on the pillows again. It feels good to have some distance between Holt and me. It's easier to process.

It's easier, too, having Sienna here.

I look at her and smile. "Thanks."

"For what?" She curls her legs up under her. "For the wine? Don't thank me. Thank Machlan. I took it from his bar."

It feels good to smile. I was afraid I wouldn't smile again for a long time.

"Thank you for coming all the way up here," I tell her. "You didn't have to do that."

"No. I did."

"You could've called me from home. Or met me for lunch tomorrow."

She sets her glass down. "You still don't get it."

"Get what?"

"Blaire, *we're friends*. If you need me, I'm going to be there. I would've flown to Savannah if you needed me ... although Walker probably would've come, and I'm one hundred percent sure that he could take Holt with one punch."

She makes a face that makes me laugh.

“I was this close to sending my sister, Camilla, over to check on you,” Sienna says. “I was afraid that would freak you out, though.”

“Yeah. That might’ve been awkward.”

Sienna smiles. “You’d love Cam.”

I start to say that maybe I’ll meet her one day, but I stop myself.

I’m never setting foot in Savannah again.

Sienna stretches her arms over her head and sighs. I know she’s giving me space and avoiding the elephant in the room, but the longer we go without addressing it, the more my anxiety about the whole thing increases.

I take a deep breath. “I’m proud of myself.”

It’s an odd thing to blurt out, and it catches Sienna off guard. She drops her hands to the sofa slowly.

“Today was awful and, at times, humiliating. But I didn’t crumple. I chose to leave because it was the best choice for me—and what he really wanted, anyway. But I made that decision, and it’s not something I’ve always been able to do in my personal life. I’m proud of that.”

“I’m happy for you,” she says carefully.

“I mean it.” I scoot to a more upright position. “Today was a really hard day.”

I feel my throat tighten again as if it’s begging me not to talk anymore. But Sienna has been with me through the whole thing, and I want her to know how it ended.

We’re friends, after all.

“I went with Holt to his parents for brunch this morning.” I shake my head. “I can’t believe that was this morning.”

“How’d it go?”

“Really good and really terrible.”

My breathing stays even as I mentally replay walking into the Mason's home.

"His family is wonderful," I say. "I met Coy in person. He's a train wreck."

"But so hot."

"He's pretty cute," I say with a grin. "Then I had the best chat with Rodney about a legal issue. And Siggy is just ... she reminds me of my mom. Well, if my mom wore pearls."

Sienna grins but doesn't say anything.

"But, um ..." I force a swallow. "Siggy asked me to get Holt and Oliver from the other room. And when I went to do that, I overheard them talking. I wasn't eavesdropping," I hurry to add. "I just heard it before I could not hear it, if that makes any sense."

"It does. Especially if there are all kinds of noise floating around, and you're hyper-focused on one person's voice."

I nod. "Anyway, Holt was telling Oliver that he didn't have the energy or time to really deal with me. That's not what he said verbatim but close enough. That was the point."

My voice dips at the end as my spirits fall. Even though I've thought about that a hundred times since then, it still stings.

Sienna smiles sadly. "I know that wasn't a good feeling."

I shake my head.

She shifts in her seat as she sips her wine. Her eyes stay trained on me over the rim of her glass. Finally, she sets the glass back down.

"I'll never forget the night when Walker's truth hit me in the face. I was surrounded by his family—*your* family. Do you remember that?"

I nod.

"It was terrible. Humiliating. And I had to sit there and absorb this ... bullshit and try to act like my world wasn't crashing down."

“I remember Machlan calling me that night,” I tell her. “I was so pissed at Walker.”

“That makes two of us.” She smiles. “But the reason I bring this up now is because it took Walker a hot minute to realize how he felt about me. And then it took another hot minute for him to work through his shit. Sometimes, it’s not as easy for guys who are used to being independent to realize they need a woman in their lives.”

“I guess. But you know what? That used to be me too. It’s not easy for anyone. It’s not a good excuse.”

She places her hand on top of mine and gives it a squeeze. “If Holt doesn’t come around, you’re gonna be fine. You’ll find a stud in a suit in Chicago, and we’ll be so glad that Holt screwed up. And if you want me to get plane tickets to Savannah for the morning, we can fly down and put a can of clams in his car.”

I laugh. “Why would we do that?”

“Ha. You’ve never met a can of clams in the hot Southern sun, have you?”

I can only imagine what she’s getting at. And even though it sounds utterly disgusting and juvenile and something I’d never do, I’m happy she said it. It just feels good to have someone on my side.

Sienna stands up. “I’m gonna pop this popcorn, and then we’re gonna watch a romantic comedy and go through all the emotions.”

“Why would we do that?”

“Because it’s cathartic. You can feel your pain or whatever your snappy little mantra is.”

I cock my head to the side. “I’m not sure you’re right about this methodology.”

“And how many times have you been in this position?” She winks. “Trust me, girl. I got you.”

As she walks into the kitchen with the popcorn in her hand, I lay back and close my eyes.

And I trust her.

Because what do I have to lose?

Chapter Thirty-One

Holt

“You look like shit.”

I ignore Wade’s remark and go back to the papers on my desk. He makes himself at home across from me, casually propping one ankle on the opposite knee.

If I look like shit, then I feel like hell.

I should’ve gotten some sleep last night. I should’ve tried, at least. But just going into my room makes me think of Blaire, and that wasn’t going to bring sweet dreams.

So I worked instead. All. Night. Long. I switched my shirt at four this morning and drove to the office. Rosie brought me coffee and a donut at six.

“You could’ve at least combed your hair,” Wade says. “Fuck, Holt. We have this under control, you know. You don’t have to turn into a troll.”

“You know what?” I say, looking up. “Fuck off.”

“Wow. Okay.”

I let my hands fall to my desktop. The sound echoes around the room.

My body sags, and I feel my energy plummet. I’ve been running on fumes for hours. I was afraid that if I stopped, I’d never gear back up.

“Good morning, boys,” Oliver booms as he walks into my office. But one look at Wade quells his spunk. “Well, fuck.”

“Same thing I said,” Wade chimes in.

“No. You said I look like shit.”

Oliver sits down next to Wade. “Well, he was right. Damn, man. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Let me rephrase—are you going to be okay? I’m asking in a totally serious way,” Oliver says.

My brothers watch me with total seriousness. Gone are their jokes and jabs, and in their place is a concern for my well-being.

It’s not misplaced.

Nothing feels right today. My house feels too big and my office too quiet. My shirt is too tight, and my stomach, despite being empty except for Rosie’s donut, threatens to spill its contents all over the floor.

I keep telling myself this will get easier. I just need to get absorbed back into this project and forget all about Blaire.

My head hangs in front of me.

“Of course, I’m going to be okay,” I say without any gumption behind it.

Oliver and Wade sit quietly—something that’s unusual for them. It makes a strange day even stranger having my brothers in a room with silence.

The truth is, I don’t even care. I lost all my fucks to give somewhere around two this morning.

I just don’t care.

I should. I want to care. I cared so much yesterday. I cared so fucking much that I left a woman who’s a damn unicorn—a woman unlike any other I’ll ever meet in my entire life—in my house crying.

I don’t know who I am anymore. I’ve lost touch with reality.

How did I get here? Why do I feel defeated?

Especially when I’m on the precipice of the biggest victory in Mason Ltd. history.

Wade checks his watch. “Look, we have a few minutes before we have to leave. You are going to have to pull your head out of your ass.”

Oliver sighs. “Come on, Wade. Have a little heart.”

“I have a heart,” he says. “I just don’t have room in it for someone to fuck up my future.”

“He’s our brother. He’s heartbroken.”

“I’m right fucking here,” I tell them both. “Damn.”

Wade places both feet on the floor. “I’m trying really hard here to have some empathy for your situation. However, I’m coming up shorthanded.”

“Shocker,” Oliver mutters.

Wade doesn’t look bothered. “I’m going to be quick about this and very cut-and-dry.”

“You just keep bringing the shockers, don’t ya?” Oliver asks.

Wade ignores him again. “This whole thing you have going on today is because of Blaire. Correct?”

“Well,” I say, “it is. But really, it’s more about—”

“A simple yes or no will suffice,” Wade deadpans.

I sit up, making myself appear as tall as I can.

“You know what? Maybe it doesn’t suffice,” I counter. “Maybe life isn’t black and white and yes and no and up and down and left and right. Maybe it’s fucking gray. Maybe it’s a decimal point. Maybe it’s a ... tie game, and there is no overtime.”

That last bit doesn’t make a lot of sense. I just keep going so Wade doesn’t start picking at my analogies.

“The point is,” I continue, “that I can’t give you a simple yes or no because it’s not just because of Blaire. It’s because of ... me.”

I don’t think I realized this until I said it.

But I’m right. It *is* about me.

In so many ways.

And not just that I caused the detonation of my relationship with Blaire or that I subconsciously pushed her away to save

myself from having to face my truths.

This whole thing is about me and my fear of failure.

I know it. And as soon as I realize it, a weight lifts off my shoulders.

I'm afraid of failing my family and hurting our business. I'm terrified of failing a woman and being a shit companion. And I'm absolutely petrified of committing to Blaire and losing her.

Because out of all the things I'm most scared of, that's the one I don't think I'd survive.

"Why'd you let her go?" Wade asks. "And, yes, I know she left because Boone told me."

"How the fuck did Boone know?"

"Larissa," Wade says. "You can't keep a secret in this family."

Oliver leans forward. "I'd like to circle back to the reason you let her go. Because if she was staying at my house, she'd still be there. I guarantee you that."

I glare at him. He laughs.

Fucker.

I ignore Oliver and turn to Wade.

"I don't know how to balance it all," I tell him. "I don't know how to perform here and be what she needs too."

Wade grins. "How very arrogant of you."

"What? What do you mean?" I ask. "How can you even say that? I pushed her away to save her, Wade. Not out of arrogance."

"Has it ever occurred to you that she doesn't need you to *be* anything. She's a grown, successful woman who's managed to obtain a law degree, be an upstanding member of society, and have very little debt all without you," Wade says.

"How do you know that?" Oliver asks.

"Background check," Wade says without looking at Oliver. "But the point here is, Holt, that you just let a woman go

because you think she needs you. I happen to think she doesn't need you for shit. She just *wants you*. Those are two totally different things."

I stare at the stapler on my desk and let his words filter through my brain.

The more I think about it, the more I think he's right.

Blaire doesn't need me. She doesn't need me to fill a role in her life or to fix her problems. What Wade said is true—she chose me to be a part of her life because she wants me.

And I made her think I didn't want her.

Dammit.

The door cracks open, and Rosie pushes her head around the corner.

"If you boys are going to make it to the Landry offices, you need to get going," she says. "You don't want to be late."

"Thank you, Rosie," Oliver calls.

"Of course. And Boone called and said that none of you are answering your phones and that he will meet you there." She rolls her eyes. "He gave me an excuse, but it was garbage. So lord knows what he was doing."

"Thanks, Rosie," Wade says.

She gives us a little wave and disappears behind the door.

We all take a deep breath and look at one another.

"You guys ready to do this?" Oliver asks.

"Yup," Wade says.

"I am," I say.

We stand and grab our briefcases and keys.

I glance at my watch as we take the elevator to the parking lot. I calculate how long it will take to seal this deal. If we can get it done within a few hours, I can still make a flight out of Savannah and be in Chicago tonight.

I need to go to her, but I need to be here for my family too. I have a responsibility to them. They're counting on me. If it wasn't for them—if it were for anyone else or anything else—I'd be gone.

As soon as this is over, I'm going straight to the airport.

My brain spins as we exit the elevator and head to our cars.

I have no idea what Blaire will say if I just show up at her apartment. Maybe she won't even entertain a conversation with me. If she does, I still don't know how any of this will work out between us.

We still live a thousand miles apart.

All I know is that I have to try. Because she's the one—the only one I've ever wanted to fight for. The only woman who makes my life more uncomplicated by being a part of it.

I stop at my driver's side door and wait for my brothers to catch up.

“Do you guys want to ride with me?” I ask.

They look at each other. I know something is amiss when Oliver smiles and Wade shakes his head as if he's in disbelief.

“Go on,” Oliver says. “We got this.”

I furrow my brow. “Go on where? You got what?”

Wade rests his hand on my shoulder. “I think this is ridiculous, and that you'd be much better off in life being alone. But I can see that you think otherwise. So, in your best interest and probably not ours, I think you should go to Chicago now.”

“What? You're crazy. We have a meeting with Graham in thirty minutes.”

Oliver winks. “We know. Trust me. But I'm going to have to fight myself from punching you in the face every time you do that little exasperated sigh that you've been doing for the past two days.”

I look at my brothers to see if they're serious. “We're in this together. I'm not going to bail on you guys.”

“We know you’re not,” Wade says, opening my door for me. “You’ve killed yourself for months to get this thing in order. You’ve gone above and beyond and are the only person I know who could’ve pulled this off. Because we *are* going to pull this off. I have no doubts. You’ve done your job. Now let us do ours.”

“But ...” I stammer.

“Trust us like we trust you,” Wade says.

“Can I just point out how nice it would be if we had a jet? Because you could get to Chicago so much faster.” Oliver looks back and forth between us. “What? I thought it was a good point.”

I don’t know what to say. Sure, I’d rather skirt off to Chicago—in a private jet if I had one—and find Blaire and put an end to my personal misery. Or try to. But they can’t really expect me to leave them high and dry.

“Go,” Oliver insists. “I like being in charge anyway.”

“Fuck you,” Wade says. “I’ll be the one calling the shots today.”

Oliver groans. “I’m the joint CEO of this company. You are the head of the architectural division. I outrank you.”

“Then do it without my drawings, genius.”

Olive looks at me and rolls his eyes. “We’ll figure it out. But you need to go. I heard there’s a ticket for you for the twelve thirty flight.”

“I don’t know what to say,” I tell them.

“Say that I’m in charge,” Wade says as he turns toward his car.

Oliver follows. “You’re so full of shit. You *are not* in charge.”

I laugh as I slip into my driver’s seat and close the door.

A part of me wishes I was going with them. But a bigger, more important part of me needs to find its other half.

And that half is in Chicago.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Blaire

“And this is why I don’t drink wine,” I groan, holding my temples.

The sun is too bright outside my office windows. The staff is too noisy. The sandwich that someone made in the break room is too stinky for me this afternoon.

“Can two glasses of wine in the evening cause this much pain this many hours later?” I ask Yancy as she enters my office. “Because I swear my head is going to split open.”

Yancy sets a cup of coffee on the edge of my desk. “Maybe this will help.”

I don’t have the heart to tell her that the smell makes me want to gag.

My blood pulses in my temple. It’s almost blinding. The pain is unrelenting despite the migraine medicine I took this morning.

It’s unbearable.

“You look really bad—in a sick, not a rude kind of way,” Yancy says.

“I don’t even have the energy to be offended by that.”

“Good.” She leans against the wall and crosses her arms over his chest. “You have a pretty tan.”

“Thanks.”

She’s trying to cheer me up, and I’m grateful for that. But the truth is that I don’t want to be cheered up. I want to wallow in my misery for a day or two, get it over with, and then move on with my life.

After Sienna left, I looked up heartbreak. Everything I read said that you really have to own your feelings before you can

proceed with life. It matches what I know from my experience with Jack. So I'm going to feel this pain unless it kills me.

And it might.

"Yancy," I say, standing up from behind my desk, "I'm going to go outside for some fresh air for a few minutes. I just need to clear my head. That sandwich that Barnard is eating is making me sick."

"It's tuna fish." She curls her nose. "I saw it in the fridge this morning. I almost threw it out so we didn't have to endure this, but I thought that was improper."

"You work for an attorney. I can get you out of trouble." I look at her and laugh. "Throw it away next time."

"You got it."

She steps to the side as I pass.

"I'll be back up shortly. I won't be gone long," I tell her.

I keep my eyes focused on the wall ahead of me as I make my way to the elevators.

The office is bustling with people catching up from the shut-down and gossiping about whether they really found a dead body or if it really was asbestos.

It's only when I'm in the elevator that I can put my guard down.

I punch the number for the ground floor and lean against the metal rail along the back wall. It's cool under the thin fabric of my dress. I close my eyes and wish I was at home.

Or at Holt's.

The pain that the website swore I had to endure comes roaring back like it knows it has a free pass. I can't help but wonder if I had found another website that instructed me to ignore any discomfort if this hurt would go away.

I doubt it.

This bullshit is very, very real.

The doors swing open, and I'm met with a barrage of bodies. People scramble through the lobby like ants looking for a picnic blanket.

I step outside the elevator cart and freeze.

My entire body tenses as the leathery scent of Holt's cologne billows my way. I allow myself three seconds to close my eyes and breathe it in. Then I lift my chin and march myself around the corner.

I have to stop this.

It will get easier.

I just need to— "Whoa!"

Something, or someone, hits me from the side. I go flying across the foyer, into a mailman, and onto the cold tile floor.

The impact breaks my spirit. All of the confidence I'd managed to muster this morning drains into the floor.

I try not to cry.

I sit on my knees on the floor and let my hair hang in my face. People scurry all around me, no one giving a second thought to the girl on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

I should stand and just go to my apartment. I'm not cut out for this. Not today.

"Let me help you up."

I still at the words coming from behind me.

And at the voice.

I tell myself it's a case of *déjà vu* and that Holt really isn't standing behind me. It's like his cologne a few moments ago and the car I thought was his that was parked on the street by the coffee shop this morning.

It's wishful thinking.

I press my palm against the floor and stand. Dusting my hands off, I turn and gasp.

"What the ...?" I stammer.

I think I'm seeing things. But at least I'm seeing good things.

Holt is standing in the middle of the crowd. He's dressed in a black suit with a black-and-white-checkered shirt. His tie is my favorite. It's the one he bound my hands with.

My eyes fill with tears. I'm afraid to blink. If I do, he might vanish.

But instead of disappearing into thin air, he moves closer.

"What are you doing here?" I whisper.

"Well, it turns out I have a very important matter to take care of today," he says gently.

He stands tall and peers down at me. His eyes are so beautiful, so clear as they search mine.

I want to pull away from him. I don't want him to read me because I know he can. With one look, he'll know I'm a mess, and he'll have the upper hand. But even though I want to do this, I want to hide from him, I don't.

Being vulnerable is a strength, and I'm just figuring out its magic. But allowing myself to be open to feelings and experiences—both good and bad—is the only way to discover the powers that lie within me.

I used to think that hiding behind a cold façade made me strong. Untouchable. Impenetrable.

I was wrong. I only knew true strength when I gave myself a chance to love and be loved.

If Holt wants to see my pain, I'll let him.

"Good luck with that," I tell him.

My voice stays strong, and I'm glad for it. I'm all for him seeing how much he hurt me, but he needs to know he's not going to walk all over me either.

"Can we go somewhere and talk?" he asks.

"Nope."

His face falls.

"Aren't you supposed to be meeting with Landry?" I ask.

He looks at his watch. “It’s probably just getting over right about now.”

My brows pull together as I try to make sense of what he’s saying. But as his gaze finds mine again, something tugs on my heart.

“Why aren’t you there?”

“I told you. I had an important matter to take care of today.”

I don’t want to ask. I don’t want to do this. And if I have to do it, I don’t want it to be here in the lobby of my building around people I’ll have to see every day.

I turn on my heel. “I have to go.”

“Blaire. Wait.”

I turn my back and march toward the doors. My lashes barely hold back tears.

I don’t think I can do this—not here. I don’t think I’m equipped enough to feel all of this kind of pain right now.

The website said to feel it all but not to let it overwhelm you. This might be overwhelming.

I blow out a breath.

My palms hit the door because I don’t wait for the revolving one as I shove my way outside. Holt is behind me. I feel his energy, but I don’t look back.

I don’t stop until I’m a half a block away and the crowd has thinned out a little. Only then can I press my back against a building and try to gather myself.

It takes all of two seconds for Holt to be standing in front of me.

“I was so fucking wrong, sweetheart,” he whispers. “I am so, so sorry.”

He’s standing so close to me that I can feel his energy rippling off his body. I shiver at the contact, wanting so badly to dive into his arms.

But I don’t. Because I don’t need to. I’m stronger than that.

“You could’ve called me about this,” I told him. “Your apology didn’t warrant an in-person exchange.”

He shrugs sheepishly. “I tried. You sent me to voicemail.”

“You could’ve left one.”

“I don’t really do voicemails. So much gets lost in the mix.”

“Well, I don’t really do men who think that they can just pop up in my life when it’s convenient for them. So if you’ll excuse me.” I give him a pointed look and head down the sidewalk again.

It kills me to walk away. It’s like a knife in my heartless cavity. Each step is like the blade is getting dug deeper and deeper into my soul.

I walk to the edge of the block and stop beneath a tree in an oversized box planter. It provides a little shade from the sun and acts like a blocker from the throngs of people.

Everyone except Holt.

“Stop running from me,” Holt says, standing in front of me again.

I refuse to look at him.

“I know I fucked up,” he begins but stops when I fire him a hard glare.

I put a hand on my hip. “I know you fucked up. I know that I could’ve been the best thing to ever happen to you. But you are too busy for that. So please, leave me alone.”

His face falls. “I deserve all of that. And I’ll stand here and listen to you berate me until you’ve said everything you need to say.”

“I don’t need to say anything to you.”

“Good. Then listen.” He shifts his weight. “I’m sorry, Blaire. This whole thing is my fault—all of it. I pursued you. I spoke to Oliver about you. I walked out and didn’t come back.” His voice breaks. “I left you when you needed me, and that’s the biggest mistake I’ve ever made.”

His face is riddled with pain. There are bags under his eyes, and his skin is pale.

I hate it. I hate that we have come to this.

“You hurt me,” I admit. “You broke my heart.”

“I know.”

“Do you know what it felt like to hear you tell Oliver that I required too much energy?”

His eyes light up. “That’s not what I said. That’s not what I meant.”

“Holt ...”

“Hear me out.” He licks his lips. “I was telling him that you deserved so much more than I could give you. I didn’t know how ... I didn’t know how to incorporate you into my life and guarantee you wouldn’t get hurt.”

“So you just hurt me outright instead? Genius move.”

“I didn’t know you were listening, or I would’ve been more careful.”

“But you walked out, and I was standing right in front of you.”

He takes a deep breath. His chest shakes as he inhales. “I promise you that I will never walk out on you again.”

“I know you won’t. Because I’m not there.”

He reaches for my hand, and I let him take it.

“Give me another chance,” he says. “Give me *a* chance because I don’t think we’ve ever had a real one.”

My heart pounds as I take in the sincerity in his face. I want to believe him. I want to go to concerts and have late night pizza and talk about law and contracts and construction projects at breakfast.

I want that. And I want him to want it too.

He rubs my knuckle with this thumb.

I look into his eyes.

My anger fades because I believe him. I don't think he meant to hurt me. And while he walked out on me, I walked out on him too.

I sigh.

"You said something yesterday that has bothered me. Well, you said a lot of things that bothered me, but one thing more than the others," he says.

"What?" I yell as a bus honks its horn as it goes by.

He closes the small distance between us. He allows his face to grow serious—totally sober—before he speaks.

My skin prickles with anticipation of what he's about to say. It could be so many things.

"You told me you loved me," he says quietly.

I hold my breath as I try to read him.

Those words did pass through my lips on accident. But that doesn't mean I didn't mean it. Because out of all the things I said yesterday, that's the one I meant the most.

I love Holt Mason. That's why it hurts so bad.

I might've said it yesterday in a fit of emotions, but I didn't realize I truly meant it. It wasn't until I was on that website last night and researching pain did I understand that what I felt for Holt was love.

That's why I trusted him enough to open up to him. It's why I was willing to put myself out there and ask him to be a part of my life—because I couldn't imagine mine without him. It's also why his rejection was pure devastation.

But love is more than an emotion that makes you feel like your head is spinning. It's respect. It's support. It's wanting both of you to be victorious in all you do.

All of those things are why I didn't fall into an abyss like I did with Jack. Because you can't be in love without loving yourself first. And Holt helped me love me before I loved him.

"Do you?" he asks. "Do you love me, Blaire?"

An ambulance whizzes by, its sirens blaring. I don't give them a second thought. I just watch the man in front of me.

"Yeah. I do," I tell him.

Before I know what's happening, my face is cupped in his hands, and his lips are on mine.

The kiss is tender but rough, gentle but aggressive. It earns him a round of applause from the people on the sidewalk.

He breaks the kiss and rests his forehead on mine.

"You know, just because I said I love you doesn't mean you can just kiss me like that," I joke.

He chuckles. "What will it take to get your permission to kiss you like that then?"

"Tickets to every Kelvin McCoy concert in the area would help," I say begrudgingly because I can't resist the joke, even if I am still not sure what's going to happen between us.

Holt drops my face and sighs dramatically. It makes me giggle.

"I'm serious, Blaire. This is it for me. *You* are it for me." He smiles. "I love you. *I love you*. And it ate me up all night that I let you leave without telling you. I sat in my house, alone, and for the first time, I hated it."

My bottom lip quivers as I take in the honesty of both his gaze and his words.

"I realized something else last night," he says.

"What's that?"

"Remember how I told you that my grandfather knew he was going to marry my grandmother the first time they met?"

I nod.

He grins. "I knew you were the one for me the first time I ran into you."

I can't help but grin back at him.

My heart fills again, my body coming alive at his words.

“I’m not going anywhere. I’ll fight for you, fight to convince you to love me back every day of my life if that’s what it takes to win you over.”

He’s already won me over. He just doesn’t know it yet.

My phone buzzes in my hand. I look down to see a text from Yancy.

“I have to get back to work,” I tell him.

He groans.

“I’m sorry. We all don’t run our own companies,” I tell him.

He closes the gap between us again as though he can’t stand for anything but inches to be between us. I don’t mind. I’ve never minded.

He takes my hand in his and locks our fingers together.

“I have two questions before you go save lives,” he says. “First, do you forgive me? And if you don’t, will you give me a chance to earn back your trust?”

I contemplate his question, but I already know the answer.

I messed up too. I should’ve communicated better. I shouldn’t have left and given him the chance to explain.

But I didn’t.

“I forgive you. Do you forgive me for leaving?”

“I never held it against you, sweetheart.”

I smile.

“My second question is this: what do you want, Blaire?”

“Honestly?”

“Yes. Honestly.”

I feel a bubble of energy spread through me as I look up into his handsome face.

The only thing I’ve wanted was him.

“I want what I’ve wanted since you asked for my phone number. *I want you.* I want you just like you are.”

His cheeks split into a big grin.

He sweeps me around into his arms. My hands go around his neck, and my gaze meets his.

“I don’t have all the answers,” he says, “but Wade told me I didn’t have to have them.”

“We can find them together.”

He presses a simple, sweet kiss to my lips.

“Can I take you to dinner?” he asks.

I grin. “Maybe.”

“Do I have to play that game where I name three things about you? Because I think I’ll be even better at it now.”

I laugh as his lips find mine again.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Blaire

“Will you stop it?” I swat Holt’s hands away from me. “Give me a freaking minute.”

“I don’t want to give you a minute.”

“Clearly.”

He pouts beside me. I know that because I can see him out of the corner of my eye. But I don’t dare look over and take in the whole image because I’ll never finish typing out my email.

“Why do you have to work so much?” he whines.

“Funny how the tables have turned.”

The setting sun paints the prettiest picture outside of my apartment. The sky is ablaze in purples and pinks and bright oranges. It’s my favorite time of day. I love it even more tonight with Holt.

I didn’t make it the whole two hours I had left at work. Luckily, Yancy is a rock star and happens to be a total romantic. When I told her what happened on my break, she insisted that I leave early. Since she refused to send back calls or copy files or find data, what was I supposed to do?

Holt’s head rests on my shoulder. “I love you.”

I can’t help but laugh. “How many times are you going to tell me that today?”

“I don’t know. As many as I want.”

“Okay.”

He looks up at me like a puppy that’s waiting for a treat.

“I love you too,” I say.

This earns me a grin.

Knock! Knock!

Holt's head lifts up. "Who is here?"

"I don't know."

I hop off the sofa and make my way to the door. "Who is it?"

"It's Sienna and Walker."

I unlatch the door and pop it open. "Hey. How are you guys?"

Sienna makes a face. "You sound better today."

I grin, letting the door swing wide open. I know the exact moment Sienna's eyes rest on Holt because they flip immediately to mine.

"What is this?" she squeals.

Walker fills the doorway with his wide shoulders and linebacker body. "Who the fuck is that?"

I swat my brother's chest. "Be nice."

I step to the side so they can come in, keeping my eyes trained on Walker. The door shuts softly behind them.

Sienna nearly bounces with excitement as she takes in Holt's arm wrapped around my waist. My brother, on the other hand, isn't quite as excited. As a matter of fact, he looks pissed.

I gulp.

"Holt, this is my brother Walker, and of course, you know Sienna. Walker, this is Holt Mason," I say.

Holt extends a hand. Walker lets it hang there for a long second before shaking it.

I roll my eyes.

"I heard that you struck a deal with Graham and Lincoln today," Sienna says. "Congratulations!"

Holt half-laughs. "My family struck a deal with them, yes. I can't take credit for it all. Sadly."

They go into some of the details, but I tune them out. Not because I'm disinterested but because it's hard to concentrate

with Holt by my side ... and Walker scowling at him in front of me.

Sienna laces her fingers through my brother's and peers up at him. She has to see the look on his face because she pokes him with her finger.

"Are you okay over there?" she asks him.

He doesn't look at her. He just keeps pinning Holt to the wall with his stare.

"Walker, stop," I warn.

"So you're the guy who Blaire was staying with in Savannah, right?" Walker asks, raising a brow at Holt.

Holt nods. "Yeah. She stayed with me for a few days."

"And you made her cry."

"Walker ..." I say. It's more of a plea than a demand because no one tells Walker Gibson what to do. "Please don't."

Holt's fingers curl into my waist. "I'm a big enough man to admit that I wasn't on my best behavior. I did say and do some things that I wish, in retrospect, I hadn't done. But I never set out to make Blaire cry."

"But you did," Walker says.

"Enough," I hiss. "I'm a big girl."

He looks down at me. He reminds me so much of my father that it's scary.

"I'm a little pissed at you too, come to think of it," he tells me.

"Why?"

"Because he didn't even know who I was when I walked in," Walker says. "That means that you didn't warn him about the hellfire he'll be walking into if he fucks with you."

Walker's eyes slide over me and land squarely on Holt.

Holt doesn't budge. He doesn't flinch. He squares his shoulders to my brother.

“That’s my sister,” Walker tells him. “She’s the only one I have. If you do anything stupid—even a little bit, I will take your body apart piece by piece. Got it?”

“Walker!” I say as Sienna shoves her elbow into his ribs.

He doesn’t flinch.

I look up at Holt to see his reaction. He takes a long, deep breath and blows it out slowly.

“I absolutely understand,” Holt says as if this mountain of a man didn’t just threaten to murder him. “My brothers and I say the same thing to the guys our little cousin, Riss, dates. Better to put them on notice early on. It might stop stupidity down the line.”

Walker nods. “You get it then.”

“Oh, yes. I get it. We’re on the same page.” Holt looks at Sienna, still cool as a cucumber. “Do you guys want to come in and sit down?”

Please say no. Please say no. Please say no.

“We’re actually heading to pick up some fabric from the fabric shop downtown,” Sienna says. “We just wanted to swing by and check on you, Blaire.”

“I’m fine.”

She smiles. “Okay. Well, Walker, let’s get out of here so Blaire and Holt can—.”

“All right. I got it,” he says before she can complete her line of thought.

It makes me laugh. “I love you, Walk.”

“Love ya, too.”

“And thanks for coming by, Sienna. And for ... everything,” I say, pulling her into a quick hug. Because apparently, I’m a hugger now.

“You know it. That’s why I’m here.” She releases me. “Holt, it was good to see you.”

“Likewise, Sienna. Be safe, you guys.”

“Call me,” Walker says to me before firing one last warning glance at Holt.

They slip out the door, and Holt wastes no time locking it behind them. He spins around to face me.

“That was fun,” he deadpans.

“He will ease up. I’m his only sister.”

“I hope he never eases up.”

“Really? Why? Because he’s a little much.”

Holt grins. “Well, for one, he’s a very large man. I’m certain that no one will fuck with you if he’s around.”

My laugh is loud and free. It fills my apartment in a way my laughter never has in the four years I’ve lived in this building.

Holt pulls me onto the couch and across his lap. His hands lock together at my hip. He holds me tight as if I might get up and dart out the door.

Again.

I reach up and touch the side of his face.

“We need to talk about what this looks like,” he says. “There are a lot of moving parts that we don’t know.”

“I know.”

Fear flickers in my gut. I don’t know what he’s expecting.

I think about my life and what it is and what I want it to be. I’ve worked really hard to get to where I am in my firm, and I’m not ready to give that up. Not even for him. Not yet.

His stubble is rough and bites against my fingers. I wonder if he forgot to shave this morning or didn’t bother. Did he stay awake all night like me? Or was he able to find sleep despite the circumstances?

I’ll never know. And I don’t want to ask because it just reminds me of the pain of not being with him.

He grins at me softly.

It's good to remember your sources of pain. I know that from my life experiences. It's just as important to give yourself grace and allow yourself the peace to move on. And right now, moving on is just as much about me and my growth independent of Holt as it is about our life together.

"My life is here," I tell him.

"And my life is in Savannah."

"What does that mean for us?"

I look around my cramped apartment and think about the stinky office twenty floors above. The city smells like sewage in the summer and is bitterly cold in the winters.

But my family lives not too far away in the sleepy town of Linton. And Yancy, someone who has tried to be my friend for two years comes in the office despite my cantankerous attitude, shows up for me every day.

There are things here that I'm not ready to part with. Maybe someday, but not yet. I have to finish this chapter of my life before I start a new one. The end has not been written.

"I'm not ready to leave Chicago," I admit.

He doesn't miss a beat. He bends forward and presses a kiss to my forehead. "Okay. We will figure it out."

"You don't expect me to move to Savannah?"

"I mean, at some point in our lives, I hope you do," he says. "Or I'll have to move to Illinois, but it's fucking cold here. We need to consider that."

I grin.

"But, yeah, we will have to live in the same place to grow old together," he says. "And if we want to make babies."

His smile fills with mischief and promises of lots of sex. My ovaries combust.

"But we have time," he assures me. "We don't have to rush anything. We won't rush anything. This is our life. We'll build it the way we want."

I rest my head against his shoulder and feel his arms around my body. Never once in my wildest dreams did I expect to be talking about having babies with a man who I met on vacation, let alone with a man who I had a one-night stand with.

The world is a weird place.

I close my eyes, and my thoughts drift to Nana. She'll be so happy to meet Holt. She'll be thrilled to hear him talking about babies.

I smile softly.

She always tells me not to block my blessings. She might be right. The first time I allowed the universe to work for me—look what happened. It gave me Holt. The biggest blessing of my life. So far, anyway. Who knows what could happen in the future?

“What are you thinking?” Holt asks.

I bite back a grin. “Just about all the blessings coming my way.”

“So many are coming your way, sweetheart.”

“I mean, think of all the Kelvin McCoy tickets.”

“Fuck,” Holt says, his body shaking with his suppressed chuckle.

I curl up against him even more and laugh. “I'm just kidding.”

“You probably aren't, is the thing.”

“You know what I heard?” I ask.

“What's that?”

“I heard he has an older brother who's hotter and way sexier than he ever thought about being.”

Holt brushes a strand of hair out of my face. “Is that so?”

I nod. “And I also heard he closed a major deal today, and that warrants a celebration.”

“That's all true. But did you hear that the brother's girlfriend is the person who brought the deal home? She needs celebrated too.”

Pride fills my body and mixes with the heat pulsing through my veins.

We make such a good team.

I can feel Holt's cock thickening beneath my hip. His gaze heats.

My body whimpers.

"In any case," I tell him, "I think we definitely need to celebrate."

He slips his hand up my shirt and cups my breast. "I like the way you think."

I stare up at him and take in every inch of his gorgeous face.

I hope he likes the way I think. Because I have tons of ideas for the next fifty years.

Epilogue

Holt

Six months later ...

“Good morning, gorgeous,” I say to Blaire as I enter the den.

She looks up at me from her seat on the chair and smiles. The glasses she got over the winter make her look so studious and *so fucking sexy*.

“Good morning to you.” She places the binder she’s looking at onto the coffee table. Her arms stretch overhead. The edge of my T-shirt she slept in rises and gives me a peek at a swath of skin at her hip.

Mornings are my favorite time of day. Waking up to the sun rising and reminding me that my life includes Blaire is like a little gift that just keeps on giving.

My life before her was busy. It was filled with motions and things and places and to-do lists. It was filled with people too—people I cared about. People I loved.

I enjoyed my life before Blaire. It was all I knew.

Now that I have her, I don’t know how I made it through a day without her.

We’ve been figuring it out for the past six months, traveling back and forth between Illinois and Georgia. We’ve met up for weekends in Nashville and Cincinnati, and she accompanied me to Portland for a trip too.

It’s been fun, and it’s worked out well. So far.

“What are you doing today?” she asks.

I take a sip of my coffee. “Not sure. Gramps wants to watch golf, and I promised him I’d come by and do something. I didn’t commit to watching golf, though.”

Blaire laughs. “It won’t kill you to watch a little bit of golf.”

“It might. It really might.” I take another sip. “What are you doing today?”

“I’m meeting your mother at her house this afternoon.”

I quirk a brow. “Again?”

“Your mother met a lady last week who said her son got an unfair trial. He’s been in jail for a year already, and the man’s mother claims he’s innocent. It’s really been on your mom’s heart. I’m sure you can imagine.”

I sit back and listen. It’s not hard to do. She’s so beautiful and so damn smart. But she also has a huge heart that makes me love her even more.

“I can imagine,” I say. “And I’d also bet that it’s been driving you crazy too.”

She blushes. “I told her I’d meet with them today and take a look at his case.”

“You’re amazing. Do you know that?”

“Hardly,” she scoffs. “I just try to use the tools I have to ... do the right thing. It’s what everyone should do.”

I sit my coffee down and start to pick up my computer. But something in the way she’s looking at me stops me in my tracks.

“Holt,” she begins. “I want to talk to you about something.”

“Sure.”

She tucks her legs under her. “I’ve been thinking and ... would it freak you out if I moved to Savannah? I wouldn’t have to move in with you—”

“The hell you wouldn’t.”

My heartbeat begins to thunder inside me. My breathing gets rapid. All I can think about is taking the next step with Blaire and making sure I don’t scare her.

Because if I had my way, I’d marry her tomorrow. Today, even.

I love her.

Her eyes grow wide. “I’m not implying that I don’t want to live here. I just—”

“Good. Because if you step foot inside Georgia, it better be in this house.” I scoot to the edge of the sofa to be closer to her. “I’ve waited as patiently as a man can fucking wait for you to want to move in with me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Can I order a moving truck today? I’ll have people at your door in Chicago in an hour.”

“Holt ...”

“Try me.”

“Easy there, tiger,” she says with a laugh.

“I’m being as easy as I can.”

She picks up the binder again and finds the page she was on. “Your mom wants to start a nonprofit to provide legal resources to underprivileged people around Savannah. She asked me to help.”

“And you said yes.”

“Of course, I said yes.” She looks up at me. “This is my passion in life. Besides you, naturally.”

I grin.

I pick up my coffee again and then take another drink.

The den, my favorite room in the house, is filled with the bright morning light. I take in its warmth and imagine little kids running around it and having Saturday morning cartoons blaring from the television. And I realize that this is why I bought this house. A part of me always knew I’d meet Blaire.

This time last year, my idea of a good Saturday morning meant being in the office before noon and maybe playing a round of golf with Dad. Now it’s daydreaming about having children.

Who would’ve thought?

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. Your mom said that Coy is coming home. I guess he and Willa ‘*broke up*,’” she says, using air

quotes. “There was a big photo spread about it in all the celebrity magazines.”

I chuckle. “It’s so weird to me that my little brother is considered a celebrity.”

“Yeah. Well, your celebrity little brother is trying to flee the paparazzi, so he’ll be hiding out around here. She told me to tell you, so this is me telling you.”

“What she’s really doing is asking me to help babysit his dumb ass,” I groan. “She doesn’t want him having too much time on his hands or he’ll end up in the magazines all by himself.”

Blaire hums in agreement, but I don’t think she heard what I said. She’s too engrossed in the paperwork in her hands.

I kick back and let my coffee warm my hands. My mind goes back to my life before Blaire.

I thought I had it figured out. I thought I had to show restraint in all things, or my life would spiral out of control.

But Blaire proves that’s not true.

Sometimes you have to release the reins and let the world guide you. You have to trust that the universe knows what’s best.

I didn’t know that when I raced through the airport that day. I had no idea that I’d meet a woman who would change the course of my life.

I could’ve helped her up and went on about my day, too concerned with the fact that Oliver was calling me incessantly. But I took a minute and looked around and was present in the moment.

Maybe not for all the right reasons, but that’s not the point.

The point is, I now know that the world will drop little cookie crumbs in your life here and there. We just get too busy to take a moment and follow the trail. Thank God I didn’t miss the trail that day.

Because it led me to my forever.

“Hey, Blaire,” I say.

She looks up from her binder. “Yeah?”

“I love you, sweetheart.”

She grins. “I love you too.”

The End.

Want to meet *the* Kelvin McCoy, aka Coy Mason? His book, Reputation, is live now on Amazon, Audible, and in Kindle Unlimited.

About the Author

USA Today, Washington Post, and Amazon Charts Bestselling author Adriana Locke lives and breathes books. After years of slightly obsessive relationships with the flawed bad boys created by other authors, Adriana has created her own.

She resides in the Midwest with her husband, four sons, and two dogs. She spends a large amount of time playing with her kids, drinking coffee, and cooking. You can find her outside if the weather's nice and there's always a piece of candy in her pocket.

Join the Locke List for exclusive stories, tales of mishaps, behind-the-scene looks, giveaways, what Adriana is reading, what you should be reading, cool recipes, and more: <http://bit.ly/LockeList>

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2. Adriana's Booklist

Reputation Sneak Peek

Chapter One

Coy

“You’re not doing anything stupid, are you?”

“Not yet,” I say, slurping the milk off my spoon. “But I just got here. Give me time.”

My eldest brother, Holt, half-laughs, half-groans through the phone.

The groan is there because he knows me enough to be afraid I’m serious. The laugh is there because, as much as he hates it, he’s entertained by my antics.

Somewhat, anyway.

I scoop up another spoonful of fruity cereal and shove it into my mouth. Ice-cold milk dribbles down my chin, and I swipe it away with the back of my hand.

“At least you decided to stay with Mom and Dad,” Holt says. “Maybe that’ll keep you out of trouble.”

“Yeah, because that’s worked out so well in the past.”

“Good point.”

I lean against the counter. The edge of the marble is cold and bites into my hip. I wish for a split second that I had bothered to put a shirt on when I woke up twenty minutes ago.

“I almost rented a house on Tybee Island,” I say, “but I figured I might as well save the cash. Besides, Mom cleans my room and makes food just how I like it. I can’t go wrong here.”

“You realize you’re in your mid-twenties now and have money of your own, right?”

“Your point, old man?”

Holt chuckles. “I’m simply pointing out that you’re capable of procuring food and housing on your own.”

“I procured them on my own.” I scrape the little flakes of cereal off the side of the bowl. “I called Mom myself ... which

was an easy choice when I got hit with how much it was going to cost on Tybee. Do you know what places are going for down there? Hell, Holt. I might quit performing and buy rental homes.”

“Great idea. I’m sure Wade would help you.”

“Very funny,” I say, making a face.

Out of all my brothers, Wade is the last one I want to deal with. About anything. Not that any of them are particularly a barrel of fun—except my youngest brother, Boone—but Holt and our other brother, Oliver, and I get along just fine. Wade and I, though? We rarely see eye to eye on anything. If I’m music and mayhem, he’s silence and spreadsheets. I’m not even sure how we have the same genetics.

“Be nice, Coy,” Holt says.

“What? Do you think that Wade and I could do anything together? He has a resting dick face and a repulsion for strip clubs. Yeah. I think not.”

Holt struggles to hide his laughter. He succeeds. *Barely.*

“I’m just happy to hear you’re managing your money well,” Holt says. “Even if you can’t manage your women.”

“Hey now,” I say, dunking the spoon into the bowl again with a little more force than necessary. “Keep your jealousy in check. I can’t help it that I’m a rock star and make women lose their damn minds.”

“Rock star?” Holt’s laughter fills the line with no attempt at restraint. “That’s a stretch.”

I smile. “Okay. You’re right. I believe the last headline I saw called me a *country music sensation*. If it makes you feel better to call me that, I’m good with it.”

“Well, the last headline *I* saw said something about you fleeing Los Angeles with your tail between your legs.”

Fucker.

I fill my mouth with cereal before a bunch of verbal diarrhea comes spewing out.

My tail between my legs.

What-the fuck-ever.

My stomach churns the children's cereal as Willa Welch and a particular day last week comes to mind.

The pretty blond actress is better at her job than anyone understands. Hell, I'm not even sure what's real and what's not when it comes to her.

The only thing I am sure of is, somehow, I was automatically the bad guy in the press.

Again.

I swallow hard before taking another bite.

My brain replays the incident. The way the boutique door sounded when it closed behind us. The sun's bright rays as we strolled down the street. The way she pivoted out of nowhere and looked like she was going to cry.

My confusion. The bag—the one holding the overpriced shirt with the semi-witty saying on it that I'd just bought Willa as a token of good faith—coming straight for my head. My shock. The shrill of her voice followed by the swarm of paparazzi who ate the dramatics up like starving hyenas.

I've only been caught off guard a few times in my life, but this was one of them. My first thought was that our shared agent, Meadow, had concocted this fight for Willa and me just like she created our fake relationship. It seemed crazy but so did the original premise.

“You need to clean up this bad-boy image you have, Coy. Willa needs to dirty hers up some to get the roles she wants. It's perfection,” my agent said.

I was quite satisfied with my reputation but whatever. I just wanted the cash, and if being a nice guy would get me more opportunities, I was in. Besides, all I had to do was pretend with Willa.

All of it was bullshit.

One of us forgot that.

That one of us wasn't me.

It all came to a screeching halt—along with a dozen cars—on Sunset Boulevard. I can't remember what I said, but I was silenced by Willa throwing her coffee in my face as the grand finale. Thankfully, it was iced.

“Are you listening to me?” Holt asks.

“I did get the hell out of LA,” I say, annoyed. “But the only thing between my legs was my giant—”

“Okay, okay.” Holt's sigh is tinged with amusement. “When are you planning on going back?”

“Not sure. I swore a blood oath to Meadow that I'd stay under the radar until she works her PR magic. I'm supposed to relax and write music—two of the three things I do best.”

My brother snorts. “I don't even want to know the third thing.”

“Your call, but I could probably give you a few pointers.”

Holt seamlessly changes the subject to some business deal he's working on, but I find it hard to follow along. My attention span is already short, thanks to the reminder of Willa.

The back of my neck tenses as I work through the asinine events leading up to me being in Savannah.

My jaw pulses as I try to calm down. It's a load of crap that Meadow sent me to Georgia while Willa is allowed to stay in the comfort of her home and routine. She's not missing work. She's not putting a pause on her to-do list. And, even worse, she's allowed to cry to the press. About me. Over a fake relationship.

None of that was real.

“You can go with us if you want,” Holt says.

“Where?”

“You weren't listening, were you?”

“Kind of,” I admit. “Not really.”

He goes on again, repeating the offer to go with him ... somewhere. But my attention is diverted.

The sound of footsteps rings through the kitchen. My mother breezes through the doorway in what looks like a lazy stroll, but it's not. I can see the wheels turning in her head as she glances my way and floats me an easy smile.

My mother makes *everything* look easy. She never used a cleaning service or bought dinner out very often for our family of seven. She managed the house, her five sons, a husband with a penchant for gin martinis and poker, and was still on the board of directors for various Savannah programs. Everyone thinks my brothers got their drive from our father, but it was really from Mom. She's the queen around here.

She points at the phone with a perfectly painted red fingernail. "Is that important?" she whispers.

"Nah. It's just Holt," I say around a mouthful of cereal.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," she admonishes before letting my error go. "I have an appointment in twenty minutes and will be home around six. Your father should be home slightly before me."

"Got it."

"Can you take the trash out for me, please?" she asks as casually as if she's asking me what I want for dinner—a question she did not ask.

My spoon pauses midway to my mouth. Milk drips off the sides and hits the counter.

"Did you just ask me to take out the trash?" I ask.

"Yes, Coy, I did." She slides a water bottle into her oversized black leather bag. "Is that a problem?"

She glances at me over her shoulder with *that look* in her eye. It's a quiet challenge, a silent invitation to press the issue.

"Mom," I say, not really wanting to press the issue but unable to help myself. "Really?"

She stops at the door leading to the garage. "Really what?"

“I had the number-one song on the radio for eight weeks two months ago, and ...”

She opens the garage door as she simultaneously pins me to my seat with a firm gaze. After a long, awkward few seconds, her face breaks out into a victorious smile.

“Do it before I get home, please. Love you, Coy. Tell Holt I love him too.”

The door snaps closed behind her.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” I mutter.

“Better get that trash taken out,” Holt says with a laugh. “I’ll let ya go. I have a meeting with Oliver in a few anyway.”

“Tell my favorite brother I said hi.”

“I’ll remember that the next time you call me needing a favor.”

“Well, you could be my favorite if you come over here and take out the trash for me,” I joke.

“Hard no. I pay someone to take mine out. Besides,” Holt says with what I’m sure is a shit-eating grin, “it might do you some good to remember where you came from.”

I look around the kitchen. The counters are a white granite and set off a dark-colored Viking range. Sub-Zero freezer drawers and a blast chiller are hidden in the cabinets. A crystal chandelier hangs arrogantly overhead.

“Yeah,” I say, my voice full of sarcasm. “Better remember my roots.”

“That’s not what I mean, asshole.”

I feign shock. “Asshole? That’s it. I’m going to have to bump another brother over you on the favorites list.”

“So what you’re saying is that Oliver and Boone are ahead of me, and Wade is last?”

“Well, yeah, basically.”

Holt laughs. “I gotta go. Call me later.”

“Bye.”

“See ya.”

I end the call and slide my phone across the counter. It narrowly misses the splashes of milk dotting the surface around my cereal bowl.

A loud, unnecessary growl rumbles through the air as I stretch my arms overhead. The clock says it’s late in the afternoon, but my brain lobbies to go back to bed. I try to bargain with myself that I got into town late and didn’t get to bed until well into the early morning hours. But truth be told, I wouldn’t have been to bed before three in the morning anyway.

Marching to the cabinet where I think the trash bags are, I open it and look around. I see a broom and a mop and a basket full of batteries. It raises a lot of questions that I force out of my mind.

I’m about to give up anyway when a slight rasp on the door leading to the side yard distracts me.

“Who is that?” I mumble as the faint knocking sounds again.

My family would use the garage door. If any salespeople manage to get by the neighborhood’s gated entry, they’d knock on the front door. The only person who would use the side door would be my dad if he’s coming in from grilling out—so twice a year at best, and this isn’t one of those two occasions.

I run my hands down my jeans—the same ones I slept in last night—and head to the door. There’s an outline of someone shorter than me by a good bit through the thin cream-colored curtain.

“Hang on,” I say, fiddling with the lock.

It takes a few seconds to figure out the fancy new combination lock that wasn’t here the last time I visited. Lucky for me, my parents’ choice of numbers was predictable.

I open the door.

“Hello—fuck!” I shout as something slams into the side of my face.

Hard.

It feels like I was smashed by a large and angry man or attacked by a swarm of bees. My eyes go blurry from the pain radiating through the side of my face.

“Oh, *crap*,” a familiar voice groans in front of me.

“Did I kill him?” another voice shrieks from farther away.

“No. Just ... sit down, Bree. Please. Right over there. Sit down and be still.”

I struggle through the wetness building in my eyes to see. I work my jaw back and forth to try to loosen the stiffness already settling in my face.

Finally, I get my bearings and open my eyes.

Through the blurry haze, I think I see heaven. And a little piece of hell.

~END SNEAK PEEK~

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Dedication

This book is for all the cool nerd girls in the world, especially the ones who love hot football guys, cats, Star Wars, The Princess Bride, He-Man, and, of course, it goes without saying...donuts, cookies, and pecan pie.

Prologue

Delaney

Freshman year

Welcome to Magnolia, Mississippi, where locusts are as big as your hand and iced tea comes with a double helping of sugar.

It's also home to the best damn annual bonfire party at prestigious Waylon University, which is currently happening right now in the middle of a cotton field.

But...

I shouldn't even be at this party.

It's mostly for Greeks and jocks and popular people, yet here I am, a mere freshman, hanging out with my bubbly redheaded roommate, Skye.

"See?" she says as we take in the bonfire. "Isn't this better than watching cat videos on a Saturday night? What do you want to do first?"

I sigh, feeling nervous. Ever since I moved here from North Carolina, I've been pushing myself to try new things. Might as well put a crazy college party on that list. "Let's get a drink."

She claps and excitedly replies, "Done. Alcohol at two o'clock." We weave through the crowd, headed in that direction, and eventually we reach the bar, which is really just a long collapsible table someone set up. On top are various bottles of alcohol, and I grab the Fireball to pour shots. I've just tossed mine back and set down my cup when a prickling sensation washes over me, giving me goose bumps.

My gaze moves across the crowd, stopping on a tall guy with dark blond hair, broad shoulders, and a cocky smile. *Aha*. He's been staring at me, and now that he's caught, he raises his glass as a half-grin crosses his face.

I blush wildly as I adjust my black cat-eye glasses. I'm not used to such blatant male attention.

Skye—who's followed the trajectory of my gaze—spits out part of her drink. "Oh my God, do you know who that is?"

"Obviously I should," I say dryly.

Her mouth flops open. "You really need to get out more."

My eyes drift back to him but keep moving as if I'm not staring. "So who is Mr. Hottie McParty Pants?"

"If you don't know him, you don't deserve to know. But, he's H-O-T—like Chris Hemsworth hot. I dare you to flirt with him." She wiggles her eyebrows at me, knowing full well that for some reason, I can't resist a dare. Normally rather reserved, a dare gives me permission to be someone I'm not.

So does Fireball. I sling back another shot.

"I'll bring you a donut every day for a week if you flirt with him," she adds, watching me.

My ears perk up. "The ones with edible glitter?"

She nods, and I toss a quick glance back to him. Our eyes collide again, and a zing of connection fires between us. He has a strong, handsome face and a stance that has masculine written all over it. A smile tips up his full sensuous lips, and—

Two brunettes—twins, no less—approach him, one on either side, and wrap their arms around his waist. He smiles down at them. *Oh. Well then.*

I turn back to Skye and frown. "Player. Not interested."

She waves her hands in my face. "He likes you—I saw it on his face."

I snort. "Probably gas pains. Your dare is not accepted."

We hear our names being called from the other side of the party and turn to take in the helmet-haired Martha approaching us, which is taking some time due to the fact that she's wearing stilettos and a slinky halter dress. She carefully picks her way through the crowd, nudging people out of her way—sometimes rudely—as she focuses on us. *Great.*

“Incoming mean girl,” I mutter under my breath.

Like us, Martha Burrows is a freshman and lives on our floor. Rather full of herself, she announced within a week of meeting us that she’d no longer answer to anything but *Muffin*, a nickname she’d given herself.

She eyes us both, a look of superiority on her pretty face. “I didn’t know you two were invited to this little shindig. Obviously, I know all the right people, so I’m always invited.” Her gaze zeroes in on my outfit and she rears back. “What on earth are you wearing, Nerd Girl?”

“Clothes.” I stiffen at her name for me as I tug on my fitted Star Wars shirt and the pleated red miniskirt I made from a man’s shirt. My long pale blonde hair is up in curled pigtails, and I went a bit heavy-handed with the shimmery eye shadow and red lipstick. It’s not your typical look for WU—which is anything monogrammed—but I’m learning to ignore the raised eyebrows.

Skye, the peacemaker among us three, clears her throat and nods her head at the guy who’s been staring. “Delaney has an admirer, but she doesn’t know who he is.”

Martha-Muffin follows Skye’s gaze, eyeballing the mystery man over my shoulder. She gives me an exasperated look. “That’s Maverick Monroe, you idiot. He’s the biggest football star in Mississippi and the freshman recruit of the year. Word is, though, girls like you aren’t his type—not at all.” Her hand flicks a stiff honey-colored curl over her shoulder.

My teeth grind together. “Martha, if you think I care what you think about me and whether or not a quasi-famous football player is interested in me, then you are confused.”

Her lips tighten. “It’s *Muffin* now, and why do you have to use such big words? What does *quasi* even mean?” is her cutting reply.

Skye’s eyes get as big as saucers, and I assume it’s because Martha-Muffin and I are about to finally have it out. I can’t stand her, and she can’t stand me. We just...clash.

But that isn’t what has Skye in such a titter.

She points over my shoulder, and I get it.

It's the person standing behind me, the one I can't see. I feel a nervous sneeze coming on and—*thank God*—I somehow push it down.

A husky voice reaches my ears. "*Quasi* means *seemingly* or *supposedly*. What she means is I'm probably not a famous football player but rather one that's been highly touted but is without merit."

Oh, shit. The voice is rich and smooth with just enough southern drawl to make a girl swoon. He also sounds halfway intelligent.

I turn around slowly. Mr. Tall, Blond, and Football is right in front of me wearing a cocky smile.

How in the hell did he get over here so fast?

You know that moment when everything stops and the next breath you take is the first one of the rest of your life? That's what it feels like as Maverick Monroe stares at me with his piercing blue eyes.

I glance down and take in the sculpted chest and hard biceps.

I look back up and see a chiseled jawline that's defined and lined with a slight scruff. I see the thin pink scar that slices through his left eyebrow, and it does nothing to detract from his appeal.

He's perfection.

He's air.

Which I desperately need right now, because I can't breathe.

He smirks, as if reading my mind, and I scramble to pull myself together. Someone calls his name—it's a girl's voice, probably one of those twins—but he doesn't budge.

His eyes rove over my skirt, glasses, and lips. "The question is...do you even know what makes a good football player?"

"Nice hands?"

His lips twitch. "Hardly."

“A tight end?” I smirk, feeling sassy...which is weird. I don’t know who I am right now, but it’s like my mouth has a life of its own, saying things I normally wouldn’t.

Martha-Muffin chokes on her drink at my remark and Skye watches me with glee, clearly excited that I have the attention of someone who is apparently *very* important at Waylon.

I put my hand on my hip. “The question is...why do I need to know?”

“You don’t. All you need to know is I’m the best.”

I suck in a little breath at his arrogance.

A guy walks past us and claps him on the shoulder. “Badass game last week, Mav. Rock on.”

“Thanks, man.” Maverick acknowledges the compliment and lifts his chin, his eyes never straying from mine.

“What position do you play?” I ask. “Quarterback?”

He smirks. “Middle linebacker—defense.”

“Sounds fancy.”

He laughs.

Skye, who’s been eavesdropping unabashedly, sighs with a dreamy expression on her face. “His stats are the best in the country.” She clears her throat. “I-I only know that because my brother is a huge fan, I swear.”

“Hi, Maverick,” Martha-Muffin says as she edges closer to him, nudging me out of the way with her sharp shoulders. “Remember me?”

He focuses on her. “No.”

She glowers. “I was in your dorm room with your roommate last week. You said *hello* to me.”

He shrugs. “A lot of girls come through. I can’t remember them all.”

Oh. My. God. He *is* arrogant, but I like how he just shut her down.

Martha-Muffin's face reddens and she mutters something under her breath, flips around, and flounces off. Good riddance.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Skye is drifting away too, giving me a thumbs-up.

Whatever. I am not going to flirt with this guy...am I?

He's definitely got something about him, something that makes my body buzz. I tilt my chin up, taking in how tall he is. He has to be at least six-four.

His gaze drifts over my face. "You know there's a legend here at Waylon about our famous bonfire party?"

"Oh?"

He smiles, a flash of white on his handsome face. "Legend says the first person you kiss at the party is the one you'll never forget. It might be years later, and still their face is the one you dream about."

"Sounds like hocus-pocus."

He lifts that mesmerizing left eyebrow. "I like to believe in legends—after all, I am one."

I smirk. "Probably a game made up by some frat-boy-slash-jock wanting to kiss all the girls."

He pauses for a moment as if thinking, and then he steps in closer, so close that I can see the varying shades of blue around his pupils. "May I?"

My heart does somersaults.

"May you what?" I ask, my voice low, but I know what he wants. My body is already leaning toward him, wanting it too.

"This." He kisses me, an almost imperceptible touch as he brushes his full lips against mine. The contact of our mouths is electric, sparks of fire skating along my skin.

As if from a distance, I hear someone calling his name. It's a female, and she's pissed.

It's one of the twins probably.

And I'm jealous.

But, I don't look. We pull away, and I stare at him as he stares right back. A stillness settles over the party, although I don't think anything's actually changed. The music is still playing. People are still talking. Beers are being passed around.

Yet...

We're connected.

Two stars in the black velvet sky.

Two ships passing in the night.

Oh, fuck, stop the nonsense, I tell myself.

"What was that?" I ask, my voice breathless.

"That's your first kiss of the bonfire. Now you'll never forget me."

And then, before I can think of a reply, he's gone.

I watch him go back to the twins, frustration coiling inside of me as I exhale.

It would be two years before I kissed him again.

Chapter One

Delaney

It's Valentine's Day evening, and my social life is worse than when I was a brace-faced freshman at William Henry Prep School in Charlotte, North Carolina. At least back then one of the geeks from my math class gave me a tiny heart-shaped box of stale chocolates and a brown teddy bear. All I have this year is a broken heart, a bottle of premium vodka, and an eighties horror movie.

Skye is out having fun, and I'm glad for her. She left the off-campus house we share earlier for a date with her boyfriend, Tyler, and here I sit...languishing in yoga pants and crying into my popcorn.

I send a longing glance at my phone, waiting for it to buzz with a call or text from someone who cares about me...but it remains silent, mocking me as I press myself into the worn brown leather of the sofa. I hate feeling sorry for myself, but sometimes it gets to me that I don't have any family since my Nana—the person who raised me—passed right before I left for college.

God. I'm lonely.

My nose takes a whiff of the blanket that's pulled up to my face, and I swear I still smell leftover hints of my ex's spicy cologne. Alex is a special teams kicker for the football team at Waylon, and we'd been together since we met in a literature class freshman year. He was my first, the person I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with, and for the past year, part of me half-expected him to propose. Instead, he cheated.

I take a sip of Grey Goose straight from the bottle, eyeing it balefully. At least he had great taste in vodka.

I lift the bottle in the air, toasting. "Happy Valentine's Day, Alex, wherever you are. I hope Martha-Muffin can give you

what I couldn't—ideally, the clap.”

Yep, my arch nemesis from freshman year slept with my boyfriend, and the worst part was I'd walked in on them in his dorm room.

Feeling that familiar melancholy of being alone creep in, I turn my attention back to the movie. Eerie, spooky music escalates from the surround sound speakers as a girl runs through a forest, her head twisting as she looks to see if she's being followed. Terror is stamped on her face.

It was on Skye's dare that I chose this particular flick, and part of me knows she really just wants me to be preoccupied on a night when I'm alone.

The popcorn is still warm from the microwave as I pop some in my mouth and chew rather furiously, watching as the heroine on the screen is suddenly accosted by a burly figure with a mask. I scream—even though I knew it was coming—sending fluffy white kernels flying. Han Solo, my cat, stands and hisses at me, his black and white fur sticking straight out. I've upended him from his comfy position on the couch.

“Sorry, little man.”

Screw the dare. I'll take her punishment, which would no doubt be inventive. The last time I lost, she made me stand on a table in the cafeteria and call out, “My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard.”

I scramble for the remote and mute it, wondering if it counts if I watch without the sound on. I *am* watching it, just minus all the bloodcurdling screams and spine-tingling music.

“Give me *Sixteen Candles* or *The Goonies* any freaking day—those are the best of the eighties,” I mutter under my breath as I stare down at Han. “You agree?”

His head cocks ever so slightly. He gets me. I know he does.

I exhale and sit back down, tucking my legs underneath me as I lean my head back against the couch.

Ping!

My phone goes off with a text and I straighten up to retrieve it from the table.

My brow furrows at the unknown number. Usually those are telemarketers or scammers...but it's a local prefix.

I read the text. **Hey, sexy. I'm glad I have a library card because I was checking you out today. Do you have a Band-Aid? Because I scraped my knee falling for you.**

Two things happen at once: I half-giggle and half-snort, causing a coughing fit I quickly recover from. I *was* in the library this morning before my upper level psychology class to work on a paper, but I didn't notice anyone staring at me. Must be my bestie pulling a prank on me with someone else's phone.

I quickly type a response. **Skye? What happened to your date with Tyler?**

It's entirely possible she's feeling sorry for me, has skipped out for a minute to check on me, and is using Tyler's phone. Any minute now she's going to ask if I'm still watching Michael Myers.

Another text comes in. **I'm not on a date and I don't know a Skye. Is she as hot as you?**

Stop messing around, I send. I've had a tiny bit of vodka... okay, a lot.

I'm a dude. Swear to baby Jesus.

My brow wrinkles. Is it possible this isn't Skye? But then who is it?

How did you get this number? I type out.

You put up a listing on the Help Wanted board in the student center a while back. I saw you and got the number. I saw you again today at the library so it must be a sign for us to get together. Wanna hook up, babe?

Babe?

Hook up?

What an assuming ass, I think as mortification shoots through me. No one has answered the listing I put up looking for a male partner to take a salsa class with me. Thankfully, the posting didn't have my name on it (*so embarrassing*), just my phone number, and I've been meaning to take it down, but between working at the library and class, I haven't found the time. I was in a weak place when the idea struck, and now, looking back, it reeks of desperation from a girl who'd recently been cheated on and was lonely.

I glare at the phone as if the jerkwad on the other side can actually see me.

I'm not your personal Tinder, I reply, my fingers flying across the screen. **Go find someone else to harass.**

Nothing comes through for the next fifteen minutes as I stare blindly at the television, not really seeing anything, just fuming, my mind racing through possibilities of who saw me posting the ad. Hundreds of students pass through every day, and it could have been anyone. I think back to my morning study session today at the library, trying to recall if anyone was watching me, but I was hyper-focused (as usual) and kept my head down.

I should probably block this number.

A new text pings.

Hey, look, I'm sorry. This isn't the person with the horrible pick-up lines and offer of sex who first texted you. Those messages were from my asshole friend who took my phone and texted you without my knowledge. I have it back now so we're cool, right? Sorry for the inconvenience and I hope you find a salsa partner. Later.

Finally, a polite text—except for the goodbye part, because I wasn't done talking. I still want to know who these two people are. Part of me wonders if it's Alex, feeling me out, maybe seeing if I've moved on. He has been texting me, trying to engage me in a dialogue, but I've ignored him. This doesn't seem like his style though.

Hold your horses, stalker. Who are you?

Seconds tick by and I can see the dots on the screen indicating he's replying. I'm picturing a loser at a frat house, the first one to fall asleep, and instead of drawing a giant dick on his forehead, they stole his phone and texted random girls.

My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.

I laugh under my breath at the iconic movie reference and part of me relaxes. **Good one**, I text.

You're a fan of *The Princess Bride*?

One of my favorites. I even have a t-shirt with Buttercup and Westley on it, I type, referring to the two main characters.

I'll remember that.

Is that why you're texting me on Valentine's Day? To talk about *The Princess Bride*? Are you lonely? My fingers move quickly, feeling comforted that I'm not the only one who's a romance dud on the holiday of love.

I'm texting you because my friend was a jerk. He doesn't mean to be; he just thinks we should hook up.

Not going to touch that comment.

So where are you right now? Dorm? Frat party? Off-campus strip club? My detective cap is on and I'm determined to figure out who this guy is. My mind goes back to a rather geeky, thin guy who hangs out in the romance section at the library. He's given me a few lingering glances when I happen to walk past him.

I'm in bed, he says.

Alone? I'm being bolder than usual.

Yes. You?

I'm hesitant about responding. After all, he could be a serial killer, but I don't get that vibe, and I trust my instincts.

Just me and my cat, a scary movie, and a bottle of vodka—hell of a way to spend V-Day.

At least two minutes go by—a damn long time in the world of texting—and I wonder if he’s left or grown bored of me. Chewing on my bottom lip, I’m in the middle of chastising myself for revealing as much as I have when a new message comes in.

Is it crazy and weird that we’re talking and you don’t know who I am?

Do you know who I am? I ask, adjusting my cat-eye glasses on my nose. If he saw me put up the ad, he probably does. Waylon is small, with an enrollment of around six thousand, so it’s likely we’ve seen each other or even had a class together.

You’re Delaney, a junior from North Carolina.

My pulse kicks up as I feel my heart beating in my chest, but those are basic facts he could have gotten off my social media.

He sends another text. **Truth: I think you’re gorgeous. We also know each other...sorta.**

He thinks I’m gorgeous? My bruised ego is flattered, and I shoot a look at Han. “Did it just get a little hot in here or is that the vodka talking?” He rolls his eyes and flounces off to the kitchen. “Are you saying I’ve had too much?” I call after him, but he pointedly ignores me by not turning around.

I stare down at my phone, wondering what else to say. I should probably end this, but I feel an odd connection with my new texting partner.

I could talk to a random guy.

I want to.

Do it, Delaney. I mentally dare myself.

Are you still there? he says. **Did I go too far? I tend to do that. I should just apologize in advance for anything I’m about to say or do.**

He hasn’t gone too far. My interest is piqued. **So who are you?**

I’m a badass athlete.

I roll my eyes. **So you play a sport here at Waylon?**

Yes.

Crap. My heart does a little sputter and takes a nosedive—it's likely he knows Alex. The athletic dorm is situated on the west side of campus, and most of the players reside there. Football, baseball, and wrestling take up one side of Byrd Hall, while soccer, volleyball, tennis, and the minor sports occupy the other.

I purse my lips. **Which sport? I've sworn off football for the moment.**

Let's keep that a secret, but if you need a name, you can call me He-Man.

And I'll be She-Ra?

His reply is swift. **Hell no—they were siblings. Pick another name, something that suits you.**

Does He-Man suit you? I type. Do you live at Castle Grayskull? Are you fighting Skeletor?

Damn straight. I kick his ass every day.

I grin. **You're very serious about this. I'm starting to wonder if you might be crazy.**

Just pick.

Princess Leia.

Perfect, he replies. **I'm picturing you with cinnamon buns on your head.**

I giggle. **I'm picturing you as a muscled blond dude with a brain the size of a walnut.**

Don't be fooled by the dumb jock stereotypes.

And you shouldn't be fooled by my nerdy, quiet girl status. I'm a red-blooded woman with needs. God. I can't believe I just typed that. I take another sip of vodka. **What I MEANT to say is I don't do athletes anymore, specifically football players. Okay, that sounded stupid.** Clearly, I need to stop texting.

Nothing comes back from him, and my mind wanders.

Is he a football player? That might explain why he's not telling me his name. The guys on the team have a serious bro code when it comes to not messing with the exes of the other players.

I decide to change the subject. **My roommate dared me to watch a scary movie tonight—alone. I was terrified.**

Do you like dares? he texts.

Yes. It forces me to put myself out there. It feels silly to say, but it's easy to tell him because I don't *know* him. I'm beginning to see why anonymity is attractive.

I hear Han meowing at the back door. He has a litter box in the laundry room, but he's rather manly and likes to go out for an occasional romp around the yard to mark his territory. I like to go with him since my last cat disappeared on me a year ago, leaving me devastated.

Hey, I need to go, I tell my mystery man. **My cat needs me.**

Wait, you said you take dares, right?

Yes.

I dare you to dream about me tonight.

What? Why? I ask, my heart rate picking up a beat.

Because I'll dream about you.

Oh. I bite my lip and chew on it. **Like a sexy dream?**

Is that what you want?

Yes.

My body comes alive, every sense on alert. It feels like forever since someone kissed me or made my stomach feel fluttery inside.

I type out, **I need more details if I want to picture you in my head, especially since I don't know who you are.**

You know I'm an athlete, I'm blond, and I like to swing my sword around.

I giggle. **Where are we in the dream? Give me a setting. I need more.**

A few moments go by before he finally responds. **At a frat party. Everyone else is downstairs and you and I are upstairs in an empty bathroom.**

Seriously?

This is my fantasy, Princess Leia. Just listen.

Fine. What are we doing? The room feels warmer, and my fingers are sweaty as I type the words. I picture myself with a dark shadowy male in a tiny cramped bathroom. His hands cup my face as he stares down at me, his thumb tracing over my lips. He kisses me on the neck, sending lightning bolts of sensation across my skin.

My body heats to the point that I squirm around on the couch, fingers hovering over my phone.

What do you think we're doing? he texts.

Kissing?

More.

Shit. **Second base?**

More.

Home run? I send after a slight pause, feeling lightheaded. This has escalated and I'll probably regret it tomorrow, but for right now, I don't care.

We're going at it against the wall, Princess Leia—hard. I like it hard.

I picture it, the small bathroom hot with our proximity. My body arches toward his and he barely has his jeans shoved down yet he's inside me, sliding in and out as I moan...

Shit. This has gotten totally out of control. The feisty girl-power woman in me is rebelling at the suggestion of him taking me hard, but...*holy smokes*, I like it. My heart thunders.

Are you still there?

I type, **I have to go.**

As you wish.

With a flurry of motion, I turn my phone off and toss it down on the couch. He-Man or Badass Athlete or whatever he calls himself is trouble. I stare at my phone for a few more beats before dashing to the kitchen to drink down a glass of ice-cold water.

Chapter Two

Delaney

I am crazy late for class as I jog out of the student center coffee shop. Wearing my black fitted North Face jacket and carrying my huge backpack, I'm a bit unsteady on my feet. I clutch a large coffee in one hand and a donut in the other; both are essential, sweet sustenance and the best part of my morning, especially since I have to head to the farthest corner of campus for my class.

My head is bent down as I head out the glass doors, my gaze catching on a silver Porsche as it screeches to a halt in a primo parking spot near the entrance.

Ugh. It's Alex, and I do not want to see him.

My fists clench as I take a step back under the shadow of the portico, hoping I can skirt over to the right to miss him before he sees me. Even though he's constantly sending texts asking to meet up, I'm not ready. He's even shown up at my door a few times, but I either don't answer or I have Skye tell him I'm not there.

I'm the unluckiest person alive because before I can turn away, his brown eyes find my face. He pauses, his cheeks reddening. Maybe it's from the cold that's still hovering this Monday morning, or perhaps he's embarrassed. He freaking should be. I recall how he gave me a promise ring on our one-year anniversary, saying he couldn't wait to make it a real engagement ring. Obviously, his "promise" meant nothing.

He throws a tentative hand up as if he wants to wave, but then it falls flat and rests against his leg.

Dammit. I can't deal with this confrontation right now. Catching him in the act nearly broke me.

I flip around and barge down the path to get away from him.

His voice follows me, echoes of a timbre that used to send shivers down my spine. “Hey, Delaney! Wait up.”

No. No matter how much I want to go off on him, I’m not stopping. My Converse eat up the sidewalk as I keep my head down and stare at my shoelaces. *Just keep going, just keep going—*

Smack.

I run straight into another body, one that smells faintly of something I can’t put my finger on, something...exotic and dark.

All I catch in that brief moment is that he’s tall, maybe six-four, with a chest of steel. My coffee sails through the air and lands upside down in the landscaping that lines the walk. I curse. I hadn’t even taken a good long sip yet because it was too hot.

Then, just when I think I’ve managed to keep my donut safe, my feet get tangled and I stumble again into the blond Viking, pressing my donut into his broad chest.

“Dammit,” is the gruff word that comes out of him as his hands reach out to my shoulders. His touch is firm and steadying without overpowering me, as if he’s completely aware of his strength and I’m merely a wisp in his grasp—well, maybe not a wisp. I’m five-ten, and I can hold my own around a big guy.

“Could you watch where you’re going, please?” he says, a flare of annoyance in his tone.

“You’re the one who plowed into me,” I snap back. This is not true, but I’m angry.

I lift my head and meet piercing blue eyes that make me go hot all over. Clear and warm, they have a hint of gray around the iris, giving them a steely look. He blinks as he takes me in, raking his eyes over my messy bun, bulky coat, and leggings. I am not dressed to impress, my face bare of makeup save for quick swipes of lip gloss and mascara, my eyebrows in serious need of waxing. I tuck a strand of pale blonde hair that has fallen out of my bun behind my ear, groaning inwardly. Leave

it to me to not only see my ex but run into the unattainable and enigmatic Maverick Monroe immediately after.

My first memory of him is freshman year at the fall bonfire party. He showed up with twins, one on each arm, but somehow he ended up kissing *me*, claiming some legend about the person you kiss at your first bonfire at Waylon being the one person you never forget.

Yeah right.

He had forgotten about me—obviously—and I'd moved on and met Alex, who at the time was sweet and kind, not the cheating asshole he is now.

In the background, I hear Alex's voice from behind me, calling my name, but the warrior in front of me has all my attention. Maverick is the one football player our team couldn't live without. All hard muscle and strength, our defense is legendary in the Southeastern Conference, and it's largely because of him, the hottest jock ever who thinks he's the best thing since hairless cats. Maybe he is. I wouldn't know because I don't really know him. Sure, I know he has washboard abs and shoulders that make you bite your lip, but I don't know a thing about his personal life.

I'm not his type.

Sadly, he *is* my type, right down to his tight jeans, Converse, and tight black shirt that accentuates every indentation in his chest. Why isn't he wearing a coat in February? Probably too tough.

"You okay?" he asks, his gaze drifting over me.

I clear my throat. "Yeah."

"I suppose you're on your way to class." He checks his watch. "Which starts in five minutes. Looks like we're both going to be late. At least you didn't get any coffee on you." He smiles, a flash of white teeth peeking through full, pouty lips.

I tell my eyes to stop looking at him—because football guys can't be trusted, *dammit*—but there are three things my brain can't help but notice: Mexican food, Star Wars, and a tightly muscled athlete...and donuts. So, four.

I nod. “Yeah, you sit with your fan girls in the middle of the auditorium. I sit in the back.” I sigh as he plucks the donut off his chest. “Sorry for bumping into you. I was in a hurry to get there, I guess.”

“No worries. It gives us a chance to talk.”

What? *Why does he want to talk to me?*

“About what?” I ask, but he doesn’t answer me.

Instead, he stares down at the pink and purple sprinkles and edible glitter that dot his shirt. “That’s a lot of sugar on my shirt. That can’t be good for you.”

“I...sorry. The sprinkles are a weakness, and I can’t resist getting them. I always say I’m not going to because they have to be at least another fifty calories, but in the end, they’re just so pretty.” I point to the squashed donut. “That particular one is called the Unicorn because it has every kind of sprinkle in the entire bakery on it.” I make the sign of the cross. “Rest in peace, sweet donut.”

I continue babbling about the different flavors of donuts as I hurriedly wipe at his shirt with my hands, flinging bits of dough to the sidewalk while secretly calculating if I have enough time to dash back in to grab another one.

His chest is—unsurprisingly—hard as iron, his pecs solid as my fingers fuss over him, and suddenly I’m feeling shy and self-conscious because I’ve touched him without permission. Sure, we briefly touched lips two years ago, but that seems like a lifetime ago.

I drop my hands to my sides and our eyes collide again.

A nervous sneeze threatens to erupt, and I push it down, my fingers clenching the straps of my backpack. *Don’t do it, Delaney!*

He clears his throat. “I was wondering if you wanted—”

Alex appears next to me. “Delaney! Are you deaf? I’ve been calling your name and you didn’t even turn around.” His eyes bounce from me to Maverick, taking in the donut, which is still in Maverick’s hand, along with my forlorn coffee cup

sitting prettily atop an ornamental bush. “What happened?” he questions, his square face concerned, his eyes taking in my face slowly, lingering on my lips. He’s a handsome guy, lean and wiry, with soft eyes, auburn hair, and an easy smile that used to make me melt.

My entire body tightens. We haven’t spoken in a month, and now here he is, chasing me down across campus and looking at me like I’m a piece of candy.

“Aren’t you even going to talk to me?” Alex hitches up his backpack and takes another step toward me.

Maverick turns his gaze to me and throws up an eyebrow, as if prompting me to respond. *He’s rather desperate*, his expression seems to say.

I’d rather eat snails than talk to him, I say back with my face. I’m not sure he gets my body language message, but I could have sworn his lips twitched.

Either way, he says nothing, just slides his gaze from me to Alex.

I’m a bundle of nerves, and most of it has to do with Alex chasing after me, but some of it is because bumping into Maverick has me thinking back to Badass Athlete and what *he’s* doing right now. What if Maverick *is* Badass Athlete? They’re both blond and athletic...but what if Badass Athlete is just a tennis player? Or one of those volleyball dudes? There’s a ton of them.

Alex takes my hand, and because I’m so surprised that he’s touching me, I let him. “Look, babe, I don’t want to have this conversation in front of everyone”—he sends some side-eye toward Maverick, who hasn’t moved an inch—“but do you want to meet me at Pluto’s for coffee after your class? I know you love that place.”

Babe? Ugh.

“You asked what happened—we bumped into each other,” Maverick says rather abruptly as his eyes go from me to Alex, talking as if everything is perfectly normal. He’s trying to change the topic, and I appreciate it. Maybe he reads the

desperation on my face. “Actually, I was on my phone—an emergency with my sister, but everything’s okay. I was looking down, and I guess Delaney was too.” He shrugs. “Unfortunately, she lost her breakfast in the process, and I lost my phone.”

“Did you drop it?” I ask, checking him out and not seeing one in his hands.

He nods, and it’s the perfect reason to immediately retract my hand from Alex’s and bend down to see if I can find it. Maverick does the same, and our shoulders bump together as we pillage through the azaleas.

“Thank you,” I whisper to him as we scan the sidewalk.

“For what?” he whispers back.

“For defusing that...moment.”

“Ah—you’re still into him.”

I scowl. “No, I’m not.”

“Then why are you so flustered?”

“I’m not,” I huff out under my breath. Scrambling around in the bushes is not the place to explain the dynamics of my relationship with Alex.

“You are. Is it because you bumped into me?” A small grin curls his lips, and I’m reminded of the arrogant football player I met at the bonfire.

I give him a glare. “No. I barely know you.”

“We can change that.” He cocks an eyebrow.

Oh.

Well then.

“I’m not one of your groupies. I don’t do random hook-ups.”

“Maybe I’m just trying to get to know you.”

I give him a *get real* look. “Why? We barely talk.”

His gaze flicks back to Alex, who’s also looking for the phone a few feet away. “Now that you’re not dating Alex...”

I let out a triumphant shout when I find the phone and hold it up over my head. Alex is glowering at us, and I think he has been since I pulled my hand out of his. I ignore him.

“Found it, and thankfully it didn’t get wet from my coffee.” Maverick and I stand together and do a little handoff where he gives me the crushed donut and I give him his phone. Our fingers graze, giving me a shiver of heat. I stick my hand in my coat pocket.

Alex touches my arm and shoots an annoyed look between Maverick and me. He’s holding my empty coffee cup, retrieved from the shrubbery, and he also grabbed my small desk calendar, which slipped out of my backpack because I left it half-unzipped in my rush to get out of the house this morning.

“Here, don’t you need this?” He waves it at me.

I give him a tight nod and shove it into my bag without looking at him.

“Are you okay? No bumps or bruises?” Alex asks, running his hands over my shoulders.

“No, I’m fine.” I straighten up and give my chin a little hitch to look at him. He’s not as tall as Maverick, about six-one.

A built-up sigh I hadn’t known I’d been holding in comes out, long and full of pent-up emotion. So what if Maverick is here, listening? It’s not like the entire campus doesn’t already know why we broke up. Gossip spreads like wildfire.

“What do you want, Alex? I have a class to get to.”

He stiffens as he glances briefly at Maverick, who is curiously *still* standing here. “I just wanted to see you, and...say hello. Now that football is over, I thought we could get together and talk about everything. I never had the chance to tell you I’m sorry in person for...everything.”

An image of him and Martha-Muffin in his bed flashes in my head. “You mean for cheating on me.” *Get it right, asshole.*

Alex closes his eyes briefly then takes my elbow and gently pulls me aside.

With a sigh, I let him. Maybe if he can say what he needs to, he'll stop bothering me.

"Don't be like this, Delaney," he says in a lowered tone. "Muffin was a one-time thing. I swear I've never cheated on you before."

My heart aches at the memory. I shake my head. "You...you are not the person I thought you were. We're over, Alex."

He bites his lip, a pleading look in his eyes. "I just want things to go back to the way they were."

I take a deep breath, the urge to flee intense. "I have to get to class now."

I turn back around, and Maverick is still standing over near the hedge, his face concerned as he watches us. He calls my name as I stomp past, but I keep going.

I just need away from both of them. Football guys can suck it.

I imagine both of their eyes on me and barely resist throwing up a one-finger salute, but those cocky athletes aren't worth the energy it would take.

Chapter Three

Delaney

Being an introvert comes with tells. Sometimes I giggle uncontrollably, but more often than not, I sneeze when I'm nervous. When I'm faced with a situation that tilts my world on its axis, a tingling starts up in my nose, itching and building pressure until finally I sneeze. Senior year of high school, I got caught skipping school, and when the principal called me into his office, I sneezed so many times tears poured down my face. He let me go after stuffing a box of Kleenex into my hands. Sometimes it works in my favor and I can use it as an excuse to make a quick exit, but sometimes it can just be downright annoying.

Like now.

“May I sit here?” a deep voice says from behind me.

My body knows who it is before my brain does, and right away, I suppress the pre-sneeze sensation by inhaling sharply and holding my breath for five seconds.

I slip my glasses down a few notches as I look over to see Maverick staring at me. It's been a couple of days since the donut tragedy, and we've passed each other in the hallway a few times. Once I thought he said something, but I'm too awkward to stop and say, *Hey, did you just say something to me?* so I just ignored him.

We're inside the auditorium for our psych class, and my hands flutter around the desk next to me. “Do whatever you want. Be prepared, though—the lights are rather dim back here. Wouldn't want you to fall asleep.”

Somehow he manages to settle his large frame into the cushioned seat and reclines it back, him and his long jean-clad legs taking up all the space next to me—and the air.

“Ah, I could never fall asleep here.” He shoots me a grin, and I mentally put up my shields. *Don't get sucked into the hotness.*

I nod, making small talk. “Yeah, it’s an interesting class.”

“And you’re in it.”

My lashes flutter and I can’t bring myself to look at him. I just can’t. A normal person would ask what he meant by that, but this is me. I just clear my throat and scoot my leg over a little to give him more room.

Just be cool, Delaney.

“What are you drawing?” he asks, leaning over my shoulder.

I stop the doodling I’ve been doing in my notebook. The heat from his body is intoxicating, and I swallow. “Han Solo.”

His lips twitch. “Hate to break it to you, Buttercup, but Han Solo isn’t a cat. He’s the captain of the Millennium Falcon.”

“He’s also a scoundrel and a smuggler,” I add. “And who gave you permission to call me Buttercup?”

He waves that off and says, “I know he’s a scoundrel—it’s what makes him endearing. He’s a badass and also has the best friend ever, a seven-foot-tall Wookiee with a gun. He’s my favorite Star Wars character ever, next to Yoda.”

Maverick likes Star Wars? I just assumed he sat around and watched recordings of football games while guzzling beer with a girl on either side of him.

I nod and point to my doodle. “Named my cat after him, Han Solo #2.”

“What happened to #1? Killed by a light saber?”

I laugh. “I hope she ran off with a tomcat. She’s probably living in a tree house with her baby kittens right now.” I don’t tell him I cried for a month when she disappeared. I don’t actually know what happened to her, but imagining her with a sweet little family is the vision I like to keep close to my heart.

“Living the dream,” he says, and I flick my eyes at him. He’s hard to look at full-on, but I do, letting our eyes meet, my green and his pale blue. Almost iridescent, like a glittering

opal, they contrast vividly with his tanned skin. His chin is firm and square with the hint of a cleft in the middle, and his hair is a mixture of dark blond with streaks of gold, painted by the sun from all those days of practicing football. I can't see his scar from this angle but I know it's there, on the other side of his face, that one little imperfection.

A slight smile curves his lips as his eyes warm, and I seize up, realizing I've been staring about ten seconds too long. That kind of stare means you either want to kill someone or sleep with them, and I've just crossed that line.

"Delaney?"

He says my name softly, and my mouth dries up as a shot of electricity shoots straight to my core.

Good grief, ignore this weird hormonal reaction you have to Maverick.

Right. Now.

"You okay?" he asks.

He thinks I'm an idiot.

"Fine, totally fine. How's it going? How's football? Oh, yeah, it's over...but you're still practicing, right? To get ready for next year and all? Can't believe we'll be seniors. Also can't believe you decided to stay another year when you could have been drafted." I'm rambling and my voice sounds breathy. I gulp in a deep inhalation to steady myself.

He scratches his head, a bemused expression on his face. "You're funny."

"I don't talk much, but when I do, I make the most of it."

He laughs. "I stayed because I wouldn't have been picked early enough yet. I need to build my stats if I want the best deal. I have a buddy who went early and his contract sucked. I have another friend who waited it out and got a two million dollar deal."

"It's all about the money."

"Especially if you've never had it," he adds.

Interesting. Maybe Maverick didn't grow up with much. I think back to what I know about him, and I realize it's basically nothing, except that he's from Magnolia. I stare down at my doodle. I'm not rich like Alex, but I do okay with the money Nana left me. I own the house Skye and I live in, and I don't have to work a full-time job. Thankfully, I'm at WU on an art scholarship.

I glance back up at him. "So...why is the big guy on campus sitting in the back of the auditorium with me? Isn't there a football groupie somewhere crying because you aren't next to her?"

"Because I can." He pauses. "And you aren't dating Alex anymore."

"What does that mean?" I can't believe I asked, but something about him has me feeling reckless.

He gets a tight look on his face. "Just an observation. You've been with him since freshman year, and everyone thought you guys were the perfect couple."

"I didn't think you cared—you know, with the twins and all."

"You remember the bonfire." It's not a question.

"Kinda hard to forget."

His eyes find mine. "I gave you your first kiss at the bonfire. Legend says you'll never forget me."

I tilt my head. "What's your name again?"

He laughs, but soon a cloud seems to settle on the planes of his chiseled face. "Alex isn't over you."

"Why do you say that?"

His shoulders shift, the movement barely perceptible yet giving off a visceral impression of suppressed power.

"He's my teammate, and I see how he looks at you. He wasn't happy to see us standing together on Monday, and that was just an accidental run-in. Imagine how he'd react if there really *was* something between us." His eyes slide over to my face. "He'd probably freak out and get pissed at me, and it would

definitely screw up his game, and then *poof*, there goes our chance at a championship next year.” He gives me a teasing look. “Kickers are rather emotional...”

I wrinkle my nose. “Regardless if any of that’s true or not, I do what I want.”

He studies me intently. “So you’re dating again?”

“Why do you care anyway?” I ask.

“Hey, Mav, aren’t you going to come sit with us?” It’s a sleek-looking girl with dark hair and a lot of hot pink lipstick speaking from behind the railing that lines the back of the auditorium. Miss Brunette trails her finger along his shoulder, giving him a soft caress.

She sends a half-smile my way, clearly not worried about me being any kind of competition. I don’t reciprocate.

He flicks his gaze at her, showing even white teeth as he smiles at her, but it doesn’t ring true. They chat about class, and I’m fascinated, watching his reaction to everything she says, taking in the way he nods, the non-interest in his gaze. His eyes find mine as she rambles on and on about some big off-campus mixer between the frat houses, and he smiles ever so slightly.

He isn’t into her, and I know it.

I don’t know how I’m able to read him, but it’s as if we have a connection and I *get* him.

She walks off, hips swaying as she does another little wave over her shoulder.

“You sleep with her?” I ask casually.

He shrugs. “A few times last year.”

Ah. “You’re just a playboy, aren’t you?”

“I’ve had relationships.”

I narrow my eyes at him, feeling prickly. “Yeah? What’s the longest one?”

He cocks a smile. “Dated a sweet girl back in high school for a year...” His voice trails off. “Then things got messed up and I came to Waylon. Football’s been my muse ever since.”

“Doesn’t that get, I don’t know, lonely?”

He stares at me. “Is this an interview?”

“No. I don’t even care.” Total lie. I’m dying to know the scoop on Maverick.

A gruff laugh comes out of him. “I just know when a girl’s a keeper and when she isn’t. She wasn’t.”

“Ah, a keeper—I see.”

“Yeah, you know, the one girl who makes your heart pound like crazy every time she walks into the room.” He’s looking at me with an intensity that makes me breathless.

Does he mean me?

Don’t be ridiculous.

Just then the professor enters and begins his lecture, so I pull out my iPad to bring up the class website and get to work.

I try really hard to ignore how close Maverick is sitting, how his leg occasionally brushes against mine...and I remind myself that getting interested in a cocky-as-hell football player is the last thing I need right now.

Chapter Four

Maverick

It's the same dream again. I try to pull myself out of it, but it's no use.

Maybe the outcome will be different this time.

Rain slaps at the car and Def Leppard blares on the radio as my father drives our old van. My mother yells at him, her mouth moving in slow motion, the sound disembodied, as if my brain doesn't want to hear her words. I look over at my little sister and curl my hand into hers. She's scared, and I have to protect her.

Dread snakes down my spine when a diesel truck's horn blares at us as we fly past it, our headlights reflecting off his grill.

It's coming.

My body tenses...waiting.

Just around this hairpin curve.

I have to stop him.

I yell at Dad to slow down.

I scream at Mom to shut up.

But I never say it in time.

There's a deer in the road, its brown face turning to look straight into our headlights.

There's a horrible metallic sound, like tin foil wrapping around a piece of meat, and then stifling silence, thick with smoke and fumes. Gas...I smell gas and oil, and it makes me frantic. I'm just seventeen, but I've seen movies—I know cars blow up. *Maybe it would be better if it did*, I think to myself in my dream. If we all just died, everything would be okay.

No, I tell myself. *Get out. Live.*

I touch my skin, feeling glass. Blood covers my fingers. Dangling from the seat belt, somehow I fight to break free and manage to crawl out of the mangled heap. Mom lies on the pavement, her body twisted like a pretzel.

I hear a whimper and find Raven, a broken doll, her eyes shut as I turn her over—

God, make it stop. Fuck!

I jerk myself awake, my body in a full sweat. Rubbing my hands through my hair, I glance at the clock and exhale heavily. It's five o'clock in the morning, and there's no way in hell I can go back to sleep after that nightmare.

My bedroom door opens, and it's Ryker, one of my roommates and my best friend. We live in an apartment-style suite in Byrd Hall, also known as the athletic dorm. He squints at me with bleary red eyes. "Dude? Heard you thrashing around—you all right?"

I scrub my face one final time and get out of bed, willing my heart rate to slow down. "Same old shit."

"Car wreck?" He leans on the doorjamb and gives me a concerned once-over. He's our quarterback, a big dude with a heart of gold, and he knows the fucked-up childhood I lived through.

I nod quickly. "Every time February rolls around, it brings it all back. It's like I'm in the dream and I keep thinking I can stop it from happening, but I never do."

He nods, studying my face. "It doesn't help that you're worried about Raven. Your dad needs to get his shit straight."

A muscle ticks in my jaw. Just thinking about him makes my blood boil. He's lost his latest job as a mechanic...again.

"How's she doing?" he asks me.

"As best she can."

A sigh comes from him, and I know he's got an opinion. "You're wearing yourself out going to see her every afternoon. Hell, it was midnight before you got in last night. Between practice and her...something's got to give."

My mouth compresses. “I don’t have a choice.”

Raven suffered a traumatic brain injury, also known as a TBI, in the accident. Now, at nineteen, she drags her right leg and has speech issues, and don’t even get me started on the loss of cognitive ability and emotional outbursts. Worry tugs at me as I think about everything she’s lost.

Everything I lost.

She’s been staying with my dad temporarily for the past few weeks since we removed her from the state-funded group home where she’d lived since the car wreck three years ago.

I never liked the home with its tiny rooms and smell of death, and when she showed up with unexplained bruises on her skin a few weeks ago, I knew right away that I had to get her out of there. I removed her and placed her with my dad, but she needs *somewhere* besides his trailer. She needs stability and a routine and a regular nursing staff to check on her every single day, not just the one her disability helps pay for that only comes out three days a week.

If only I had known about the abuse before I’d signed the paperwork to not go into the draft early. I let out a deep breath. Now it’s too late, and I have to wait until next year.

“You should talk to Coach Al—maybe he can help.” He’s saying what he always does, but Ryker doesn’t get it. No one does.

“Help with what?” I can’t help but be annoyed with him. “Going out to my dad’s trailer and cooking dinner? Helping her get in the shower? Getting her ready for bed? Get real, man. I need *money*, and no one affiliated with football or Waylon can do that because it would be an infraction with the NCAA. I can’t accept any compensation or donations, remember? Coach can’t even buy me a fucking candy bar. If they think any kind of money or benefits changed hands—for anything—I’ll be out of a career in the NFL. Those are the goddamn rules.”

“Stupid rules,” he mutters. “If you weren’t such a damn fine player...”

Yeah, tell me about it.

“I’m cool, okay. Things will work out,” I say with a lightness I’m not feeling, playing off my worry. I show him my fists, which are rough and red from hitting the punching bag at Carson’s Gym, an off-campus facility I’ve been sparring at for extra cardio. “I work out my frustrations this way.”

He shakes his head. “You always get all squirrely on me this time of year. Do me a favor and get laid, or ask that girl out.”

“What girl?”

He sends me an *are you kidding me?* look. “Dude, don’t even pretend.”

I ignore him, grab my socks out of the drawer, and slide them on while he watches me like a mother hen.

“And we need to talk about this fight thing, man. I’m worried.” His voice has lowered and he’s whispering, and I assume he doesn’t want the chick in his bedroom to hear.

I pause. I confessed to him last week that a casino owner, Leslie Brock, was at the gym where I spar and offered me a flat fee if I would box another college football player at his casino. No one would ever know, and it would be enough money to get Raven set up somewhere.

“If anyone finds out, *that* will ruin your fucking career. Look at Michael Vick—went to jail just for financing a dog fighting ring.”

I groan. We’ve had this conversation. “No one’s getting arrested, and Vick was running a million-dollar operation with illegal gambling, plus he killed the dogs that refused to fight. I’m not gambling or killing animals for sport. I’d just be fighting for money.”

That said, it is risky as hell, and I haven’t decided if I’m going through with it.

His lips flatten. “You really don’t know what this guy is planning. Who the hell knows if it’s even legal? I can see it now: you’ll be wearing an orange jumpsuit *and* taking it up the ass.”

I snort. “Someone else would be my bitch.”

He huffs, letting out a sigh of frustration. “He owns a casino, and that shit will blow up the NCAA rules.”

I stop getting dressed and give him a long look. We’ve been friends since freshman year when we met on the field, so by now I’ve known him long enough to see that he needs reassuring, just like he does when I slap him on the back and tell him his arm is fucking golden and he’s going to take us to a championship next year.

He might be the quarterback, but I’m the glue that holds our defense together, the glue he needs.

I push out a grin even though I don’t feel like it. “Dude, I’m not getting arrested. Next year is going to be our year for a championship, and there’s no fucking way I’d jeopardize that.”

Except when it comes to my sister.

He nods, the scowl lifting, revealing his All-American face that is usually lit up with a permanent grin. “I knew you’d make the right decision. You know if you ever need any money, I can maybe see if one of my relatives has some extra cash. It’s a long shot, but—”

My pride jacks its head up. I was the recipient of a lot of handouts growing up, and I never want to revisit that. “No, I’m cool. I’m making it.”

“Ryker, where’d you go?” comes the sleepy voice of the jersey chaser in his bed.

I arch my brow at him, recognizing the nasally whine even with a wall between us. “Is that Muffin? Seriously? Don’t tell her shit. Her mouth is bigger than your ass.” I pause. “I thought she was doing Alex now?”

I’ve never been with her, but half the team has. A bit of a schemer, she’s never gotten over the fact that I turned her down cold freshman year when she snuck into my room one night and tried to crawl in bed with me.

Ryker shakes his head. “Apparently that was a one-time thing. Alex is probably still in love with you know who.” He cocks

an eyebrow and I know he's waiting for me to comment about Delaney, but I don't—not going there. Yeah, I'm interested in her, always have been, but she *is* my teammate's ex, and that's touchy.

“*Rykeeerrrrr*, I need you, big man,” she coos from the other room, her voice making a weird throaty sound.

I suppress a laugh. “Sounds like you're being paged, bro, and FYI, she's looking for a paycheck, so instead of worrying about me fighting, maybe worry about Muffin pulling a fast one on you. Wrap it when you tap it.”

“You're just trying to change the subject,” he mumbles.

I've finished dressing so I grab my shoes and shove them on. Once I'm ready, I put on my orange and blue Waylon Wildcats cap and jog past him into the small living area we share with two other players. A quick glance tells me their doors are still shut and I haven't woken them up. *Good.*

He follows me and stands there glaring, concern on his face. “Where you going?”

“For a run.” I chug down a bottle of Gatorade from the fridge in the kitchenette.

“At five in the morning? It's still dark—you might get run over.” He's got an obstinate look on his face.

“I'll stick to the sidewalks and areas with streetlights.”

“At least wear pants. It's cold as shit out there.”

I huff out a laugh. “Dude, are you sure you aren't a girl?”

He shrugs. “Just worry about you is all.”

“Bye, Mom,” I say sarcastically as I head out the door.

Chapter Five

Delaney

He-Man: Are you over your ex?

Me: Why?

He-Man: Just curious. Do you miss him?

Me: Sometimes. But every day is better.

He-Man: You just have to get your groove back. I dare you to go to the library and shout out that Princess Leia is a badass.

Me: What? No!

He-Man: I thought you couldn't turn down a dare.

Me: How will you know if I go through with it?

He-Man: Oh, I'll be there watching. What time should I show up?

Me: Dammit. Tomorrow at 8:00 PM. BTW, I hate you. ☺

I smile, feeling good as I think about today's text convo with He-Man. We've been texting on and off for the past week, just little messages here and there. He now knows I can sing every word to "Baby Got Back", and I know he can tie a cherry stem with his tongue. I admit, I spent a few hours picturing that in my head last night.

He hasn't brought up the whole *I dare you to dream about me* comment, and neither have I.

It's Sunday night as I park my Prius at the local Piggly Wiggly and head across the parking lot. I've come to the second grocery store past campus, mostly because I don't want to run into anyone while wearing yoga pants and a sweatshirt with no makeup on. I'm just about to pat myself on the back for not seeing anyone, but that all goes to hell when I'm almost to the

door and see Martha-Muffin with one of her sorority girlfriends at the self-checkout near the entrance.

Part of me considers just turning around and leaving. I can always come back later, but once Monday arrives, I tend to be overwhelmed with classes and my job at the library.

Don't let her get the best of you, Delaney.

With my head down, reading the grocery list on my phone, I fortify myself with a mental pep talk and walk through the sliding glass doors.

Don't make eye contact, I tell myself, but before I realize it, I'm glaring right at her. She looks up, catches my eye, and sends me a sly smile, lashes batting.

Our dislike of each other is palpable and always has been. Skye claims she's intimidated and threatened by me because somehow I managed to land a football player as a boyfriend freshman year, and all she got was an STD.

She's wearing her usual, something ridiculous and ill-suited for the cold weather: tall Uggs and a pair of denim shorts lined with lace. Of course, her face is expertly made up, all the way down to the arched eyebrows she probably watched some two-hour YouTube video on how to make.

She finishes checking out and pushes her cart straight over to me, her pert little nose practically twitching with excitement. "Well, well, if it isn't Delaney Shaw." Her gaze sweeps over me, lingering on my baggy Waylon hoodie. "Here to raid the ice cream freezer? Just be careful you don't eat the whole gallon."

I stiffen. As a matter of fact, I do have chocolate ice cream on my list, but it'll be a cold day in hell before I tell her that.

"Don't let me keep you from your Mensa meeting," I say before moving to walk around her.

I've gotten a few feet away when she calls out after me, almost tauntingly. "I can't believe you're being so rude, especially since I haven't seen you in weeks." I cringe, knowing she's referring to the night I caught her with Alex.

I turn back around, knowing I shouldn't, but I just can't stop myself.

She puts a hand on her hip. "Look, you don't have to be so upset about Alex. He's an *athlete*. They screw around—it's what they do."

My stomach churns at the imagery her words bring up, and I feel the blood draining from my face.

Her friend tugs on Martha-Muffin's arm, ushering her out the door, and I stand here for a full five seconds just breathing, trying to get myself under control.

I make my way over to the produce aisle and walk around, not really seeing anything, my heart heavy as I think about Alex and everything we lost.

On an impulse, I pull my phone out of my bag and send a text to my mystery man.

Paging He-Man. I miss you. Where are you? Not that you care, but I'm staring at cherries at the Piggly Wiggly and thinking of you. It's been a shit day. Shit week. Shit month. Just ran into the girl my ex cheated on me with. Need to vent. Need a cigarette...or I would if I smoked.

He replies immediately, and I want to shout with glee. **Awkward. Want me to kick her ass?**

Yes.

Done. I'll be there in five.

A laugh comes out of me, and for some reason, seeing Martha-Muffin doesn't have nearly the punch it did a minute ago.

No! I'm just kidding. Plus, she's gone already. Hey, can I ask you a personal question?

Shoot, he replies.

Do YOU sleep with those groupies who hang all over athletes? You know the ones—they've had more loads than a washing machine but they're hot so all the guys want a spin?

Uh...how many loads are we talking?

Of course he sleeps with them. He calls himself “Badass Athlete”, and what red-blooded male is going to turn down what’s offered?

He-Man, you’re disappointing me.

Truth: I haven’t been with a girl in months. I’m turning them down left and right.

You’re so full of yourself.

True, he says. But I am the best.

Best at what? Football? Volleyball? Baseball?

Why are you turning them down? I ask.

I’ve been waiting on you.

WHAT?

Is he kidding? Is it the truth? He never replies, even after I linger around the produce, waiting to see those three little dots that mean he’s responding.

They never appear, and once again I’m overcome with embarrassment at my neediness and lack of male attention. *Screw it.* I stick my phone in my purse and head to the magazine section to pick out a new Cosmo. I move on from there and hit up the meat department. Several minutes later, I’m lifting a large container of ground beef into my cart when I hear a deep male voice behind me.

“Didn’t know you liked that much meat, Delaney.”

I stop in my tracks.

I turn to see Maverick standing behind me, wearing low-slung jeans, a tight t-shirt, and a grin. We’ve been sitting together all week in class, and it’s been pure torture. We make small talk about the weather and football, but underneath is a current of electricity that I do my best to ignore. Maybe he’s ignoring it too.

His gaze brushes over me as if he’s undressing me, and a tingling sensation tickles my nose. I can’t stop it, sneezing once, twice, three times before I clench my hands together and calm myself.

I'm digging for a tissue in my bag when he says in his southern drawl, "You okay there?"

Sucking in a breath to stop the next one, I hold up a finger for him to give me a minute, and he seems to understand. It would be better if he just moved away.

He takes my packages from me and sets them down in my cart. It's a thoughtful gesture, and I think he does it because he knows he makes me feel out of sorts.

He's just standing there, patiently waiting for me to speak.

"You make me sneeze," I finally say.

"I hope you can find the antidote or we won't be able to hang out together."

"It's worse when I'm surprised by someone, and you're always sneaking up on me." Not exactly true, but I'm making up all kinds of excuses.

"Is it because you think I'm hot, Delaney?"

"Doesn't everyone think you're amazing and wonderful and hot? Been there, done that with a football player, and not doing it again because all it got me was a broken heart."

He rubs at the scruff on his beautifully chiseled jawline. "We're not all cheaters, Delaney."

"I'm not buying it."

He gives me a serious look. "Challenge accepted."

"What challenge?"

"Proving to you that I'm not like anyone you've ever met."

"And how are you going to do that?" I cock my hip and lean against my cart, trying hard to be nonchalant, but it's hard as hell with six feet four inches of solid muscle running his gaze over you.

"You can start by hanging out with me."

"We do...in class."

"No, more than that." He thinks on it, his top teeth chewing on his bottom lip a little. "Definitely somewhere with a lot of

other people.”

“And why is that?”

He sweeps his gaze over me. “I think we both know what’s going to happen if we’re alone.”

Oh. My. God. He is so infuriatingly arrogant that I can’t even...

“I’m not interested in you like that.” Total lie. My body definitely is; it’s my head that’s rebelling.

“Uh-huh.” He grins widely.

My eyes flare. “I’m not.”

“Are you denying what’s going on between us?” His blue eyes are hot as he stares at me, and I might have to step into the ice cream freezer to cool off.

I swallow. “Yes. Flat-out denying.”

He shakes his head and laughs a little, his face so self-assured and freaking confident that I want to scream...or kiss him. *What?* Where did that thought come from?

He shuffles his feet. “Maybe I’ve been waiting two years for you to be free so I could ask you out.”

What?!

His eyes go back to the packages of ground beef. He clears his throat. “You never answered my question—what’s with all the meat?”

He’s changing the subject. *Thank God.* “I cook for the upcoming week on Sunday nights. Monday’s taco night, Tuesday’s nacho night, and Wednesday is quesadillas.”

“She’s beautiful *and* she cooks?”

“Stop flirting,” I snip. “I’m not beautiful.”

“You are.”

My body tingles all over at his simple words.

He leans over into my personal space, and I smell him, dark and exotic with a hint of pure male. His finger tilts my chin up

until we're staring each other in the face.

I recall the sexy convo with He-Man, about us standing in a cramped bathroom having sex against the wall, only now He-Man has a face and it's Maverick. He's holding me up, cupping my ass as he slides into me, and I'm gasping his name —

I stop, my heart flying as heat rushes to my cheeks. I look down and realize how close we're standing. One more inch and my entire body will be plastered against his, and it's all I can do to stand perfectly still.

Tension crackles in the air as his piercing eyes stare into mine.

"In case you didn't know it already, I like how you look." His eyes slowly drink me in, drifting over my face and lingering on my chest. "All that blonde hair, and your green eyes. I dig how tall you are...and your curves."

Oh, lord. I'm nowhere near as bosomy as most, but I do have nice B-cups.

I'm back in that bathroom fantasy and he's kissing me, his hand on my breast—

I can't breathe.

A soft voice brings us both back to the present. "Mav? I... found...you."

I glance over his shoulder to see a delicate creature with long, flowing russet-colored hair and a heart-shaped face. With creamy, porcelain-perfect skin, she reminds me of the beautiful dolls Nana used to collect. She tilts her head and looks at us with interest.

My lips compress as I turn and mutter under my breath. "You're here with a girl and you're hitting on me?"

Ignoring my comment, he takes a step back and simultaneously reaches out a hand to her. "Hey, I lost you at the candy aisle. You find what you wanted?"

She nods, presenting him with the little carry basket she's hooked on her arm. She shows him a handful of Snickers and a

six-pack of Dr. Pepper. “Can...I...have...them?” Her words are drawn out.

I glance back at Maverick to see a soft expression on his face. “You can get them, but you know the rule: only one each per day. Too much of that and...”

She nods. “My...teeth...will...fall...out.”

I look from one to the other, thoroughly confused. *Who is she?*

He glances back at me. “Delaney, I’d like you to meet Raven—my sister.”

Oh. She does a slow blink then comes toward me, and I notice her leg hitches a bit as she moves. She takes my hand in a limp shake, her expression unsure, as if she’s not certain of the etiquette.

“Girlfriend?” she asks, her eyes going from me to him.

Maverick grunts. “Too personal, Raven.”

She shrugs and drops my hand, almost sizing me up. “Need...a...girlfriend...so...you...stop...worrying...so...much.”

Hmmm. What does Maverick have to worry about?

“Nice to meet you,” I say. “And, Maverick and I are just friends.”

She squints, looking disappointed. “Oh.”

“We have a class together,” I tell her.

“Where she mostly ignores me,” Maverick adds.

I laugh.

Raven studies me and gives her temple a little tap with her index finger. “Nice...to...meet...you. My...head...is...wonky. I...tell...everyone...so...they...know.” She shrugs indifferently.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I say, not quite sure how to respond.

“Don’t...be.” She smiles sweetly at nothing in particular, her gaze drifting off. “Mav...olives...please?”

He nods. “Of course, get whatever you want. Meet me back at the front to check out, okay?”

She nods, and without another glance at me, moves down the aisle.

I’m watching this in fascination. Maverick has a sister...a sister with special needs...and he adores her—it’s obvious in the softness of his eyes as they follow her.

He turns back to me. “What?” he asks, and I guess he’s reading my face.

I shake my head. “You’re such a surprise.”

“Yeah?”

I nod. “Is she the reason the highest-rated defensive player in the country decided to stay home and play for the local college?” It’s no secret that Maverick received ESPN’s highest ratings and was courted for scholarships from the big schools like University of Alabama and Georgia. I’ve even heard he promised himself to a big SEC team, but at the last moment decided to stay in Magnolia and play for Waylon—which, admittedly, isn’t a horrible team, but it doesn’t have the same prestige the Crimson Tide does.

“Yeah. It happened in a car accident my senior year that also took my mom. It...changed a lot of things for me.”

His countenance is full of melancholy, an emotion I recognize because I have the same darkness inside of me. Anyone who’s lost a loved one knows it. I nod. “I lost my parents at age ten in a car wreck. I get it.”

He straightens and gives me a surprised look, almost as if he’s restructuring how he sees me. “I never would have known it. You seem so...adjusted.”

I huff out a laugh. “Thanks?”

“You know what I mean,” he says with a little smirk. “You’re a good person, Delaney. You’re always kind and sweet and...” He stops talking and shakes his head. “Never mind. I’m talking too much.”

I clear my throat, easing over the awkwardness. “Anyway, my Nana took me in and raised me. I’d just graduated high school when she passed from a bad heart. Sometimes I think she waited until I was old enough and then just let go.” I don’t know what it is about this guy, but suddenly I’m opening up to him.

He nods. “That must have been tough.”

I shrug, playing off my grief, but when I look back up, there’s this look on his face like he gets me...like he’s been there a million times before and—

God.

Stop, Delaney. Just stop. No more football players.

I recall the words Martha-Muffin just spoke to me: *Athletes screw around—it’s what they do.*

I clear my throat and move closer to my cart, wrapping my hands around the handle, anchoring myself, because Maverick makes me feel like I might toss aside everything I think about football players and give him a chance. “Look, you’re a great guy, and thank you for the offer of hanging out, but it’s best if we keep it simple.”

He studies me. “You’ll change your mind.”

My chest rises rapidly, and before I can formulate a snarky reply his sister’s voice drifts toward us from down the aisle, calling to him, and he waves back at her.

“Guess I have to run. Later,” he says, and then just like that, he’s walking off—and *damn* if his ass isn’t fine.

I let out a sigh and push my cart to the front to check out.

Chapter Six

Maverick

“She’s...pretty,” Raven says as we get in my silver truck, ten-year-old Toyota I bought with my own money when I was sixteen. It’s seen its fair share of dings and scrapes, but it still runs like a well-oiled machine. Someday when I’m playing in the NFL, I’ll buy something sharp, but for now, I can’t think about that. One day at a time is all I can handle.

“Who?” I ask, helping her with her seat belt. Her eyes follow as I clip it into the buckle.

“Have...you...kissed...her?”

Raven’s eyes are turned up to me, and the light from the streetlight illuminates her sweet face. Emotion slams into my chest, reminding me that she’s not the same, not even close.

“No,” I say tersely as I start the truck and drive out of the parking lot.

“You...like...her?”

“Apparently, she’s just a friend.” I roll my eyes. “This isn’t one of your Disney shows where everything has a happily ever after.”

She shrugs and looks out the window. “You...should...ask...her...out.”

I shake my head at her, not telling her that I practically had. “Thanks for the dating advice, sis.”

Delaney...*where do I even begin with her?* Sure, we met at the bonfire, but I cocked that up, and by the time I tried to find her, she was with Alex. Once a football player has a girl, you can’t mess with them. It’s the bro code, not to mention the fact that Alex is the kicker and any small thing can freak them out.

I recall the first time I saw her after the bonfire: at a football party, on Alex’s arm, looking like she just stepped out of the

pages of a geek girl magazine with her glasses, tight jeans, and a *Walking Dead* t-shirt she'd turned into some kind of halter top. What I liked about her was how she never looked at me any different because of who I was. She never put me on a pedestal or kissed my ass. In fact, she always fucking ignored me.

But now she isn't with Alex.

The question is...what am I going to do about it?

I pull up at Dad's doublewide, wishing like hell I had the money to get Raven out of here and in at Pineview Retreat, a state-of-the-art facility near Jackson, Mississippi. I've been eyeing it since she left the home where she was staying.

I put the groceries I bought in the cupboard and wake Dad up. He's fallen asleep watching one of my old high school football games. It brings back memories of when Mom was alive and we were a whole family. Sure, we never had much, not with a dad who couldn't hold down a job and a mom who railed at him constantly, but for me, it had been better than *this*.

He stirs in his recliner and looks up at me with bleary eyes. Smaller than me with thin shoulders and a haggard face, he's in his fifties but looks older.

"You been drinking?" I ask sharply, feeling more like the parent than the child.

He stands and stretches. "No, just tired. I worked at Bill's today changing oil on some cars he had."

I exhale, staring at him. That's good. As long as he works, everything is fine. I nod. "Just keep it that way."

Dad gets up to make us dinner: leftover meatloaf and potatoes from last night. While he finishes up, I wait outside the bathroom while Raven takes a shower so we can talk through the door. I'm paranoid she'll fall even though her balance has improved. I wish we could afford more than three days a week of a nurse who comes in to do these things.

After dinner, Dad loads the dishwasher and I tuck Raven in her bed. As requested, I make up a random story about a princess and her one true love.

She sighs as I stand up to turn off the light, careful to make sure her butterfly nightlight is still on.

“Mav?”

I pause at the door and hold in my exhalation, not wanting her to see how bone tired I am. I’ve been going since eight this morning when I hit the gym to box.

“Thank...you.”

“You don’t have to thank me every time I come see you, goofy.”

She sighs. “It’s...hard...for...you. Do...me...a...favor?” Her voice is small.

“Anything.”

“Kiss...Delaney.”

That wasn’t what I expected. I thought she’d ask for another cookie from the cupboard or another story.

“Why would I do that?”

She shrugs under the covers as she tucks her chin in, her eyes droopy. “You...just...need...to.”

“I’m not sure Delaney wants me to kiss her.”

“She...does,” she says. “I...have...a...TBI...but...I’m...not...stupid.”

I huff out a laugh. “Okay.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

Guess this means I’m kissing her whether it’s a good idea or not. I mean, I’d do anything for my sister.

Chapter Seven

Delaney

“What you need is a fresh start with a rebound guy,” Skye says with a toss of her long red hair as we sit inside Buffalo Bills, a rowdy restaurant and bar near campus. We’re in the back in a leather booth, munching on peanuts from a pail as we wait for Tyler and my—*shudder*—blind date to show up. We came a bit earlier than the guys so we could catch up, and so I could get my nerve up with a drink. I haven’t been on a date with anyone but Alex since freshman year, and it feels weird.

I take a deep breath. “Tell me more about this Bobby Gene guy—which is a really weird name, by the way.”

Bubbly and eager, she waves me off and starts in. “Just ignore his name. You’ll love him. He’s on the baseball team but not a horn-dog. He’s nice—like you requested. No athlete floozies chasing him, no fetishes that I know of.”

“Key words being *that I know of*.” I smirk.

“You’re just anti-guy right now. At least he isn’t a football player.”

That is true.

She straightens her red halter top, which matches her hair. “Plus, Bobby Gene’s Tyler’s friend, so this is important.”

“Of course,” I murmur, but I’m feeling ambivalent. I mean, she’s put a lot of effort into arranging this, so I don’t want to be negative, but...Tyler’s a bit of a jerk. I’ve noticed him checking out other girls when they’re together then playing it off when she calls him on it. Maybe it’s nothing. Maybe I’m just in a funk because *my* boyfriend cheated on me.

Whatever.

I just hope Bobby Gene is nice.

Skye gets a thoughtful look on her face. “You know, I wanted to tell you that I saw Alex on campus today and he looked...I don’t know...sad.” She sees my face and holds her hands up. “I mean, yes, he’s a major douchebag and I’ll hate him until the end of time for you...” Her voice trails off as she grimaces, giving me a *please don’t be mad at me* look. “But, I don’t know, maybe someday you guys can be friends again?”

I stare down at my drink. That’s the rub—we were all three great friends. I also adore Alex’s family in Texas, and now I’ll never get to see them again. *Ugh*. I don’t want to think about him right now.

A noncommittal shrug is my answer.

She sighs. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have even mentioned it.”

I nod. I know she misses him too since he was over at the house a lot. Before she met Tyler, we spent lots of nights hanging out, cooking, and watching movies together. There were even times I was a little jealous of the camaraderie she and Alex had, but I knew she wasn’t interested in him that way and he loved me. *Ha. Right*.

Paging Princess Leia. Where are you?

My happiness level goes up a notch as I read the text and quickly tap out a reply. Skye doesn’t notice as she orders another round of drinks from our waitress, who’s stopped by the table. I don’t know why I want to keep He-Man a secret, but I do, as if he’s all mine and I need that for some reason.

On a blind date.

Oh. Where?

I’ll give you two hints: there are beers and peanuts on the table.

Ah, Buffalo Bills. Do you want me to rescue you? I can call and pretend I’m your aunt who’s terribly sick.

I giggle. **That’s AWFUL! I’m disappointed you’d encourage a lie.**

Okay. Hey, I saw you at the library last night—nice dare completion. I was digging the buns on your head.

Oh my God. He was there.

My heart thuds, racing back through every single face I encountered.

I recall how at precisely eight, I stood in the middle of the study area and yelled out, “Princess Leia is a badass!” I’d even put my blonde hair up in little fluffy buns on the sides of my head before work. I’d also gone all out with my clothing choices, wearing a fitted white shirt and a pair of white jeans—in February! Deep red lipstick completed the look. If I do a dare, I do it right. The shy girl in me loved letting loose and knowing it was for a dare, which gave me the courage to do it. My eyes scanned the place, but I was so nervous, it was hard to take a good inventory of who was there. It was at least most of the football team since they do study sessions there on Mondays, and several baseball players saw it along with some guys in fraternity jerseys.

Everyone stared. A few clapped. Some whistled.

Did it feel good to do the dare? he asks.

Yes, I reply. It was fucking empowering, especially when Alex stared at me with a forlorn look on his face, obviously missing me.

I saw Maverick there too, surrounded by a group of girls at a table. His response to my outburst? A simple smirk and a head nod.

I chew on my lip, wondering once again who He-Man is.

Hey, you’re not the skinny hipster guy who hangs out in the romance section looking for dates are you?

He sends a whole string of laughing/crying emojis.

If I stood in the romance section, I’d never make it out alive. I’m already irresistible, but put Twilight in my hands and girls will piss themselves.

“Why are you giggling?” Skye asks, and I raise my head. Her gaze goes to my phone.

“Just a meme someone sent me,” I say as I take a sip of the new beer the waitress apparently set down without me even

noticing.

“It must have been a funny one.”

“Yeah, it was a cat.”

Any mention of my love for cats has her rolling her eyes. She and Han have a love/hate relationship. She gets up and straightens her skirt. “I’m going to head to the ladies’ room to freshen up. You’ll be okay till I get back?”

I nod. “Sure.”

She heads off, and I look back down at my phone as it pings.

Where did you go? Is your date there? Are you riding a bull? Don’t ride the bull because I want to be there when you do.

He-Man, I’ve been thinking...I need to know who you are,
I send.

Why? Don’t you like being anonymous? Don’t you think we’re opening up to each other more?

Yes. Maybe. I don’t know.

I get nothing but silence in return. My hands clench my phone, waiting to see those telltale little dots, but he isn’t responding.

Why doesn’t he want to tell me? Is it someone I hate? Is it Alex with a burner phone? Is it Maverick?

I take a deep breath and text, **Are you a football player?**

Yes.

My heart flips over. Is He-Man really Maverick? *God*, I want it to be.

I don’t do football players anymore, I text.

You’d do me. It’s going to happen.

I squirm in my seat as a bolt of electricity zips through me and my entire body heats up. My skin gets goose bumps, and I know it’s because I’m picturing Maverick on the other end of this conversation.

You’re cocky, I send, my fingers sweaty.

I know when a woman wants me, and I want you too, Princess Leia. I have for a long time.

I want to ask more, but I'm scared of...*dammit*, I don't even know. Being hurt? Being lied to?

I spend the next minute staring intently at my phone, trying to think of a response, and I'm still staring when Skye gets back from the restroom. I finally put my phone away when Tyler arrives, along with my blind date.

* * *

An hour later, I've met Bobby Gene and we've finished a round of beers and a plate of cheese fries. Handsome with a lopsided grin and cropped brown hair, he's rather engaging. He's made me giggle with his talk of growing up on a pig farm in Iowa, but He-Man is all I can think about.

Each minute I'm here with Bobby Gene feels like an hour, and I'm anxious to get home and text him so we can figure things out.

But is there really anything to figure out?

How can I ever trust a football player again?

My phone rings, surprising me, and I battle down a sneeze when I see He-Man's name on the screen.

"Who's He-Man?" Bobby Gene asks, leaning over and peering down at my phone where I left it sitting on the table.

"Just a friend," I say.

"Well, you gonna get it?" he asks with a grin. He's obviously easygoing and doesn't seem perturbed that I have someone calling me while I'm on a date.

I pick up the phone, excitement curling. "Hello?"

“Hey, I thought you might need a rescue phone call.” I can’t make out the voice because he’s whispering, but it heats every inch of my skin.

I’m talking to He-Man! I want to shout it out to everyone, but that would be weird, so I don’t. Instead, I clear my throat, injecting concern into my tone. “Yeah, what’s wrong?”

“I’ve fallen and I can’t get up.”

I bite my lip to keep from laughing.

“Oh, no. What happened?” I infuse my voice with drama.

“Truth: I was studying and kept thinking about you on your date. Does it suck? Is he ugly? An asshole?”

I glance over at Bobby Gene, who grins.

“No,” I say, and I get silence from the other end.

“You mean you like him?” There’s an incredulous tone to his voice.

I do like Bobby Gene—as a friend—but I can’t answer something so specific with the detail it needs. Too many people are listening to me.

Skye is shooting me a quizzical look, and Tyler is eyeing me suspiciously.

“Uh, yeah? It’s great,” I answer.

There are several ticks of silence, and I imagine I can feel his unhappiness with my response.

“Are you still there?” I ask, chewing on my bottom lip.

“Yes. I shouldn’t have called you. Obviously I’ve interrupted a good time. Have fun on your date.”

Click. He ends the call without even saying goodbye, and I’m surprised.

“I’m so sorry. That’s just terrible!” I say to the silence, clutching the phone tighter as I lean over the table. “Yes, of course, I’ll go home and call her right away and let you know.”

I get off the phone and send a regretful look at Bobby Gene. “Sorry, my aunt is sick—”

“But aren’t you from Charlotte?” Tyler asks, a slight curl to his lips. Skye is giving me a pointed look, and I know she knows I’m trying to get out of the date.

I blink. *Oh, God.* Lies truly are a sticky web.

“Yeah, but I just need to check in on her, not actually catch a plane to go see her.” I try to sell the lie again. “I should go home and call her.” There, it’s final: I am a terrible person.

Bobby Gene, bless his heart, gives me a shoulder squeeze, and I feel even worse. “I got ’cha. They don’t have to be direct family to be important to you. Maybe we can get coffee and donuts sometime?”

Coffee *and* donuts?

Bobby Gene just went up another notch on my like list.

I agree and we exchange numbers. With a hasty goodbye and a bit of a glare from Skye, I exit Buffalo Bills and head for the house.

It’s not until I’m home and lying on the couch with Han on my chest, purring in my ear like a motorboat that I decide to text him.

I’m home, I say.

Alone?

Yeah. You?

Always, he says.

Were you jealous tonight?

Yes.

I stare at the one-word response, my stomach jittery with excitement even though my head is yelling at me that he’s a football player.

Biting my lip, I change the topic. **This is random, but do you like cats?**

I’m more of a dog guy.

We can never text again, I quickly type out and send.

Okay, fine, I like them—just for you, Princess Leia.

A pang strikes my heart. He's just...perfect. Everything he says makes me feel fluttery inside, and even though my head is warning me, my heart wants to put a face to the code name of the person I've been texting with.

But for now...I wait.

Good night, He-Man.

As you wish.

Chapter Eight

Delaney

Me: If you had a pair of X-ray glasses, what part of my body would you look at first?

He-Man: Collarbone.

Me: LIAR.

He-Man: Fine, fine, you win. I like big tits and I cannot lie. But I do like collarbones too.

Me: Ha. All guys are the same.

He-Man: Fine. What would YOU look at?

Me: I'd look at He-Man's sword, of course.

He-Man: Trust me, it's pretty fucking magnificent.

Me: Wanna send me a pic?

He-Man: Just to clarify, the quiet and reserved Delaney Shaw is asking me for a dick pic?

Me: It sounds bad when you put it like that...

He-Man: I'd rather show you in person, Princess Leia.

Me: Oh.

Can't never could is what my Nana always said and I'm saying that in my head over and over as I shelve books on the third floor a few days later. I'm beat from a long day of volunteering at the cat shelter and now I'm stuck in The Dead Zone of the library, where few roam unless they're doing serious research. At least I have last night's texting with He-Man to think about, which had gotten very sexy before I'd finally let him go.

The next book to shelve is a huge three-inch atlas that weighs a ton. I drag the stepladder from the wall over to the metal shelves so I can reach to the top where it belongs. Once I

climb up and clear the shelf, I have a clear view of most of the floor.

I'm about to turn and come down when two guys come up the stairs and onto the third floor, the echoes of their hushed voices carrying across to me. My heart leaps—*damn heart*—when I see Maverick walking next to Ryker, Waylon's quarterback.

Maverick's eyes look up and capture mine—he must have some kind of secret power that detects female attention—and takes me in, hovering above the shelf like a crazy person. He sends me a wave and I smirk.

Ryker taps him on the shoulder to pull his direction toward one of the study areas to the left, but Maverick nods his head at me and walks in my direction. Ryker follows.

Shit! They're coming over.

My hair's in a ponytail and my glasses askew, and I hurriedly pat down the crazy stray strands and straighten my frames. I wish I had time to grab my lipstick, but of course, it's in my purse on the first floor.

"Hey," Maverick says as he turns the corner. He's holding a book and smiling, looking pleased as punch to see me, and it takes my breath a little.

I blink up at him, taking in the finely carved jawline and bitable lips.

Just. *Damn.*

He's gorgeous and it pisses me off that it makes me melt into a puddle of goo.

I stuff that behind me and give him a nonchalant shrug, keeping my expression easy and not at all like I didn't nearly break my neck getting off the ladder. "Hey."

"You working?"

"Obviously."

His lips twitch. "You sound excited."

"I'm not. What are you doing here?" I ask.

“Just roaming the library.”

“Why?”

He tilts his head, studying me. “Why not?”

“It’s a bit late for mind games, Maverick.” I look down at the cart full of books I still have to shelve. “And I have work to do.”

“Maybe I was looking for you. I can help if you want?”

My eyes flare. *Damn*. Why does he have to be so sweet sometimes? “That’s okay.”

He gazes around at the shelving, taking in the empty tables and then focuses back on me. “This would be a great place to hook-up. Ever consider it?”

I roll my eyes. “Scoping out future make-out places? Please, for the sake of the books, leave the library out of your pound town itinerary.”

He throws up a cocky eyebrow. “I like the dim lighting and all the shelves. Good coverage in case someone comes up.”

My face colors, picturing him with some pretty co-ed.

He grins. “Would you be jealous if I hooked up with someone here?”

“No, don’t be ridiculous,” I say. *Yes*.

He studies me, eyes at half-mast. “Okay, fine, Delaney. I’ll never hook-up with anyone in the library...unless it’s you.”

My mouth opens and I’m about to say something *really* witty and smart—although I can’t think of a damn thing—when Ryker turns the corner. I guess something must have caught his eye on the way over and that’s why he lagged behind.

Obviously, Maverick has impeccable timing.

The quarterback gives me a nod. “Ah, Delaney. Surprise, surprise.”

Is he being facetious?

Because he doesn’t sound surprised. He sounds cryptic and a little pleased with himself if that makes sense. I squint at him,

reminding myself to play back this conversation later.

“Hey, Ryker,” I say, giving him a nod. “We rarely get people on the third floor, so...welcome?” I hold my hands out.

Ryker looks around. “Yeah. It’s dead up here. Great place for a hook-up.”

I shake my head. “Oh my God. Is that all guys think about?”

“Yeah,” they say in unison.

“Typical,” I say with a laugh.

Almost as if he knows I’m putting up my internal defenses against him, Maverick takes a step closer and picks at a spot on the shoulder of my black shirt. Butterflies take off inside me as his index finger and thumb press together on the fabric to grab a white hair.

“What’s this?” he asks.

Swallowing, I look down at his hand and clear my throat. “Cat hair. I got in the kitten tent today at the shelter and they crawled all over me. Super adorable. I’d love to bring one home but Han would flip his lid.”

Ryker takes a full two steps back from me, his eyes wide. “You rolled around with cats?”

“Well, not literally, but yeah. It’s very therapeutic. Are you allergic?”

He nods.

“That’s awful.” I grimace.

He waves me off. “No worries. I’ll just stand over here so I don’t breathe it in. That way you guys can chat.” He finds a spot about ten feet away and pretends to look at a book. I say *pretend* because it’s a reference book about rivers in South America and I can’t imagine why he’d be interested, but who knows.

It’s almost as if they planned on seeing me...

I turn back to Maverick who hasn’t taken his eyes off me. “I’m completely non-allergic to cats,” he tells me.

“Why should I care?” I’m being bratty, but his cockiness brings it out in me.

He isn’t fazed and plucks another hair off me, this time around the neckline of my shirt. His fingers brush my collarbone and I inhale sharply, remembering the texting convo about collarbones with He-Man. “You’re really covered in these.” My chest rises rapidly, and he grins, leaving me convinced the man is the devil.

I’m saved just as I hear Skye talking. We’d made plans to meet after my shift and grab a drink at Buffalo Bills before we head home. She’s probably on her way up here to keep me company until I’m done.

I hear her talking to someone as she calls out my name rather tentatively, which is odd, and I’m wondering who’s with her. It sounds like a guy, but not Tyler...

Alex and Skye appear from around the corner of the shelf and I start, stiffening.

What the hell is she doing with him?

With a sheepish expression on her face, she clears her throat and waves at everyone. “Hey, y’all.”

I’m frowning as my gaze goes from her to Alex.

She nods, reading my expression. “Ah, yeah. Alex saw me on the staircase on my way up and wanted to talk...” Her voice drifts off.

Ah, I fill in the rest. She couldn’t tell him to buzz off. She’s too nice and she’d probably done her best to dissuade him.

Alex’s eyes are measuring the space between Maverick and me, which admittedly is just a few inches.

“What are you doing up here?” he asks Maverick.

Maverick straightens, his back going stiff. “It *is* the library. People do come here to study. What are *you* doing here?”

Alex taps his hand against his thighs and juts out his jaw. “Studying. Same as you.”

“I don’t see any books, kicker,” Maverick says.

A spot of red appears on Alex's cheeks. "I left them on the first floor—since you're so interested."

"Huh. Maybe you should go get them."

Alex's face hardens. "Why? Am I interrupting anything between you and Delaney?"

Jesus take the wheel. They are both crazy.

I hold my hands up. "Hang on a minute—"

"Yeah," Ryker says, interrupting me. He's put down the reference book and has joined us, his brow pulled low in a scowl as he takes in the back and forth between the two. "We don't need any trouble here, guys."

Skye takes Alex by the arm. "Why don't we head back downstairs?"

Alex pulls his gaze from Maverick and looks down at her, a slight softening in his face. "Sure. Sounds good." He sends me a resigned expression. "Bye, Delaney."

They turn to go and Skye gives me an *I'm sorry* look over her shoulder as they walk away.

"Dude. Not cool or subtle," Ryker says to Maverick as soon as they are out of earshot. "Did you have to be a dick?"

Maverick's nose flares. "He was a dick first."

"Yeah, but you're a leader," Ryker tells him. "The team needs you to show everyone else how to act."

Maverick lets out a long exhale, his hand rubbing at the back of his neck. "Yeah."

Hang on a minute. Maverick is jealous of Alex? I'm about to remark on it, but he brushes past me, his tall frame stalking off. Part of me wants to call him back, but pride and all.

I look at Ryker and raise my hands up. "What's going on?"

"If you can't see what's right in front of you..." He shrugs. "Later, babe."

And then he's walking off but not before turning around for one more comment. "Just do me a favor, okay? Don't hurt

him. He's been through enough already.”

My heart drops at the thought of hurting Maverick. Of course I wouldn't.

Chapter Nine

Delaney

The cafeteria in the student center is loud with the sounds of clanging dishes and students' voices. I'm not here to eat, just to grab a soda before I head upstairs to my first salsa lesson.

I get to the register, pay for my Coke, and then head for the exit. My eyes can't help but wander to the far left corner table near the windows where the football players usually sit in a huddle. I come to a stop when blue eyes meet mine. A flash of awareness washes over me as Maverick rakes his gaze up and down.

A small smile tilts up the side of his mouth, and it infuriates me that he seems to *know* he makes my body do crazy things. He'd acted jealous of Alex in *The Dead Zone* a few days ago but neither of us has mentioned it since. I guess we've decided to let it go.

Miss Brunette—the same one from class—approaches his table and plops down in the seat next to him. Her hands snake around his bicep as she looks up at him adoringly.

I feel the eye roll coming, and instead of stopping myself, I let him see it.

There you go, folks: further proof that football players are magnets for floozies.

I tip my soda at him and he smirks, as if saying, *I can't help it if women love me.*

You're so full of shit, my face says back.

He gives me a full-blown grin before looking over at her with that distant smile, the one I know isn't authentic. He leans in and says something to her, and she looks crestfallen.

He turns back to me and stands.

He mouths something, and it looks like *Wait for me.*

I glance around to make sure he means me, and the only person near me is a cafeteria worker in a white jumpsuit. Looking back at him, I point to myself, just to confirm.

He nods and makes his way along the tables, weaving through players and girls and the general maze that is our cafeteria.

My body draws up in anxiety. I'm not ready to deal with Maverick and his intensity, so I do what I do best.

I bolt.

I have somewhere to be anyway.

Flipping around with a flounce of my ponytail, I head for the exit in a full-on speed walk that's debatably a run. I clear the door and dart for the elevator to head up to the third floor.

As soon as I exit, I approach the door to the dance studio. From inside, I hear the low undertones of a conga drum and maracas, so I know I'm at the right place. On the door hangs a sign that says *Welcome to Salsa 101! Can't dance? We can change that!* I hope that isn't a lie. I'm fascinated with Latin music and food, and learning to salsa is on my bucket list... hence the urge to finally show up when I don't even have a partner.

I open the door to the studio, which is actually just a room on the third floor of the student center. In my hand is the flyer that lists the class times and requirements along with the twenty dollars to cover the cost of the lessons.

I'm tempted to text He-Man and tell him what I'm doing, to see if he'd be proud of me for coming alone. I make a mental note to take a selfie and send it to him later.

It's a large square-shaped room with a sound system in the corner and an entire wall covered in mirrors. My eyes scan the space and land on a tall, thin male wearing super tight black pants and a red sequined shirt. He's sitting at a small table in the corner, next to the sound system. Dark gelled hair is brushed straight up from his forehead, and there might be the sparkle of shimmery eye shadow on his lids. I catch a small white nametag pinned to his shirt that reads *Ricardo, Dance Instructor*.

I'm definitely in the right place.

He looks up from his clipboard and brushes his gaze over me. "Here for salsa?" He looks past me. "Alone?" I can hear the surprise in his tone.

"Um, yes," I say, forcing conviction and confidence into my voice. I really do want this. "Is that okay?"

A doubtful look crosses his face. "Typically, it works best if you have a partner. Everyone else has a partner. I might be able to jump in and dance with you, but I'm usually too busy."

Nice. Even the teacher doesn't want to dance with me.

A group of people standing next to a refreshment table a few feet over swivel their heads as his voice carries over to them.

"Right, I saw that in the flyer. Normally my roommate would jump at the chance to do this, but well, she's got this new boyfriend. I mean, who doesn't want to learn to salsa..." My voice peters out and I sigh as I realize I'm rambling.

Ricardo gives me a wry yet kind smile. "Ideally you learn how the rhythm of the body works when you have someone to mirror the moves with you."

I push my glasses up on my nose and shuffle my feet, thinking I should have just stayed at home and watched a movie.

The instructor gets distracted as another couple comes in the door, and I ease off to the side, looking for the nearest exit.

Could I leave without anyone noticing?

I pause, clenching my fists.

Why do I care so much? So what if I'm alone?

Where are your balls, Delaney? WHERE ARE THEY?

I dare myself to go through with it.

I slap my money down on the table and Ricardo turns back toward me, a surprised expression on his face as he takes in my crossed arms. "I'm here to have fun with or without a partner, and who's to say I might not start a new trend: salsa

sans partner. You never know, it could be the next big thing in ballroom dancing.”

Ricardo’s face breaks into a smile as he swishes around the table to hand me a nametag to put on my shirt. “I like your spirit,” he says as I scrawl my name on it with a pen and slap it on my *Game of Thrones* shirt. I’m here and I’m ready to rumble.

Bobby Gene appears in front of me. “What! Are you kidding me? Delaney Shaw comes to salsa lessons?” He grins broadly and I automatically give him a hug. With his brown hair and soft eyes, he has an infectious personality that puts me at ease.

“I’m just here for the great Cuban food,” he whispers conspiratorially as he nods his head at the long table filled with various dishes and small bottles of water. “And a girl I work with at the school paper. She roped me into this, and I couldn’t say no.” He points out a perky little redhead with freckles, and she waves at me enthusiastically.

“Where’s your partner?” he asks.

“Don’t have one,” I say.

“Really?” He looks confused. “But how will you—”

“I’m her partner,” says a deep voice behind me, and I know who it is before I even turn around.

A sneeze racks my body—of course.

I battle down the next one and turn to face him.

Maverick stands before me like some kind of Greek god, with his lush lips, magnificent body, and perfect blond hair perfectly swept back. My mouth dries as I take in the fitted black shirt that clings to his sculpted muscles. Does the man ever have a bad hair day or *anything*?

“What on earth are you doing in here?” I whisper-hiss, although I don’t really have to because Bobby Gene has taken one look at Maverick’s glare and wandered back to his partner.

“Honestly, I was following you. Had no clue it was to a dance class...but now that I’m here, I may as well help you out. I

heard you don't have a partner." He cocks his head, waiting for my reply. "I must warn you though...I can't dance."

I shrug, trying to play it cool when on the inside I'm a mess, quivering with excitement that he's here...with me. "Well, I am alone, and so are you, and apparently the food is great here. Want to check it out before we get started?"

He grins. "You're asking a football player if he wants to eat? I just had dinner—as you know, since you ran away from me—but lead the way, my lady."

He gives me his arm and I take it.

We make our way over to the table, which is stocked with dishes that have little placards next to each one, naming the contents. I take in the marinated olives, fancy cheeses, fried plantains, and flan.

"Wow. If I had known all this was here, I might have tried this a lot sooner," I say.

Maverick picks up a ramekin of flan and hands me one. "Let's try this."

He gets his own and we each take a bite at the same time, our eyes closing in simultaneous ecstasy.

"Damn, that's good," he says, his eyes on my face instead of the caramel pastry.

"It is," I reply as I watch him savor the bite.

I'm relieved when the instructor claps his hands and motions for us to move to the center of the room.

Disposing of our dishes, we follow his directions.

Ricardo's eyes widen as he takes Maverick in and then he looks at me, a little smile on his face. "I see you found a partner after all, Miss Shaw. Nice choice."

"Indeed," I say.

Maverick smirks and shrugs.

Ricardo goes on to explain that the salsa attitude comes from the music, the dance is something you feel with your body, and

at the same time, your brain can memorize the mechanics of the eight-count method. He's enthusiastic as he runs through the steps around the circle we're standing in. I try to pay attention but it's difficult with Maverick standing next to me, our arms brushing against one another.

"First, we must start with the embrace," Ricardo says, pulling on the arm of a tiny woman in a matching red dress who I assume is his partner. He pulls her close with a twirling motion and stares deep into her eyes. "You hold them with intense emotion. You're going on a journey of love and you must convey this in your every movement, in your eyes, in the sensuality of your muscles as you hold your partner tight."

I need a fan just from his words. Ricardo is quite the romantic.

He demonstrates by leaning in and putting his left hand on her shoulder. He hugs her tight then wraps his right arm around her lower back, centering it above her ass. His partner then raises her right hand to mirror his movements.

"Keep your head high, your spine straight, your core strong, and your chest lifted. Ooze confidence, my loves!" Ricardo demonstrates with a sliding movement of his feet as he twirls his partner around. "Move forward with your left foot, then forward with your right, forward with the left, then the right. Then, feet together, moving left to meet right. Tada! That's it, and repeat!" He stops and takes a little bow along with his partner who, of course, mirrored his movements while moving backward. He claps his hands. "Now, let's partner up and hold each other with deep sensuality."

Sensuality?

I turn to face Maverick, a small laugh escaping me. "Are you as uncomfortable as I am right now?"

"I don't have a clue what the hell he just did out there." He grins in a self-deprecating way, a spot of pink on his cheeks.

"Does that embarrass you? That you can't do everything?"

"No, but I do want to make a good impression on you."

My heart does a somersault.

“Why?”

He ignores that comment and pulls me into his arms, his left hand on my shoulder and his right going to the base of my spine. Goose bumps rise on my arms as he tugs me in closer. “Put your arms around me.”

I do, my mouth completely dry, my body in tune and ready to catch fire as his chest grazes against me and his leg fits smoothly between mine. Heat engulfs my lower regions and I ignore it by staring at his chin. I can’t bring myself to look into those eyes.

“I’d do anything for some people—you’ll figure that out about me,” Maverick says softly, and suddenly it feels as if we’re all alone and not in a crowded studio surrounded by people.

“So I’m one of those people? We barely know each other.”

A bit of a laugh comes from him as our eyes meet. “You pretend like you don’t know me, Delaney, but there’s something between us.”

I bite my lip and stammer out, “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Plus, I don’t like football players.”

“So you keep saying, yet here we are...dancing.”

“You offered, and I didn’t have anyone else.”

He laughs. “You love being in my arms and you know it.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You’re so freaking infuriating.”

He just shrugs.

“I’m not changing my mind.”

He leans in and whispers in my ear. “Your body already says *yes*.”

Oh...God! He’s so annoying, but dammit if his proximity isn’t creating havoc in my internal organs, and it’s all I can do to not straddle his leg and hump it. Luckily, I’m saved when he begins the forward motion of his feet and I take a step back to mirror his steps.

It's pure torture the way he guides me across the dance floor, his hold firm yet loose, his movements fluid and graceful. He's not as horrible a dancer as he said, and I feel like he only said that to make me comfortable.

Later, after the class is done, we're standing near the door talking as the students mill around and Ricardo ushers everyone out the door.

Bobby Gene gives us a wave as he passes us in the hallway. He looks like he might want to say more, but he gives Maverick a wide berth and calls over his shoulder that he'll catch me later.

We decide to take the stairs instead of the elevator since it's packed. Maverick walks next to me, his body solid and hard, and I'm feeling more powerful than I have in days.

"Want me to walk you to your car?" he asks as we reach the bottom floor.

"Uh, yeah, sure."

Even though there are plenty of streetlights and security cameras, it is dark.

We walk toward the exit, but then I see Martha-Muffin watching us from a cozy sitting area off to the right. Her eyes are lasered in on Maverick and then they bounce to me, a slight snarl forming on her face. I must slow or stiffen because Maverick pauses and looks down at me. "You okay?"

I take a deep breath and shake my head. "It's nothing."

A scowl forms on his brow as he scans the open space of the lobby, his gaze landing on Martha-Muffin, who's put her hand on her hip, openly glaring at us.

"Ah, her..." He stops and looks back at me with a grimace. "If it's any consolation, I can't stand her. She tried to trick her way into my bed once and I kicked her ass out. She's been hating on me ever since."

I can't imagine anyone hating Maverick, and I'm glad he's never been with her. But, seeing her just reminds me of Alex's

infidelity and the fact that while Maverick hasn't been with her specifically, he's still a football player with plenty of access.

We exit the building and take off across the parking lot. I'm wondering if he'll ask me out again. What will I say? Am I still on this *just friends* kick?

We reach my silver Prius and he grins. "The kind of car you have says a lot about a person."

"Is this where you say I'm pragmatic and predictable?"

He stares down at me. "Maybe. I like that about you. You're quiet but deep. I am too. I mean, I'm popular but underneath, I'm a quiet guy."

I bite my lip, wanting to know more. "What would you do if you didn't play football?" I ask.

He sticks his hands in his pockets and stares up at the sky as he thinks. "Medical school, probably a neurologist."

Ah. "Because of Raven?"

He smiles ruefully, a contemplative look on his face. "Yeah. I read everything I can about her injury, all the latest findings. It's a complex condition, and very...personal. No two cases are ever the same. Her injuries were rather serious. She had to learn to talk and walk all over again."

"You're a good brother."

He shrugs. "She's all I have. I mean, there's my dad, but sometimes I think he's already given up."

I inhale a sharp breath at his vulnerability. There's so much more to him than everyone thinks.

We stare at each other in silence, and it's not weird or uncomfortable, and...

I'm dying for him to kiss me.

His gaze brushes over me, lingering on my lips. "Want to do the salsa thing again next week?"

"Yeah."

God.

I really want him to kiss me.

Which is crazy. He's bad news...right?

He leans down and brushes his sensuous lips across mine, and for three seconds, I can't breathe.

My body hums. My heart flies. We feel connected, as if his lips on mine were always meant to be but we're just now figuring it out.

"Our second kiss," he says softly, pulling back to stare down at me.

"Yeah."

"It won't be the last," he says huskily, his voice sending shivers over my skin.

Then he takes my keys from me, opens my door, and helps me inside. He waits as I start the car and drive away.

The entire trip home is a blur because all I can think about is him.

What am I going to do about Maverick Monroe and how he makes me feel?

Chapter Ten

Delaney

Me: Did you see tonight's episode of Game of Thrones? OMG.

He-Man: Yep. Now I want a pet dragon.

Me: Would you settle for a cat?

He-Man: Only if you come with it.

"I can't believe you talked me into this party," I mutter to Skye Friday night as I walk next to her up the sidewalk as we make our way to the baseball frat house near campus. It isn't really a frat at all, just a huge colonial brick house donated by one of the former players from Waylon who went on to play major league baseball.

"Well, you need to get out of the house. Plus, that outfit is amazing and we can't waste it." She eyes the black asymmetrical knit mini-dress I'm wearing. I spent my free time this week piecing together and sewing it. Made of jersey, it's formfitting with a band of thick cream lace on the bottom, giving it a flounce. The neckline has little hearts cut out of the fabric while the back is cut into strips, creating a peekaboo effect.

"You're so talented," she murmurs. "Instead of being a graphic designer, you should consider fashion."

I laugh. "Ha. Me?"

"You'd rock a nerd girl line. Think about it: cute little up-cycled dresses, shirts with books on them...the possibilities are endless."

I shrug. Skye is sweet, but I'm not sure I'm fashion material. I just like being different and wearing something no one else has.

“Oh my God, I’m having so many epiphanies tonight.” She grabs my arm and stops walking. “Text your He-Man and see if he wants to meet you there!”

Yes, I ended up telling her about him one night this week when I’d had a few glasses of wine.

I nibble on my lips. “I kinda like not knowing who he is. It’s... freeing.”

She thinks. “True, but wouldn’t it be great to have a guy with you in case Alex is at the party?”

“He probably will be.” The jocks tend to stick together.

My brain mulls it over, part of me scared. He-Man and I have such great conversations. What if it’s not Maverick—the person I really want it to be—but some pimply-faced water boy?

Skye sighs. “You know what, stop thinking about why you shouldn’t. Just do it.”

“Fine.” I pull out my phone and type: **I need you, He-Man.**

Ten seconds go by and I don’t see him replying, so I send another text.

I’m still single, in case you were wondering.

Still nothing.

I’m headed to the baseball party. Do you want to meet me there?

“What’s he saying?” Skye asks.

I shake my head. “Nothing. He’s playing hard to get.”

She takes my phone, reads through the messages, and before I can stop her, she’s typing out another one.

I’m a little drunk, a lot horny, and all alone. Come with me to the party, and I mean really COME.

She hands it back to me in triumph.

“I don’t think that message is *quite* slutty enough,” I say with a smirk.

Skye laughs then shouts as the three little dots appear. “Well it worked—he’s replying!”

Already here, Princess Leia. Remember the first night we texted? The fantasy of us at a frat party?

My heart flutters.

Yes, I text back. It’s never far from my mind.

Meet me upstairs in the bathroom in an hour and we’ll make it come true. I dare you.

Excitement steals my breath at the thought of seeing him for real, but are we really going to hook up? I swallow. **How will I know it’s you?**

I’ll be the only badass athlete waiting for you in the bathroom.

My hands are trembling as I tuck my phone back in my clutch and look at Skye. “Shit. He’s here and we’re going to meet in the bathroom.”

Skye claps, giddy for me. “You’re going to have sex,” she sings.

“It doesn’t mean that,” I say, trying to shush her as we approach the door to the house, but I have to admit the exhilaration is making my steps light as we make our way inside.

I get to see He-Man!

The room is packed with groups of people talking and drinking or making out in corners. Loud music blares from the sound system, and I estimate the drunk factor is already at a five on a scale of one to ten.

Tyler calls out from the hallway where he’s chatting with some other baseball players, his hand waving at us to come over. Skye gives me a questioning look. “Want to come with?”

I shake my head. “You go on. I’ll find the bar.”

She heads off toward Tyler, and I watch as she jumps at him. He catches her in his arms and lays one on her.

Bobby Gene calls out my name, and I look up to see him standing upstairs. He's looking handsome with a ball cap on and his arm tossed around the redhead from dance class. "Delaney!" He tips his beer at me.

I tilt my head toward his beer. "I need one of those—stat."

Someone jostles into me from behind, and I turn to see Maverick. He runs his eyes over me, lingering on the cutouts on my chest.

Goose bumps pop up on my skin. I'm hyperaware of every single nerve ending in my body when he's near.

"So are you always bumping into people or is that just me?" he says.

"You bumped into me," I retort with a grin. "It's like you were waiting for me."

Was he?

He shrugs, those broad shoulders shifting with an animalistic grace. He's wearing a fitted orange and blue Wildcats shirt that hugs his chest, the sleeves tight around his hard biceps.

I get distracted when my eyes go past him and I see Alex with Martha-Muffin trailing along behind him. He looks annoyed, and her eyes are red as if she's been crying. I study them more intently, taking in the sad expression she wears as she stares longingly at Alex. I don't really want to know what's going on between them, but it's apparent she really likes him.

I inch in closer to Maverick, needing to get away from them. "Why don't you show me the bar in this place? Isn't it in the back room?"

As if reading my mind, he tosses a glance over his shoulder and sees Alex. He looks back and gives me a nod. "Done."

Chapter Eleven

Maverick

We're sitting on a couch in the back room. People come and go past us, mostly on their way outside where the fire pit is, yet it feels like we're alone. She's all I can see right now, and I've been counting down the days until I can go to a damn salsa lesson with her again. *Fuck me, I want Delaney Shaw.*

I never imagined I'd be this...*intense* about wanting a girl, but here I am. Something about her has me worked up, has me wanting everything I never thought I did.

She smiles at me, her ruby lips curving. "So, let's go back to freshman year—why exactly did you kiss me?"

"Because of the legend. The first person you kiss at your first bonfire at Waylon is the one you'll never forget."

She leans into me. "But you *did* forget about me. You went home with twins."

"Whom I barely remember." I exhale, thinking back to how I was at eighteen. "The truth is, I didn't know what I wanted back then. Plus, the accident had just happened a few months before. My head wasn't in the right place."

"And it is now?"

"I'm not perfect, but I know what I want." My eyes go heavy as I run my gaze over her, taking in the way her breasts push against the fabric of her dress. "You're the one that got away, Delaney, the opportunity I missed."

My hand goes to her back and strums across the bare skin of her shoulder. Her skin feels like silk, soft and velvety.

"And you think you can just sweet-talk me into giving another football player a chance?"

I grin. "Yes."

A little laugh comes from her. “Sometimes I’d like to just slap you.”

I smirk. “That means I have an effect on you.”

“You drive me crazy,” she murmurs, her eyes going low.

Our faces are closer now, and her scent washes over me, light and fresh, like lemons.

I touch her face, tracing the line of her jaw.

“What are you doing?” she asks, her voice whisper soft.

“I’m going to prove that this heat between us...it’s got to be dealt with,” I say.

“Why?”

“Because I can’t sit by you in class one more day without doing something about it.”

Just before I’m about to press my mouth to hers, someone barks out my name.

Chapter Twelve

Delaney

He's going to kiss me...until he doesn't, his head turning sharply at the sound of his name.

Anger clouds his face, and I look over to see Alex and Ryker and several other football players striding toward us. Suddenly the room seems full of people swiveling their heads in our direction. Maverick stands, and I do the same. Martha-Muffin is here too, huddled in the corner with some of her sorority sisters, her eyes darting from me to Alex.

I stiffen my shoulders and tilt my chin up as he stops in front of us, his eyes bouncing from me to Maverick. Ryker trails behind him, a worried expression on his face as he looks at Maverick.

"Everything okay here?" Alex says, his chest rising rapidly. A muscle ticks in his jaw.

Maverick towers over Alex, his body coiled like a snake, his face tight. "She's fine. Why are you asking?"

"One of the freshmen said you were getting cozy with Delaney," he snaps. "That isn't cool—not at all."

Maverick scowls and takes several steps away from me, forcing Alex to move backward. In a matter of seconds, the space between us has been filled by other players surrounding them, waiting to see what's going to happen.

"You aren't dating her. What's the problem?" Maverick bites out.

"The problem is I know *you* aren't Delaney's style, and I wanted to check on her. Besides, it's a shitty guy that hits on a teammate's ex."

I've pushed my way through the throng of people and I see Alex crossing his arms. His face is red with anger.

Shit. This is escalating fast.

Maverick inhales a deep breath, his fists clenching. “That’s up to her. She can make up her own mind.”

Ryker steps in between them, his voice low. “Hey, hey, look, this is just a little misunderstanding. No one is angry here. Everything is cool.”

Some of the other players grumble out an agreement, but neither guy seems to be listening.

Maverick’s eyes have narrowed in on Alex. “There’s no misunderstanding. I was sitting with Delaney. Everything was fine until he showed up.”

Alex puffs up his chest. “She still cares about me, and you’re just getting in the way.”

Maverick bristles and leans his face into Alex’s. His index finger pushes at Alex’s chest, forcing him to take a step back. If a fight is about to happen, it’s clear who would win. “Stay out of *my way*, kicker, or you’ll regret it.”

Alex pales and is fumbling for a response when Maverick spins on his heel and stalks out the back door into the yard. I exhale, watching him go.

I should let him cool off.

But I don’t. I head out the door, chasing him to the back gate that connects to the front drive.

“Maverick! Wait.”

He halts and flips around to face me, his jawline taut with repressed anger. There’s about ten feet between us, but I can read him like a book. He’s coiled like a tiger, ready to spring.

His gaze brushes over me, and I think I see a flash of regret flicker across his face.

“Delaney...go back inside.”

I lift my hands up. “Why? Where are you going?”

He exhales slowly as he sticks his hands in his pockets. “I just need to cool off, okay?” His eyes flick back to the house. “I

can't go back in there. I'm on the verge of kicking Alex's ass, and I can't do that."

Oh.

I get it—he wants to flirt with me, but I'm not quite important enough to go against his teammates for.

Fine. Football is king, and nothing else matters.

Disappointment hits me. "So you're just giving up?"

His lips flatten and he doesn't meet my gaze. "Later," he says, and then he's walking away from me.

I stalk back into the house, my hands clenched, disappointment churning. Part of me is...hurt. Just when I'd been softening to the idea of a football player, he goes and blows me off.

It's been almost an hour, so I decide to go upstairs and meet He-Man. Careful to avoid Alex, I head upstairs to the hallway to wait outside the bathroom while a myriad of people come and go.

I'm anxious to see He-Man, but when he's fifteen minutes late, I'm starting to look like a bathroom stalker. I pull out my phone.

I'm here and you're not. Are you standing me up?

No reply.

You suck, I send, typing the words.

I can't make it, he replies. **Sorry. Something came up.**

My stomach drops as I suck in a breath. Why is everyone letting me down?

Feeling more devastated than I should about a guy I've just been texting with, I shove my phone back into my clutch.

Alex is a cheating dick, Maverick ditched me, and now He-Man is a no-show.

All men are jerks.

Chapter Thirteen

Maverick

“I’m sorry I had to call you to come get him,” Mick says as I march up to the counter of a local bar, aptly named *Mick’s*. It’s a rather seedy, dusty place that plays old country songs, and it’s my father’s favorite, even though he’s been kicked out of it at least half a dozen times that I know of.

My hands clench. I didn’t see Mick’s voicemails until two hours after he left them because of football practice.

“What happened?” I ask, looking around and assessing, not seeing Dad or Raven. It’s a Monday evening and the place is dotted with a few worn faces.

His head nods to a back booth and my eyes follow, landing on my father. “He’s been here drinking since six. He fell pretty hard and hurt his hand. Nothing too serious, I don’t think, but Jackie played nursemaid back in the office.” I see the large white bandage. “He begged me not to call you, but I knew you’d want to know.”

Anger curls inside me. “Where’s Raven?” I ask, my eyes scanning the room once again.

“In the office with Jackie.” Mick sends me a sympathetic look. “Look, I know things are busy at school, but something needs to be done.”

My entire body tightens. “I’m doing the best I can.”

What I don’t tell him is that I’m driving out to the trailer multiple times a week to take care of her, even though it’s half an hour from campus. In a perfect world, I’d just move back in with Dad and Raven, but Coach Al requires us to live in the dorms.

I deal with my dad first, walking over to his booth and shaking his shoulder. “Dad!”

He reeks of bourbon and stale cigarettes, making bile rise up in my throat. It's a smell I recall from my early days as a kid, coming home from school to see him passed out on the couch.

"Mav," he slurs, raising his head up as spittle slides out of his mouth. "I'm sorry...didn't mean to...all my fault." The words are low and barely decipherable through the whiskey.

"I can't believe you brought Raven here," I snap, my gaze brushing over the patrons at the bar. "*Anything* could have happened to her."

"Didn't have money for a sitter." His eyes blink up at me, bloodshot and runny with a wetness I don't want to decipher. *I don't care*, I tell myself.

"You're a son of a bitch," I mutter as I lean down and pull him to the edge of the booth so I can swoop him up in my arms.

His chin falls down to his chest.

I brush past the bar and carry him out the front door. Ryker is waiting for me, his arms crossed against his chest. Same as me, he's dressed in workout clothes, and he straightens up from leaning against my truck. Normally I wouldn't have asked him to come down here with me, but he was with me when I listened to the voicemails. I motion for him to open the door so I can prop Dad up in the backseat.

He watches me with a grim face, his gaze brushing over my father. "What the hell? Shit," he mutters.

With a withering glare at my dad's lowered head, I head back inside with Ryker following me.

Mick ushers me to the back office and we sweep inside. Raven is sitting in a recliner watching *Family Feud*, her face pale and her cheeks stained with tears. Jackie is sitting at the desk working on a laptop, and she gives me a soft nod and a pat on the shoulder. "She's okay, love, just feeling out of sorts."

"Mav!" Raven lights up as she rushes over to me.

She bursts into tears as she jumps toward me, her thin arms wrapping around my shoulders. *God, I need to do better by her.*

“I’m sorry. I never dreamed he’d bring you here.”

Cupping my face, she searches my eyes then gives a little knock to her head. “I...have...headache.”

I kiss the top of her head. “Come on, Rav. I got you. Let’s get you home.”

* * *

Later that night as Ryker and I drive back to campus, my head is wrecked, riddled with worry and trying to come up with a solution. Only one thing is certain: I want Raven out of my dad’s trailer.

The problem is, I don’t have the money to fund it. I can’t ask for a loan from Coach or *anyone* at school, and I can’t have a job that pays over two thousand dollars; those rules are in place to prevent bribing and payouts. My dad has zero credit, so he’s out as well.

Ryker keeps shooting me careful looks and I know he’s worried about me, which is funny considering this past weekend he was worried I was causing trouble for the team with Delaney. Obviously, I have bigger issues right now.

Once we get back to the dorms, I give him a brusque good night then go into my bedroom and dig around in my nightstand for the number the casino owner gave me.

I recall his offer to pay me money—a lot of money—to fight another football player.

He answers on the first ring.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Leslie Brock?”

“Yes? Who’s this?”

I clear my throat, picturing the sharp-toothed, plump man who was at Carson's Gym. "This is Maverick Monroe from Waylon. You made me an offer a few months back when we bumped into each other at Carson's Gym?"

"Ah, yes, the famous football player. You have quite the record, young man."

Whatever. I know he's just a bull-shitter. "Are you still interested?"

"Hmmm," he says, as if thinking long and hard, and I clench the phone. I mean, he should be fucking *thrilled* I called him. I know the deal he's running, and it's sketchy as hell. I'm a damn fine player and he'd be crazy—

"Can you come to Carson's next week? We can finalize the details there and I can tell you more about the fight."

I exhale. "Sounds good. Text me the day and time and I'll be there."

There's a tone of satisfaction in his tone when he replies. "Excellent. You won't regret this, Maverick."

I tap my screen to end the call.

I'm already regretting it, but I don't see any other options.

Chapter Fourteen

Maverick

The next day Raven and I drive out to Pineview Retreat, a fucking magical place for residents who need extra care.

The fifty-seven acre facility is located outside Jackson, and there are manicured lawns and flowers everywhere you look, even though spring hasn't really sprung yet in Mississippi. It reminds me of somewhere a movie star might go if they needed a spa to recuperate at.

It's a damn far cry from the trailer park we grew up in.

Raven and I get a tour of the place, including the gym, indoor and outdoor pools, sauna, tennis courts, pottery studio, horse barn, and cinema. Hell, the place even has a bubble bar where you can make your own liquid with different colors then package it and give it away as gifts.

I want this to be where Raven will live, but I can't breathe every time I glance down at the dollar amount at the bottom of the paperwork Mrs. Watson, the admissions advisor, has given me.

She sits across from me in her office, the huge bay window behind her showcasing the horses that roam in the sprawling pasture.

Raven's disability compensation would only put a slight dent in the six-thousand-dollar monthly fee, but to even get on the list, I need fifty grand, which acts as a deposit to hold her spot and pays the first few months up front.

I feel like I might be sick.

I'm thankful Raven is sitting out in the waiting room.

"Is everything okay, Maverick?"

I look up into the kind face of Mrs. Watson. An older lady in her mid-fifties, I sense she can read right into my panic.

Once again, I'm regretting not going into the draft early, but it's too late now. Once you send your decision to the board, it's final, and you can't go back.

"Yes. Thank you for the tour and the information." I paste a smile on my face. There's no way in hell I can swing this place.

She nods, her hair carefully coiffed and pulled back at the nape of her neck. "In addition to your sister's fully furnished apartment, she'll have three nutritious meals served each day in our cafeteria, or she can opt to visit one of our onsite restaurants with friends or visitors. We have daily group activities and excursions to museums and other places of interest. Just last week we took a group to the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis." She laughs. "We even do Graceland once a year—talk about an interesting daytrip." She glances down at Raven's health history and shuffles through the papers. "I see she sustained a traumatic brain injury in a car accident a few years ago?"

I clear my throat. "Yes, she suffers from memory loss, sporadic seizures—which can be avoided with medication—minor cognitive delays, and frequent headaches, which are easy to manage if she gets plenty of exercise. She was wheelchair bound for a year and still walks a bit off balance."

Her eyebrow rises. "You're very knowledgeable about your sister's health. That's impressive."

"I've done some research."

She nods. "We also provide counseling, as well as medical services and checkups. A full-time nurse is on her floor twenty-four hours a day."

Damn. That sounds like heaven. It would mean I could rest easy knowing she was being taken care of.

I sigh, getting to the crux of the matter. "I don't suppose you offer any financial aid options, do you? The cost is...steeper than I anticipated. I mean, I knew what to expect based on researching your facility online, but I wasn't sure if you had scholarships or some kind of assistance?"

I'm just hoping maybe I missed something.

She gives me a soft smile. "No, but I understand your reticence. It's quite the sticker shock."

"How soon could you get her in if I paid the deposit?"

She looks at her calendar and taps her pen on the desk. "If you pay in the next few weeks, I can pencil her in for the first of May."

Shit. That's just a few months away.

I'm meeting with Leslie in a few days, and I'm anxious to hear what his offer is and how soon I can fight.

Mrs. Watson pulls me back to the present. "I hate to be a pain, but would you mind signing an autograph for me?" She blushes. "My son will go nuts over it. Our family has followed your career since you were in high school."

"Of course." Feeling at a bit of a loss and still reeling from the idea of figuring this mess out, I sign the piece of paper she's slid over to me then hand it back to her.

"Great. Someday when you're in the NFL, this will be priceless—not that I'd ever sell it."

Right, but as a college student, I have zero money, and no one can give me money. It doesn't make any fucking sense.

I nod and stand. More than anything, I just want to get out of here, talk to Leslie about the fight, and figure this shit out. I shake her hand and mumble a thank you for the hasty meeting she agreed to then make my way out the door.

Raven walks as fast as she can when she sees me, her face still red from the brisk wind.

"See...the...apartments...again? Please?" She hates Dad's trailer, and I don't blame her. I can't keep running over there, trying to mesh two demanding worlds together into one.

I'm missing class today just to be at this meeting. God knows Dad isn't the one to come. When I showed up today to pick her up, he was still asleep. I was the one to make us breakfast,

help her pick out her clothes, put a load of clothes in the wash, and usher her out the door.

I ruffle her hair, forcing lightness into my voice. She's sometimes quick to pick up on how I feel, and I like to think it's flashes of the old Raven, the one who made straight As in school and was a normal sixteen-year-old girl.

“We only get one tour. How about some ice cream at Buster's? You love their chocolate raspberry.”

Her shoulders shift in a vulnerable way, as if she's preparing herself. “Pineview...won't...let...me...in?”

I laugh and hook our arms together as we walk down the hall and head toward the parking lot. “It just takes time to get you signed up, that's all.”

She sighs. “Wish...I...could...snap...my...fingers...make...everything...how...it...used...to...be.”

I swallow down the lump in my throat.

Chapter Fifteen

Delaney

He-Man: I'm sorry about the baseball party, Princess Leia. Forgive me?

Me: Why should I?

He-Man: Because we're friends.

Me: Are we?

He-Man: I hope so. I left a gift for you at the front desk of the library. Did you get it?

Me: Yes.

He-Man: Well? Do you like it?

Me: What's not to love about a full-size movie poster of *The Princess Bride*? Thank you.

He-Man: I may not be texting you as much. I've got some personal things going on, but that doesn't mean I'm not thinking about you.

Me: What's going on?

He-Man: Just...wait for me.

“Hey,” comes a husky voice, and I flip around, dropping the book I was trying to shelve.

It's Maverick, and my eyes drink him in. His face appears tired, his expression somber as he studies me. It's been almost a week since the party, and things are weird. When he showed up for class on Monday, I'd switched seats on him, opting to sit in the front row. Maybe it was a test to see if he would follow me. He didn't. His eyes searched the room and found me, and though I saw disappointment there—or maybe relief—he took his usual seat in the back. On Wednesday, it was the same. He sat in the back, and I was down in front.

“We haven’t talked since the party,” Maverick says, bending down to pick up the book and hand it to me.

“Yeah,” I mutter.

He tucks his hands in his pockets and leans against one of the racks, his gaze studying me intently. “Look, I’m sorry I didn’t show up for salsa this week. Things are on hold with me right now. My dad is going through some things, and I’m spending a lot of time with my sister.”

I give him a shrug, trying to be as nonchalant as I can when really I was devastated when he didn’t show. I stood outside the door until the very last minute, hoping he’d appear. I didn’t even have his phone number to text him.

“It’s fine. You did miss some great plantains though.” I’ve torn my eyes off him because he’s too handsome, and I stare down at the cart of books I need to get shelved. “I need to get back to this...so if you don’t mind, maybe we can chat later?”

He exhales and takes a step closer to me. “Delaney, I’m sorry...I just need to focus on football...” His voice trails off.

His words hurt, and it makes me angry that I’ve let my guard down and allowed him to get this close. “I’m sure you do have big things going on—football, and probably a different girl every night.” It’s not a fair assumption, but I can’t stop the words from coming out.

He frowns. “It’s not like that at all. I’m taking care of my sister, juggling classes and practice, and working through some other things.”

“What things?”

He stiffens and shutters his face, not giving anything away, but this nerd girl can read him like a book: he’s withdrawing. He doesn’t want to share. He doesn’t want *me*.

I let out a sigh. “Good luck with your life,” I say as I grip the cart and push it down the aisle.

Chapter Sixteen

Maverick

I'm at Carson's Gym, and I grunt out my displeasure when I take a direct hit to the face from my sparring partner. Rio, the guy Leslie has paired me up with, dances away from me, grinning around his big-ass mouthpiece. His hits are sneaky and he's got a mean left hook, but I'm bigger, faster, and light on my feet. Being in tune with my body and how it works is something I've always been good at. Boxing is second nature to me as well, something I took to in high school since my dad used to work here doing part-time janitorial duties.

My skill is the reason Leslie is interested in me—well, that and my name in football. He's standing down on the floor watching us, a cold look on his face, wearing a slick tailored suit. I've already met with him this week, and he's made it clear what he wants from me: a fight with another SEC football player. No rules, just me and another guy in a boxing ring. My gut churns at the prospect of putting everything on the line—my career, my whole fucking life.

A flash of white-blond hair and a pink workout shirt coming out of one of the yoga classrooms gets my attention—right as Rio plants a hit straight to my eye.

“Shit!” I bark and back away into the corner. At this rate, I'll really need to brush up on my skills if some chick in a tight top is all it takes to lose my focus.

I look back to the hallway, and my heart pounds as I realize it's Delaney—I know it from the Princess Leia buns she likes to wear. I haven't spoken to her since the library, and that was a few days ago.

She strides toward the gym foyer, and it looks as if she's been crying.

“Delaney! Wait!”

She pauses and looks over her shoulder at me, and once again I'm floored by how gorgeous she is. Wearing black yoga pants and a pink tank her breasts strain against, she is damn amazing, even with a tear-streaked face. Her cheeks are red, and she hurriedly wipes at them as I grab a towel and jump down from the boxing platform.

Her eyes widen as she watches me.

I call over my shoulder, telling Rio I'll catch him later, and I give Leslie a quick nod. I've gotten enough sparring in today and I'm done.

"Why are you crying?" I ask as I come to a stop in front of her, still breathing hard from the boxing.

"I'm not." She sniffs and turns her head away, giving me a view of her long neck, the soft lines of her jaw. My eyes greedily eat her up. I've missed her like crazy in class, and I'm a heel for not trying to explain things to her, but with the fight looming over me, I think it's best I keep my distance. Even so, that doesn't mean I haven't thought about her a hundred times.

"Why did you bolt out of the yoga class?" It's an activity I didn't even know she participated in.

She seems to gather herself slowly. "I know it seems silly, but Han Solo's been missing the past two days. I'm sure you don't get it..." Her voice trails off.

"What happened?" I take her arm and lead her over to a group of chairs in the foyer. Grabbing a box of Kleenex from the desk, I press them into her hand as she sits down.

She cleans up her face. "A couple of days ago, I let him out to stomp around like he likes to do, and he just never came back. I called for him and put out tuna fish on the back porch—nothing. It's not like him."

"Maybe he found a girlfriend?"

She shakes her head. "He's been spayed. What if he's in a ditch somewhere and I can't find him?"

"So why are you rushing out?" I glance back at the yoga room. "I didn't even know you took a class here."

“The campus rec center has the worst yoga classes. This one is much better, and I needed to get out of the house and let off some steam.”

I nod.

“Anyway, my neighbor, Mrs. Wells, just called me. She thought she saw him on campus today near the fine arts building, and it’s the first ray of hope I’ve had. I’m on my way there to look for him.” She stands and holds out the box of tissues. “Thank you for asking.” Her voice is shaky yet cool, and I sigh. I don’t blame her for being standoffish with me.

“I’ll go with you,” I say, and she blinks.

“What? Why?”

I ignore that. I’m in take-charge mode, and when I see the coat she wears to class hanging near the door, I stride over to get it. Slipping it off the hook, I wrap her up in it and button it carefully.

She stands there watching me as I dash back to the boxing area and grab my gym bag.

I jog back to where she waits. “Now, let’s go find Han Solo.”

A smile briefly appears on her face and she gives me an odd look. “Are you sure? You’re...” She clears her throat, her gaze lingering on my pecs. “You’re half-naked and it’s cold outside.”

I grab my North Face off a hook and slip it over my bare chest. “I’m fine, Buttercup.”

Chapter Seventeen

Delaney

Maverick ushers me out into the cold and straight to his truck, a Toyota that looks like it's seen better days. He opens the passenger door for me and gives me a hand up into the cab. He gets in on the other side, looks over at me, and squeezes my hand, surprising me. He's being so...sweet and helpful. "You okay?" he asks.

I nod. I'm worried about Han, but I'm also discombobulated by seeing Maverick at the gym, even though Skye casually mentioned this week that she heard a lot of the football players come to Carson's during the off season to take advantage of their programs.

Part of my reason for taking the yoga class here was hoping I'd run into him—so stupid, but I can't help myself.

"Why were you boxing?" I ask.

He shrugs. "My dad used to work there and was able to get me a few lessons when I was growing up. I'm pretty good at it."

"Is there anything you're not good at?"

"Nope." He sends me a grin and I try to reciprocate, but it fails. Things are still strange between us. I sigh and look out the window.

We pull up to the fine arts building, and I'm out the door before he even gets us parked. My gaze scans the horizon, looking past trees and landscaping and buildings, trying to catch a flash of black and white fur. It feels futile, and I don't see anything that looks like him. At least it's the weekend and campus is dead, so there aren't a hundred bodies to look around.

"Han, where are you, little man?" calls Maverick as he takes the north side of the building and I take the south. Ten minutes of fruitless searching goes by as I make one more pass and

then two across the quad in front of the surrounding buildings. Nothing is out here except for a few crazy squirrels and blackbirds.

I feel lost. Han #1 left, and now Han #2.

“Over here!” It’s Maverick’s voice, and I flip around to see that he’s holding a squirming Han about fifty yards away. Pure joy fills me as I take off running toward them. Breathing heavily from my jog, I come to a stop, take the fighting Han, and pet him until he calms.

“Maverick! Oh my gosh, where did you find him?”

He shrugs. “Would you believe he was in the dumpster behind the building? He must have crawled in there for food and couldn’t get out. I heard a tiny meow, opened it up, and there he was.”

I rub his head the way he likes, and he nips at my hand then purrs.

Looking back up, I notice Maverick’s jacket is torn and his shorts look askew. My mouth opens. “You got in the dumpster?”

He grins. “Dumpster diver, at your service.”

I throw my arms around him, somehow managing to not squish Han in the process. My lips graze his cheek for a second and he turns his head to meet them, but I pull away before that happens.

I react by looking down at my runaway cat. “What if no one had seen him all weekend? You probably saved one of his lives.”

“Undoubtedly. I hope he’s worth it.”

I sigh. “He’s all I have.”

“Well, you have me now.” He clears his throat. “He looks a bit frazzled. Let’s get you both home.”

* * *

We pull up at my house and it's nearly dark. Skye's car is gone, and I recall a text from her earlier saying she was staying at Tyler's place tonight.

I'm still holding Han in my arms and he's anxious to get down, so I get to the front door in a hurry. Maverick follows me, taking my keys from my bag and unlocking my door.

As soon as he gets it open, I plop the cat down and he takes off. "Now don't run away again," I scold him as he flounces toward the kitchen where his food and water are.

I gaze back at Maverick, who's watching me.

"What?"

He shrugs as he leans against the doorjamb and brushes those gorgeous eyes over me. "Just like looking at you. I'm glad we found him."

"Me too," I sigh. "Well, thank you for taking me there and finding him."

Maverick starts, straightening up. "Oh, I just realized we didn't go get your car at the gym."

I shrug. "Don't worry about it. I'm not going anywhere else tonight, and Skye will be back tomorrow."

He chews on his lip. "Don't you have plans?"

"Nope. You?"

"No."

He watches me, studying me, and before I can stop myself, I blurt out, "Do you want to stay for dinner? I can cook for us—you know, as a thank you for helping me find Han. I don't think I would have been able to get him out of that dumpster even if I had heard him in there."

“I’d love that.” An almost shy expression crosses his face. “I don’t think anyone’s ever cooked for me...you know, since my mom.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. Come in.” I’m nervous, feeling him walking behind me as we enter the house and he checks out the place. It’s nothing fancy, but it’s all mine, built in the late eighties and only a block from campus.

Before I get to the kitchen, he grabs my hand, halting me. His expression is conflicted as he stares at me. “Hey, I’m sorry for being an ass lately, Delaney. I swear there’s no one else. I’m just—”

“It’s fine,” I say. “I get it. You’re busy.”

It seems like he wants to say more, but he lets my hand go, takes off his jacket, and tosses it across the back of the couch. I see his chest...his naked chest...and I swallow thickly.

Feeling breathless, I say, “Take a look in the fridge and decide what you’d like. I have a little bit of everything.”

“You did mention nachos once,” he says as he pulls out a pack of ground beef and holds it up.

I nod and he grins, making my face heat. “I did. Now move your ass so I can work my magic.”

“Can I watch?” he says softly, crossing his arms over his chest as he leans against my fridge, perfectly showcasing his biceps and the ropes of muscle in his forearms.

I take a deep breath. “Sure. Hand me my apron, will you?” I say, turning on the stovetop and putting the beef in a pan. I tilt my head at the hooks along the back wall, and he strides over to pick up the black apron. He shakes it out and brings it over to me, and I expect him to hand it over, but he doesn’t; instead, he slips the loop over my hair, his hands brushing lightly over my shoulders as he spins me around to tie the back. Blood pounds in my veins at the way he handles me, as if he’s perfectly attuned to every nuance of my skin.

He spins me back around. “*May the Forks Be With You?*” He shakes his head as he reads the white words printed on the apron.

I ease away from him to stir the beef.

“You’re such a nerd, Delaney.”

“And your point is?”

His eyes light up. “I like it. I like a girl with a brain.”

“Good. I like you too.” I say the words lightly.

He’s closer now, leaning against the fridge and watching me as I work. His scent hits me—male with a hint of sweat—and I’m having a hard time keeping my eyes off his chest.

Just keep him at a distance, I tell myself, but the truth is I’m weak and tired of fighting this feeling. Maverick freaking Monroe is in my kitchen, without a shirt on, watching me cook like he wants to eat me instead of the food I’m preparing.

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, his hand drifting down my arm as he pulls away. “You’re quite possibly the most beautiful girl I’ve ever met,” he says softly as his thumb rubs at a spot on my shoulder, and I don’t stop him, don’t pull away. “You’re nervous,” he says, leaning in closer. “Are you trying not to sneeze?”

I clear my throat. “Actually, my sneezing seems to be better lately.” It’s true, and the more I’m around him, the sassier I’m becoming.

“Nice.”

I fiddle with the pan. “Uh, do you want to find us a movie while I cook?” I gesture to the big screen in the den, which is easily visible from the kitchen with the open floor plan of the house.

“Sure. How about *The Princess Bride*?”

I drop the spatula in the pan and turn to look at him. A small grin curls his mouth.

“Why would you say that?”

His eyes lower. “I saw the poster you have up in the den.”

Oh, right. I glance past him to the gift He-Man left for me at work. I already got it framed and up on the wall, and every

time I look at it, I think about the mysterious man who gave it to me.

“It’s one of my favorites,” I say.

“Mine too.”

I suck in a breath, my heart flying. I want to ask if he’s He-Man...but I don’t. “Yeah, sure, *The Princess Bride* sounds great. It’s free on Netflix.”

I work in the kitchen and listen to him as he fiddles with the remote, searching for the iconic classic. As I drain the meat and set it to the side, I work precisely and methodically, trying to keep my brain from piecing together what I know is true.

It *has* to be him. Too much has been similar, and I feel close to both of them.

I’m dicing tomatoes at the counter when he strides back into the kitchen, his piercing gaze sweeping over me. “Mind if I take a shower before we eat?”

“In my shower?”

“No, your neighbor’s. Yes, yours.”

“And you’ll use my soap?” I picture him using my loofa too, rubbing it across that magnificent chest.

Another grin. “Is this a problem? Are you uptight about people using your stuff?”

“No.” How do I explain that the image of him in my house with water spraying down on him...I shake myself. “Yes, of course you can shower. I-I just...what will you put on?”

He rakes a hand through his blond hair and scratches his jaw, which I notice has acquired a bit of a shadow. I wonder how it would feel between my...

“I can wear a towel,” he says, a glint of glee in his eyes.

“No.”

“One of your shirts?” His eyes brush over my chest.

“Too small.”

He shrugs. “I can always just walk around naked.” I throw a dishtowel at him and he catches it. “This?”

“No, goofball!” I huff out a laugh. He really is incorrigible. “Wait here, I think I have something.”

I turn to head to my bedroom and hear him call out after me. “It better not be one of Alex’s shirts.”

I chuckle as I grab the garment I have in mind, a roomy shirt featuring a white cat wearing spectacles. I head back to the kitchen, thrust it into his hands, and push him toward the bathroom. He walks backward, letting me guide him, my hands on his forearms.

He’s in the bathroom and I’m just standing here waiting for him to shut the door, but he doesn’t right away. He’s looking at me as if he wants to say something.

So do I.

I swallow, feeling breathless. “I...I have to ask you something.”

“What?”

My chest catches as our eyes meet. I bite my lip. “Are you... He-Man?”

His chin goes up as his eyes lower to half-mast. “Damn, Buttercup, I’ve been waiting weeks for you to ask me that.”

* * *

Maverick—or *should I say, He-Man*—is showering while I furiously set the table and finish making lemonade.

He’s in my freaking shower...*naked*.

I check the clock on the wall. It seems like he’s been in there forever, although in reality it’s only been fifteen minutes. Feeling flustered by the images my mind is conjuring up, I

march down the hall to knock on the door and let him know everything's done.

Just as I raise my hand, Han comes up behind me and puts his front paws on the bathroom door, which of course isn't shut all the way, so it opens. *Darn cat.*

I don't mean to spy on Maverick. Really it's just an accident that I peek through the crack in the door and see the mirror, which shows the glass shower enclosure...and his naked form. I swallow hard at his broad chest, his thick arms as he scrubs his hair, the drops of water as they run down his pecs to that deliciously tempting V, right down to his—

Our eyes meet in the mirror and I take a step back, out of sight.

Shit.

The water turns off.

I clear my throat. "Everything's ready," I say, projecting my voice.

The shower door opens and shuts. "Do you think dinner can wait?" he says.

I can't see his face, and it's killing me, so I step forward a little so we can talk. Before I realize it, my feet have taken me right into the bathroom, and it's not an accident. My body knows what it wants.

"Wait for what?" I say.

He's standing there in front of me, and I blink rapidly, my traitorous eyes tracking a wayward droplet of water as it skirts down his corded neck, past his shoulders, and to his legs.

"Buttercup, I think you know what."

The air is hot and humid, making my face damp as I stand within a few feet of him. My hands itch to touch him, to caress that utter perfection, that body that's been honed by years of hard work and training.

"Delaney," he says, and I hear the command in his tone, the sheer confidence that he knows I want him.

“You’re naked,” I say, averting my gaze and looking up at the ceiling.

“And you’re not—why?”

I take a deep breath.

“Delaney.” His tone is silky. “Look at me.”

I do and my body shudders with built-up need, taking him in. *God*, I want to be naked. I want to throw myself all over him and satisfy this craving, but...

“I want you, Delaney, and it’s killing me slowly.”

I suck in a sharp breath as his hand moves to caress his hard cock. He’s unapologetic and proud as he pumps from tip to root, his palms working over the velvety-looking skin of his hard, long member.

“He-Man has a big sword,” I say breathlessly.

“Damn straight.” He rolls his fingers over the mushroom-shaped head as he bites his lip, making *me* bite my lip. His breathing increases as his chest rises, and I’m filled with the need to be the one to make that noise come from him.

Desire swirls in his gaze. “This is all for you...*you*.”

He releases his grip and I whimper, missing the sight of him pleasuring himself. He takes a step toward me and threads his hands through my hair, tugging at the pins that hold the buns together. With a touch so light it makes me shiver, he trails his fingers down the sides of my neck and onto my shoulders.

“You’re wet,” I say, watching the water drip down his chest.

“Are you?”

“Yes.”

He murmurs his approval softly, and a thousand thoughts fly at me at once, telling me to stop, to not get this close to another athlete, but I’m past caring.

“This is crazy,” I murmur.

“Crazy good,” is his reply.

“It’s probably a mistake,” I add.

“Best fucking mistake ever,” he says before taking my mouth, his full and sensuous lips sliding over mine, parting them until I sink into him and revel in the sensation of him against me.

Strong hands cup my face as his tongue tangles with mine, and I put my hands on top of his then whimper with need.

“Delaney,” he whispers in my ear as his mouth explores the tender curve of my neck and the hollow of my throat. His teeth nip at my skin, and I groan out his name.

With a deftness that doesn’t surprise me, he has me out of my pink workout top and sports bra. He backs me up against the wall and kisses me, sighing into my mouth as my hands snake around his shoulders and cling to him. His cock is pinned between us, pressing into me, and I swivel my hips against it.

His hand skates across my breast teasingly and his mouth follows, capturing my nipple and making me moan.

Is it possible to orgasm with just this?

Why am I surprised? It’s *him*.

His hand curls around my ass and my leg hooks around his hip, needing friction. With a groan, he pushes my yoga pants down to my feet, puts my leg back around his hips, and slides his fingers underneath my panties. I’m thankful I put on the pink lace ones this morning, but those thoughts vanish as his fingers brush back and forth, teasing my clit and the entrance to my core. He fingers me slow and then fast, his lips sucking my collarbone as I toss my head back and take in much-needed air. The scent of him fresh from the shower, the wetness of his skin, the sheer beauty of him—it all overwhelms me.

My pelvis moves with him as my spine tingles, the energy building and heating my insides. I’m putty in his hands as he touches me, his forehead pressing against mine.

“You’re dripping for me,” he says, and I moan. I can’t do anything else but be at his mercy as he plays me. Our breaths mingle together and when our eyes meet, I combust.

Fireworks go off as I come, my body vibrating against his hand, my walls reverberating with bliss. I place both hands on

his shoulders to hang on, the aftershocks of the quake keeping my body undulating against him. He watches intently, that piercing gaze of his so open and honest and needy that I reach up and kiss him.

“That was...” I don’t know what to say. Amazing seems so cliché; so does awesome.

He seems to know I have no words, looking as bemused as I am by our explosive chemistry. “I didn’t plan on this. I was just taking a shower and I saw you...” He swallows, his eyes searching my face. His arms curl around my waist. “Do you want more?”

I feel his cock brushing against my panties, which are now back in place. All it would take is for him to push that fabric aside and slide into me.

“I’ll be your scabbard,” I murmur, and he flashes me a grin then swoops me up in his arms.

“You’re a nut,” he says as I point him to my bedroom amid giggles.

He’s not even winded by carrying me, and I sink into his skin, wanting to bury myself in him.

He laughs as he sets me on my bed and scoots me over until we’re under my covers, face-to-face.

“You okay?” he asks.

I pause, my brain spinning. I’ve had a moment to think between here and the bathroom, and I’m not sure.

It’s like he reads my mind. “I’m not him, Delaney. I’m never going to cheat on you.”

I swallow. “So this isn’t just a spur-of-the-moment hook-up?”

His hand on my waist tugs me closer. “It’s going to take a million hook-ups to get you out of my head.”

My body curls into his as he pulls me against his chest and kisses me again, harder this time.

He works his way down my body at a leisurely pace, his lips toying with my nipples, plucking at them with his teeth.

I'm moaning as he slides farther down, his mouth finding secret places on my skin, the bend of my knee, the inside of my thigh. When his tongue slides across my clit, my lower body bows up and clenches, on the verge once again.

His hand pushes my chest down, holding me firmly in place as he works me over with the dance of his mouth. He devours me, giving me everything and not holding back. I'm panting when he finally comes up for air, my body trembling, ready to explode.

"Maverick." I taste his name on my lips, and it's so good. My hands tug him up to me, caressing his chest and hips, learning his skin. We kiss deeply, and the heat between us is the hottest I've ever been for another person in my life. His cock begs for me to take it in my hands, and I do, running my fingers over his length, lightly teasing the tip.

"Do you have condoms?" he asks between kisses.

I nod toward the nightstand. He reaches over, opens the drawer, and grabs one. I'm impatient, stroking him with my palms as he tears it with his teeth and slides it on.

He positions himself and enters me slowly, easing his thickness inside my entrance and then darting out, making me moan.

"More," I tell him.

He pumps inside, soft and slow and barely there, making me crazy.

"Please," I beg.

He bends his forehead to mine and kisses me as he adjusts my hips for a better angle, and then he slides all the way in, to the hilt, his girth filling me up tight as he moves inside me. With him on his knees, he takes me, hard and fast, his breath coming in pants as he works above me.

"All mine, Delaney." His words are broken up, and I can tell he's into this. There's an intensity to him, and he's staring at me like he'll never let me go.

Arching his back, his fingers rub at my pussy, playing me in a synchronized rhythm with his thrusts. I come apart.

He watches me with a heavy-lidded gaze, his eyes eating up every detail of my orgasm. “That’s what I was waiting for, Buttercup.”

With a shout, he comes after me, his body tightening and straining as his cock hardens inside me, his body pumping out every last bit of sensation.

“Damn,” he says after a few moments of lying on top of me. His chest is heaving as he slides out and lies down next to me.

“What?” I ask.

“That was...that was...”

“The best?” I ask.

He grins. “I know it was for you.”

I smack him with a pillow and he laughs, pulling me into his arms for an embrace.

* * *

Later, we’re cuddling and talking in the dark.

“I can’t believe you’re He-Man,” I say, gazing up at him. “I’m still processing.”

He grins down at me. “I know. I was going to tell you at the party, but then the other stuff happened with Alex.” He plays with a strand of my hair. “Ryker was the one who first texted you that night.”

“Did he know who I was?”

“He just knew I’d torn a girl’s phone number off of the salsa sign you’d put up. I didn’t tell him *who* it was because I knew he’d be worried about the whole Alex thing. You should have

seen his face when I told him it was Delaney Shaw. He freaked out.”

“Speaking of Alex...what’s going to happen now?”

He looks over at me. “Alex has nothing to do with us,” he sighs. “Hell, just you saying his name pisses me off.”

Oh. I bite my lip. “I mean, I know you have a lot going on, and I don’t want to mess up your game—or his.”

But isn’t this feeling worth it? I don’t say that, but I’m thinking it. My feelings for Maverick have merged with those I’ve developed through the texts with He-Man, and I’m in deep even though I know it’s dangerous to my heart.

“Football doesn’t start until this fall. He’s got time to get used to us.”

Us?

I smile and he leans in to kiss me. “Ready for round three?”

I laugh. “You think you’re up for it?”

“I’m up for anything with you.”

My heart swells.

The voice of Taylor Swift singing “Shake it Off” comes from another room. It sounds like a ringtone, but it’s not mine.

He heaves out a sigh and scrubs at his chiseled face. “Dammit.”

“Is that your ringtone?”

“Yeah, my sister’s. I need to go. I forgot I was supposed to check in on her tonight.”

“Oh...okay.”

He stands up, his head seemingly already somewhere else, and I do as well, grabbing a robe from the back of the bedroom door to slip on. He’s already dashed to the bathroom, grabbed his gym shorts, and put them on.

“I wish I didn’t have to rush off, but I’m staying there tonight because my dad’s helping a buddy out at his garage.” He grimaces. “It’s extra cash for them, so...”

I tighten my belt, following him out into the hall. “You do that a lot when he’s gone?”

He shrugs. “Sometimes on the weekends. Raven doesn’t need to be alone.”

How does he have a life?

“How do you do that between school and football?”

“Most days I’m barely hanging on.” A gruff laugh comes out of him as he quickly checks his appearance in the hall mirror, arranging his hair. “But really, her living with my dad didn’t start until after football season. If this had happened during the season, I’d have been screwed.” He rubs at the scruff on his jaw.

“Where was she before your dad’s?”

His teeth clamp together, and I know I’ve hit a nerve. “She was at a state-funded group facility paid for by insurance, but we weren’t happy with it. She had bruises and no one could explain them.”

I inhale. “That’s terrible. What happened when you asked?”

“Nothing. It’s a shitty place and I couldn’t leave her there, so we put her with my dad temporarily—but that comes with its own problems.”

Wow. It’s a lot to take in.

He must read my face. “Don’t worry about me. I can handle it.”

I clear my throat. “Do you want me to come with you? I mean, I don’t mind hanging out with you guys. We can watch TV or play a game or something?”

He rubs his hand across his lips and considers me, a frown twisting his face as he considers what to say.

“Maybe next time.” He kisses me on the lips, cupping my cheek. “I’ll text you, okay?”

I nod.

But...

I know he's not telling me everything.

There's a cagey look on his face, a wary expression that pricks at me.

Stop worrying, Delaney.

I want to, but now that the fun is over, my head is reminding me to guard my heart.

If you're going to do this with him, be careful.

I head into the kitchen to pack up the food. "Okay, at least take this with you. I'm sure you guys need dinner." I busy myself getting out containers to put at least half the nachos in, leaving some out for me.

"Delaney..." His voice is soft as he looks around at the preparation I did while he was showering. I chopped tomatoes and lettuce and got cheese and guacamole out of the fridge. I even put out real plates when I normally only use paper. I blush. "I didn't do anything but make nachos."

"You're incredible." He takes the containers of food I hand him, gives me one last look, and then he's out of the kitchen and out my door.

I watch him go, hoping like hell I'm not going to get hurt.

Chapter Eighteen

Delaney

I'm ready for class on Monday at least an hour before it starts. Part of it is that I didn't sleep well over the weekend, thinking about Maverick and Raven and how much pressure that must be when he's so young and has such a big future ahead of him.

Since I haven't seen him since Saturday, I take extra care with my hair, blowing it out and straightening it until it's a thick blonde curtain. Last night, I carefully scoured my wardrobe and came up with a tight-fitting lilac sweater and a pair of smoke-gray skinny jeans that curve over my bum. Now, with a careful hand, I apply extra dark red lipstick.

I saunter out to grab a cup of coffee and find Skye sitting at one of the barstools at the island, her head bent as she inhales her early morning brew.

"What's up, girlie," I call out, and she just grunts. She isn't a morning person like I am. "I made some chocolate chip cookies this weekend if you want some," I tell her as I breeze by to grab a mug from the cabinet. "Nana's recipe."

She gives me a little mumble.

I pour my coffee and toss in a healthy amount of French vanilla creamer from the fridge. "They are your favorite, right?"

She nods, her hands gripping her cup as she lifts it up for a long swig.

"Skye? Are you okay?"

She shakes her head. "Not really."

I sigh. I should have known something was up when she came in last night and didn't even pop her head in to say goodnight. Normally she'd check in with me on a Sunday just so we could recap the weekend.

“Did you and Tyler fight?”

She raises her head, and I see dark circles under her eyes from lack of sleep. She grimaces. “I know, I look like hell. I slept horribly—I’m surprised I didn’t keep you up with my tossing and turning.”

I was doing my own tossing around in bed.

“What did Tyler do?” I say.

She grunts out a laugh. “Funny how you knew this was about him,” she sighs. “We were at the baseball house watching a movie with a bunch of people and he just started...being a dick and ordering me around, like he expects me to be his maid or something. He asked me to clean his room and I told him to fuck off. Then I go to the bathroom and when I come back, there’s some stupid girl in his lap.”

My stomach drops. *What a douchebag!*

She bites her lip. “So I get pissed and we have words then he kicks me out of the house and tells me not to come back until I’m *ready to apologize*.” She uses air quotes.

“I’m so sorry.” I always knew he was a jerk, but of course, I don’t say that.

A tear makes its way down her face and immediately I’m next to her with my arms around her shoulders as she leans into me. “Hey, don’t cry.”

Her hands tighten around her coffee mug. “Ugh. I can’t believe I’ve spent the past few months dating him.”

I rub her back. “You know what? Let’s plan our spring break trip tonight. Going to the beach always makes you feel better. We’ll lay out in the sun and forget all about our ex-boyfriends.”

She nods, wiping at her face. “How was your weekend?”

I almost tell her about Maverick, but then decide to wait. “It was great.” I hand her the container of cookies and pop the top, letting the scent of sugar and chocolate waft around us.

She lets out a long sigh. “God, those smell amazing.”

“Five hundred calories each, but who the hell cares?”

She takes one and smiles.

* * *

Later, I arrive at class and take my seat in the back of the auditorium. When our professor arrives and Maverick still hasn't shown up, I'm nervous. The teacher is adamant about attendance, and there's no excuse for missing a test unless you're practically hospitalized. Then again, he is an athlete, and I know from experience they get away with missing class all the time. Still, that isn't really Maverick's style. The man has a brain to go along with all that brawn.

So, where is he?

I feel odd as I look through the history of the text conversations with He-Man. I have a different perspective now that I know it was Maverick. It was Maverick who rescued me from my blind date, showed up at the grocery store, and dared me to say I was a badass in the library. I change his name in my phone to Mav-Man and send him a text.

Where are you? We have a test today.

Not coming today. I'll explain later.

The professor approaches me to give me a stack of papers that are part of the test, and I slide my phone into my bag after switching it to silent.

Whatever he's doing, I hope all is well.

Chapter Nineteen

Maverick

“There must be at least three hundred people packed in this ballroom,” Ryker mutters as he stands next to me on Monday afternoon, surveying the milling crowd. “And they’re all rich assholes.”

I tighten the fingerless leather gloves on my hands and focus on taking deep breaths. Instead of being at Waylon today, we both skipped class to drive to Tunica, Mississippi, for the fight. We’re standing in the corner of a ring underneath a glittering chandelier inside a riverboat casino owned by Leslie.

Standing in my corner as we wait, Ryker grimaces. “This place reeks of cigarette smoke. God, I hate casinos.”

I force a laugh, shaking off my nerves as I do a few air punches and bounce around on my feet. “Isn’t this the first time you’ve been to one?”

He shrugs. “Still don’t like them. This place is trouble.”

Hell yeah it is, yet here we are.

I look around the room, taking in the high-dollar crowd sporting tailored suits and tailored gowns. Just to get in the door, the crowd had to get Leslie’s personal approval as well as put up several grand. The kicker is I have to *win* to get the fifty grand I negotiated.

My stomach feels like it’s filled with lead, and I’m doing my damndest to keep my eyes averted from the stares of the women and men who have their eyes on me as they sip from champagne flutes.

“Don’t look at them,” Ryker says firmly. His mouth is a thin straight line, and his face is harder than I’ve ever seen it. He hates that I’ve made this decision and he doesn’t approve, but he’s the kind of friend who’s not going to leave my side.

“I just want it over with.”

He swivels his head as the competition stalks into the ballroom from a side door. It's a showoff of an entrance by a monster of a man. He's around my age, flanked by two girls in low-cut dresses. He stops in the middle of the aisle, letting the spotlight dance over his broad chest as he puffs up and does a strut up to the ring.

He's massive, at least a couple of inches taller than me, which puts him around six-six. Swirls of brightly colored tattoos cover nearly every inch of his thickly muscled skin. Appearing to be of Polynesian descent with a wide chiseled face and a braid of long hair, he smirks at the crowd, shaking hands with some of the attendees.

I hear a sharp inhalation from Ryker. “Is that Kai Willis, the linebacker from Ole Miss? Goddamn, he's huge.”

I exhale, the lead in my stomach getting heavier. “Shit.” Ole Miss is our biggest rival in the SEC and “Killer” Kai is their star linebacker, so it makes sense that Leslie would want us to fight.

Ryker shakes his head and whistles as his gaze sweeps over the crowd. “What a bunch of sick bastards.”

I nod. “People get off on this. They like seeing blood.”

That hard look settles back on his face as he focuses on me. “Yeah, but you're jeopardizing everything.”

Maybe.

He grimaces. “And why are there no cell phones? Why did we have to get patted down before we entered the room?”

“Leslie's protecting his fighters. He assured me this won't get out to the press.”

He exhales. “The entire state of Mississippi will tear him apart piece by piece if he screws with their hometown Magnolia boy.”

A muscle flexes in my jaw. Yeah, I'm a hometown boy with nothing but the clothes on my back.

Kai's face is impassive as he studies me from across the ring. Big, mean, and full of vitriol, he's one of the most formidable offensive players in the country. He stalks over to us, his eyes low as they take in every facet of my physique.

He stops in front of me and just stands there, a curl to his lip. "Never seen you without all the padding," he tells me, a sly tone to his voice. "Not impressed."

I shrug. "Impressive is when I kick your ass back to Oxford."

He tosses his head back and lets loose with a booming laugh before quickly sobering and leveling me with a cold stare. "You're going back to Waylon in a body bag. I've been doing this a long time, and you're the perfect little pretty boy for me to toss around today." He flexes his arms, bending his elbows and flexing his muscles in a strong man-style showoff as he does a little pirouette in front of me. "You can't beat this, pretty boy. I'm gonna kill you." There's a wild glint to his eyes, and part of me believes he wants to.

I force a shrug, playing it cool. He's trying to rile me up, and I can't let him. "We beat you on the field this year, Kai, and I'm going to beat you in that ring." I tap my head. "See, you may have those big steroid muscles going on, but I'm smarter."

He sneers at me as he gets up in my face. Someone from the crowd gasps as we catch the attention of the betters.

I arch a brow, not flinching. "Scary. Now fuck off and wait for the bell to ring."

He barks out that bellowing laugh, flips around, and stomps away.

I study him, trying to figure out what his strengths and weaknesses are. He has me on size, but that could be an advantage if I'm faster.

I stretch out and begin my routine of small punches. I flick my eyes over to Ryker, who has a deep scowl on his face. "I got this, Mama Ryker. Just be here when I'm done."

He lets out a long exhalation as he studies me, his hand sliding over his jaw. "Always, man. I'm not going anywhere until this shit is done."

* * *

Kai is killing me.

I take a punch straight to the jaw and it sends me reeling. I hit the ground on my ass and blink up at the chandelier, the bright lights competing with the birds that are flying around my head.

Get up, I hear Ryker say.

I look over at him with one eye because the other is completely shut from a hit I took in the last round. Blood runs down and clouds my vision as I swipe at it.

Kai is standing over me and delivers a kick straight to my ribcage.

I choke out a gasp and focus. *Fuck*. I'm drifting, my mind wandering because I've been hit one too many times.

I scramble up and dart away from Kai's massive legs to rest against the ropes. He approaches with his gloves up, his mouthpiece filled with saliva mixed with blood. I've gotten in a couple of good hits to his wide face, but it's like banging my hand against concrete.

His fist connects with my hip and I stumble back again.

Ryker is yelling at me from the sidelines, but I can't hear what he's saying. The crowd cheers and shakes their fists, some for me and some for Kai. Loud rock music blares from the speakers, and all the lights are out except for the spotlight that's narrowed in on the ring.

Panting through the mouthpiece, I bounce around on the ropes, moving away from Kai. *God dammit*. I need a fucking minute to get myself together.

Raven.

Pineview.

Fifty thousand dollars.

I shake myself off and roll my neck, barely pausing before I rush at him, my first strike clipping his shoulder, not the chest like I wanted, but the hit has enough force that he stumbles a bit. He barrels back at me, his legs maneuvering a roundhouse kick that plants right into my side.

He bounces away. “Second-degree black belt, asshole. Anything goes in this fight—didn’t you know that?”

I narrow my good eye at him, my fists curling. “Mississippi boys learn how to fight for real in their fucking sleep. Karate isn’t going to help you.”

I wipe sweat out of my eyes, square off again, and eye him, looking for chinks in his armor. He’s proficient in MMA, but boxing is where my strengths lie, and that’s what I focus on.

Bobbing around him, my fists are up as I dart sideways, moving in and out, teasing him then popping just out of reach. I land a small right uppercut to his jaw, and he comes right back at me with a quick two-handed jab. I block it with my forearms and retaliate with an uppercut to his gut.

Whoosh. He grunts and bends over to catch his breath but pops right back up.

He maneuvers behind me, and this time I’m ready before he kicks, managing to block him with a punch to his thigh.

He growls out a curse and backs up, a slight limp to his normal swagger, and my fist aches inside the glove—it was a good solid blow.

He shifts around, eyeing me. He thinks I should be down by now.

I force a grin, knowing I probably look maniacal.

He comes at me again, his swipe a hair too wide, and I duck. He breathes heavily as he chases after me.

“Stop playing and take him down!” one of the men from Kai’s corner calls out.

“Go back to Ole Miss!” Ryker yells back.

Kai runs at me head down, in football mode, and I anchor myself, waiting. He gets a second from knocking me on my ass, I sidestep like a good boxer, and he misses completely, lurching into the ropes.

I rush at him, landing a punch to his lower back.

Score.

Using my shoulder, I pop him in the chest and send him reeling.

Stay down, asshole, my face is telling him.

But he gets back up, his eyes glazed.

“You done?” I pant.

“Pussy,” he calls at me as he slings blood out of his face.

“Your funeral,” I say and raise my fists up.

My words spur him into action and he rushes at me again. He lands a strike to my spleen, and I thrash away to get my breath back. *Fuck.*

“Killer! Killer! Killer!” some of the Ole Miss fans chant.

It’s like he brought his own cheering section.

I spare a glance at Ryker, and he screams out that there’s a minute left in the round.

I’m not sure I can last sixty more seconds without a breather.

Kai advances again, on the offense, and I skirt around him, my feet skipping on purpose. If I can’t take him down, maybe I can distract him. I make my way over to the crowd of people who’ve congregated in Kai’s corner, cross my left arm into my inner right elbow, and pull it up—the universal sign for *fuck you*. The crowd roars its approval while Kai’s fans shake their fists at me. I prance off, forcing my body to move like it isn’t screaming in pain.

He runs at me, more sluggish than before, and I square off and wait. I suspect he’s going to throw more fancy karate moves at me, and he does, his legs kicking at me as his fist aims for my face. I turn my body sideways and he misses, the inertia of his

movement making him stumble. Before he recovers, I hit him in the head and he pops back with a dazed expression.

Down he goes like a rock off the side of a cliff.

“Hell yeah!” Ryker screams from the side, and I look around for Leslie, who motions for the ref standing off to the side. He jumps in and checks on Kai, who hasn’t even twitched. His chest is rising and falling so at least I know he’s breathing—I don’t want anything serious to be wrong with him.

“Winner!” the ref yells as he holds up my hand.

I take a walk around the ring, eyeing the people in the audience. Some are cheering—*thank you, fellow Waylon fans*—while some are surly and sneer at me. *Whatever.*

It’s fucking over.

Chapter Twenty

Delaney

Mav-Man: I miss you.

Me: Me too. Will I see you today?

Mav-Man: No. I'll see you soon, Buttercup. Just...be patient and wait for me.

“This donut is the best thing I’ve ever put in my mouth,” I murmur in reverence as Skye and I sit inside the pastry shop at the student center. The books for our next class are piled on the table where we’ve been studying. A popular hangout, the place is packed with students milling around before class on this Tuesday morning.

She picks at her donut, a sparkly thing with white icing and purple glitter, as she watches Tyler. Sitting at a table a few feet from us with several baseball players, Bobby Gene included—someone who is obviously too nice for Tyler—he’s been glaring at us since they came in. He also sent Skye a few nasty texts over the past two days. So far, she hasn’t responded, and I approve of her decision to dump him and move on.

“He’s leaving,” I tell her, watching as he picks up his trash and throws it away. “And, dammit, the douche is coming over here.”

“Ugh.” Skye wipes her fingers on a napkin, her body stiffening.

“You got this, girlie. Be polite, but don’t let him talk down to you,” I tell her.

He arrives at our table, tall and looming over us with a glower on his face. He brushes his eyes over me dismissively then turns to Skye, a curl to his lip. “You haven’t replied to my texts. Still pissed at me, I suppose?”

“You told me not to come back until I’m ready to apologize.” Her face reddens as if remembering how he kicked her out of the frat house. “I’m not going to apologize—ever.”

His lips flatten, his face hardening.

“Bye, Tyler,” I say, waving at him. “We’re trying to eat here—alone.”

He spears me with a glare. “You stay out of this.”

“Just leave...please,” Skye tells him, her eyes brighter than normal.

He utters a slur—*the dreaded C-word*—making her pale, and my hands clench as several heads turn in our direction. His comment was loud and clear, and now we’re the center of attention inside the shop.

Skye is biting her lip and I’m about to stand up and go off on him when suddenly Alex is standing there, a scowl on his face as he looks at Tyler. “What’s going on?”

“He’s calling Skye names and being a dickhead,” I say.

“Dude, back off,” Alex tells him. “They’re girls—what’s wrong with you?”

Tyler huffs as he takes in Alex’s tight face, probably debating whether or not it’s worth it to start something. He hitches his backpack up on his shoulder and sends a heated glance at Skye. “Whatever. This is the end of us, bitch. I hope you’re happy.”

We watch as he stalks off, and I heave out a sigh of relief.

My eyes go back to Alex. I’m still a little ticked at him for the whole baseball episode, but I’m thankful he came over.

“Thanks,” Skye says to him as she chews on her lip. “I-I didn’t know what to say.” She holds up her half-eaten donut. “Want the rest of this as a thank you?”

“Uh, I already have one.” He holds up a to-go bag. “I was just walking past when I heard what he said to you. I couldn’t let him get away with it.” He grimaces and shuffles his feet, looking awkward.

I clear my throat. “He and Skye broke up over the weekend.”

He nods, sending Skye a rueful look. “I see. Been there.” His eyes are regretful as they find mine. “Uh, since I’m here and you’re here...I want you to know I’m sorry about the baseball party. I shouldn’t have jumped in between you and Maverick like that.”

I blink.

He sighs, his face solemn as he rubs the back of his neck. “I’ve been thinking about it—about everything, and I hope you can forgive me someday for cheating on you.”

Oh.

He takes a deep breath. “And I’m not going to bother you anymore—or Maverick. I won’t stand in his way.”

This is good...well, except that I haven’t even seen Maverick since we were together. Sure, he’s texted me, but he has yet to tell me why he missed class.

Alex exhales. “Do you think you can ever forgive me?”

I take in his slouched shoulders, the contrite expression on his face as he watches me anxiously.

“Yes,” I tell him sincerely as something clicks in my heart, and it just feels right. I don’t want him to be unhappy. We had some great times together, and most of all, we were always friends. I hold my hand out. “Friends,” I say with a little smile.

He takes it and we shake.

* * *

The next morning before class, I’m standing outside Maverick’s dorm room to check on him. I already sent him a text asking if he’s going to show up, but he hasn’t responded. Part of me is worried, and a bad feeling looms over me, one I won’t be able to shake until I see him.

I rap out a quick knock and hear scuffling from inside the apartment-style residence.

“Who is it?” comes a muffled voice.

“Delaney Shaw.”

The door flies open and I blink at the image in front of me.

With his wavy brown hair, Ryker has been caught unaware if his leopard print bikini underwear is anything to go by.

I clear my throat. *Good lord.* He’s got hair everywhere, his chest a gold mine of curls.

He leans against the doorjamb and rubs the scruff on his face, completely unconcerned that he’s only wearing a banana hammock.

“Morning, Ryker.”

He throws a look over his shoulder before coming back to face me. “Mav’s asleep.”

“He isn’t going to class?”

“Uh—” He flounders, clearly not wanting me to come inside.

But I’m determined.

“Do you have any coffee made?” I ask sweetly.

“Why?”

I smile and hold up my paper bag of goodies. “Because coffee would go great with these chocolate muffins I made.”

He sucks in a long breath as I open the bag and show him the contents, the appetizing scent of sugar and butter wafting up out of the bag. Ryker grins at me. “He said you like to cook, and I can’t resist home-cooked food. Come on in.”

I step inside, heading straight to the little kitchenette. Like Alex’s dorm suite, the space has a small kitchen, a den, bedrooms off to the right, and a bathroom to the left.

Ryker sinks his teeth into a muffin as I dig around in the pantry to find what I need to make coffee.

“Goddamn, you’re amazing,” he murmurs as he reaches for a second muffin. “If Maverick isn’t into you, how about we spend a little time alone?” He waggles his brows at me, clearly joking, making me shake my head.

“Maverick *is* into her,” comes a gruff voice from behind me as two strong arms wrap around me and a nose finds my neck and inhales. “Damn, I’ve missed you.”

My body melts into his. *God...yes.* This is what I need.

Ryker rolls his eyes at us. “Okay, you two, keep it PG.”

Feeling glad that he’s here and okay, I turn around only to have my heart fall.

He stands there in bare feet, navy flannel pajama pants, and a white t-shirt with one eye swollen shut and his left cheek colored yellow and purple from a bruise. His arms are painted with bruises too, most of them on his biceps.

For a moment, I can’t breathe. I feel sick. Swallowing down my panic, I say, “What happened to your face? Are you okay?” My hands flutter around him.

He shakes his head. “Nothing you need to worry about. It’s all over now.”

What? Nothing to worry about? Is he crazy?

“Who did this to you?” I’m assuming it was a fight.

His face tightens, his gaze not meeting mine. “I got in a fight with someone at the bar when I went to pick up my dad this weekend.”

My brow furrows, trying to imagine it. “That’s horrible.”

Ryker seems displeased with Maverick’s response and lets out a sigh. Maverick scowls back at him, his jaw clenching.

I look from one to the other. “What on earth is going on? Is there something you’re not telling me?”

Maverick doesn’t respond, just strides over to the coffee. I watch as he lifts his arm to get a cup from the cabinet, the movement slow and careful.

My frustration with the lack of details grows. “This is why you weren’t in class?”

Ryker snatches another chocolate muffin from the container and makes his way around us. “Looks like you two need to talk, and I need to put some clothes on.” He walks by, giving me an apologetic look. “Good luck,” and then he’s out of the room and shutting his bedroom door.

“What the hell is going on here?” I ask Maverick as he stirs in creamer and settles back against the counter to sip his coffee.

“Just got in a tussle. It’s not anything I want you to worry about.”

“I am worried.”

“Why?” Those intense blue eyes study me.

“Because you look terrible and I’m afraid you’re hurt.”

“Why?” He takes a long drag from his mug.

I lift my hands in exasperation. “Because I like you and I don’t want bad things to happen to you.”

He exhales loudly as he sets down his coffee, the movement making him wince. Because he’s an alpha male, he’s probably holding back some of his discomfort, so I know he’s in a lot of pain. My eyes roam over him, taking in the way he gingerly moves forward to retrieve one of the muffins and sinks his teeth into it.

My lips compress. “Were the police involved? Because you need to file charges against the person who did this to you.”

“No.” Silence fills the room, and I stand here, not feeling entirely welcome. I’m disappointed and angry he isn’t being more forthcoming.

Fine. I inhale sharply and snap up my backpack, which I set on the floor next to the table when I came in.

I’m at the door when I hear his voice.

“Delaney, please...don’t go.”

I freeze, my chest rising at his plea. His tone is soft, with an undercurrent of vulnerability that gives me pause.

I hear scuffling and turn around to watch him walk toward me. His steps are slow, his jaw clenched, his chest barely moving as if he's restraining even his own breaths.

"Dammit, you're really hurt," I say, biting my lip as I drop my backpack and walk over to him.

"I don't want you to go." He swallows and stares down at his feet.

"Let me see everything," I say, pulling up his loose shirt and gasping as I see the bruises on his ribs. A long one stretches down his right side, ending just above his hip. I clench my jaw and gaze up at him as tears prick at my eyes. This wasn't just a regular good-ol'-boys tussle.

"Maverick? This is...this is..."

"I'm okay," he says soothingly, cupping my cheek. "Get that worried expression off your face. I've been checked out by a friend, got some X-rays, and nothing's broken or fractured. I'll be fine, and I'll be back at practice in a week. Coach Al and my professors think I had a fender bender."

I lace my fingers with his and squeeze. "You're scaring me. Are you going to tell me what happened?"

His forehead presses against mine. "Just trust me, okay? Are you in a hurry to get to class?"

I shake my head as his eyes hold mine.

He kisses me lightly on the lips. "Good. Come back to bed with me."

My body gets hot at the words.

"You can't have sex like this...can you?"

He huffs out a laugh, and a smile—the first one I've seen today—flashes across his face. "I can have sex even if I'm half-dead, but right now, I just want to hold you."

There's a neediness in his gaze, and it makes me protective of him.

He tugs me toward a door and I follow him as we enter his bedroom. The bed is a full with a plaid duvet, and there's a dresser against the wall. His laptop and books are scattered across the foot of the bed, and he grunts as he moves them to a chair next to the door. I'm itching to offer to help, but I can sense he doesn't want me to.

I have a design class at noon, but I know I'm not going to make it, especially when he slowly pulls his shirt off by tugging at it from the neck. I get an unobstructed view of his magnificent chest as it slips over his hair then gets tossed to the floor. Next are his flannel pants. He kicks them off and stands there proudly, bruises and all, and I probably look like I need a fan in my face to cool me down.

“Want me to open a window, Buttercup?”

I smirk.

He hits me with those piercing eyes. “Take your clothes off. I want your skin against mine.” There's that need in his tone again.

I take my coat off and toss it on the chair. My shirt and jeans are next, until I'm standing in my black lace demi-bra and matching panties.

A long sigh slips through his lips as his eyes caress me. “Damn.”

Moving tentatively, he gets in the bed, lies back on the pillows, and pats the spot next to him, a searching expression on his face. “It's like I wished you were here, Delaney, and you appeared. Thank you for checking on me.”

I swallow. Part of me wants to get to the bottom of what happened, but for now, it doesn't feel right. I crawl in beside him and lie down, our bodies touching lightly; I don't want to hurt him. His arms curl around me, and everything else fades away.

Whatever's going on with him, I'll figure it out later.

Chapter Twenty-One

Maverick

Delaney taps her chin, thinking. “My biggest TV-slash-movie pet peeve is that Han Solo and Princess Leia never got enough on-screen kissing time.” She looks over at me. “What’s yours?”

I grin at her. It’s been over a week since the fight, and most of the bruises on my face have faded to a light blue. I’ve been wearing sunglasses and a ball cap everywhere, and my story of a minor car accident seems to be accepted. I hate lying to everyone, but it’s necessary.

We’re sitting inside Buffalo Bills after salsa lessons, and Delaney’s on a quest to figure out the real Maverick. I get the feeling once she becomes interested in something, she’s devoted to it with a one-track mind. I can relate because I’m the same with football.

She’s wearing a flowing red skirt and a pale blue sweater with a deep V-neck that clings to every curve. I’m trying not to stare at her full breasts, but I’m a Neanderthal and can’t help it.

She waves a hand in front of my face. “Hello, is anyone listening?”

“Right. Back to your twenty questions,” I say teasingly.

She stabs one of the fries on her plate. “If you didn’t want to play, you should have just said so. I just thought it would be a good way to get to know each other.”

I grin. “I can think of a few other ways.”

She blushes furiously.

We’ve shared a lot since she came to my dorm room that morning, but I still haven’t told her the particulars of the fight

or the fact that I'm training for the next one at Carson's Gym every night after football practice.

I cock my head, thinking. "Okay, my pet peeve is when you're watching a horror movie and that *one* person breaks off from the group to go search. Right then you know that's the next one who's going to end up dead. Why are people so stupid?"

She laughs. "Right! Why don't they just get in their car and go to Starbucks? At least then they wouldn't die." She takes a sip of soda, her red lips curving around the straw. "What's your favorite color?"

"Your sweater color...whatever that is." My gaze lingers on her tits.

She glances down. "Yeah, you can't seem to take your eyes off of it. It's pale blue, by the way."

"In my defense, it's pretty tight," I point out. My voice lowers. "And you look fucking hot in it."

She rolls her eyes. "Okay, if your life is a movie, what's the soundtrack?"

"*Star Wars* theme song."

She frowns. "But there's no words in it. Are you just saying that to get on my good side?"

I arch my brows. "I've already seen your good side, and it's amazing."

She just shakes her head and bites her lip. I've been flirting with her constantly for the past half hour, and I really do only have one thing on my mind: getting her alone. Between class, football, boxing, and Raven, I've barely seen her.

I laugh. "Fine. My theme song would be..." I drum my hands on the table for dramatic effect. "*We are the Champions* by Queen. It's old school but spot-on."

"Why that one?"

I shrug. "I'm a small-town boy, but I'm going places, and I've never stopped fighting to get ahead. Nothing's going to hold me back, and I'll do whatever it takes to get where I want to

go. I want to win a football championship next year, and then I want to have a stellar career in the NFL.”

She takes that in, absorbing my words. “Football’s everything to you.”

I nod. “What’s your song?” I ask.

“Definitely *Beautiful Day* by U2. It’s about life giving you lemons but you still find the good. I try to do that, especially after Nana passed. I came to Magnolia and try to live a life she’d be proud of.”

I look at her, feeling emotion shifting inside my chest. Like me, she’s experienced death, but being with her and talking with her, I’ve never been happier.

I jump into the question game. “What’s your favorite... position?”

She pushes her glasses up while her top teeth nibble on her bottom lip. “What do you mean?”

I lean forward. “Don’t be coy. You know.” I set my napkin down on the table. “Mine is any position with you. I want you so bad right now that I can’t even focus on anything else.”

A telltale blush steals up her neck to her lovely face.

God. She’s everything I want, and I spend most of my time thinking about her.

But, dread tugs at me. I’m worried she’ll discover what I’m doing and be disappointed.

I tried a while back, rather feebly, to push her away at the baseball party, but once I saw her crying at the gym because Han was gone, all that went out the window.

She toys with the straw in her drink. “Oh, I know exactly what you meant. I just wanted the question to be clear before I answered it.”

“Well?” I picture her back in my bed with my head between her legs while she moans my name out.

“My favorite position is linebacker, of course.” She giggles.

I lean forward again, my voice low and husky. “I’ve just spent the last hour with you pressed up against me trying my damndest to do some Latin dance because I like you, and now you’re just teasing me.”

She lets out a shaky breath. “You’re bossy.”

“You like it.”

“I love it,” she whispers, her chest heaving. Her tongue darts out and licks her bottom lip. “Does that even make sense?”

Heat fires through my body. “It does when it’s the right person.”

Her eyes hold mine. “How’s this for a little tease? I have a skirt on so you have easy access. What are you going to do about it?”

Clearly, she is past being nervous with me.

My cock hardens even more and I stifle down a groan. I look around the restaurant, my head spinning. We’re sitting in a booth toward the back, but it’s definitely not private, and with what I want, I need privacy. I exhale slowly...and have an idea.

I catch her hand. “I dare you to go to the last stall in the ladies’ room and wait for me.”

“Now?” She blinks. “Why?”

“You know why.” I cup her face. “And have your underwear off or there’ll be hell to pay, Buttercup.”

Her chest rises rapidly, the color in her cheeks flaming. She thinks for a moment then stands rather shakily, gives me a final lingering look, and heads down the darkened hallway that leads to the restrooms.

I give her five minutes before I pull out a couple twenties that more than cover the bill. Rising up, I’m barely able to walk in my tightened jeans, but I manage to make it over there without anyone glaring at the obvious tent in my pants. At this rate, I’m going to bust a button off my britches.

Damn. I’m halfway in love with this girl.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Delaney

Why am I standing in a bathroom stall, you ask?

Because I want Maverick more than I want air.

My head spins with heat and pure need. He is a rollercoaster, dangerous and exhilarating; my brain is telling me to jump off and save myself, but my heart yearns to ride it to the end to see if I live or die.

I hear the door open and the lock slide into place. My heart pounds. The stall I'm in is hot, my skin is hot, and I just might pass out before he—

The door swings open and it's him.

A quivering breath slips out of me.

I breathe in his masculine scent as he stalks forward and laces his fingers through my hair. His shoulders are broad and taut, as if he's coiled like a tiger and ready to pounce. I know that feeling well. I've been on a tight wire all week, wanting him, worrying about him. For now I lock that away, promising myself I'll come back to it later.

He doesn't speak, just runs his eyes over my face before drifting down to my chest then lingering on my legs. I hold up my purple lace underwear, and he takes them from me with a smoldering look then tucks them in the front pocket of his jeans.

“Good girl.”

His eyes come back and capture mine, and I feel weak at the desire I see there. We haven't even kissed and I feel like I'm going to come apart.

My breath comes in shallow pants as he places his hands on my shoulders and strokes them down my arms then back up. His fingers drift to the curve of my waist and back up to cup

my face. He's so gentle, and the emotion in his eyes—I gasp at what I see. Is it love burning in his gaze, or is it just passion? I don't know, but right now I'll take whatever he gives.

He kisses me, devouring my mouth with his, nipping at my lips and sighing. One of my hands curls around his neck to pull him closer while the other one plants itself on the hard bulge in his pants. My mouth doesn't want to let him go, and it feels like it's the same for him.

He traces his tongue down my neck to my collarbone, slips his hand under my sweater, and massages my breasts, his fingers tweaking the lace of my demi-bra. I toss my head back and hiss at the pleasure that zips up my spine. He maneuvers my arms out of my sweater and pushes it up around my neck without taking it off. I'm hot with it like that, but I don't care. All I want is *him...this*. My nipples strain toward him and I bite my lip when he finally frees them with a snap of the back clasp. He groans as he cups my bare breasts, his expression raw with passion, visceral and primitive. His mouth sucks at a nipple, making me gasp.

“You're too beautiful for me,” he says.

With need and lust rippling through my veins, I try to be careful as I help him take off his t-shirt and sling it over the top of the stall door. Though faint, there are still bruises on his body, and I lean down to kiss each one. A hiss escapes his lips as I trace my fingers over his pink nipples, playing with his skin. My mouth finds them, exploring, tasting him.

I work my way lower to unbutton his pants and shove them down around his hips. I push at his tight athletic briefs, my fingers stroking over the head of his cock. My mouth follows, tasting him the way I've been thinking about all week, and he groans my name.

While my mouth works him, he reaches his fingers underneath my skirt. He finds me wet and grunts as his finger slides back and forth against my core, teasing me and making me squirm with need. I'm panting around him, feeling like I'm going to come any moment.

“Do you have protection?” I gasp out. *Hurry, hurry* is all I can think because it seems like a million years ago that we were together in my bed.

He gives me a quick nod and tugs a package out of the back pocket of his jeans.

I watch him slide it over the bulbous head and onto his hard shaft, the veins there long and thick. His eyes look up at me.

He tugs my neck forward and kisses me, his chest against my breasts. In between kisses he whispers, “You’re everything I’ve ever wanted.”

In a rush, he has me picked up as if I weigh nothing. My legs wrap around him, my center resting on his abs. I’m soaked and I don’t care that I’m out of control for him.

His length nudges at my entrance, easing inside until finally he grunts and sheaths himself fully. Neither of us move a muscle for ten seconds, our faces next to each other, my hands hanging on to his shoulders.

“Fuck.” He closes his eyes and groans as I begin to move on him, grinding my hips and swiveling.

He turns so I’m pressed against the wall then withdraws and slides back in, the fullness intense, a sensation I quickly adjust to as he begins again. Hard and fast is the pace, and I can’t get enough. Each time he strokes inside me, it’s like it’s happening all over again for the first time.

“Mav,” I say as he watches me, detailing every nuance of my reaction. I’ll never have enough of this, of him. He’s ruining me.

I turn my face to him, gasping for air. His lips kiss my shoulder, sucking hard as my body clenches his cock.

Sensation gathers, growing warm and then hot at the base of my spine. Arching my back, I take all of him as his hands hold my hips, pushing me harder and harder until I break, shattering into a million pieces.

I breathe out his name and hang on as his cock swells inside me. He crests over the edge and calls my name.

His mouth finds mine and kisses me, his hands still holding me up as he pushes into me and shudders.

I feel supple and loose, like a cat that's just been fed a big bowl of cream and now only wants to bask in the sun.

Then I'm reminded of where I am: in the restroom of the local Buffalo Bills.

He slowly lowers me. "I can't believe we just did that," I say as I disentangle myself, my feet finding solid ground.

I'm wobbly as I straighten my clothes, watching out of the corner of my eye as he disposes of the condom then zips his pants up. I hand him his shirt and he finishes getting dressed, watching me with a considering look on his face.

"What?" I say, turning to him. I know I must look crazy with my hair everywhere.

"Nothing, just...happy."

Emotion clogs my throat. We're moving so fast, but I can't stop it. *I can't*. I want him. Maybe I love him. My hands shake as I ease past him to open the stall and step out into the sink area where I turn on the faucet and run cold water over my wrists. I don't know why I do it, just that my Nana used to do it when she got flustered. It seems fitting.

He grabs my hands and laces our fingers together. "So are we going back to your place or mine?"

"I thought you said you had to go work out?"

"I do, but I want to hold you tonight. I want to wake up and you be there."

I smile. "Mine."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Delaney

Mav-Man: Did you get the gift I left on your porch?

**Me: You mean the stuffed animal wearing a Jedi outfit?
Didn't know it was from you.**

**Mav-Man: Minx. Who else buys you stuffed cats? I'll
make you pay for that remark later.**

Me: Can't wait. XOXO

I sip from a glass of red wine as I sit across from Maverick inside Giardina's Italian Grill, an eatery a few blocks from campus. With dark lighting, a ceiling strung with ivy, and a collection of art depicting scenes from Venice on the amber-colored walls, it's quaint and a popular date night place—which is what we're doing tonight. Saturdays are busy, and I'm glad Maverick called ahead to reserve a table for four. I cross my legs under the table and uncross them, nervous to be meeting his dad and seeing Raven again.

He taps his fingers on the table, on edge, perhaps because his dad and sister are officially ten minutes late. He keeps staring at his phone, checking the time and seeing if she's texted him.

I study him, taking in the chiseled jawline, the straight angles of his nose and forehead. It's late March and his hair has grown out; he wears it swept back off his face, the ends curling around his ears. A pale blue button-down shirt with the cuffs rolled up is paired with a pair of jeans that sculpt the taut muscles of his thighs. He smells intoxicating, all earthy and spicy from his shower at my place. Even though he looks great semi-dressed up, my favorite look on him is gym shorts, a tank, and a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes.

"You look gorgeous," he tells me, taking in my demure Peter Pan-collared black dress. The lapels are a stark white with tiny seed pearls I sewed on myself. His hand reaches out and

strokes a long finger down my neck, ending at my collar where he tugs me toward him and kisses me lightly on the lips. “I’m with Skye—you should look into fashion when you graduate.”

I grin. I love how beautiful and talented he thinks I am. “Maybe. I’m not sure what I’ll do after this, maybe grad school.”

“Where at?” There’s a worry line on his forehead, and I wonder if it’s because he doesn’t want me to go too far from wherever he ends up in the NFL.

I study the white linen of the tablecloth. “I’m not sure, maybe somewhere back in North Carolina.”

What I don’t say is I really don’t know because I want to know where he’ll be going next year. I sigh at the prick of fear that rises up at the direction of my thoughts. Maverick is...he’s all I think about. What I felt for Alex doesn’t even compare.

Just then his phone pings with a text, and he pulls away to glance down at it.

His face tightens.

“What’s wrong?” Just a few days ago, a local strip club called about his dad, and Maverick drove to pick him up then took him back to their house, where he spent the rest of the night. He wasn’t able to leave until the nurse showed up for Raven.

He exhales, his eyes still reading the text. “It’s Raven. Dad hasn’t come home from work yet and isn’t answering his phone. The nurse is ready to go but doesn’t want to leave her alone. She’s gone next door to see if the neighbor is home.” He looks up at me. “He should have been home an hour ago.” He checks his watch.

“Can you call the garage?”

He grimaces. “They’re already closed. He’s probably at a bar.” Uncertainty crosses his face and he looks around the room as if searching for answers. He’s told me a lot about growing up with an alcoholic father who rarely had a steady job.

He looks through his phone and calls a few different numbers to ask if his dad is there, keeping his voice quiet.

I take his hand. “We can just go to her. That way you won’t be worried and she won’t be upset, and you can figure out what’s going on with your dad later.”

He looks up. “You don’t mind?”

“Of course not. She’s your sister.” I pause, seeing from his intensity that this is important to him. “I’ve always wanted a sister, so any sister of yours is a friend of mine,” I assure him.

“The trip will take an hour if we go get her then come back—and she *will* want to come back because this is her favorite place. You said earlier you were starving...” He searches my face for a chink in my optimism.

There isn’t one.

I smile. “You’ll figure out that I’m pretty easy and laid back. I may be a bit of a nerd, but that doesn’t mean I’m a control freak and have to have everything a certain way.” I gather my purse and jacket off the back of the chair and notice he hasn’t moved yet, a hesitant look on his face. “Is there something else?”

He stands and takes my arm in a brisk motion, as if he doesn’t want to respond to my question. He lays down more than enough money to cover my glass of wine and gives a nod to the server who brought us our drinks. He explains to her that we have to go but will come back later. A young teen girl who’s obviously a Maverick fan, she tells us they’ll make sure we have a table once we come back.

“What’s wrong?” I ask as we head to the foyer of the restaurant.

He exhales. “The thing is...you’ve never seen where I grew up. It’s not much.”

“You don’t have to apologize for how you grew up. Your humble circumstances made you who you are”—I squeeze his hand—“and you’re one of the most honest, hardworking people I know.”

“I’m not honest.”

What? I look at him. “Yes, you are.”

He doesn’t meet my gaze and I imagine I read remorse on his face, but over what, I can’t imagine.

“You *have* stalked me since freshman year...so there’s that.” I give him a soft slap on the shoulder, trying to change his mood.

He nods and shoots me a brief smile, seeming to come around. “Yeah, and you always dreamed about me even when we weren’t together. You watched me on the field at every home game and wondered what it would be like between us. You may not admit it—because you were seeing Alex—but I know you did.”

“How on earth do you contain that giant ego of yours? Oh, that’s right—you don’t.”

He tugs at my hair. “Admit it—you’ve wanted me since the moment I kissed you at the bonfire.”

“Nope.”

“You have.”

“Okay, fine. I can’t deny a few fantasies,” I murmur. “There’s this one in particular where you’re in a Han Solo outfit in my front yard holding an eighties-style boom box, trying to woo me.”

“Do I have a light saber?”

I grin, waggling my eyebrows. “Oh, yeah, a big one.”

He laughs, and I lean my head on his shoulder as we walk out the door, aware that several pairs of eyes are watching us. A few die-hard fans even have their phones out and are snapping pics. A young boy, around eight years old, has been sitting in the waiting areas with his family and comes running up, yelling Maverick’s name. He hands him a napkin to scrawl an autograph on and he graciously does so before folding it back into the kid’s shirt pocket.

Just as we're almost to his truck, Maverick's phone rings and he looks down at it, sees who's calling, and stops.

"Is it your dad?"

He shakes his head, his face hardening "No, but I need to take this." He hands me the keys. "Go ahead and get in. I'll be there in a second."

I glance at the ringing phone in his hand and the scowl on his face.

"Ryker?" I press.

"No. Just wait for me please." His words are curt, and my body stiffens. I want to ask him what the hell is going on, but he's barely noticing because the phone has all his attention. I watch as he stalks away from me to take the call, going several feet before he answers, his voice hushed.

What is he hiding from me?

I get in the truck, but I turn around to watch him as he paces back and forth, his body language tense as he listens intently to whoever is speaking.

Why is he being evasive? Maybe it's Raven. Maybe it has something to do with the bruises he had or the fact that he's always busy. I chew on my lip as worry settles in my gut. Am I putting my trust in someone who's only going to let me down? What if these sweet moments with him are just stolen bits of paradise that will crumble at any moment?

What if...he breaks my heart?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Maverick

On Monday, I wake up tired and worn out in my dorm room. After working out in the ring at Carson's for two hours last night, I ended up going out to the trailer to make Raven dinner and then hung around while she took a bath and went to bed.

Dad was there, and I'm still angry with him for being a no-show at the dinner where I'd planned for him to meet Delaney. I don't know why I thought it was a good idea for us all to have dinner. I guess there's just a small part of me that's still optimistic that he will be a regular dad. Turned out, he went to a bar after work for a few drinks and lost track of time. *Figures.* Delaney and I ended up picking Raven up then having dinner with her at Giardina's, and by the time we brought her home, Dad was already in bed passed out—further proof that Pineview is a great idea.

After showering, I come out of the bathroom and Muffin is sitting on the couch in her underwear and one of Ryker's shirts. A cursory glance around the room tells me his door's shut, and I figure he's still sleeping.

She darts her eyes at me rather furtively as she puts something behind her back, and I study her more intently. Maybe it was her phone. *Whatever.* There's not much to steal here, so I ignore it, and I don't want to ask her too many questions because she might get the idea that I'm interested in her.

I mutter out a greeting as I walk past, keeping my eyes averted from her legs, which she's propped up on the coffee table. She's a sly girl with an agenda, and I'm disappointed Ryker is still into her. To me, it's clear she still wants Alex if the way she chased him at the baseball party is anything to go by.

I make my way to the kitchenette to make a protein drink before class.

“So, you’re with Delaney now?” she asks, her nasally voice echoing in the room.

I give her a short nod. “We’re dating.”

Her lips turn down, her distaste obvious. “I don’t know what everyone sees in her. First Alex, and now you—she must be amazing in bed.”

My nose flares. Everything she says rubs me the wrong way, and I’m pretty sure the feeling is mutual. “I don’t talk about my private life.”

A laugh comes out of her. “Oh, you’d be surprised what I know about your private life.”

I freeze, my eyes on her face, trying to read the smarmy expression there. “Is that supposed to mean something?”

She shrugs, her eyes hard as they stare right back at me.

“I don’t like riddles, Muffin.” *And I don’t like you.*

“No riddles here, just the fact that everyone loves you and you’re the best player ever...right?” With that she stands, marches back to Ryker’s room, and shuts the door.

* * *

“Where are you off to? I thought you already had football practice,” Delaney asks as I load the dishwasher at her house. Ryker and I came over after class and she and Skye made lasagna for us. As a thank you, Ryker and I cleaned up the kitchen.

She’s standing next to me, her gaze zeroed in.

I shrug. “We’re going to hit the field house for some weight training.” Every word is a lie and feels like a bullet to my gut, but I can’t tell her the truth: I’m going to meet with Leslie at Carson’s tonight to work out the details of the next fight. He was the one who called me as we left Giardina’s.

I want to confide in her, but if I get caught fighting, the less she knows, the better, and damn it's hard to admit I'm a cheater who's breaking rules.

"I made cookies," she tells me rather tartly. "Too bad you're going to miss those."

Han is weaving in and out of her legs, and I reach down to give him a pet so I don't have to look her in the eyes. I'm such an asshole. "Just save me some and I'll get them tomorrow."

"Are you coming over later?"

"No, I have a test tomorrow." I stand and brush my lips across hers. "Thank you for the meal. It was amazing as always."

Feeling the weight of her eyes on me as I move to grab my gym bag, more guilt settles over me. Besides Raven, she's the most important person in my life, and I'm not giving her what she deserves.

After thanking the girls for dinner, Ryker follows me as I make my way out the front door.

He starts in on me as soon as we get in the truck. Earlier I told him about Leslie calling me, and he's been fuming all afternoon.

"You can't do another fight. I won't let you," he mutters as I start the truck.

I exhale. "Just one more and I'm set to pay for Pineview for an entire year. If I get one more fight in now—before football starts this fall—then I won't have to do it again." I flick a quick glance over to him as he stares out the window, clearly annoyed with me. "Look, think about Raven—this is for her. My dad is shit, man. He can't take care of her, and I'm barely managing everything I have with school and football. Plus, I've already paid the facility the deposit. Raven moves in May 1st."

Knowing she will be happy and safe...that makes it all worthwhile.

"Unless you get caught," he mumbles, raking a hand through his hair. "Then you'll never play pro ball."

“Nothing’s been said about the last fight, and no one will find out about this one.”

“Secrets never stay secrets, Mav. Someday it’s going to come back on you.”

“Have you told anyone?” My head recalls Martha-Muffin in our dorm room and how oddly she acted.

“No, of course not.” His words are clipped.

My hands tighten on the steering wheel. “If you’ve got something to say, spit it out.”

He exhales loudly. “Have you told Delaney what you’re doing for cash? Because she isn’t going to be cool with it.”

“Stay out of me and Delaney.”

“See, you know I’m right. You haven’t been honest with her—with anyone, not even Raven.”

My teeth clench. “What’s your point?”

He waves his hands around. “Raven has a traumatic brain injury, and you’re out there getting beat up. Last time you nearly fractured a rib.”

I shrug. “It’s the same as being on the field.”

“On the field, you have a helmet and pads.”

I shake my head. “I could break my neck on the football field and never walk again. I could die in a car wreck like my mom. I could be walking across the street and get hit by a car. I can’t live my life by what-ifs. All I know is what I have to do right now, and that’s take care of my little sister. No one else is going to do it—not my dad, not the state, *me*.”

We’re both quiet for a moment.

“You don’t know what it was like growing up like I did,” I add. “I got a job when I was thirteen, mowing the football field at school. When I was sixteen, outside of football, I helped my dad clean Carson’s Gym. I’ve worked my entire life and now I have the chance to really provide for Raven.”

He looks out the window.

“Dude, let it go,” I say. “Be my friend.”

He shrugs. “I just...have a bad feeling.”

“Maybe it’s because you’ve been hanging out with Muffin.”

He juts out his jaw. “So?”

I sigh. “All I’m saying is be careful. Just a few weeks ago, she was hot and heavy after Alex.”

He scratches at his scruff. “We’re keeping it casual.”

“Good.”

* * *

We enter the gym and take in the surroundings. It’s seven at night but the place is busy. Off to the left are the locker rooms, and I head there to wrap my hands, change into shorts, and put on some flat, high-topped boxing shoes, ones Leslie provided for me after the last fight. I figure I may as well get some sparring in while I’m here.

Ryker goes over to the weights to do some lifting.

I come out of the locker room and see Leslie has entered the building and is in the main office talking to Carson, the owner. Dressed in a suit that looks out of place in the smelly gym, he gives me a wave through the glass walls.

I nod and head that way, and as soon as I enter the room, Leslie motions for Carson to leave us, which I can appreciate. I’m sure Carson knows what’s going on, and I don’t doubt he’s got his fingers all up in this, but I’d rather speak with Leslie alone.

Leslie motions for me to take a seat, but I decline. I don’t like him. He’s a slimy guy who’s taking advantage of the fact that I need money. It makes me wonder about the other players and their reasons for fighting for him. No football player with a

good record would do this *just* for the money; it's too dangerous.

"I'll stand, thanks." I cross my arms. I want him to know he doesn't own me. "You said you had some news about the fight," I say.

He studies me with a smile that's overcrowded with small teeth in an otherwise large mouth. "Yes. Same terms as before. Your opponent has knocked out everyone before the second round. You up for it?" His beady eyes rake over me, an arch to his brow as he takes in the additional muscle I've managed to build up in the past couple of weeks. I've also healed up completely and feel like I'm at the top of my game.

"Who is it?" A whole list of names runs through my head, mostly SEC powerhouses since those are the ones I know the best.

"He's an Alabama boy, and the fans are chomping at the bit to get to you. It's all everyone is talking about."

Everyone being his little circle of rabid rich fans.

My lips flatten. Alabama is the best in the country—this year. They defeated us in a tight Rose Bowl game last year, knocking us out of the national championship.

A muscle flexes in my jaw, and I give him a sharp nod. "Done. Just tell me when."

"I'll make the final arrangements and call you." He puts out his hand for me to shake. There's an ostentatious ring on nearly every finger, but I grit my teeth and take it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a flash of movement outside the office, and I turn to see Muffin watching us, a petulant look on her face.

I narrow my eyes at her and she flips around then hurries toward the door, but not before I see that she had her phone out.

Did Ryker tell her we were coming here? That doesn't make sense, not when I'm meeting Leslie here.

Brushing past him, I exit the office, my eyes scanning the gym for Ryker, who I find in the back on a butterfly machine.

Everything seems okay, but I know something isn't right. I follow Muffin as she heads to the foyer, her bag slung over her shoulder.

I call her name, but she tears out the front door, a purposeful stride in her walk.

Following behind her, I exit the building and see her half-running to her little Mercedes convertible.

Jogging, I catch her before she gets it unlocked.

"Hey, I didn't know you worked out here." It's not unusual for students to come, especially since the Waylon facility doesn't offer the same variety of classes, but I've never seen her here. "What's up?" I say.

"Yeah, well, I signed up for a CrossFit class here. The only time available is super late." She's fumbling around in her purse for her keys. "I thought it would be great since Ryker is here a lot."

My stomach falls. He must have mentioned that he comes here. *Dammit.* I don't need Muffin sniffing around and seeing me spar in the ring. I mean, it doesn't look bad to box, but still...I want to cover my tracks.

"Oh, did you see him? He was on the butterfly machine."

She blinks. "Uh, no...but I saw you in Carson's office."

My eyes narrow. "Is that right? Huh."

"Yeah, that's right," she says curtly, giving me a sneer.

"You seem a little off, Muffin. You okay?"

With an aggravated sigh, she glares up at me. "Why so many questions, Maverick?"

I sneak a look at the phone she still has clutched to her side and nod my head at it. "Did you take a picture of me?"

She blinks. "What if I did? Is that a problem? Do you have something to hide?"

A scowl pulls my brow down. “No.”

She laughs. “I did actually, of you and the fat guy in the suit. Those glass walls are amazing—I could see everything.”

I stiffen. “Don’t meddle in my life, Muffin. Stick to Ryker.” My voice is hard and flat.

She bristles and opens her car door, giving me a cunning look as she slides inside. “Are you threatening me?”

I take a step back, holding my hands up. “No. I’m just asking why you took a picture of me with a man you don’t know.”

She arches her brow. “There are ways to find out who he is. Ever hear of reverse image search on Google? Besides, I asked Carson and he told me his name was Leslie Brock. Guess who I’m going to look up when I get home?”

I’m baffled by why she would even care.

Anxiety eats at me, imagining her blabbing around campus about who Leslie is. I know exactly what she’ll find out if she tries hard enough: he owns casinos.

“Don’t start something you don’t know anything about,” I say tightly.

An insinuating expression flits over her face. “Just a heads up, Ryker leaves his phone out constantly. I just happened to take pictures of some messages you’ve sent him that came across his lock screen—texts about fighting in Tunica and a man named Leslie, and then lo and behold, I ask Carson who you’re with and he says *Leslie*. Not smart to meet your bookie so close to home.”

Fuck. I can’t breathe.

I bark out a laugh. “He isn’t my bookie.”

She’s off base, but dangerously close...

“Yeah, right. You’ve been gambling.”

“It’s not what you think it is,” I say. “I’ve never gambled.” There’s so much more I want to say to her—I want to fucking go off on her—but I’m terrified.

“Whatever. You’ll say anything to protect yourself.” She’s managed to get in her car now. “I’ll see you,” she says as she slams her door and cranks her engine.

I stand back as she jerks out of her parking spot and squeals off.

Everything feels wrong.

I scrub my face and head back into the gym. I have to find Ryker and figure out what the hell is going on.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Delaney

It's the Thursday night before spring break and the library is a dead zone, except for the diehards who aren't leaving early for a quick trip to somewhere.

It's seven o'clock, so I have two more hours before I can hightail it out of here and head to my house, where I'm supposed to meet Maverick.

Voices drift in from the front, and I look up from the circulation desk I'm manning, expecting to see my co-worker who's been working on the main floor downstairs, but it's Martha-Muffin and one of her sorority friends.

She sees me and changes her trajectory, making her way over to the desk. She practically flounces in a pair of white cutoffs and a lace top that barely covers her boobs.

I exhale. "Mensa meeting for two tonight? Please don't let me interrupt. Choose a table, any table." *As long as it's far, far away from me.*

"You think you're so smart." She shakes her head. "It all might just fall down around you."

I arch my brows. "*Okaaaay*. Am I supposed to be scared?"

"You would be if you knew what I knew," she says, twisting her lips.

I sigh, not in the mood for her antics. I just want to get out of here and see Maverick. "Unless you're here to check out a book—which I highly doubt is the case—or need help finding a book—which I also highly doubt—then I'll leave you to your ridiculously vague comments and go do something productive with my time."

I skirt around the edge of the counter, my goal to get as far from the toxicity as I can, then I hear her voice calling behind

me in a singsong tone. “I know something you don’t.”

I push my glasses up and turn around. “I already know you slept with my ex. Over and done. I’ve moved on.”

She laughs, but it isn’t a pleasant sound, and by now the group of guys back in the corner openly stare at us.

“This is about Maverick.”

She’s toying with me, I tell myself, but part of me—the insecure side of me—wants to know exactly what she means. My old anxieties tug at me, reminding me that Alex cheated and saying maybe Maverick has too.

“Fuck off, *Martha*.”

She rears back in surprise. “Well, you do have claws. I was beginning to wonder.”

I flip back around and head down an aisle.

Her parting shot follows me. “Just ask him why he’s been training at Carson’s Gym so much. Ask him who Leslie is.”

Leslie? Is she someone he’s seeing at the gym? He’s been telling me he goes to the field house to work out...

But I did see him at Carson’s all those weeks ago when Han was lost.

I take the stairs two at a time, her comments niggling at me, digging under my skin. I try to pack them away and store them in a back corner of my mind, but when my phone pings with a text from Maverick and I read it, the uncertainty yanks at me even more.

Rain check on tonight? We’ve got a big scrimmage coming up and I need the rest.

Fine, I say.

You okay?

I type **Yes**, but then delete it.

I’m not okay, not at all, and I need time to think. I don’t respond, instead just tuck the phone back in my pocket.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Delaney

The next day, Ryker opens the door, this time with some clothes on. It makes sense since it's the afternoon and after classes, but in a dorm with athletes, you never know. I'm here to pump him for information, and I'm not above using food to get what I want.

"Mav isn't here. Already left for the gym."

I let out a sigh. "Is he at Carson's with *Leslie*?"

Ryker pales—just a hair—and I know I'm on the right track. "He might be at Carson's, but I don't know a Leslie."

My heart drops at his obvious lie, but I shrug, playing it cool. "I know he's not here. He texted me this morning and said he had things to do today." He's been too busy for me for the past several days, and my nerves are stretched thin. It feels like whatever we had is slowly slipping away and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

He nods. "So why are you here?"

I pull a full pecan pie out of my handy little Tupperware carrier. "I made pie, and I do recall you mentioning once that pecan is your favorite. Just thought I'd drop it off."

"Man, you're the best." He opens the door wider and I step inside, heading to the kitchenette. "It's been a shit day and I really need this."

"Oh? What's wrong?" Normally he always wears a smile, but now that I'm noticing, there are dark circles under his eyes and his hair is everywhere, as if he's been rubbing it.

His lips tighten. "Just girl problems." Muffin problems, no doubt, but I hold on to that thought and wait.

"Let me cut you a piece," I say as I pull open a drawer to find a pie cutter. Alas, these guys are primitive, so I settle for a

butter knife. I slice into the flakey golden crust, tossing a look at him over my shoulder.

“Sure.” His eyes are focused on the dish, and I smile at his interest.

“By the way, this was my Nana’s recipe, and it’s been handed down in my family for generations. It won a blue ribbon at a fair in North Carolina.”

He walks in closer. “Awesome, but why are you bringing *me* pie? Shouldn’t it be for Mav?”

“Just thought we could chat. Want me to make us some coffee to go with this? Or some iced tea?”

“I think my mom left some Lipton packets here the last time she dropped off groceries, and there’s sugar in the pantry. I don’t have an iced tea maker though. We can use a pan?”

“Sure.” I nod and he helps make the tea, immediately turning on the stovetop. There’s a bit of pep in his step, probably excitement about the pie. He fills the pan with water and I drop in the bags as he digs out a pitcher. I mean, I don’t really want tea, but I’m nervous and need something to keep my hands busy because I feel guilty about pumping Maverick’s friend for information. I exhale. I’m desperate, and I just want Ryker to reassure me that everything’s okay.

“Let’s talk while the tea brews, yes?”

“Sure.” He shrugs.

I set the pie in the center of the table and cut it into six large slices, the sterling silver of the knife slicing into the crystallized pecans and down farther into the dark gooey confection.

“So the recipe is a big secret?”

“Nana thought it was. Sometimes I think it’s a shame not to tell people about it because I’m the only person in the world that knows it, and I don’t have any family to pass it on to.”

“You’re not missing much. Family can be a real pain in the ass. Maybe you’ll have a house full of kids someday.”

I hope so. “Or a bunch of cats.”

Silence settles between us as we wait for the tea to brew, and I notice the pensive look on Ryker’s face.

I’m trying to figure out how to lead into asking him details about Maverick when he speaks first. “You didn’t *really* come here just to bring me this pie, did you?”

I feel myself blush. “Correct.”

A gruff laugh comes out of him. “You came to ask me about Maverick and why he’s so...weird lately, right?” His eyes flash down to the gooey goodness that’s spreading out on his plate. “The pie is a bribe.”

He’s funny, and I smile a little even though I’m worried. “Pretty much.”

He sighs, but I don’t think he’s annoyed with me.

My stomach churns and I go all in. “The truth is...Muffin came to see me at the library last night, throwing threats around about Maverick and someone named Leslie. Is he cheating on me?”

He shakes his head. “No. God, no—Maverick wouldn’t do that. Leslie is a guy, a real piece of work.”

I sit back, my head spinning with relief. I’d been so focused on him cheating...

He rakes a hand through his hair, his lips twisting as if he’s deep in thought.

“But you’re not telling me everything,” I say. “What does Muffin claim to know about Maverick?”

He rubs a hand down his face. “This whole Muffin thing... shit, it’s my fault. Apparently one night she got my phone while I was sleeping and read a bunch of texts from Maverick. It was on the lock screen but she was still able to take pictures of messages about a casino and this Leslie person. She’s crazy. She even went up to him at Carson’s and took a picture of him with the guy.”

He says a few other things, mostly about how he's pissed at Muffin and how he's tried to call her but she's not answering, but all I can focus on is the casino bit.

My heart drops. "He's been gambling?"

He studies me and frowns, giving me a rueful look. "No, and I've already said too much. I only did because I know you care about him and if anyone can talk to him, it's you. You'll have to ask him for the rest of the story."

I chew on my bottom lip, my head trying to piece it all together. Ryker's right—if I want to know the truth, I'll have to confront Maverick.

He lets out a sigh as his eyes drift back to the plate in front of him. "Are you still going to let me eat this?" The fork is already in his hand and there's a huge clump of crust and pecan filling on the tines.

"Eat the damn pie."

"Thank God." He shoves the huge bite in his mouth and groans so loudly, I blush. Once he gets the first bite down, he reaches across the table and gives my hand a squeeze. "Don't give up on him. Just talk to him."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Maverick

I'm leaning against the wall in the gym's showers, letting the hot water run down my body. I've been pushing myself to the limit this week, preparing for the fight along with our first scrimmage game tomorrow. NFL scouts will be in attendance, and just thinking about everything I have on the line kicks up my adrenaline.

I think back to Muffin and what she might do with those text messages she took pictures of. Everything she has is just conjecture, but she's batshit crazy, and batshit crazy can cause a lot of havoc.

I get out and am drying off when I hear the clank of a door somewhere in the building. *Dammit*. I thought Carson locked up before he left, but obviously he was leaving that to me since I'm here so late.

Still damp, I toss on my gym shorts then ease out the door and into the darkened gym. The lights are off and the only light is the glow from Carson's office, which he leaves on all the time.

"Maverick?"

My shoulders sigh in relief—it's Delaney.

My eyes scan over her, eating her up. She's wearing a pair of gray yoga pants and a shirt that says *I'm Sorry For What I Said When I Was Hungry*. Her hair is up in a side knot thing, and strands of blonde hair that have escaped fall down her cheek.

I exhale. Damn, she's beautiful, but she shouldn't be here.

"What are you doing here? It's past eleven."

She looks around the deserted gym, her gaze ending on the boxing ring. She pushes her glasses up on her nose. "Muffin came to see me at the library last night, and I went to see

Ryker today. He didn't tell me everything, so I'm left piecing things together. I'm not sure what to think, and I'm here to find out what the hell is going on with you."

"Okay." I swallow as my entire body tenses. My chest feels like a chunk of ice.

"Who's Leslie and what does he have to do with a casino?"

Fuck. My pulse kicks up, dread filling my gut as I realize the one person I didn't want to know what I'm doing is about to find out what a liar I am. I suck in a sharp breath, gathering myself.

"Let me get dressed first," I say before turning back around to head into the locker room, trying to keep it together. She follows me as I march away and dig through my gym bag, my eyes avoiding hers.

"Is that how you want to play this? By not saying anything?" I look up and her hands are on her hips, her breasts straining against the fabric of her shirt.

I slip a Waylon football shirt over my head and shove my feet into Adidas slip-ons. "I just didn't want to involve you. The less I say, the better." My voice is soft.

Her hands fall to her sides and she clenches them. "You've been lying to me for weeks. I thought we...had something real." She swallows, her eyes searching my face for answers. "Don't we?"

"I don't know. This isn't the time to ask me, Delaney." It hurts to say the words, but I'm reacting on instinct. I need to push her away and just focus on the game tomorrow.

She stiffens. "Who are you?"

I scrub my face. "Look, my life...it's crazy right now, and I don't want you caught up in my shit."

"With this Leslie person?" Her voice trembles, and I know her well enough to know she's close to tears.

"Yes."

“What? Is he like a mobster or something? Do you owe him money?”

I push my hair off my face, tugging on the ends. *Fuck it—just tell her.* “No, I’m fighting in Tunica for him. He owns a couple of casinos. Muffin thinks he’s my bookie, but he’s not.”

Her chest rises rapidly and she looks faint. She sits down on one of the benches.

“I’m just fighting. I get in the ring, go a few rounds, and get paid a flat fee if I win. That’s it.”

She sucks in a shuddering breath as the dots are connected in her head. “That’s why you were all beat up before?”

I nod.

She shakes her head. “But you can’t take money from anyone, not if you want to play football.”

An eerie calmness settles over me. “I know.”

“Why?” She stands and walks over to me, her hands fluttering as if she’s a caged bird who needs to escape but doesn’t know the way out.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “I did the fight for Raven, to pay for Pineview.”

She blinks, taking that in. “I didn’t realize you were paying the bill. I thought the state or insurance was.”

“No.” My shoulders slump as I feel the weight of all my decisions. “I’m sorry for lying to you. I’ve been coming here to spar as much as I can. I just wanted to keep you out of it in case the press finds out.”

She stares at me, taking it all in.

I pick up my gym bag. “I need to go. The scrimmage is tomorrow and I have to be rested. It’s late. I’ll see you later?”

Hurt flashes over her face, and her eyes shimmer. “Seriously?”

I nod. “The NFL scouts are coming. I need some space, okay?”

She nods, pain in her eyes as they dart around the room. “Fine. I see what’s most important to you.” She brushes past me and out the door.

Part of me wants to call her back, for her to just...help me through this craziness, but the other part knows I need distance. I need to focus on tomorrow and everything else that may come with it.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Maverick

The next day, I'm on the way to the field to dress out for the scrimmage.

I was up late thinking about Delaney, and I'm beat. At least Eminem is blaring on the radio, and I crank it up. The lyrics to "One Shot" blast out as I tap the beat on the steering wheel. The song feels prophetic. The NFL scouts will be sitting in the stands getting a tight view of me as I manage the defense, and whatever happens will definitely set the tone for next year.

I pull into the parking lot and make my way to the dressing room. Most of the guys aren't here yet, and more than likely won't be for another hour. I like to come in extra early, get dressed, and get myself mentally prepared for the game. Every hardcore player has a few game-day quirks, and mine is running my hands along the turf or grass before any other player steps on it. Ryker likes to tell everyone I actually eat the grass, but that's a lie. Still, I go along with it, let them think I'm crazy. As for Ryker...his is getting bitch-slapped by one of the coaching assistants while I hold his hands behind his back. Says it gets his adrenaline going.

Coach Alvarez comes out of his office and meets me in the hallway. A few inches shorter than me with a bald head and bright blue eyes that don't miss a thing, he's in his forties and stocky. A former WU player, he lives and breathes the game. His face is grim most of the time, as if the weight of the world is on his shoulders, but today there's an extra bit of downturn at the corners of his mouth. Known for his profanity and booming voice, he scares the shit out of most people, and no one wants to get on his bad side. He can rake you over the coals faster than a quarterback sneak.

I nod. "Coach. On my way to the locker room."

“My office first, Monroe.” He juts his chin in the direction of his door.

My first thought is *Shit, he knows*, and a wave of dread washes over me. He’s been nothing but kind to me, a good coach who saw right away that I had no father figure at all, and freshman year, he made sure to check in with me from time to time.

My second thought is that this is a pep talk. He knows how much I’m hanging on to the fact that the scouts are interested in me, especially since I didn’t go out early. They want to see if I’ll live up to the hype.

I follow his broad frame into his office. Boxes of equipment, helmets, and padding are stacked against the walls, and a white board and a projector sit in the back surrounded by several desks and chairs. This is the coaching headquarters where the assistants meet to decide how we’re going to be playing the game. He leans against his desk.

“Shut the door.”

I close it as quietly as I can, suddenly a ball of nerves.

“Take a seat.”

His voice is hard as nails—the usual.

His eyes bore into mine, that deep frown on his face, making his chin triple as it digs into his chest. A long stretch of ten seconds goes by as a myriad of emotions cross his face, ones I can’t read...don’t want to read.

My hands shake as I clasp them in front of me. “Sir? Is everything okay?”

“No, Monroe, everything is not fucking okay.” His voice is deadly quiet.

That’s when I know it’s bad. He’s not yelling, and this is even worse than if he were.

“I want to know why the motherfucking hell I got a call from the athletic director this morning about an anonymous tip that you’re somehow involved in gambling.”

It's not just my face that pales—it's my entire body. I feel my skin grow cold. I lick my lips.

"I don't know anything about that, sir."

"Don't fucking play with me, son. Have you been gambling?"

I feel faint.

I tell the truth. "Sir, I have not been gambling. I would never gamble on a game or throw a game. Winning—this team—means everything to me."

He squints at me, a scrunched up look on his face as if he's tasted something sour. "Then where the hell is the AD getting this from?"

"A girl, Coach. She thinks she knows shit and she doesn't." I grip the edge of my chair. Part of me wants to tell him everything...

Tell him, my inner voice screams as nausea washes over me. Let out the guilt you've been carrying.

But...I'd never play for him again.

"Son, are you sure you're telling me everything? The AD says I'm supposed to question you, but if you got nothing, I'll let you play today. It is a big fucking day."

I feel the weight of his stare and it makes my heart jerk.

What I've done is so goddamn wrong.

I should just quit football and get a job and support me and Raven. I can live at the trailer with her and take care of her. I can get a job.

I exhale. I don't want to hang on to this any longer. "The truth is—"

"Al!" It's the quarterback coach at the door, and his eyes go from me to my coach. "Oh, sorry. Am I interrupting anything?"

Coach Al moves off his desk, sticks out his hand, and hauls me up to my feet. "We done here?"

"Uh..."

He gives me a nod and a shove toward the door. “Get the hell out of here, get dressed, and hit the field. I want you out there shining today for the scouts—no matter what. You’ve told me everything I need to know right now. You got me?”

His gaze brushes over me, dismissing me as he turns to talk to the quarterback coach, but there’s a question in his gaze. I realize he likely knows there may be some truth to what was reported to the AD, but he doesn’t *want* to know. If he knows, he’s culpable. If he doesn’t know, I can play today—and I have to play today.

Maybe I’m reading too much into it.

Maybe I’m just paranoid.

Maybe I’m just fucked up.

I picture what things would look like if I didn’t have football, and I want to run as far away from Coach as I can.

I can’t tell him.

I give him a brief nod and slide out the door.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Delaney

Skye, Raven, and I weave our way through the crowd of people to get to the section of seats reserved for players' family members. I told Maverick weeks ago I'd make sure Raven saw the game, and that's what I'm doing.

I think back to Maverick and swallow down the lump in my throat as I recall our conversation last night. I still feel like I can't breathe. I'm worried about him, but I'm also angry.

I force a smile, trying to put on a brave face.

With a quick survey of the nearby seats, I find a collection of six men, all dressed in various forms of suits that look a bit too posh for rural Mississippi. They're sitting on the front row at the fifty-yard line, and several of the coaches from Waylon are shaking their hands—must be the scouts. I send up a prayer that Maverick does well.

Waylon's team has been divided up into two separate teams, red and blue, and the winner gets bragging rights for a year plus a party tonight in their honor.

Maverick and Ryker are both on the red team, and when Maverick's name and stats are called, Raven jumps to her feet and claps furiously. I stand up with her and we root for the hometown boy.

Even though my heart aches, my eyes can't get enough of him as he takes the field.

Skye rolls her eyes but stands anyway. "I really don't see what all the fuss is about." Her eyes drift over the players as they line up on the field, seeming to linger a little on Alex. "Guess I like a more trim look."

"Football...is...king," says Raven, and I grin behind my popcorn.

Skye laughs. “Well, aren’t you just the little spitfire?”

Raven turns her head to Skye. “Spitting...is...gross.”

“It means you’re sassy and smart,” I add.

Raven grins, her big eyes finding mine.

I nod.

Raven leans over on her knees, propping her chin up, laser focused on the team as they line up. Maverick barks out encouragement and when the blue team snaps the ball, his team flows into motion and tackles the quarterback.

Two more downs, and each time the red team stops the running game before blue can get the ten yards needed for a first down.

“He’s...good,” Raven murmurs as she crams a handful of candy into her mouth.

“The best,” I say, running my eyes over those sure, confident shoulders. He’s the focal point of every eye in the stands.

“He...deserves...best,” she adds slowly, and I look at her with interest, noting the quiet tone of her voice.

“Of course he does. You do too.”

She squints up at the sun that’s beating down on us. April in Mississippi can either be humid or freezing, depending on God’s sense of humor, and today he must be happy because it’s a beautiful seventy degrees.

“I...know...what...he’s...doing...is...wrong.” Her hands twist at the box of Skittles.

I stop chewing my popcorn. *Does Raven know something?*

“What’s he doing that’s wrong?”

A pensive look crosses her face. “Heard...phone...call...at...my...house.”

“About what?”

“Fighting...football...players...in...casino.”

Skye's eyes have widened and she puts her phone down, a confused expression on her face. "No, a casino is where people go to gamble—"

I clear my throat, cutting her off. I haven't said a word to her about what I know. "There's no casino here, and no fighting, I promise." Skye nods then turns back to the game, and I grab Raven's hand. "Don't worry about Maverick, okay?"

She nods, and I turn to watch him run off the field.

I keep my eyes on the game, but my brain flies. I'm sure Raven will keep this to herself, but Martha-Muffin is going to be a problem. How much longer before she tells someone? How much longer before it all hits the fan?

* * *

The game is over and I wait near the team entrance to the locker room, just outside the tunnel at the end zone. Maverick comes running out, wearing a pair of slacks and a blue button-down shirt with the cuffs rolled up, obviously dressed up to see the scouts at the meet and greet, and then he'll be off to the party at the AD's house.

He's stopped at a couple of young boys wanting autographs who've been standing here with me for the past half hour. Skye and Raven have gone on ahead, and I don't plan on being here long. I've made up my mind to say what needs to be said, and once it's out, I'm done.

"Congratulations on the win and a great game," I say as he nears me, stopping within a few yards.

He runs a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I played well."

I huff out a laugh at his honest assessment. There's no pretense to Maverick when it comes to his abilities. He looks around for Raven.

“Don’t worry, they’re waiting for me. We’re going to get pizza.”

He nods. “Thank you for today. She really wanted to come, and my dad...well, you know how that goes.”

“Yeah. I’ll make sure she gets home okay.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

I nod, my emotions tugging at me, clogging up my throat. I swallow. “I also wanted to tell you that I...I don’t think we should see each other for a while. You’re not being truthful with me, and you haven’t been for weeks. Also, I’m not even sure how you feel about me, and if you can’t talk to me or tell me what’s going on with you, something isn’t right.” I take a big breath. “We need a break.” There, I’ve said the hard words, and I turn to leave before the tears that are brimming in my eyes fall.

“Delaney, wait!” he calls out as I walk hurriedly across the field. He catches my hand and turns me around. “I’m sorry,” he says softly. “For putting you through this, for Muffin hounding you, for lying about the bruises...”

I bite my lip, not able to stop the admission. “For making me fall in love with you?”

“Delaney?” His voice is torn and he swallows. “Is that true?”

God, yes. I do love him. Maybe I have since the moment he admitted he was He-Man. Maverick is in my blood, my skin, my bones. He’s the light, the sun I want to orbit.

But, I make mistakes when it comes to love—every damn time.

This time, it hurts way more than it did when Alex cheated on me.

If Maverick cared about me, he’d have told me he loves me back by now instead of just standing there with an uncertain look on his face.

“I always fall for the impossible guy.” I clench my hands, trying to keep it together.

He scrubs his face. “Delaney, I’m sorry.”

He’s sorry?

I close my eyes at the words he’s not saying, at the way he isn’t committing to us.

“I hear everything you’re *not* saying, Maverick—everything.”

“Just let me take care of this thing with Raven, and then I’ll be back for you.”

I sigh. I want to believe him, but still, it isn’t enough. “Whatever you’re doing—this fighting—you need to stop. It’s wrong.” I shake my head. “When people care about each other, life has a way of working out. We can figure out Raven’s situation together.”

A male voice calls Maverick’s name from the tunnel, and I shift my gaze to see one of the scouts waving for him to come over.

“Look, I have to head out. Can I come by your place later?”

I shuffle my feet, and his eyes watch me with a desperate look, but I’m not sure he actually feels that way. I just don’t know if I’m *worth* it to him...not like he is to me.

“I’m driving down to Panama City tonight with Skye for spring break.”

“That didn’t take long,” he says, a muscle flexing in his jaw. “You’re just going to leave me here.”

“You wanted space, and now you have it,” is my reply, recalling words he said last night.

“Delaney...”

But I don’t want to hear anything else. I flip around and stalk off, feeling his eyes on me the entire way.

Before I get far, he calls out, “We aren’t over, Delaney, not by a long shot. I’m going to make you proud of me.”

I clench my hands into fists and keep walking, because if I don’t, I’m going to turn right back around and run straight into his arms and tell him I’ll stick by his side. I want to tell him

that no matter how many times he pushes me away, I'll always be there.

But I don't.

Chapter Thirty

Maverick

Watching her walk away from me nearly makes my knees buckle. It feels like she isn't coming back.

She loves me.

She loves *me*, even though I lied to her.

I've wanted her to say it so many times, yet I'm the one who can't admit what's going on inside me.

"Maverick? You coming?" It's one of the scouts, and I give him a nod and head that way.

Something's got to give. I hate this feeling, like I'm torn apart and in shambles.

I pull out my phone and type a quick text to Delaney.

Don't go to the beach. Please, don't leave me. Just wait.

But, I delete it before I hit send. *Shit.*

What am I going to do?

I think about Raven and how much she loves Pineview, the expression on her face when I told her I got her in.

There are only two options: admit I've been taking money for fighting and lose everything, or just keep my head down, keep on trucking, and pray to God Muffin shuts up.

My head tells me to keep trucking, to maintain the status quo.

But...

I rub at my chest, a nagging, aching feeling tugging at me, telling me I'm going to lose everything.

Chapter Thirty-One

Delaney

Even though I told Maverick I was leaving that night, I still half-expected him to show up to catch me before I left. He didn't. I checked and re-checked my phone, hoping to get a text from him, but nothing.

Skye and I made the drive to the beach in five hours. There were other people from Waylon on their way, all of them taking flights or driving, several of them staying in the same area of hotels on the beach.

Two days in and I'm lying out on the sand, wearing a yellow bikini, still a little burned from yesterday's time in the sun, but I really don't care. I'm nursing a bit of a hangover from the shots of Fireball Skye made me take last night. Okay, she didn't make me, but she did strongly encourage me, and I didn't need too much urging after still not hearing anything from Maverick.

A shadow drops down next to me, and I glance up from the book I'm reading, expecting to see Skye, who ran in to grab me a water and get a margarita for herself.

My eyes widen as I take Alex in. I'm not too shocked to see him here since it's the same place we come every year, but I haven't thought of him in so long that, well, I'm taken back.

Wearing a pair of salmon-colored Ralph Lauren swim trunks, he's tan with a hint of a slight sunburn on his shoulders. He's sitting on the beach lounge next to me, the ones only hotel guests are allowed to sit in, looking quite comfortable as he looks at me.

"Alex? What are you doing here?"

He smiles. "Hey. I texted Skye and she told me where you guys were staying."

Interesting. He and Skye had lunch together a few times last week.

I sit up and ease my sunglasses off, propping them on my head where my hair is tied up in a messy bun. I'm without makeup and my eyes are puffy from crying into my pillow last night.

He tilts his head down toward the north end of the beach. "A couple of guys from the team are staying in a house a few resorts up."

"Cool." I really don't have much to say; I'm too depressed and just *blah*.

"Skye says you and Maverick are having problems?" He squints at me.

"Maybe."

His eyebrows go sky high. "Well, you are at the beach without him."

I nod, feeling the pressure of the headache I've been nursing since I woke up this morning. I slip my sunglasses back down. "He broke my heart. Happy?"

He frowns. "Of course not, but it does explain his bad mood after the scrimmage."

I stiffen, worried. "Did something happen?"

"Yeah. He and the AD exchanged words, and then Maverick left the party."

"He left? *Why?*" My heart is in my throat. *Did he tell them about the fighting?*

Alex looks up at me. "I don't know, but there are rumors going around the team. Nothing concrete, but I've heard gambling tossed around."

I stand up. "He has never gambled! It's your friend *Muffin* who's stirring this pot." I'm glaring at him. "You really know how to pick 'em, Alex. She's a liar and a lunatic."

He holds his hands out in a placating manner. "Look, Muffin is nothing to me, and I'm just telling you the rumor, that's all."

He stares at me. “I only want the best for you, and if Maverick is what you want, then I want you to be together—I really do.”

I sigh and sit back down. “She hates Maverick...and me, and...” I let my voice drift off. It’s not my story to share, and the less that’s said about the fighting, the better. “You can’t trust her.”

“I know.”

Skye appears with a sardonic expression as she juggles a cooler and a margarita. Her red hair is a riot of curls around her face, and a sheen of sweat covers her forehead.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Mr. Silver Spoon.”

Alex grunts. “If it isn’t Miss I Only Date Baseball Players.” He goes to help her with the cooler.

Skye watches him critically as he situates it between the two loungers, underneath the two umbrellas so it doesn’t get hot.

“Nice job, Cheater.”

“You’re welcome, Home Run.”

Skye snorts. “You’re such a douchebag. You wish you could get a home run.”

Alex brushes at a patch of nonexistent sand on his chest. “You wish I’d try.”

Oh. My. God.

I forget my own melancholy as I watch their bantering like I’m at a tennis match.

Skye and Alex? I blink. *Wow.* My best friend and my ex might actually have some chemistry.

I look at Alex. “So you wanna hang with us girls today or do you have a hot babe to get back to at your beach house?”

“I’m free.”

Skye smiles and bumps him out of the way with her hips as she grabs me a water out of the cooler. “Here, sweetie, for your headache.”

Impulsively, I grab her and give her a big hug. She's been waiting on me hand and foot and giving me pep talks for the past few days.

Alex is watching us as I set her down. "Nothing like seeing two chicks rubbing up on each other at the beach."

Skye darts over and tackles him, and I laugh.

Maverick's face comes to mind, and I bite my lip, hoping wherever he is, everything is okay.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Delaney

“Let’s watch a movie!” Skye calls out as we walk in the door of our hotel room.

“It’s two in the morning!” is my reply.

She shrugs and bats her lashes at me. She looks at Alex, who’s clearly had too much to drink judging by the way he’s weaving.

I blow out a breath. *Ugh*. I’m not even buzzing, yet somehow she and Alex are like the Energizer Bunny, still ready to party.

They’ve worn me out dancing, and all I want to do is crash. It’s the only way I can turn my head off and stop thinking about Maverick.

They follow me into the room and I head to the mini fridge to grab water.

“Get me a glass of wine, will ya?” Skye requests as she points herself in the direction of the bathroom. Her face is flushed and lined with sweat from dancing. Knowing her and her penchant for cleanliness, she’s headed in there to spritz on more deodorant and powder her nose.

“Red or white?” I ask, looking at the two boxes of wine we bought at the liquor store.

“White.”

I give her a nod as she stumbles into the restroom, already fluffing her red hair as she walks in.

“Alex? You want anything?” I ask.

He turns his gaze from watching Skye to me, and I bite back a smirk. Maybe a normal person would be jealous about their ex sending lingering looks their best friend’s way, but I’m not. He made a mistake with Muffin, but maybe he learned from it.

“Um, I’ll take a wine too,” he says. He flops down on the bed spread-eagled, his hand over his face. I’m beginning to wonder how he’s going to make it back to his house.

After chugging half the bottle of water, I get to work on making their drinks. Once I have them ready, Skye still isn’t out of the bathroom, and I make a mental note to check on her.

I walk over to Alex and nudge him with my hand after setting his drink on the nightstand. “Dude, wake up.”

I get nothing but a soft snore.

Dammit.

I decide he’s Skye’s problem and once she comes out of the bathroom, she can decide what to do with him. He’s on her bed, so she should be the one to deal with him.

There’s an abrupt knock at the door, and I figure it’s the pizza guy from the place across the street. Skye called in an order right as we left the club, and even though it’s late, my stomach grumbles.

I fling open the door with cash in my hand and freeze.

Maverick is standing there in the hallway, his head bent as he stares at the floor. There’s a slump to his shoulders that breaks my heart.

His head flies up and his eyes are haunted.

“Delaney.” My name on his lips is like a benediction to my ears. I’ve missed him so much, and it’s only been a few days. I want to run to him, cup his cheeks, and take that anguish off his face.

A heavy exhalation comes from his mouth as he straightens. “God, thank fuck. I had to bribe the desk clerk and sign three autographs to get your room number, and I still wasn’t sure he told me the truth.”

“Are you okay? Is anything wrong?”

His eyes cloud over. “Everything’s wrong. I came here to—”

His voice abruptly cuts off as he looks over my shoulder into the room where he has a clear view of a set of feet on Skye’s

bed.

He walks in, brushing past me. “Who the fuck is in your room?” He halts mid-stride, his face paling as he sees Alex. I send up a prayer that he’s still out and doesn’t have a clue that a hulking man is glaring at him like he wants to yank him up by his ankles and toss him over the balcony.

Maverick’s chest heaves, his face oddly still as he moves his gaze around the room, taking in the clothes strewn about on the floor, the shoes I kicked off as soon as I came in, and the boxes of wine. He swallows, his throat bobbing as his eyes finally land on me. His fists are clenched at his sides, a barely contained force about to blow.

“Alex? Seriously? Goddammit, Delaney. You really had me fooled.”

I die at his words. The world stops.

I want to rewind everything and make sure Skye doesn’t beg Alex to walk us to our room. I wish I’d never even spoken to Alex at the beach today.

He brushes past me and I grab his arm, making him come up short. Anger works his face, and another girl might worry that he’d lash out, but it’s Maverick and I know underneath all that muscle is a heart that would never hurt a girl, not even Muffin.

“It’s not what you think. Skye and I went clubbing with him then he came up here and promptly passed out. That’s it.”

His teeth snap together, his shoulders stiff and defensive as he glares at me. I see pain there, hurt. “You tell me you love me one minute and the next you’re at the beach with your ex—what am I supposed to think?”

How on earth do I explain to him that Alex doesn’t even register on my radar anymore? Not after falling for Maverick.

“You’re supposed to believe me because nothing compares to you,” I say, letting his arm go. “Because my heart is yours and always will be.”

He’s made it to the door but turns back toward me. Maybe it’s my words that stopped him. He scrubs his face and pulls the

hair off his forehead, holding on to it as he stares at me. “You’re killing me, Delaney. I can’t think straight without you.”

We hear Skye then, flushing the toilet then singing “Let It Go” from the *Frozen* soundtrack over the rush of the sink as she washes her hands.

I walk over to him, eliminating the distance between us. “You came all this way, Maverick. Stay and talk to me. Alex...he and Skye...I think there’s something there between them—that’s why I agreed to go out with them tonight. He’s not a rebound guy. I think they like each other. You...you’re all I want.”

He stares at me for a long time, even after Skye pops out of the bathroom and weaves over to me. She throws her arms around me and once she sees Maverick, she takes a step back, nearly falling. “Whoa. Is there a hot guy that looks like Maverick in our room?” She squints. “Is he a stripper? Please tell me it’s a stripper.”

“No,” I tell her firmly. “It’s Maverick.”

She blinks. “How did he get here? Is he magic?”

“I drove,” he says tightly.

He must be exhausted.

“Well, howdy do, Maverick. I’m glad you’re here because this girl has been crying her eyes out.” She shakes her finger at me and giggles.

I exhale. “That’s enough. You need to go to bed.”

“Fine.” She burps and pulls her dress over her head like she’s getting ready for bed. I try to stop her but she’s already got it around her neck, and at this point, I just help her get it off. Tomorrow she’ll be mortified that she took her dress off in front of Maverick.

She looks around the room and finds Alex. Her eyes light up then she gets on the bed and lies next to him, her body curling around his. At least she’s got a camisole and undies on.

She gives us a little wave. “Peace out, y’all. I got what I need.”

Skye says exactly what she thinks when she's been drinking.

"See," I say, looking at Maverick.

There's a tightness around his eyes. "Come here," he says, motioning for me to come closer.

I do, and he curls his arm around me, staring deep into my eyes. "I believe you." He pushes a strand of hair behind my ear, his hand warm as I lean into it. "But if you think for one minute I'm letting you stay in this room with them, you're crazy."

"What do you suggest?"

"Get your shit. You're coming with me."

"Lead the way," I say after grabbing my purse. I don't need anything else, only him.

We make it to the elevator and I don't even ask where we're going. I don't care. As long as I'm with him, everything else will work itself out.

We exit and he leads me to another hotel room, where he slides the key card in the slot and ushers me inside.

Neither one of us speak as we face each other. I'm scared. He looks so serious, the chiseled lines of his face etched with an unnamed emotion.

"Talk to me."

He closes his eyes then opens them again. "I love you, Delaney. I love you so damn much, and watching you walk away from me and not being able to do the right thing for you...I never want to go through that again."

I bite my lip, holding in the swell of feeling that washes over me. "Never again," I whisper.

"I'm sorry I couldn't tell you how I feel after the game. I'm sorry for dragging you into this mess. My life is probably ruined, but right now, I don't even care because all I can think about is you. I can't lose *you*."

I run to him, he catches me, and we kiss. His lips are everything, hot and needy, tasting of a passion that only comes

once in a lifetime. Our tongues tangle, greedy for the other, anxious to get our fill.

In a blink, his hands have expertly unzipped my dress and I've removed his shirt. In between long breathy kisses, we hold each other, rushing and touching and taking everything.

It feels like it's been months since I've seen him and I want to relearn his skin, but right now all I focus on is how much I want him inside me.

"Fast now. Slow later," he says as he tugs down my underwear to my heels. He looks up at me from where he's kneeling on the floor and I bite my lip. He's perfect. He's gorgeous with those steel eyes looking right at me.

His lips and tongue kiss my calf, my kneecap, and the inside of my thigh while his hands cup my ass, pulling me closer.

I huff out a laugh. "I thought you said fast."

"I lied," he says breathlessly as his thumbs slide to the front to part me, his tongue lapping. He inhales my scent, his fingers dancing across my body, strumming me and making me undulate against him.

I tug him up. "Maverick...please."

He stands and removes his jeans and shoes, his gaze never wavering from mine. "I didn't bring a condom. I wasn't thinking. I just needed to get to you. I'm clean."

"I'm protected," I tell him, and before I even finish, he's kissing me.

It's perfect.

It reminds me of the night we met at the bonfire when he brushed his lips across mine and became the one I'd never forget. Two stars in the sky, two souls destined to be together.

He picks me up, my legs wrapping around his waist. He likes me like this, and it makes me smile to know the power I have over him.

Holding me around the waist, making it seem almost effortless with his strength, he slides into me slowly, giving me what I

need. I gasp each time he takes me, my head leaning against the wall. Our breathing is loud, the sex louder, and I come fast, my legs locking on his hips as I clench around him. We kiss and he breaks with me, our love the perfect storm, a tsunami that washes over us.

Later, we're in bed under the covers, our bodies sated. His fingers trace loops and intricate swirls on my back as he hugs me from behind.

"I told Coach and the AD the night of the meet and greet."

The enormity of his words hit me. "What? Why? Does this mean you aren't going to fight?"

He nods. "Yeah."

I cup his cheek. "What's going to happen to Raven?"

A hint of sadness crosses his face before he recovers. "I don't know."

I kiss him softly on the neck. "I'm sorry I didn't ask sooner."

A brief smile flashes. "We had other things going on."

"Are you okay? I mean, what's going to happen with football?"

He plays with a piece of my hair and doesn't answer.

"Maverick? You seem rather calm about all this. This is your career on the line."

He nods. "I know."

"So?"

He arches a brow. "Will you still love me if I don't play in the NFL?"

"Hell yes," I say.

"That's the answer I was looking for." He gives me a lingering kiss, making me grab his shoulders and pull him down until he's on top of me.

He clasps my hand tight, intertwining our fingers as he looks down at me. "I actually have a plan," he says.

I wrap my hands around his nape and pull his lips to mine.
“Whatever it is, I’m in.”

We kiss more, our hands exploring. I’m so happy to have him back, but I know we need to talk. No matter what, as long as we’re together, we can weather any storm.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Maverick

We're at a television station and Coach Al and I sit behind a table, the cameras locked and loaded, ready to film. On my right is Delaney, and on the other side of her, slightly off camera, is Raven. A rep from the NCAA is on the other side of Coach, and we're about to go live on ESPN for an interview about the fighting scandal that's rocked the college sports world since I came forward and admitted to my involvement.

Fred Moran is the interviewer, and he's eyeballing me critically. A former linebacker from Ole Miss, he was one of my heroes when I was a kid, and now he's looking at me like I've disappointed him.

I get that, but I'm ready—ready to be true to everyone I care about.

The interview starts with the control room replaying a statement I made at Waylon that was recorded at a press conference put on by the school then released to the media.

“I fully admit to accepting money for fighting a rival football player. I knew this went against NCAA rules of accepting money for gain. I also take full responsibility for deceiving my university, my teammates, and the people I care about, and for this, I'm deeply sorry.”

I didn't reveal Kai's name, leaving it up to him and anyone else who'd been involved to come forward. Sure enough, five additional players also made statements after mine.

Even so, I was the big one, the famous player with so much promise, the one who was going to break out of the small town.

I was a disappointment to everyone—everyone except Delaney, Raven, and Ryker, who've stood by me the entire time.

The cameraman starts a countdown, signaling that we're about to go live.

I tense, and Delaney squeezes my hand.

I look down at her, and she gives me a soft smile. "Me and you, He-Man. We got this."

Fred Moran focuses in on me. He gives me a nod then speaks to the millions of viewers. "As many of you know, Maverick Monroe came forward with a scandal that was hard to believe: a star college football player fighting in a casino for money. That's right, tonight in the hot seat, we have none other than Maverick himself."

The camera swings to me, and I nod and straighten my shoulders. I have nothing else to lose.

"Good evening, Fred." I smile, digging deep for that Maverick charm I used to have. "Before we begin, I'd just like to say I'm a huge fan of you and your career, and I follow this show religiously." I huff out a laugh. "Especially lately since I seem to be the topic of many of your conversations."

He smirks. "People aren't saying very nice things about you."

I nod. "And I accept that."

His eyes scrutinize me, noting my hand clasped with Delaney's. His gaze brushes over Raven, who smiles at him.

He clears his throat. "I was wondering if perhaps you'd like to shed some light on why you risked your career."

"I didn't do it for the money. I mean, I did, but it wasn't for me. It was for my sister."

He nods, encouraging me to go on.

"In a car accident that took my mom, she suffered a traumatic brain injury, and I've been unable to get proper care for her, the kind she needs. My father is an alcoholic and at times is... unable to care for her, and I was often either in class or at practice."

"He...cooks," Raven calls out, and the camera swings to her.

Fred smiles. "You're Raven?"

She nods and plays with her hair, her voice slow but careful as she speaks. “He...takes...care...of...me.”

I give her a soft smile and continue. “As you know, I’m not allowed to work or accept any kind of loan or money from anyone in case it’s construed as bribes for football. I was hoping I could get by until the draft next spring. Unfortunately, I’d already opted out of the draft this year when we realized she needed extra care.”

Fred exhales. “I see. Do you gamble, Mr. Monroe?”

Ah, the crux of the matter.

“I have never gambled, and Leslie Brock has already told the NCAA that.” I go on to tell them the details of the organization, how Leslie’s casino is a legit business and I merely worked as an employee.

“I never placed a bet on myself or a fight or a football team. What I did was fight, that’s it.”

“How much money did you get for the fight?” is Fred’s next question.

“Fifty thousand, and every penny went to the facility to take care of Raven.”

Raven is crying softly, and Delaney hands her a tissue then pats her on the shoulder. They’ve grown close these past few weeks.

Fred nods, a softening to his face. “Is it true that you requested the money you’d already paid to the facility be returned?”

I smile. “Yes. We donated the money to fund an animal shelter in Magnolia. It was Raven’s idea. She’s going to be volunteering there some.”

Raven glows at my words.

Really, that was all Delaney. She sat down with Raven and they talked about what kinds of volunteer work she’d like to do. It was something I’d never thought of, mostly because I’d have to get her there and back.

“And what about your sister? We’ve heard from a close personal source that you don’t have anyone to take care of her.”

“I’m taking care of her,” Delaney says proudly. “She’s my family.”

Love slams into me. What I ever did to deserve her, I don’t know.

What she doesn’t say is that Raven and I have moved in with her, and she’s quit her library job to take care of Raven on the days the nurse can’t come by. Skye said she’d chip in a day a week too.

Fred looks at the viewers. “Well, the question on everyone’s mind is if you’ll be playing for Waylon this year.”

I swallow. “I don’t know. I haven’t been informed yet.”

He nods. “What do you think the ruling will be when it comes to being drafted?”

“I have no idea.” I look at Delaney and Raven. “We’re still waiting to hear.”

I do know that whatever happens, I’ll be okay.

* * *

Delaney comes out of the kitchen, wearing a big grin and her *May the Fork Be With You* apron. She and Raven are making dinner and pecan pie for Ryder since he helped us move into her place a few weeks back.

It’s the end of the year, and we’re celebrating.

I think back to how everything played out after the interview. After much discussion and interviews, it was determined that the only technical rule I broke was accepting money. There was no indication of foul play, and most importantly, no gambling. Because the scandal involved several star players in

the SEC who'd been preyed upon by offerings of big money, the NCAA decided not to kick us out of college football completely. Myself, along with the other players, would be sitting out the first five games of the year.

It was enough.

It was hope.

As far as Muffin went, none of the players on the team would even talk to her anymore. Rumor has it she's transferring schools for her senior year.

This fall is going to be the year—*my year*. I look at Delaney and watch as she shows Raven how to make her Nana's pie. She catches my eye and smiles as Han weaves between their legs, meowing for a table scrap.

"I love you," I mouth at her as she straightens up. She's everything, mine, and maybe she has been since the night of the bonfire. We just had to figure it out.

She smiles, a slow blush working up her cheeks. "I know," she mouths back.

I burst out laughing.

Forget this being my year. I look at her and Raven.

This is our year.

Epilogue

Delaney

Few years later

I wake up, and Maverick's not in bed. *That's weird.* It's not quite eight in the morning and it's the off-season, which means he gets to sleep in before training starts. Spotting the blue dress shirt he wore last night when we went out to dinner, I pick it up off the floor where I tossed it before we made love. I pull it on, pad over to the window, and look out over the Nashville skyline from our penthouse.

I sigh contentedly. After winning the national championship with the Waylon Wildcats, Maverick went on to be drafted in the first round by the Tennessee Titans. He's already broken two records, and they went to the Super Bowl this year. They were defeated, but like he says, it gives him something to work for.

I look at the picture of him and me and Raven on the nightstand and smile. Somehow we managed to juggle her and classes and football our senior year, and because Maverick was so open about the reason he fought, people came out of the woodwork to help us. Mrs. Watson from Pineview herself volunteered to donate services to Raven, including riding lessons and art classes at Pineview.

She lived with us until Maverick was drafted, and then made it clear that while she loved us, she did not want to be attached to us at the hip. So, we did some research and found her a facility nearly identical to Pineview in Nashville.

As for me, I'm designing a line of clothing for my new Geek Girl fashion label and volunteer weekly at a local animal shelter. Maverick loves coming with me too, although I don't think he'd ever admit it. Rescuing animals has become his charitable calling card, whether he meant it to or not.

I hear clanging from the living room and make my way there.

“Mav?” I call. “Where are you?”

I make my way down the hall and into the den then come to a halt at the vision I see. Standing smack dab in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows is Maverick dressed as a...Jedi?

I give him a careful once-over, taking in the white leggings with brown boots, the beige tunic with a utility belt, and the light saber holder. A brown overcoat is draped over the getup, and I rub my eyes. The detail is amazing and he looks professional, like something straight out of the movies.

“Morning, gorgeous.” He strikes a pose, waving around a blue light saber that makes a *whooshing* sound with each movement.

“Morning, babe. Where did you get this outfit?” I’m impressed and starting to wonder if I can get a Princess Leia one. “Are we going to a comic con somewhere?”

“I had it made. And no, we’re staying in today. Just you and me.”

Cool. We’ve been busy these past few weeks, and it would be great to just relax at home. Maverick swings the sword and Han darts from behind a chair, paws swatting at the light saber as he runs past.

I giggle. “Nice moves. You’ve got Han riled up now.”

I expect him to laugh with me, and he does flash me a brief smile, but there’s something about his expression that’s different. It’s intense, as if he’s about to head out to the most important football game of his life.

“What’s going on? Are you okay?” I say, moving in closer.

“More than okay. It’s the best day of my life,” he says as he sets the light saber on a chair and kneels down in front of me. From the coffee table, he picks up a black velvet box that I hadn’t noticed yet and pops it open. Inside is a ring with the biggest square cut solitaire diamond I’ve ever seen.

I blink. My body flutters and I can’t breathe.

He gazes up at me with those steel blue eyes, the ones I hold close to my heart every night when I go to sleep.

“It feels like I’ve waited forever to do this. Delaney Renee Shaw, will you marry me and make me the happiest Jedi in the universe? I promise to always love you—and your cats—and give you everything you could ever want, body and soul.”

Tears flood my eyes as I take him in: his pure heart, the way he fights for those he loves, the way he loves *me*.

“Yes. Always. You are everything.”

“*You’re* everything, Buttercup, and I couldn’t have made it without you by my side.” He stands up, cups my face, and kisses me, and I know that no matter what, he and I can do anything together.

* * *

About the Author

Wall Street Journal, *New York Times*, and *USA Today* bestselling author Ilsa Madden-Mills writes about strong heroines and sexy alpha males that sometimes you just want to slap. A former high school English teacher and elementary librarian, she adores all things *Pride and Prejudice*; Mr. Darcy is her ultimate hero. She loves unicorns, frothy coffee beverages, vampire books, and any book featuring sword-wielding females.

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[Boyfriend Bargain](#)

[Dear Ava](#)

[Not My Romeo](#)

[Not My Match](#)

[The Last Guy \(w/Tia Louise\)](#)

[The Right Stud \(w/Tia Louise\)](#)

Tapping the Billionaire

Max Monroe

New York Times & USA Today Bestseller

New York Times & USA Today Bestselling author duo Max Monroe brings you a sexy, laugh-out-loud new series. Are you ready to meet the Billionaire Bad Boys?

Blind dates? Online dating profiles? Been there, *done that*.

Georgia Cummings has zero luck with dating, and the era of the internet is not her friend.

No matter how fast she runs, how many corners she turns, she can't find her way out of this weird, alternate universe where men think d*ck pics are a replacement for small talk and getting to know a girl. One more crotch selfie and she might write men off for good...

But why can't she stop fantasizing about him?

Kline Brooks is the quintessential billionaire bad boy—dark, styled, short hair, muscles for days, and a panty-dropping smile.

Except—*he isn't*.

As his employee, he won't touch her with a ten foot pole.

But she won't touch him either.

Too bad their hormones missed the memo.

Disclaimer:

If you're the type of woman who prefers crotch selfies to small talk, this book isn't for you.

If you enjoy random men you've never met filling up your inbox with dirty words and p*rn—for reasons focused more towards diddling your donut than laughing at the absurdity—this book isn't for you.

If you HATE laughing, this book isn't for you.

If you want your male leads to grunt, thrust like jack rabbits, and have one-track minds that prefer a nice pair of t*ts to brains every hour of every day for the rest of forever, well, then, this book still isn't for you.

But.

If you enjoy a good swoon, a hearty laugh, witty banter, and some hot as f*@% f*@%ing, then consider Georgia Cummings your Girl Friday and Kline Brooks your next irresistible book boyfriend.

This is a series of interconnected romantic comedy standalones.

Suggested Series Reading order:

#1 Tapping the Billionaire

#1.5 Tapping Her

#2 Banking the Billionaire

#2.5 Banking Her

#3 Scoring the Billionaire

#3.5 Scoring Her

Bonus novellas:

Motherfluffer

Sleighed It

Dedication

Fuck you very much, Leslie.

You always manage to ruin everything, but you didn't ruin this.

Disclaimer: *You are NOT the Leslie we're talking about. No, really.*

You're not her. We swear. It's another Leslie. One you don't know and have never heard of. Camp Love Yourself Scout's honor.

Introduction

I'm Kline Brooks.

Harvard graduate.

President and CEO of Brooks Media.

Net worth: \$3.5 billion.

Devilishly handsome. How do I know this? I was prom king two years in a row.

Highly intelligent. Proof? I can solve any Rubik's Cube, in front of your face, with *magic* fingers.

Certified master of female orgasms. My fingers, my tongue, my cock—I can make you scream, "*I'm coming!*" before you even realize I've removed your panties with my teeth. Not the almost orgasms that spur a pathetic moan and half-ass whimper. *No.* I'm talking toe-curling, back-arching, earth-shattering *Os* that will leave your voice hoarse, your body shaking, and pack a punch so powerful you'll be left a sliver of intensity short of unconscious.

Am I piquing your interest?

Should I mention my cock is the kind of cock that's actually dick-pic worthy? I'm not talking an average six-inch shaft. I'm talking big. Thick. Smooth. And hard. Especially when there's work to be done.

Or maybe all I've done is turn you off. Are you thinking I'm like every classless man out there who's literally a disgrace to my gender?

The type of spineless dicks who won't call the next day. The guys who specialize in late-night booty calls but refuse to take a woman out on an actual date. Yeah, you know exactly who I'm talking about. Those idiots who have women thinking staying single for the rest of their lives is a better alternative than dealing with the bullshit that's running rampant in the dating world.

Well, I'm not that kind of guy.

I say what I mean and mean what I say. I don't kiss and tell. I call the next day. And if I'm interested in a woman, I *will* take her out on a date. I'll open doors for her. I'll pull out her chair. And I'll never be the kind of horny bastard who texts dick pics—unless the right woman begs me for them.

Bottom line, **I'm a gentleman.** I prefer monogamy to serial dating and fucking my way through New York City. I've spent the past few years avoiding the kind of women most would label “gold diggers” and trying out a couple of girlfriends in between. I've looked for the kind of woman I want, but lately, I have to admit I haven't put in as much effort. My focus has been on my company—building it to what it is and then keeping it that way, not only for me, but for all of the people who work so hard for me.

Until Georgia Cummings.

She's fiery, beautiful, has this sassy attitude that demands attention from everyone within her orbit, and is worth way more in value of character than I am in money.

I don't know how I missed her.

I don't know why it took me so long to *really* see her.

Two years, right there in front of my face as my Director of Marketing.

Maybe it's because I need to stop drowning myself in work so much. Maybe she didn't want to be seen.

No matter the reason, it only took one spur-of-the-minute decision for this remarkable woman to come barreling into my world.

I wasn't prepared for her.

And I sure as hell had no idea she'd knock me on my fucking ass.

Because the nice guy who believes in real love enough to build his entire fortune from a dating website?

That's me.

And this story?

Well, that's us.

Chapter One

Georgia

My eyes! Dear God, my eyes!

There were things in life that, once seen, were damn near impossible to forget. A bleach scrub...acid straight to the retinas...three hours of perfect porn GIFs...hell, even a lobotomy wouldn't remove those kinds of images.

Lucky for me, I had come across not one, not two, but *four* day-destroying pictures. Dick pics, to be more specific. And let's just say this latest one was *not* pic-worthy. Not by a long shot. Or a short shot, if I took size into consideration. This was the kind of pic that would leave any woman wondering why. *Why? Why would anyone want to advertise they were the owner of this?*

It was the gremlin of male members—and the sole reason my night had taken a turn for the worse. What was supposed to be a nice evening in, watching TV with my best friend and roommate, Cassie, had turned into a nightmare of pubes, wrinkled balls, and a crown that was not fit for a king.

I banged my fingers across the keypad with a response.

TAPRoseNEXT (11:37PM): Is that your dick? Really? REALLY?

TapNext was the latest and greatest dating-site-turned-app for single men and women to meet, chat, and, hopefully, find their next date. Generally speaking, it was a better alternative to nights out at a bar or club. Because, for me, those nights had the same ending—politely declining the thrilling (insert *heavy* sarcasm) offer of hooking up with some random dude at his apartment, one hell of a hangover, and weird guys with names like Stanley or Milton sending me texts for late-night booty calls for the next month. Which I *always* ignored.

My business card said *Director of Marketing, Brooks Media*. It was a hefty title for someone just starting out in their career, but I had earned it. I worked harder than anyone else in my department, and it also may have helped that the man who held the position prior to me had been fired after being arrested for picking up a prostitute in one of the company cars. Why he had even been driving a company car in the city was still confusing to me. Seriously, even hookers cabbed it in New York.

Since Brooks Media owned TapNext, it was easy to understand why I was well versed and highly invested in the app's success. It was a requirement when hired—all single employees had to create a TapNext profile. Staff were strongly encouraged to use the app and give honest feedback about their experiences. Profile names were kept top secret and on penitentiary-style lock-down with Human Resources. And feedback stayed anonymous.

Translation: Don't worry, TAPRoseNEXT, your boss doesn't know about your pervy play on words.

At first, I'd felt it was an odd way to handle business, but after two years of working at Brooks Media, I'd found that my TapNext profile was a damn good way to do research and find promotional ideas.

My phone pinged with the offender's response.

BAD_Ruck (11:38PM): ...

Did he just ellipsis me? Really?

TAPRoseNEXT (11:38PM): Creep Threat Level MOTHERFUCKING Red.

There was no immediate response, but the rest of my rant would not be contained.

TAPRoseNEXT (11:39PM): Don't any of you know how to start conversations anymore? Jesus.

Cassie sighed beside me. "Stop slamming everything around, Wheorgiebag! I'm trying to watch *American Ninja Warrior* and you're totally messing with my pumped up vibe."

I ignored her, still focused on finding a way to erase the offending images from my brain.

She peeked over my shoulder before I could pull my phone away. “Whoa. Whoa. *Whoa*. Is that *my* picture on *your* profile?”

Creamy, perfect-skinned thighs on display, she was bent over with her dark brunette head peeking through the space between her open legs. Her hooch just barely escaped making an appearance.

“Paybacks, Casshead.”

“And what did I do to deserve being your pro-bono photo ho?”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Do I have to choose just one?”

“Go ahead, give me one example. I dare ya.”

“College. Sophomore year. I told you not to post those pictures on Facebook, but did you listen? Of course not.”

She grinned. “Ahhhhh, yes. I remember those. I thought you looked really cute that night.”

“My head was in the toilet.”

“But you had those cute puppy dog eyes going on.” She glanced at my phone again, dusky gray eyes hitting the phallic bull’s eye. “Holy hell, what is that? Is that Quasimodo’s dick?”

I stood up from the couch and began to pace in front of the TV. “Four dick pics today, Cassface. *Four!*”

Cassie scrunched her face up. “And what? You were hoping for five?”

My expression was a combination of disgusted and puzzled.

“You know,” she explained, “one to fill all the holes and one for each hand.” Easy to interpret and equally graphic hand gestures matched her words as she spoke. “Although, I’m not sure I’d want DP from The Hunchcock of Notre Dame.” One look at my face and she coughed out a laugh. “You’re not really a prude, but right now, you’re playing one on TV.”

I groaned and gave in, planting my ass back on the couch and burying my face in my hands. “I guess it’s because this profile is for work research. I have this unjustified sense that it should be more professional.”

She shook her head and smiled, propping her mismatched-sock feet on the arm of our couch. “I gotta say, that wiener is pretty fucking awful. But, Georgie, you work for a company that specializes in an app called *TapNext*, not the White House.”

After a brief beat of silence, we laughed at the same time, and I raised one eyebrow in question. “You’re comparing *TapNext* to the *White House*?”

“You’re right,” she agreed. “Bad analogy. There’s probably *more* dick pics there.” A giant, mischievous grin consumed Cassie’s face as she grabbed the remote.

“*Cassie...*” I pointed in her direction, but it was too late. She was already standing on top of our coffee table, using the remote for a microphone.

My best friend had this thing with making parody songs out of pretty much anything when inspired. And she didn’t do it quietly. No way, quiet was not Cassie’s style. She sang like she was Adele performing at the Grammys.

“I call this one *White House Lovin’*,” Cassie announced.

I groaned but secretly couldn’t wait to see what she would come up with. Think Kristen Wiig on *Saturday Night Live* kind of hilarious shit. That was Cass.

“*Blue-dress intern, found my pants fast...*”

“*White House intern, it was a blast...*”

She was singing her little heart out.

“*This girl, she was crazy for D...*”

Snapping fingers. Pelvic thrusts. Head bobs. Cassie wasn’t missing a beat.

“*Met the prez, down on both knees...*”

One verse in and the dick pic bandit had been forgotten. I hopped off the couch and tackled her to the floor. She screamed. I laughed. And five minutes later, Cassie was back on the coffee table while I sang backup to the rest of her ridiculous song.

Tell me, whore... Tell me, whore...

Admit it, you're singing it too.

Later that night, once I had cozied myself in bed and was so very close to reaching that heavenly REM cycle, the ping of my phone pecked at me. I groaned my way out of Dreamland slowly. God, it was time to make some major life changes. For example, the alert settings for my TapNext profile in my phone. It was either that or murder, and I'm the kind of person who likes to dip a toe in the pool water to test it rather than cannonball my way in.

Rubbing a hand over my face, I forced my eyes opened and snatched the phone off my antique nightstand. I barely resisted the urge to slam it back down, thus breaking it into a million tiny pieces. Luckily, my rational thinking wasn't as sleepy as the rest of me and realized the amount of work that would result from such an impulsive decision.

Cleaning and shopping and transferring my contacts, oh my.

Yeah, screw that.

BAD_Ruck (2:09AM): It's NOT my dick.

It's not his dick?

What the double actual fuck?

No. Nope. This was *so* not the right time to deal with this bullshit.

Not. Answering.

The sides of my pillow exploded upward with the force of my punch and made the perfect cushion for my face when it slammed down beside my hand. I had so much shit to do at work tomorrow, and dealing with **BAD_Ruck** and his proclivity for awful crotch selfies and unintelligible responses was not going to be on my agenda.

I was focused on getting shut-eye, confident that sleep and I would spoon the fuck out of each other until the sun rose the following morning. I channeled Buddha for my inner Zen, humming my way toward unconscious bliss. It was either that, or grab my vibrator and participate in a ménage à moi.

Thankfully, my return to sleep came easily that night. No hands-on approach required.

The next day, while I was getting ready for work, I decided to give **BAD_Ruck** a piece of my mind. I spit toothpaste into the sink, rinsed my mouth out with water, and turned off the faucet. Striding into my room with purpose, I grabbed my phone off the nightstand and sent the dick gremlin a response.

Suck. On. That. Buddy.

Chapter Two

Kline

TAPRoseNEXT (7:03AM): Then it's someone else's dick? WORSE. Threat Level EXPLODED.

“Good morning, Mr. Brooks.”

“Good morning, Frank,” I replied, picking my head up from the crime scene on my phone just long enough to meet his honest amber eyes before sliding into the soft leather seat of my Town Car.

Fucking Thatch.

I swear, somehow he took doing what would already be really fucking annoying and advanced it to the next level. If he didn't have the same ability with money, I probably would have dropped him by now.

To the bottom of the ocean. With a cinder block attached to his ankles.

She was right, of course. Sending a picture of someone else's dick *was* considerably worse than sending a picture of your own.

Especially this one.

Three rings trilled in my ear before his sleep-laden voice forced one hungover syllable past his lips. “Lo?”

“A dick, Thatch? Really?” I asked immediately, pinching the bridge of my nose to stave off a headache.

No amount of lingering alcohol could stop his answering laugh.

His throat cleared a little more with each chuckle, and by the time he responded, he was speaking clearly. “You're the one using my picture for your profile, bro. It was only fair that I unleashed the gargoyle dick.”

Gargoyle dick. Too fucking right. A winglike knob, a hunchback, and questionable coloring all lent themselves to his description. I'd left my phone on the bar without hawk-eyeing it for *two fucking minutes*, and the asshole had somehow managed to send one of the world's worst illicit pictures to some poor—now blind—woman in that time.

“That profile was only payback for the last awful thing you did to me.”

“Which was?” he asked, altogether too amused.

“Who knows,” I admitted, staring up at the passing high-rises and shaking my head. “I can't keep up.”

“Then join in, K. Live a little, for fuck's sake.”

The burgeoning sun glinted off of a pane of perfectly smooth glass at the top of a building and reflected a rainbow right into the window of my car.

“I'm living just fine,” I argued.

“Yeah.” He laughed and scoffed at once. “Say hi to Walter for me.”

That was Thatch's version of calling me a cat lady.

“Hey, fuck you!” I said, only to be met with dead air. I pulled the phone away from my ear to discover he'd ended the call.

“Fuck that guy,” I muttered, somehow calling more of Frank's attention to myself than I had with all the yelling.

“Sir?”

“No worries, Frank.” I paused for a second and looked back out the window. “You wouldn't happen to know a hit man, would you?”

I glanced up front in preparation for his reaction.

“Um,” he murmured hesitantly, flicking his eyes between me and the road in the rearview mirror. “No, sir.”

I shook my head as I smiled, a brief chuckle tickling the back of my throat.

“Good. That’s good,” I remarked, just as we pulled up to the curb in front of my building.

Flexing the door handle in my hand, I shoved the door open with the toe of my shoe.

“Mr. Brooks,” Frank started to protest, as usual, jerking into motion in order to hop out to help me, but I just couldn’t get into the mindset where his *and* my time was well spent waiting on him to walk around the car just to do something my opposable thumbs and lack of paralysis made shockingly simple.

I smiled in response before he could get out, meeting his eyes in the rearview mirror before exiting.

“Have a good day, Frank. I’ll see you at six.”

With the slam of the door, I buttoned my suit jacket as I walked, twenty audible smacks of my soles eating up the concrete courtyard in front of my building in no time.

New Yorkers buzzed around me, continuing a marathon life that started the moment they opened their eyes. That was the vibe of this city—active and elite and totally fucking focused. No one had time for each other because they barely had time for themselves. And yet, each and every single one of them would still proclaim it the “best city on Earth” without prompting or persuasion.

As my hand met the metal of the handle, I surveyed the lobby of the Winthrop Building, home to Brooks Media, to find the front desk employees and security guards scurrying to make themselves look busy when they weren’t.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing. I’d never been the kind of boss to rule with an iron fist, and not once had I uttered a word of micromanagement to loyal employees like the ones practically shoving their hands in their staplers in order to look busy.

But being CEO of a company of this size and magnitude had a way of creating its own intimidation factor, whether it was intended or not. And, sometimes, the weight of unintended consequences was heavier than gold.

“Morning, Paul.”

He nodded.

“Brian.”

“Mr. Brooks.”

The button for the elevator glared its illumination prior to my arrival—more help from the overzealous employees, I’m sure—and the indicating ding of its descent to the bottom floor preceded the opening of the shiny mirrored doors by less than a second.

I stepped in promptly without another word, offering only a smile. I knew anything else I said would only cause stress or anxiety, despite my efforts to convey the opposite. For a lot of people, their boss was never going to be a comfortable fit as a friend—no matter how nice a guy he was. The best thing I could do was recognize, accept, and respect that.

I sunk my hips into the rear wall as the doors slid closed in front of me and shoved my hands into the depths of my pants pockets to keep from scrubbing them repeatedly up and down my face.

I rarely overindulged, so I wasn’t hungover, but Thatch’s antics, both in person and online, were wearing me out. It wasn’t that I didn’t think the gargoyle dick was funny—because it *was*—but it was really one of those funnier-when-it’s-not-happening-to-you things.

In fact, that rang surprisingly true for most of Thatch’s prank-veiled torture.

The direction of my thoughts and the weight of my phone bumping against my hand had me pulling it out of my pocket against my better judgment.

I hovered my thumb over the TapNext app icon.

With one quick click, I had the ability to make a bad situation worse.

The screen flashed and the app loaded as soon as my thumb made contact.

BAD_Ruck (7:26AM): Despite what the gargoyle dick conveys, I promise I'm NOT a sexual terrorist.

Clutching the phone tightly in my fist, I shamefully knocked it against my forehead multiple times.

“Fucking brilliant.”

I should have just dropped it. Moved on. I didn't fucking know this woman, for God's sake, but I couldn't help myself. I couldn't stand for even my fake dating profile persona to be remembered like this.

Here lies this man to rest. He will be remembered: Sexual Terrorist, Social Media Nuisance, Unfortunate Genital Development.

The elevator settled smoothly to rest on the fifteenth floor, and as the doors opened, I stepped out. My receptionist stood waiting with a stack of messages, having been warned of my arrival by the staff one hundred and fifty-some-odd feet below.

Neat and conservative clothes encased her sixty-eight-year-old frame, and stark white hair salted its way through her dark mocha bun.

Her smile was genuine, though, years of age, wisdom, and experience coloring her view of her thirty-four-years-young “boss.” When it came to the infrastructure and real office inner workings, she ran this show.

The ends of my lips tipped up, forming wrinkles at the corners of my eyes.

“Good morning, lovely Meryl.”

She clicked her tongue. “You better find some other roll to butter up, Mr. Brooks. It may be early, but my allowance of saturated fats is all used up for the day.”

“Geez.” I winced, clutching my chest in imaginary pain. “You wound me.” A grin crept onto one end of my mouth and a wink briefly closed the eye on the same side. “And it's Kline. Call me Kline, for shit's sake.”

“Ten years. Same conversation every day for every single one of them,” she grumbled.

“There’s a lesson in there somewhere, Meryl, and I think it has to do with bending to my will.” I took the messages gently from her hand and bumped her with just the tip of my elbow.

“I’m consistently persistent.”

“So am I,” she retorted.

“Don’t I know it.”

“Four urgent messages from new potential investors on top, and multiple urgent IT problems below those,” she called to my back as I walked away.

I shook my head to myself. Potential investors were always urgent.

Pausing briefly and turning to look over my shoulder, I asked, “And *you’re* giving me the messages from IT, why?”

Things like that normally came from my personal assistant.

“Because I am,” she called back, not even looking up from her desk. “And because Pam is at home with a sick baby.”

I leaned my head back in understanding and bit my lip to stop a laugh from escaping.

“Ah. And we all know the only soft spot in your entire body is reserved for the babies.”

“Precisely,” she confirmed unapologetically, looking over the frames of her glasses and winking.

I turned to head for my office again, but she wasn’t done talking.

“But don’t you worry—”

Shit. Anything that started with Meryl telling me not to worry meant I should worry. I should *really* worry.

“Leslie’s here to pick up her slack.”

I shook my head. I didn’t know if it was in disbelief or resentment, but whatever it was, I couldn’t stop the motion.

Meryl’s eyes started to gleam.

“And since *you* hired her and all, I figured you wouldn’t mind taking her directly under your knowledgeable wing for the day.”

Fuck.

I let my head fall back with a groan briefly before resigning myself to a day from hell and getting back on my way.

One foot in front of the other, I walked toward my doom, knowing the only people I had to blame, other than myself, were my family. And I couldn’t even *really* blame them. I was an adult, a business owner, and the leader of my own goddamn life. It had been my choice to hire the airhe—*Leslie*—whether I had done it out of obligation or not.

Still. “Fuck.”

“Good morning, Mr. Brooks,” she greeted as soon as I rounded the corner, the last syllable of my name trailing straight into a giggle.

God, that’s painful.

Her eyes were bright, lips pouty, and her forearms squeezed into her breasts. Her black hair teased and sprayed, several curls rolled over her shoulders and hung nearly all the way down to her pointy nails. And she eye fucked me relentlessly, pounding me harder with every step I took.

I plastered a smile on my face and tried to make it genuine. She was really a nice person—just devoid of each and every quality I looked for in both lovers and friends.

“Come on, Leslie.” I gestured, turning away from her nearly exposed—completely office inappropriate—breasts and walking straight into my office with efficiency I knew Cynthia, my head of Human Resources, would appreciate.

The boss in me wanted to tell her to put them away. The man in me knew I wouldn’t be able to do that without opening some sort of door for a sexual harassment suit. Situations like this were ripe for postulation.

“You’re with me today,” I went on, walking straight to my desk and shucking the suit jacket from my shoulders to hang

on the hook to the back and right of me.

“Here,” I offered when she didn’t move or speak, holding the messages from potential investors Meryl had handed me not five minutes ago out to her. “Take these to Dean and have him make some precursory calls. He can schedule calls for me this afternoon with any of them that show signs of legitimacy.”

A fake-lashed blink followed by a blank stare.

I even shook them a little, but she didn’t respond.

Right. Small words.

“Ask Dean to call these people back. He’ll know if it’s worth my time talking to them, and if it *is*, I’m free to do so this afternoon.”

“Got it!” she said with a wink, jumping from one heel to the other, spinning, and sashaying her way out of my office.

I wasn’t a psychic, but one thing was increasingly clear—I was going to need to stop and buy an extra bottle of scotch tonight.

Chapter Three

Georgia

I dove through the subway doors mere seconds before they crushed me to my death.

Okay, maybe that seems a tad dramatic, but if you lived in New York, you'd understand the sentiment I'm trying to portray.

The subway waited for no one. It didn't care if you were the next big shark on Wall Street. If you didn't reach those doors in time, *fuhgeddaboutit*.

I loved my job. I loved working at my job, once I managed to get my “never on time” ass there. It was that whole getting out of bed thing that caused me the most grief. Morning person, I was not. My body preferred to wake up on its own time. Therefore, my snooze button was ridden hard and put away *extremely* wet.

Every day was a race against time, and today was no exception.

I found a seat across from a thirty-something-year-old guy whose nose stayed buried in a book. He was hot by all accounts—brooding eyes, red flannel shirt, beanie-adorned bedhead, and cheekbones that would make Michelangelo's David look soft.

His book: Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto by Chuck Klosterman.

I knew that book well. I'd fiddled around with it during undergrad at NYU. It was a handwritten bomb of pop culture references and reflections on pretty much anything that mattered to young people. *The Real World*, porn, kittens, *Star Wars*, you name it and Klosterman discussed it. His witty take on American culture was supposed to be ironic in an existential kind of way. But I wouldn't say any of the topics

were deeply examined, which was probably why the book had left me with a Tumblr-like aftertaste in my mouth.

Translation: *Total hipster*. Although insanely good-looking, this guy would probably end up an NYC transplant in Portland within the next year. But I wasn't ruling out seeing his gorgeous mug on one of my favorite Instagram accounts, *Hot Dudes Reading*.

Because who doesn't love seeing man candy nose deep in a book?

My ogle time came to an end as I jumped off at my stop. Brooks Media headquarters was located on the prestigious Fifth Avenue, smack dab in the center of Midtown. This part of Manhattan was the central business district of the city—hell, even the country. Name a successful business, and it was probably located here. And lucky for me, my apartment in Chelsea was only a ten-to-fifteen-minute subway ride away.

Doesn't explain why I'm running twenty minutes late.

Following the hustle and bustle of sidewalk traffic, I maneuvered past as many map-reading tourists as possible. Street vendors littered the sidewalks. A guy on a bike missed getting hit by mere inches, elegantly flipping the driver off over his shoulder.

It was a weekday in New York, and it was fucking beautiful.

I loved my city. I loved the ebb and flow of its many eccentricities. Heels click-clacked against concrete, headed for Fifth Avenue's upscale boutiques. Loafers tip-tapped their way toward the Financial District. Taxis honked. Delivery trucks unloaded their goodies with clashing bangs and swift maneuvers. It was the New York song and dance. Everyone was on a mission to start their day. And nothing would stop them.

I strode into the Winthrop building, the spacious lobby greeting me with its gorgeous marble pillars and floor-to-ceiling windows. It was breathtaking. The office space was just as exquisite—wide hallways, natural stone floors, and the perfect amount of light coming in through large windows and

skylights. Brooks Media had definitely shelled out some cash for this prime piece of real estate. By all accounts, it was stunning.

“Morning, Paul. Morning, Brian,” I greeted the front desk security guards.

“Well, hey there, pretty lady.” Paul smiled. “I see someone is still having issues with getting here bright and early.”

“Oh, shut it, Paul. Not all of us can look as good as you without a little work in the morning.” I grinned and batted my eyelashes.

Brian laughed. “She’s got your number, dude.”

“I *wish* she had my number,” Paul interjected. “C’mon, Georgia, let me take you out to dinner.”

“We’ve been going through the same conversation at least once a week for the past two years, Paul. My answer isn’t going to change,” I called over my shoulder as I made my way to the elevator.

“It will change!” he yelled. “One day, it will change!”

The elevator pinged and I stepped on, giving Paul a little wave before the doors shut.

He was an adorable guy: mid-forties, hard-working, and sweeter than honey. But I didn’t mix business with pleasure. And Paul from security wasn’t my kind of guy. One day, though, he’d meet the right kind of lady who’d wash his socks and make him beer-cheese dip for Monday Night Football. He needed a woman who was just as good in the kitchen as she was in the bedroom. I could sixty-nine with the best of ’em, but I was useless when it came to home-cooked meals. Talented chef would never be on my résumé. My oven was better used for storing shoes.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in. Fashionably late today, Georgie?” Dean winked, passing me in the hallway.

Shit. My late arrivals were starting to mimic the walk of shame. I seriously needed to get my shit together.

“I was only trying to impress you with my new A-line skirt,” I called over my shoulder, sashaying my hips a little. “Vintage. Vera Wang. How ’bout them apples, cupcake?” Should I have mentioned I found the skirt at a secondhand shop in SoHo? Designer digs were great, but I refused to pay designer prices.

“Someone is fierce this morning. Go on with your bad self, little diva,” he teased, snapping his fingers. Dean was one of my favorite people in the office: hilarious, flamboyantly gay, and smart as a whip. What more could a girl ask for?

He turned in my direction, stopping in his tracks. “Lunch today?”

I paused at the entry to my office. “I’d kill for a chicken salad sandwich from the deli across the street.”

Dean grinned. “No homicide needed. We’ll grab it to go.”

“Let’s eat there. My office, quarter till one?”

He blew me a kiss. “It’s a date, lover.”

Another day, another dollar, yadda yadda yadda. My mantra, even though I would have preferred staying wrapped up in my comforter and sleeping until noon. Some days, adulting was too much responsibility. Get up for work. Brush your hair. Pay bills. It was an endless list of too many things and not enough time. The struggle was real, my friends.

But rent in Chelsea wasn’t a Sunday picnic in Central Park. A two-bedroom space with an elevator and doorman was pricey. Bottom line, I *had* to adult. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.

I settled into my day, checking emails and making follow-up calls to a few marketing prospects. The TapNext app had skyrocketed in success over the past year. I’d developed an ad campaign that had brought in several companies wanting to advertise within the windows of our app. And these scrollbar ads had become quite lucrative for the company. Businesses not only paid us a nice advertising fee, but they also agreed to some form of promotion for Brooks Media. We scratched their backs, and they gave us a full body massage. Although I was no use in the kitchen, I was *very* persuasive in a boardroom.

* * *

“Knock, knock,” Leslie announced her arrival. Her curvy frame swayed into my office, seemingly aloof to the fact I was in the middle of a conference call with Sure Romance.

“Uh, Georgia, like, there’s birthday cards you need to sign for people in the office,” she continued, tossing the greeting cards onto my desk. They spilled over my laptop, stopping my busy fingers from making much-needed progress on the current contract I was discussing.

I held up a finger, pointing to the Bluetooth in my ear.

“Georgia? Hellooooo, Georgia?” she repeated, tapping the toe of her stiletto in six quick, impatient movements.

Leslie was a horrible nightmare of ditzy responses, poor time management skills, and cleavage-revealing tops. And she was new to the company. But *for fuck’s sake*, how hard was it to see that I was currently in the middle of something?

“I’m so sorry, can you hold on for just a second?” I politely asked Martin, Sure Romance’s Director of Marketing.

“You know what, Georgia? I’ve got about three minutes to get to another meeting. How about you make the changes in the contract and send them over to legal? Let’s shoot for another call on Friday to review everything and find a middle ground we can both be happy with.”

Goddammit. This, my friends, was a perfect example of how to lose valuable footing in a business deal.

“Sure thing, Martin. And since Mr. Brooks wants to be on that call Friday, let’s plan on it being a video chat.” My boss knew nothing about that call. But this was me calling Martin’s bluff. My persuasion skills were top notch, but there was a reason Kline Brooks was President and CEO of his own company. The man could talk an Eskimo into buying ice.

“Oh, okay.” Martin cleared his throat. “In the meantime, I’ll try to get legal to review everything over the next twenty-four hours. The sooner we can sign off on this deal, the better.”

Translation: I’d like to avoid a video chat with your boss.

“Perfect. I look forward to hearing from you.” I ended the call and used all of my strength to plaster a neutral smile on my face as I looked up at Leslie.

“So, like I was saying, you need to sign these,” she repeated, still clueless.

God, I didn’t even care if I had resting bitch face. Hell, I wanted to active bitch face this chick so bad. She’d been with the company for a hot minute, and I was already done with her.

“Okay, Leslie. Just give me a second and I’ll sign them so you can go about your day,” I responded through a fake smile. I wanted to berate her. I wanted to let her know just how much her interruption could have screwed up an important business deal. But it would’ve been useless. My words would have gone straight through the giant hole in her head.

I gripped my pen, scribbling half-assed sayings about celebrating and happy birthday and have a great day. Five cards later, I handed them back to Leslie and sent her ditzy ass on her way.

* * *

I was twenty emails deep before another interruption peeked in my door.

Kline Brooks. He was the kind of man women fantasized about. A quintessential billionaire bad boy—styled, short dark hair, muscles for days, and a panty-dropping smile.

Except—he *wasn't*.

His smiles were genuine and his orders gently delivered. He kept to himself, from what I could tell, and didn't appear to sleep around. Despite his crazy good looks and net worth, I'd yet to see him land an "NYC playboy" spot on Page Six. I'd never seen him execute a salacious glimpse at a single employee—male or female. He was a mystery, hidden under all of that quiet direction with absolutely no chance of being uncovered.

As an employee, he wouldn't touch me with a ten-foot pole. Honestly, I wasn't sure he knew I had a vagina. He treated me as an equal and seemed to truly value my opinion on all things business and marketing. His eyes never strayed to my tits. His mouth never flashed a devilish grin.

And I stood strong in my beliefs that business and pleasure may as well have been oil and water. Kline was business, plain and simple.

Plus, he wasn't at all what I was looking for.

And yes, I can practically see the word billionaire flashing in front of your money-hungry eyes and feel the judgment rolling off of you in thick, disdain-filled clouds.

But this isn't actually about him. Not really, anyway.

Despite my inexperience with relationships, I knew myself enough to know I liked a straight shooter—both in conversation and the pun that intends. And I wasn't willing to settle—even if it was on a big, comfy pile of money.

Christ, there had to be a middle ground between soft talkers like Kline and dick pic bandits like **BAD_Ruck**. *Didn't there?*

"Good morning, Georgia," he greeted with that professional yet handsome smile of his. "Just wanted to check in and see how the Sure Romance deal was doing."

"Even though I had to threaten Martin with your presence on a video chat, I think we'll walk out of the deal with a million more than we anticipated."

"Nice work. Keep me abreast on the progress and let me know if you need backup."

My mind went straight to the word *abreast*. I knew my boss wasn't referring to my breasts, or breasts in general, but I couldn't stop my thoughts from wandering there.

I doubted Kline Brooks had ever thought about my breasts.

That would have been weird, right?

There was no way he saw me *that* way. And of course, I didn't think about him like that either. But it didn't hurt that he was easy on the eyes. Well, not *my* eyes, but other women's eyes. I was sure he was easy on *their* eyes. My eyes *knew* not to look at him.

I wouldn't deny my eyes were thankful he didn't have a weird comb-over or nose hairs or crusty lips. But Kline Brooks was business, *not* pleasure. He wouldn't touch me, and I sure as hell wouldn't touch him.

"Georgia?" he asked, pulling me from my rambling inner monologue.

Shit.

"Sorry." I shook the awkward thoughts out of my head. "I will definitely keep you updated on the Sure Romance contract, Mr. Brooks. I'm planning on signatures being finalized by the end of this week."

"Good to hear." He rapped his knuckles twice against the doorframe in that way only a man can pull off. "Thank you."

And with that, through the glass walls of my office, I watched as Kline Brooks strode down the hall with purpose. I knew that look well. Either someone was ready for lunch or they were about two minutes late for a meeting.

Before I could resume the task of responding to the morning's emails, Dean walked into my office, a shit-eating grin plastered to his face. "Got a minute, sweet cheeks?"

"Of course." I shut my laptop, giving him my full attention.

He plopped his Prada-wearing ass in the leather seat across from my desk. Dean kept grinning like the fucking Cheshire Cat as he slid a Hallmark card across my laptop.

I raised an eyebrow. “Why are you smiling like that? It’s creepy, dude.”

“So, Tits McGee put this card on my desk,” he sing-songed. “Of course, this was after she practically shoved her cleavage in my face.” The wide smile turned to irritation. “That girl has about the worst gaydar I’ve ever seen.”

“Aw, poor Dean. So attractive that single women are throwing themselves at him,” I teased.

“Well, you’re about to be thanking poor Dean here in a minute.” He nodded toward the card. “Go ahead and read it, sassy pants. I think you might want to make some changes.”

Huh? I glanced at the front, reading the sentiment. It was, by all accounts, a sympathy card. Someone in the office must have had a death in the family. I opened it and read through everyone’s thoughtful responses.

I’m so very sorry for your loss, Mary. -Patty

You’re in my thoughts and prayers. -Meryl

Please let us know if there’s anything we can do. -Gary

My coworkers were really sweet. That much was apparent.

Lots of love and prayers being sent your way through this difficult time. -Laura

HAPPY! HAPPY! JOY! JOY! Have a great day celebrating! -Georgia

Oh, fuck.

I read it again just to make sure my eyes weren’t playing tricks on me.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

My *Ren & Stimpy* reference wasn’t all that funny when written in the center of someone’s *CONDOLENCE CARD*.

“*Fucking Leslie,*” I spat. “She threw a bunch of cards on my desk and said they were *birthday* cards.”

Dean proceeded to lose his shit, his cackling laughs echoing inside my office.

I glared at him. “It’s not *that* funny.”

“Oh, hell yes it is. You referenced *Ren & Stimpy* on a sympathy card,” he wheezed.

Seriously, fuck you, Leslie. Fuck you, hard.

I was convinced I could blame her for everything wrong in my life.

Lost my keys? Goddammit, Leslie!

Missed the subway? Fuck you very much, Leslie.

Another awful dick pic sent to my phone? *You’re such an asshole, Leslie.*

I sighed. “I’m not even sure how to fix this.”

“White out?” he suggested, still laughing like a lunatic.

“Please.” I waved my hand at him. “Continue to giggle your ass off at my expense.”

“This was literally the highlight of my day. When I read it, I about fell out of my chair from laughing so hard. Pretty sure everyone in the office heard me. Even Meryl was giving me the stink eye.”

“Glad to know I’m brightening someone’s workday.”

He smirked, standing up and snatching the card out of my incompetent hands. “Let’s just throw this card out. I’ll have Meryl send flowers to Mary’s house from everyone in the office.”

I let out a breath of relief. “I’m in full support of this plan. I’ll even chip in fifty bucks.”

“Perfect.”

“Hey, you’re throwing that card out, right?” I asked before he made his way out of my office doors.

He only responded with a shrug and a few more cackles.

Dean was such a bitch. If I didn't love him so much, I'd have definitely disowned his designer-tag-wearing ass.

As his laughter faded, the annoying crescendo that signaled a text on my phone built.

I grabbed it quickly, knowing if I didn't read it now, I wouldn't remember it until the end of the day.

Cassie: I just watched the police arrest two guys for fucking right up against a wall on Broadway.

Not sure how to respond, I said the only thing that came to mind.

Me: Well, it is the Theater District.

I exited my messages, and before I locked the screen, I noticed the little red notification on my TapNext app. A message from **BAD_Ruck** from this morning made promises of sexual normalcy despite his indiscretions. A truce was in order.

TAPRoseNEXT (12:14PM): Awkward apology accepted.

His response came two minutes later.

BAD_Ruck (12:16PM): Thank God. Though, to be fair, your profile name really does nothing to discourage bad behavior.

Chapter Four

Kline

TAPRoseNEXT (12:19PM): Ugh. Don't remind me. I owe it mostly to a bottle of wine and an ill-advising roommate.

I chuckled to myself and then glanced at my watch, compelled to double-check the time even though the display on my phone told it to me just fine.

A pastrami and corned beef on rye from the deli on the corner was calling my name, yelling louder with each passing minute, but every single action of the day seemed to move as if it were coated in molasses.

“What are you laughing at?” Thatch asked from the screen in front of me.

I'd nearly forgotten I was on a video call with him.

“Your ugly mug,” I countered, pointedly electing not to tell him I was having any further conversation with **TAPRoseNEXT**.

“This face? No way. This is my moneymaker, son.”

“You sound like the biggest douche on the planet right now. Can we work, please? I'd like to eat lunch sometime this century.”

“You and your delicate stomach.”

“It's not fucking delicate,” I argued grumpily. But he really couldn't blame me. I *was* hungry after all. “It's manly and it needs food on the regular. There's nothing wrong with that.”

“Right. Now you're justifying your PMS symptoms—”

“Yes, Leslie?” I interrupted Thatch as she pushed open the door to my office.

“I just finished moving all of your meetings from this morning to this afternoon,” she purred, smiling at me like I should

praise her. *She* was the one who'd told Dean to schedule the investor calls for that morning rather than this afternoon, necessitating a schedule flip in the first place.

"Thanks," I said through gritted teeth. Catching sight of Thatch's "Duran Duran" face on the screen in front of me stopped me from rolling my eyes. Operation *Cockblock Hungry Wolf* superseded my needs.

"You can just leave the new schedule by the door and head to lunch," I offered, hoping she'd telepathically understand what I was trying so hard to communicate—*get out*.

She giggled.

Nope. Life wasn't that easy.

The tile of my office floor turned into a runway, her dramatic, foot-crossing steps designed to amplify the swing of her hips and elicit a man's attention.

And for any other man, it probably reached into his pants and hardened the attention right out of him.

I, however, was too busy cleaning up her mistakes and trying to finish a phone call so I could go to goddamn lunch.

Tits suddenly filled the frame of my vision, and I practically had to slam my head back into my chair to keep from eating them by accident.

No, I wasn't *that* hungry. That was how close she had placed them.

"Here you go."

"Yeah, thanks," I said, dismissing her and averting my eyes as much as possible. It wasn't a battle of wills, but rather, strictly a game of proximity.

The day I was willing to subject myself to that kind of pussy was the day my cock would rot off and my office would burn straight to the ground. I was sure of it.

Come hell or high water, I was done being this amenable to my mom's suggestions. Leslie needed to be gone by the

beginning of next week. Soon, but not soon enough that I couldn't talk my way out of it at family dinner.

I watched as she walked, counting the seconds and praying he'd wait until she left the room.

"Ho-ly hell—"

"Thatch—" I attempted to interrupt, recognizing his tone from experience and knowing it would only lead to bad things.

"Where the hell have you been hiding that one?"

"Don't say another word," I warned, just as the door shut blessedly behind Leslie.

"Fuck me hard, fast, and dirty, Kline-hole. Did you see the tits on her? Seriously, let her know she can swaddle me up and ride me like a cockpuppet any fucking time she wants."

I picked up a pen and pretended to scribble on a piece of paper.

"Ride...you...like...a...cockpuppet. Got it."

The muscled chords of his throat flexed with a bark of laughter, and recognition of his absurdity flashed in his eyes.

"All right, point taken." He raised his hands and winked, his fingers in air quotes, mocking, "Business."

I didn't waste any time getting back to it. "I've got two investor meetings in L.A.—"

"And you want me to be there."

"Yeah."

He sat back in his leather chair and crossed his thick arms. "Done."

"You don't even know when they are," I pointed out. I reached forward and took hold of my mouse to double-check the timing, but he didn't wait.

"For you, my love, no time is a bad time." He blew me a kiss.

"Why do I put up with you?" I asked, sitting back again and raking a hand through my hair.

His response was immediate. “I personally think it’s because you like a reminder of the fine male specimen you’ll never live up to.”

I shook my head and smirked, knowing I’d never be the six-foot-five monster he was and not struggling to swallow it even one little bit. My leaner but no less toned six-foot package hadn’t failed me yet.

“I’ll see you in L.A. tomorrow night, Adonis.”

“No way. I’ll see you here, at the airport, so you can hold my hand during—”

Raising my middle finger in salute, I clicked the button to end the call.

Thatch’s ability to bounce back from a night out was almost unfathomable. I needed more than four hours of sleep, and I needed to do it for some other reason than being blackout drunk.

My best friend and money man could go several nights in a row without, it seemed, and holding his liquor had practically been his first childhood milestone.

Nights out were dwindling for both of us, though. My tendency to be “an old man,” according to Thatch, and his secret rendezvous with every available pussy in Manhattan pretty much soured the deal.

It’s not that I didn’t enjoy nights out or the company of a beautiful woman. I loved women. I loved every fucking thing about them. I just didn’t love the idea of having drunken sex with some chick I picked up at a bar. I wasn’t a fan of Pussy Roulette, and when I ate one, I wanted to be able to remember the taste.

My phone rang on my desk as though the call had been put straight through without a heads-up from a lunch-eating Leslie. Normally, Pam rolled my calls to voicemail when she was away from her desk, sorting through them and passing along worthy callers upon her return.

Every ring made it that much more painfully obvious she was out, a duck-lipped, inexperienced seductress in her place.

“Brooks,” I answered, putting the phone to my ear.

“Yo,” Thatch greeted. “I forgot to ask. Do we have BAD practice tonight?”

I covered my groan. I’d forgotten about rugby practice.

That didn’t stop me from busting his balls. “Yes, Princess Peach. We have practice every Monday night.”

“Yeah, but with it being football season and all, I thought maybe Wes was busy cheerleading or whatever.”

Wes was the third member of our bachelor trio and the owner of the New York Mavericks. We teased him relentlessly, but in reality, it was *cool as fuck* to know somebody who owned a team in the National Football League. A little sweet-talking got us tickets anytime we wanted and field time with the players.

“I take no offense, by the way. Princess Peach is a badass bitch.”

“Most of their games are on Sunday. You know, like the one you talked me into going out to watch last night. I’ll see you at practice tonight,” I said, shaking my head at another ridiculous conversation.

“Geez, Diva. Eat a Snickers.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “You know, you force me to say *fuck*, as in *fuck you*, way more than I ever dreamed in a business environment.”

His answering chuckle was dry. “Just one of my many talents, K. Most of the others involve a lighter, a forty of beer, and my cock—”

I ended the call before he could finish.

Jesus. Is this guy really my best friend?

The short of it was, yes, he *was* my best friend. And I wouldn’t change it despite his ability to produce migraines. I was never short on entertainment, that was for sure. But my well of patience had run dry for the day. Simple as that.

Standing quickly, before I could be interrupted again, I yanked the skinny end of my tie from its knot, unwound it from my neck, and hung it on the hook next to my jacket.

I dropped my keys with a clang into my pocket and slid my wallet snug into its spot in the one in the rear.

Retracing my steps from several hours earlier, I passed Meryl with a nod and escaped the building without having to do more than smile politely at passing employees.

The sun nearly blinded me as I pushed the front door open, and the sounds of an active fall lunch hour overwhelmed my office-trained ears. Horns honked and cabbies yelled and pigeons took off in a rush as a toddler ran screaming through the middle of them.

I popped the buttons on my sleeves as I walked, rolling them up to expose my forearms and bask in the dramatically warm weather, and faded into the crowd of pump-wearing women and suit-clad men.

Indian summer, I think they called it, the desertlike arid heat settling deep into my bones and radiating from the inside out.

I could see the sun and city from the wall-to-wall windows of my office, but my lunch hour was pretty much the only opportunity I got to *feel* it.

That was the real root of my grumpiness, I guess. I worked hard from sunup to sundown, and one simple hour in between was what helped keep a happy head on top of tense shoulders.

“Kline!” the owner of my favorite little mom-and-pop deli called as I pushed my way inside the door.

“Hey, Tony!” I answered, gently making my way through the standing-room-only crowd to shake his hand over the counter.

“Here, here,” he urged, moving some old memorabilia to unearth the one empty seat in the place.

“No way,” I denied with a smile and a shake of my head. “I’ll wait for a table like everybody else. I could use the extra time to clear my head today.”

“Sit, sit, sit,” he said over me, his refusal to let me stand in the crowd and wait a regular occurrence. But he didn’t do it because I had money. Tony didn’t even *know* I had money. All he knew was I’d been coming in every workday I was in town for the last ten years, and I looked him in the eye and shook his hand every single time I did.

“Thanks, Tone.” Giving in was the only option.

“We got a sandwich for you today, buddy,” he said as I slid my butt onto the seat.

“I hope it’s a pastrami and corned beef on rye. I’ve been fantasizing about it all morning.”

“Ah,” he said with a shout and a wink. “For you, I’ve got just the thing!”

And the truth was, he did—a warm smile, familiarity, and a genuine exuberance. Stuff I needed way more than a sandwich.

Chapter Five

Georgia

“Finally!” Dean remarked as he slammed through my door half an hour later.

I’d just finished finalizing and faxing the *original* Sure Romance contract. The one where a little quick talking had prevented Leslie’s ill-timed interruption from ruining my life and dragging the company over a swath of hot coals. *The one I was shoving down Martin’s throat whether he liked it or not.*

Meanwhile, my stomach was working on chewing a sandwich-sized hole through itself.

“I swear that evil trampvestite is the bane of my existence.”

I raised a single, perfectly plucked eyebrow in amusement. If Cassie was the expert of parodies, Dean was the single-most talented nickname giver I’d ever encountered. No two people were alike and no name was deemed off-limits in the name of political correctness. Basically, Dean did the dirty work and I reaped the benefits.

“Trampvestite, huh?”

“Oh, yeah,” he confirmed, pointing to his fluttering eyes. “Fake lashes to here.” He held both hands out generously in front of his chest. “And fake tits out to there.”

I didn’t bother to conceal my laugh.

“She’s had me running all over this goddamn place this morning, putting out fires and sweating through a five-hundred-dollar shirt.”

“You know what will make you feel better?” I cooed.

His green eyes twinkled under the fluorescent lights. “Twenty million dollars and a private island with Brad Pitt?”

“A hot turkey sandwich.”

“Hmm,” he mumbled as he pretended to consider it. “I guess that’ll work.”

I slid the bottom drawer of my desk open with ease, yanked my purse out, and slammed it shut with a bang.

“Let’s go. Feed me. Regale me with all of your tales of woe.”

“She’s been annoying you too,” he argued as I slid my arm through his at the elbow.

“She has,” I agreed. “You just play a much more convincing victim than I do.”

A small blush stole through his cheeks, and he leaned down to smack a kiss on mine. Compliments always cheered him up.

“I’ve had more practice,” he comforted me. Not that I *needed* to be comforted. This was still all about Dean and giving him what he needed. I didn’t have a dick, but I could do drama.

“Ah, yes, the struggles of an attractive gay man.”

“They’re like wolves, Georgia! One innocent cherub like me in the club and they swarm like bees.”

“Wait. I’m confused. Are they wolves or bees?” I teased as he pushed the button for the elevator.

“Shut your crimson lip-stain-covered trap!”

Perfect.

A distraction of *cosmetic* proportions.

“You like the color?” I asked as I backed into the rear wall of the elevator, propping my chin up on a posed hand and pursing my lips.

“Hmm.” He pretended to inspect me, fluffing the hair on both sides of my head. Consideration turned into a quick smile, and a wink popped his left eye closed. “Love!”

“Thanks,” I offered with a return grin.

While Dean proceeded to gab about his recent rendezvous with a cute bartender, I couldn’t shake a question that’d been nagging me. I needed an answer.

TAPRoseNEXT (12:52PM): So, if that wasn't your dick, whose dick was it? I think I want to know the answer to this, but there's another part of me that's a little afraid...

BAD_Ruck (12:53PM): Afraid I'll reveal that I've got a stockpile of other dudes' dicks on my phone?

Hells bells, that answer was *not* reassuring.

TAPRoseNEXT (12:54PM): ...

TAPRoseNEXT (12:55PM): For real "...” is the only response I have to that.

Okay, seriously, if he didn't respond in the next two minutes, my trigger finger was going straight for the block button.

TAPRoseNEXT (12:56PM): ...! (If I could use shouty caps for ellipses, I'd be doing it RIGHT NOW)

BAD_Ruck (12:57PM): I don't make a habit of collecting other dudes' dick pics or taking my own. But I do have a friend (who's a bit of a prick) who loves "gargoyle dicking" people as a prank.

TAPRoseNEXT (12:58PM): My friend (who's pretty hilarious) referred to the dick in question as, "The Hunchcock of Notre Dame."

BAD_Ruck (12:59PM): If I were the kind of guy who used text acronyms, I'd definitely be responding with LOL.

TAPRoseNEXT (1:00PM): Question: were you purposefully withholding important information to get me worked up?

We crossed Fifth Avenue, heading straight for my favorite family-owned deli. The sidewalks were bustling with energy, but **BAD_Ruck** had become quite the distraction. I only willed my eyes to look away from our message box to avoid being run over by a taxi or knocking over my fellow pedestrians.

Dean cleared his throat. "Excuse me? Are you even listening? Or am I rambling on about Sir Sucks-A-Lot for no reason?"

"Sir Sucks-A-Lot?"

“Jesus.” He sighed. “What in the hell are you doing? Are you texting someone?”

I shrugged. “Just checking work emails.” No way in hell would I give Dean any kind of ammunition regarding TapNext. I’d never live that down.

He stopped in the middle of the New York sidewalk traffic, nearly causing a woman with her dog to trip over the leash. “Work emails? You’re so full of it.”

Uh-huh. I hid the screen of my phone. “What? I’ve got that big deal with Sure Romance I need nailed down by the end of the week...”

“You’re the worst liar. Seriously. It’s like you’re so bad at lying that I honestly wonder if you’re doing it on purpose.”

“I’m not lying,” I said, fighting a smile.

Dean pointed to my mouth. “Says the girl who’s notorious for smiling or giggling nervously whenever she’s lying.”

Shit. I covered my mouth.

“Honey, you are too much,” he teased, placing his hand at the small of my back. “Now, let’s get your lying ass inside that deli so I can fight the starvation that’s threatening to take place.”

* * *

“This place is insane,” Dean whispered in my ear as we stepped in the door.

The restaurant was packed. Every table was filled, and the line to order reached the door. But I didn’t care. My nostrils had already been seduced by the delicious aromas of freshly baked breads and soups. I’d wait two hours if I had to.

“I know,” I agreed. “But it’s like this all the time.” My eyes scanned the tables for any open seats. “It looks like that

woman in the corner is about to get up.”

“Perfect. You grab it. I’ll order,” Dean suggested. “The usual?”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Like you even have to ask.”

“Chicken salad. Lettuce. Light mayo. Hold the onion and tomato.”

I nodded. “I swear if you didn’t have an aversion to vaginas, I’d beg you to be my husband.”

He smirked. “Plenty of women are beards to their fabulously gay husbands.”

“Yeah, but we’d fight too much over our clothing budget. You’d shop us out of food and rent money.”

“I bet you wouldn’t be complaining too much when your curvy little ass was decked out in designer duds.”

Laughing, I held up both hands. “Fine. You’ve convinced me. If I reach the age of thirty-five and neither of us is married, I’ll be your beard.”

“Fabulous.” He winked. “Now go snatch a table while I grab the food.”

Since Dean was a diva from way back, I did as I was told. I pretended to mosey around the joint, casually stopping to look at the memorabilia on the walls, but in reality, I was watching some woman with a red turtleneck and Crocs like a hawk. By the time she gathered her trash and was getting ready to hop to her feet, I had strategically placed myself a few feet away from her table, carefully planning my descent onto her chair.

The second Turtleneck’s butt cheeks left the seat, I slid into her place with the finesse of a gazelle. Well, in my head, I looked like a gazelle. The guy whose head I nearly took off with my purse probably would’ve called it more *bull in china shop*, but whatever. Tomato. Tomahto.

My phone pinged inside the front pocket of my purse.

BAD_Ruck (1:12PM) Question: Is now the time to confess you’re pretty adorable when you get worked up?

TAPRoseNEXT (1:13PM) Egging me on for your own amusement? That's not very gentlemanly of you.

BAD_Ruck (1:14PM) I can assure you, I'm a gentleman in all the ways that count.

TAPRoseNEXT (1:15PM) Are you flirting with me?

BAD_Ruck (1:16PM) If I am, is it working?

TAPRoseNEXT (1:17PM) A lady never kisses (or flirts) and tells.

BAD_Ruck (1:18PM) Neither does a gentleman.

TAPRoseNEXT (1:19PM): I think you might be BAD news.

BAD_Ruck (1:20PM): BAD in the best kind of way, sweetheart.

TAPRoseNEXT (1:21PM): You're definitely flirting with me, Ruck.

BAD_Ruck (1:22PM): You've got a keen eye, Rose.

"I'm convinced. You're sexting someone."

I glanced up from my phone, meeting Dean's knowing look. "Don't be ridiculous. Why would you think I'm sexting someone?"

"The fact that you're smiling like a loon and haven't noticed I've been sitting here for a good five minutes with our food."

He had a point. I was too wrapped up in **BAD_Ruck's** responses to notice anything else. I couldn't deny, the man intrigued me. But I also couldn't deny that if I didn't set my phone down and give Dean my undivided attention, it might be grounds for a full-on catfight.

TAPRoseNEXT (1:23PM): I've got a growling stomach and an impatient friend who's staring at me from across the table. Rain check (on the flirting)?

I set my phone on the table, eyeing the goodness set before me. The aroma of chicken salad and greasy French fries called

my name. “This looks like heaven ready to explode in my mouth.”

“That’s what Neil said last night when he was taking off my navy Gucci dress slacks.”

My hands stopped at the halfway point of sandwich-thrusting into my mouth.

“Simply stating ‘my pants’ would have been sufficient. And who the hell is Neil?”

“Sir Sucks-A-Lot,” Dean said, taking a bite of his Greek salad. “And honey, those weren’t just any pants. They were Gucci’s twill blended wool. And they make my ass look fabulous.”

“I guess that explains why Neil was taking off your pants in the first place.”

Dean grinned. “Truer words have never been spoken.”

A jolting bump forced the sandwich to fall from my hands and land half open on the kitschy diner table. *What in the ever-loving hell?* If Turtleneck was coming back for her seat, it was about to go down.

“Excuse me,” was muttered over a man’s shoulder as his dress-slack-covered ass—fantastic ass, mind you—moved past my chair and toward the doors. His face was too buried in his phone to realize he had just barreled through my lunchtime fun.

“*Jesus,*” I grumbled. “Does everyone in New York have to be so pushy? I mean, how hard is it to watch where you’re going instead of knocking into everyone?”

Dean tilted his head to the side, eyes focused toward the front of the restaurant. “I think that was Mr. Brooks.”

“What?” I turned in my chair and watched as my boss’s tall frame walked out of the restaurant and onto Fifth Avenue.

An incoming TapNext message icon lit up my screen.

“Yep,” Dean agreed. “That’s definitely him. I’d know that body anywhere. Broad shoulders. Sexy forearms. Perfectly toned ass. The things I’d do to that man.”

“Horny much?”

“Nah.” He waved me off. “I’m still recovering from having all the horny sucked out of me last night.”

“On that note,” I announced, standing from my seat. “I think I’ll go order another sandwich. Be right back.”

“I’ll be here, doll face.”

While I stood in line, I took a gander at what else Ruck had sent my way.

BAD_Ruck (1:25PM): Can’t wait. Enjoy your lunch, Rose.

Two things stood out in my mind.

1. I wanted to chat more with **BAD_Ruck**. Which was crazy, considering we had been introduced by a gargoyle of dickish proportions.
2. How had I not known Kline Brooks had such a tight ass? And more importantly, if his ass looked that good *in* pants, what did it look like without them?

Chapter Six

Kline

“I found the perfect date for you Friday night,” my mom claimed in my ear as I walked out of my office to head home for the night.

I didn’t even have to think about it.

“No.”

I pulled the door shut behind me and walked slowly down the hall and around the corner to the main office space.

“She’s twenty-nine, long dark hair, well kept and attractive—”

“No.”

“Her name is Stacey Henderson. I don’t know if you’ve been at any social engagements that she’s attended in the past—”

Stacey Henderson? Oh, hell no.

She *was* well kept and extremely attractive. And an eleven in vapidness on a scale from one to ten.

“Mom. *No.*”

“She’s really excited—”

“Mom—”

“Said she had just the thing to wear—”

“Mom,” I snapped, finally speaking firmly enough to earn her attention.

“What?”

Excuse. I needed an excuse.

My marketing director’s back and bright red hair caught my attention from across the office, and the words left my lips before I could think of anything else.

“I already have a date.”

“Oh. Oh dear. Well, I guess I’ll have to call Stacey and cancel, then—”

“Yes!” I agreed eagerly. “Cancel Stacey.”

Her voice turned suspicious.

“Kline—”

“Gotta go, Mom. Have to touch base with my date.”

Convince her to go with me.

“Kline—”

“Loveyoubye.”

With a tap of my thumb, I hung up fast, hoping I wouldn’t find myself in too much hot water for ending the call so quickly but desperate enough to end the conversation that I didn’t care.

Thirty-four years old and, if anything, my mother was “mothering” me the most she had in my entire life. Wanting a respectable woman to take under her wing and claim as her own was a powerful motivator, apparently, compelling her to meddle like she’d never meddled before.

Most of the time I gave in, but living with Walter on a day-to-day basis was a pretty unforgettable lesson. The grumpiest cat in Manhattan—if not the world—lived with me, and it was all my mother’s fault.

I don’t want you to be lonely, she said.

We’re traveling too much to take care of him, she said.

You’ll love him, and he’ll love you, she said.

Ah, to go back in time.

There were days I actually avoided going home—to *my* apartment—because Walter lived there.

But that was a subject for another time.

I crossed the office quickly, my shoes slapping out a muted rhythm on the marble tile and a whistled tune flying from my lips.

Georgia Cummings.

My employee and the cure for my Stacey Henderson-themed nightmares.

She'd been working for my company for a couple of years now, but as I approached, I realized I'd never actually *looked* at her in all that time.

A glance here, a smile there, a professional exchange every week or so. But I'd never studied her body the way I was now.

I knew I hadn't.

Because I sure as fuck would have remembered.

Petite in stature but curvy in shape, her body was a perfect pint-sized hourglass perched precariously on top of razor-thin five-inch stilettos.

Her goddamn calves looked like they had been carved out of granite, and the rounded cheeks of her ass grabbed on to my eyes and refused to let go.

She moved slightly as I got closer from behind, and she bent at the waist to do something in the filing cabinet in front of her.

The gloriously short filing cabinet.

I watched as she went about her business, wondering how I'd managed to so effectively blind myself to her. I worked really hard at treating every single employee with fairness and without prejudices. I could remember the looks Dean had given me when he'd thought I wasn't looking, and the friendly crinkles at the corners of Pam's eyes. *The devil was in the details*, my dad had always told me, and I did my best to notice them. Except for hers.

As I tried to picture her smile from memory—and *couldn't*—I knew all of my compartmentalizing engines must have been running at full fucking steam to protect me from getting into something I shouldn't.

But those engines weren't running now, the override switch turned and fully engaged thanks to Meddling-Mom-Maureen, and as the fabric of Georgia's creamy white dress pulled tight over her ass, alarms started blaring.

“My neck.”

A sway of her tight-white-fabric-covered hips accompanied her off-key singing.

Something told me she didn't know I was standing behind her.

"My back."

More torture in the opposite direction.

"Lick my pussy—"

Ears bleeding. Pants tightening.

"—and my crack."

Holy. *Fuck.*

I had to stop her before it got even worse. *Better.*

Quickly, I shook my head to clear it and then reached forward to tap her smooth shoulder.

Hair flung out in an arc, she turned on her heel at warp speed, her eyes widening in horror as she pulled on a white cord to release an earbud from her ear.

"Shit."

I smiled. Her eyes widened impossibly further.

"Mr. Brooks. I'm so sorry." She clamped her eyes shut in shame. "I didn't know anyone else was still here."

Her face was mostly hidden in shadow as she tilted it to the ground, but I was still almost positive I saw her mouth the word 'shit' again.

"It's all right," I offered, and her head snapped up in question. I grinned slightly. "The singing and the shits. In fact, if you really need to, you can say it again."

Her face froze in shock.

"I can tell you want to," I prodded. "Maybe even three or four more times."

"Three. Four." She shrugged helplessly. "Forty, maybe."

"Forty shits?" I questioned, raising a brow in amusement.

"Depends on how much you actually heard, I guess."

I craned my neck to one side and back again.

“I’m not sure. I’m feeling particularly attuned to your neck and back, and, well, the rest I’m not sure I can say in an office environment.”

“Oh my God,” she cried and sank her face into her hands, embarrassment renewed.

“Definitely forty shits. Maybe even fifty.”

I coughed on a chuckle before tucking it away, knowing it was the perfect time to get on with what I needed.

“It’s okay. I know how you can redeem yourself.”

Her gaze jerked up from the floor and her eyes widened with hope. “Yeah?”

“Tomorrow night. Go to the benefit for the Children’s Hospital with me.”

Horror contorted her face into a scrunched-up version of itself. Not *exactly* what I was going for.

“What? Go to the...with you... No.” She shook her head frantically, desperately even, her bright red hair swinging to and fro before settling helplessly on the white fabric at her shoulders.

“No.”

I had to admit, the double, *emphatic* nos threw me a little. It wasn’t that I thought no one could turn me down. They could, and hell, they probably should. But they hadn’t in a long time.

Not in a *very* long time.

“You’re busy?” I offered as an excuse, hoping her visible discomfort was more about being caught off guard than anything else.

One slim wrinkle formed between her eyebrows, and the corners of her eyes seemed to pinch together slightly. “No. Not busy.”

Ouch.

For the first time in quite a while, I struggled to find my words. “I...uh...well. Okay.”

She forced a fake smile in response.

And yet, I couldn't bring myself to give up.

Walking around her desk and into her space enough that she backed up a couple of steps, I leaned my ass into the surface behind me and crossed my arms.

She rubbed goosebumps from her arms in a nervous fidget.

“So, how definite is this ‘no’? Is it an ‘I’m mildly considering it, but I’m thinking no’ or a ‘not a snowflake’s chance in hell no’ or maybe somewhere in the middle where negotiation lives?”

She shook her head as if mystified and tapped the toe of her stiletto twice.

My gaze shot down the length of her legs and back again, only to find her bright cerulean eyes narrowed slightly at the end of my circuit.

“I’m not disgusted with you, if that’s what you’re asking, but negotiation isn’t likely.”

Jim Carrey inhabited my body and took over my vocal chords before I could stop him. “So you’re telling me there’s a chance?”

“What the hell is going on here?” she snapped softly at the ceiling, almost as if to herself. Her eyes jumped to me. “Why are you asking me out? Why now? None of this is making any sense.”

The only thing I could do was give it to her straight. Whether it was a good thing or not, I never could stop the honesty. It was just my nature.

“Look. For some godforsaken reason, society has decided to care about my completely uninteresting life because I have money, and because tabloid fodder is way more important than donations or time volunteered, they want me to have a date at every function I attend. Normally, this wouldn’t be an issue, as in they can go fuck themselves, but in another slap of fate, my

mother has decided she cares. Wants a daughter-in-law and grandbabies and all that crap.”

Her previously peachy-tan skin blanched white.

“But she has terrible taste, and though I know next to nothing about you, you’re already guaranteed to be better than any of my other options.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Trust me, I intended that as an insult to the others, not you.”

“Right.”

“I’m not trying to marry you, though I’m sure I’ll enjoy our time together endlessly—”

“I’m sure.”

I couldn’t help but smile at her mockery.

“I’m trying to avoid ending up with another chattier, day-spa-loving version of Walter.”

“Walter?” she asked with good reason.

“My cat.”

Incredulity warred with confusion on her face, pulling her lips out flat to the sides and back again several times.

I knew I was talking her in circles. I just hoped her confusion would lead to grudging acceptance.

Just when I feared she’d chew her lip raw if she kept on at that pace for much longer, she broke the silence with one simple question. “Why me?”

Once again, honesty prevailed.

“Because you’re here.”

She pursed her lips around the sour of my words, but as I tore my gaze away to look into her bright blue eyes, I knew I wasn’t done.

Not with her, not with this conversation, and not with being stupid for the day.

“And you’re fucking beautiful.”

Chapter Seven

Georgia

“Beautiful?!” I shrieked, slamming the door to my apartment behind me. The walls shook from the undeserved abuse. “For fuck’s sake, all it takes is one guy—who’s never even been on your *let’s get naked together* radar—to call you beautiful and you’re acting like some desperate hussy! Really? *Really?* That’s all it takes?” I dropped my purse to the floor and kicked off my heels. “Where is your pride, you stupid hussy! Where is your *fucking pride?*”

Cassie barreled out of her room like a herd of buffalo with a curling iron in hand and the cord trailing behind her, startling me enough that I slammed my ass into the counter of our island.

“Where’s the stupid hussy?” she yelled, eyes manic and searching.

I rolled my own eyes dramatically, too pissed at myself to laugh at her antics. “You’re looking at her!” I pointed at myself like a lunatic. “She’s here! She’s right fucking here!”

“Oh,” she sighed, losing her aggressive stance, dropping the unlikely weapon to her side, and standing straight at once. “You don’t count. I thought there was *actually* a stupid hussy out here you needed to be saved from. I was ready to throw down and beat some ass.”

“Oh, I am a stupid hussy. A pathetic slut who’s a disgrace to our gender. Trust me.”

“Nooooo, you’re not. You’re a Wheorgiebag, but even that isn’t a *real* whore. Whores have excessively loose vaginas. I’m talking big enough to store all of their whoring money, and yours has never even been open for business. Probably couldn’t even fit a nickel.”

She had a point. My vagina was sealed tighter than Fort Knox. A proverbial “do not pass go” zone for all cockbandits begging entry. It wasn’t because I was a prude or saving myself for marriage. I had just never found the right guy I deemed worthy of thrusting into my goodie bag.

Maybe I was too picky. Maybe my sex therapist mother had driven me to insanity. Or maybe my expectations of waiting to do the deed with a man I had an actual connection with were unrealistic in this day and age. I mean, the plethora of dick and sac pics floating around social media could’ve been evidence of this.

Don’t even get me started on the reaction I received from men when they found out I was a single, twenty-six-year-old woman with an unclaimed V-card. I might as well have told them I was a unicorn who could shoot sparkles out of my ass.

And it wasn’t like I was averse to *all* sex. I was a big-time advocate for oral. Well, as long as there was a giving and receiving clause in the agreement. Call me crude, but if I’m going to suck it, you’re going to eat it. Period. End of story.

Despite the shocked reactions and stigma revolving around being a woman who had made it through college with her virginity still intact, I stuck to my guns, refusing to just *give it up* to whoever was hard and willing. It wasn’t a statement of abstinence or strong religious views. It was just me, being myself, and doing what I thought was right for me.

That’s the most important thing when it comes to a woman’s sexual prerogative. She should decide what she really wants without being influenced by social norms or penis peer pressure.

“You’re doing it again,” Cassie interrupted my thoughts.

I tilted my head, confused. “What am I doing?”

“You’re doing that ‘this is why I’m still a virgin’ inner monologue thing. Do I need to turn on the fireplace for a bra-burning ritual? Or should we throw out the razors and let our pit hair run rampant?”

“You’re a pain in my ass.” I laughed. I couldn’t help myself.

“I love you too, my beautiful, virginal best friend.”

I ignored Cassie’s shit-eating grin and strode for the fridge. Lord knew there was a giant glass of wine with my name on it.

“Let’s hear it,” she demanded, plopping down at the kitchen table. “Why are you a stupid hussy?”

Grabbing a bottle of moscato from the fridge, I filled a coffee mug to the brim. “I don’t want to talk about it. It’s too embarrassing.”

“Uh-huh. Sure you don’t. That explains why you were just talking *to yourself* about it.” She eyed me with a pointed look. “Spit it out, Georgia Rose.”

I shook my head, taking a giant swig of sugary wine.

Cassie stared.

I shook my head again.

Her eyes did that scary death glare thing where I started to be concerned for my well-being.

“Okay,” I relented, holding both hands in the air like I was being held at gunpoint. “Okay. But you have to cool it on the creepy eyes first. You’re wiggling me out.”

She smiled. “Works like a charm. Every. Single. Time.”

I groaned.

“So,” she encouraged, gesturing with her hand. “What has your panties in such a twist?”

“Kline asked me out.”

“*Kline?* Who’s Kline?”

“Kline Brooks...Mr. Brooks...” I offered, jogging her memory.

“Holy fucking goat scrotums! *Kline Big-dicked Billionaire Brooks?* Your crazy-hot, super-rich boss?” she continued before I could utter a response. “Say *whaaaaaaat?* How in the hell did this happen?”

“First of all, what do you mean by ‘how in the hell did this happen?’ I might be a virgin, but I’m not a two-bagger. I can

look pretty when I actually take the time to brush my hair.”

“Oh, cool your jets. You’re gorgeous and you know it. Kline Brooks would be one lucky son of a bitch to score a date with you.”

“And how do you know he has a big dick? You’ve seen him once. And it was a five-second ‘Oh, that’s my boss, Kline’ conversation while we were walking across the parking lot. You haven’t even met him in person.”

“Five seconds is all I need.” She tapped the side of her head. “You know my cockdar is off the chain. I can sense a giant swinging penis pendulum from at least ten miles away. It’s a God-given talent, Georgie.”

I choked on my wine. “Let’s not bring God into this.”

She raised an eyebrow. “God knows the G-spot needs a more than adequate-sized wiener to get the job done.”

“I’m pretty sure that comment just got you wait-listed for heaven.”

“Probably.” She shrugged. “Tell me you said yes to Big-dicked Brooks.”

“Stop calling him that!” I shouted, unable to hold back laughter.

“Oh, c’mon, Virgin Mary, you know your boss has that *‘Hello, ladies, I’m packing’* swagger.” She waggled her eyebrows. “Tell me you said yes to him. For the love of God, tell me you’re going on a date with him.”

“He’s not my type.”

“Georgie,” she groaned. “He’s handsome. He’s successful. He’s not propositioning you for a five-dollar blow job. What’s not to like? I don’t get it.”

“Five-dollar blow job? What are you even talking about?”

“Obviously, *bad* propositions.” She held out both hands, irritated. “Even the worst blow job—with teeth and chapped lips and poor suction—is worth more than five bucks.”

I sighed. “Look, he has like eleventy bajillion dollars in his bank account. His suits cost more than our apartment. We are not on the same level. Not even close.”

“First off, that’s not a number. Secondly, who the fuck cares? Why are you judging him by his money?”

“I’m not judging.”

She nodded, eyes wide. “Oh, yes you are. You’re totally judging.”

“But...he’s...”

“Stop it.” A stern finger was pointed in my direction. “Stop being judgy.”

Was I really judging Kline by his money?

And more importantly, did he really have a big d-i-c-k?

“You’re going on a date with him, aren’t you?”

I feigned confusion. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You little hussy! You’re freaking out because you said yes, didn’t you?!”

Her evil, victorious laugh pushed me over the edge. “Fine!” I shouted. “He called me ‘fucking beautiful’ and I folded like a deck of cards. I might as well have lifted my skirt and spread my legs for him. I was pathetic. Like some swooning, teenage girl. I said yes because he tossed a goddamn compliment in my direction!”

“God, I’m sure it’s going to be absolutely terrible for you. Having to go on a date with a rich, successful, gorgeous man who also happens to give you compliments.” She feigned shock. “Oh, the humanity!”

I stared at Cassie for a good three seconds before her words sank in. And then, I couldn’t stop myself from laughing after muttering, “You’re such a bitch.”

Maybe I was being a tad bit ridiculous over this whole scenario. It was just one compliment. And I only agreed to one date. How bad could it be?

Darth Vader's dark side ringtone filled the room, vibrating my phone across the counter.

Incoming Call Dr. Crazypants

"Ugh," I sighed. "It's my mom. Lord help me, I'm not in the mood for her randomness." I sent her call to voicemail, too tired to keep up with her rambling.

My mom, otherwise known as Dr. Savannah Cummings, was a force to be reckoned with. She spent her days counseling couples and her nights doing God only knows what with my father. Sex therapy was her game and bringing sexy back into the bedroom was her claim to fame.

And yes, I was well aware of the "sex therapist named Cummings" irony. My mother was too. Several years ago, she had made a point to use that satire to her advantage—on a *billboard*, hovering over a *main* interstate that led straight into *New York City*.

Her slogan: "Dr. Cummings wants you to *come*...visit her brand new office."

Needless to say, eighth grade was a pretty hard year for me.

Conversations with Savannah mostly consisted of small talk about my dating and sex life and her usual spiel about the importance of masturbation. "*Make sure you're masturbating at least once a day, Georgia Rose. It's imperative for your sexual health.*"

My mother, the sex therapist, was a bit of a weirdo. But she was my weirdo and I loved her dearly. I just couldn't handle her open-ended questions and virginity interrogation at the moment.

I downed the rest of my wine and slammed it on the counter. "I'm calling it a night. I'll see you on the flipside, Casshead."

"Night, Wheorgiebag."

Without wasting time, I did the usual bedtime routine—face washed, teeth brushed, and comfy sleep clothes applied—and happily plopped my tired ass into bed.

But sleep refused to come.

My brain had reached the hamster-on-a-wheel stage of insomnia. Thoughts raced and unanswered questions refused to leave. I kept replaying Kline asking me out, over and over again. And all I could think was, why me? What made him all of a sudden show interest in me?

“And you’re fucking beautiful.”

I wasn’t dealing with a shortage of self-esteem by any means. I considered myself an intelligent, attractive, confident chick. Now, I wouldn’t go as far as saying I was perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but I knew how to highlight my strengths and downplay my weaknesses. Heavy makeup, spandex, and the color yellow were always a hell no. Long hair, red lips, and a pair of well-fitting jeans that accentuated my ass were always a hell yes.

My confusion over Kline asking me out wasn’t about my attractiveness.

I’d never had a man like him on my radar.

We were total opposites.

He had a chauffeur. I took the subway. He wore Armani. I shopped at vintage, secondhand shops. He had enough money to invest in things like hedge funds and annuities. I had a fifty-dollar bond from 1996 that my grandmother had gifted me on my birthday. Fingers crossed that baby would gain another two dollars and twenty-five cents this year.

My life and his life were pretty much worlds apart.

Or was Cassie right? Was I judging Kline Brooks by the fact that he had more money than God? Or was I just freaked out over the fact that my boss, the CEO of Brooks Media, had asked me out?

My dating experiences hadn’t been the best. They generally ended on epically bad notes. So, what would happen if Kline and I dated a few times and the shitstorm that was my overall luck with men took over?

Fuck.

I had to do something to take my mind off things. It was time to take things into my own hands. Literally. There was no sleep aid better than a climax-induced coma. Just one shot from the orgasm bottle and I'd be out like a light, racing thoughts and restless nights be gone.

Grabbing my vibrator, I lay back, spread wide, and pictured Chris Hemsworth in all of his Thor glory. I'd been on a recent Avengers kick—Captain America, Thor...hell, even Black Widow when I was feeling frisky. Scarlett Johansson in that black leather suit could make a lot of women switch-hit.

A few minutes into my fingerbating session, Thor's hammer was hard and ready. Things were feeling good. Real fucking good. Muscles were tight, fingers were moving at the perfect pace, and Amen for my vibrator, the glorious little clit tickler that he was. I was on the brink, white spots dotting my vision, and then, Thor and his hammer cock slowly morphed into someone else. Someone I had never fantasized about before.

Kline.

He was hovering over me, his hot, naked body mere inches from mine. That body—good God, that body. Lean, tight, toned muscles. So many fucking muscles. Washboard abs and that perfect V pointing right down to his...um...*yeah...Big-dicked Brooks.*

Hot damn, Cassie was right.

He had the kind of cock you could make a five-second GIF out of and never get tired of watching it on loop. I was convinced, somewhere down the line, Kline's dick had a great-great-great-great grandfather dick, and it was that exact shaft that had inspired some woman to pull down a guy's pants and say, "Oh yes, I need to suck on that." This was a history-making, Nobel Prize award-winning cock. The sole reason the blow job was an actual thing.

"I can't wait to taste you," he whispered, sliding my panties down my legs.

Yes. Hell. Yes. Taste me.

“God, you’re fucking beautiful.” He licked across my stomach.

“Your cock is beautiful,” I said.

He kneeled between my legs. “Tell me how bad you want my cock, Georgia.” Blue eyes scorched my skin as he stroked that perfect dick.

“Bad. So bad,” I begged.

“Be patient, sweetheart.” He smirked. “I can’t wait to fuck you, but right now, I need your taste on my tongue.”

Kline gripped my thighs, spreading me wide, while his head was between my legs doing everything a guy should know how to do with his tongue.

“Oh, fuck,” I moaned, gripping his hair and following the movements of his mouth with my hips.

“Come for me, Georgia,” he demanded.

And like a goddamn romance novel cliché, I came on command...*on my boss’s face.*

I was panting. Drained. Sated. My muscles were lax, skin peppered with a sheen of sweat. I had thoroughly worked myself over. When I opened my eyes, I realized I had just gone to a place I could never come back from.

Kline Brooks had just been inaugurated into my spank bank rotation.

And he’d given me the best orgasm I’d had in a long fucking time.

Chapter Eight

Kline

“So the Sure Romance contract went through as expected. Martin folded like a fitted sheet at the threat of...” Georgia recited as if rehearsed, her attention drifting from the lights overhead to the paperweight on my desk, out the window, and back again.

She’d been trying her damndest not to look at me since she’d knocked on the door of my office two minutes ago.

“Wait,” I interrupted, startling her enough that her eyes found my face. “Aren’t fitted sheets hard to fold?” I kicked one corner of my mouth up in a grin, adding, “Mine sure as hell are. Is there some secret I’m missing out on?”

Bewilderment forced her eyebrows together and her plump bottom lip out.

I could see the thoughts race through her eyes one after the other, wondering what we were talking about and why we were talking about it at the same time she questioned the likelihood that *I* was the one who actually folded my sheets, rather than a maid, a butler, or several servants, perhaps.

Once she realized I was teasing her, the lines of her face transformed from confused to punishing.

“Sorry,” I apologized, easing from a grin into a full-blown smile. “Continue.”

“Right.” She huffed adorably. “As I was saying, Martin...”

Her words muffled into a simple rhythm of soothing sounds as my concentration transferred to my thoughts.

Two years of listening to Georgia Cummings talk about product placement and commercial budgets didn’t hold a candle to one fucking day of actually talking to her. The

flustered, less professional, overtly female version one simple encounter had turned her into, that is.

She was still poised, as always, knowledgeable, and completely on top of her tasks and obligations. But her looks lingered longer—when she forgot to think about being awkward—and her humor lived at the surface, just at the tip of her quick-witted tongue, instead of buried under layers of propriety and boss-employee relations.

Put simply, I looked different to her, and, with her hair swept up off of the smooth, slim column of her neck and her eyes bright with mischief, she sure as fuck looked different to me.

“Mr. Brooks!” she called, fiery and peeved that I wasn’t listening to her with full attention.

“Kline,” I corrected, thinking about the way she’d sounded singing about her pussy and the faces I thought she’d make while I finger-fucked it, and then waited for her to agree with popped brows.

“Fine,” she consented. “*Kline.*”

God, I needed to hear her say that while she came.

I smiled again and fought the urge to adjust my tightening pants under my desk.

“Good.”

She didn’t seem nearly as amused. I forced my mind to the mildly professional side of its coin when she crossed her arms over her chest and tapped a toe on the tile. After years of keeping every exchange with employees above board, I’d never felt such a blatant need for betrayal by my eyes. They wanted to be bad. They wanted to be *really* bad. And my stupid cockblock of a brain wouldn’t let them.

“Look, I trust you.” Her feathers unruffled slightly. “Do I want to know that the deal went through? Absolutely. Do I need to know the details and question your every move? Not so much.”

She unwound her arms from her chest.

“In fact, I’m headed to L.A. tonight, and I need someone to hold down the fort. Can you handle it if I tell everyone to report to you?”

Her spine straightened involuntarily, outrage at having to be asked tensing all of the muscles around it. “Of course I can.”

I studiously ignored her irritation.

“I’m not expecting you to solve every issue that comes your way. Just keep the ship afloat and the piratelike crew members from setting her ablaze.”

“Done.”

She traced a circle on the front edge of my desk, and I could practically *see* her effort to be casual. “So you’re, uh—”

She tucked an imaginary strand of hair behind her ear. Not a single one had been out of place.

“You’re headed to L.A., huh?”

I bit my lip in victory. She was asking because she wanted to know. She *wanted* to go out with me, she just hadn’t accepted it yet.

“Yep.”

“Oh...okay. So, um—”

“Quick trip,” I said, letting her off the hook. “Just a couple of investor meetings and then right back to the East Coast. I’ll be back in plenty of time for Friday night.”

“That’s cool,” she muttered, clasping her hands together like she didn’t know what to do with them.

I had a few ideas, but most of them came from the brain downstairs. And I didn’t think she’d be extremely welcoming of them at this stage of the game.

“Georgia?”

Her attention jumped from the floor straight to my gaze. The vivid depths of her eyes’ blue, swirling with a heady mix of excitement and uncertainty, nearly knocked the wind out of me.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Looking forward to it?”

“Friday night, with you.” Her clasped hands turned white with pressure, and a blush colored the apples of her cheeks. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

Her face softened briefly, overwhelmed by a powerful look of longing. Fifteen seconds later, when determination replaced it, her sweet jaw flexing under the pressure, I wasn’t sure it had ever existed.

In contrast to the harsh hue of her features, her voice was nothing more than a whisper. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

I considered her question carefully instead of firing out some bullshit answer. I knew the reason she was asking, and it wasn’t trivial. I was her *boss*, and for all she knew, I had plans to fuck and forget. There were no guarantees that anything would really bloom between us, and we’d both feel the fallout. She was an asset to my company, and I signed her checks. Everyone would argue she had more to lose, but I wasn’t as sure.

Cynthia in HR would ride my ass for a decision like this—because, regardless of the absence of an actual no-fraternization policy, interoffice romance was *always* messy, especially when one of those employees was the boss. She knew it as well as I did, and I might have even known it better. But as I sat there looking at Georgia’s face, my big fucking desk in between us, the only thing I could think about was being closer, standing next to her, escorting her as I walked with a hand at the perfect swoop of her lower back—*smelling the sweet curve of her neck and nibbling it with my teeth.*

Maybe I was blind, but as far as I could see, it was the best goddamn idea I’d ever had.

Her gaze followed me as I stood up and pushed my chair back, circling the desk and settling my hips into it a mere foot in front of her. She wanted to move back, I could see it, but she

held her ground anyway, ready to listen to whatever I had to say.

I crossed my feet at the ankles and clasped my hands together in front of my thighs.

“I get it.”

Her bottom lip rocked as she chewed at the inside of it. My vision locked on to the movement like a heat-seeking missile. With effort, I forced my eyes back to hers.

“I get why you’re nervous, and I get the kinds of things a leap of faith could cost you. All I can promise is that I won’t be a prick.”

Surprised eyebrows ate up half of the distance to her hairline.

“Whatever happens between me and you, Kline and Georgia, is a completely separate entity from what happens under the umbrella of Brooks Media between Mr. Brooks and his Director of Marketing. My employee is efficient, well liked, and boasts a seasoned track record of success. Mr. Brooks has seen it, paid attention to it, and appreciated it for a while now. But Kline...” I laughed. “Well, that guy’s been an idiot.”

A small hiccuplike laugh bubbled up her throat and right out of her mouth before she could stop it.

“Because Georgia Cummings is a beautiful, smart, intriguing woman, and until yesterday, he hadn’t seen her at all.”

“Good God,” she muttered to herself.

I smiled wholeheartedly, with nothing held back, and felt my heart jump in my chest when her eyes flared like she noticed.

“Kline *is* like Mr. Brooks in some ways, though. He *hates* to be stupid. And now that he knows, he’s not too keen to be stupid ever fucking again.”

She swung toward me on instinct, the movement excruciatingly slow and too fast to consider all at once. I grabbed her hips, squeezing them too hard, I knew, but I couldn’t help it. The thought of leaving my mark on her skin had my hands clenching again.

Heat settled in my palms and shot straight to my crotch as I caught a whiff of all that was her. A mysterious mix of fruit and flowers, her scent stabbed me right in the fucking chest like some kind of olfactory voodoo doll.

I slid my hand up her side with little finesse before cresting her shoulder and forcing it into the tresses of her bright red hair at the back of her head.

Her eyes were open and searching and a whole lot frightened, but her lips moved toward mine with purpose. My fingertips flexed in her hair of their own accord, and a cross between a whimper and a moan caught right at the top of her throat.

“*Kline*,” she whispered emphatically. The puff of her hot breath on my lips was enough to push me right over the goddamn edge.

“Knock knock,” Leslie called *as* she was pushing open the door.

The two of us shot apart like Leslie’s arrival was a hell of a skeet shooter and we were the clay pigeon. At the sudden release of so much sexual tension, I would have sworn shattered pieces of me littered the room.

My heart beat at double its normal speed, and Georgia’s cheeks were the color of cherry Kool-Aid. Though, given the fact that *Kline* had been milliseconds away from eating *Georgia* alive, I’d say *Mr. Brooks*’ and *Ms. Cummings*’ level of faux composure was impressive.

“What do you need, Leslie?” I asked, straining to make my voice sound even, but she was clueless. Most of her attention focused inward, on herself, rather than the things going on around her. I swore it was the first and only time in my life I’d be thankful for that kind of woman.

Chapter Nine

Georgia

It had been one of those days where staying in bed and calling in sick would have been a better option than actually participating in life. Kline Brooks left his new intern, Leslie, under my watchful eye while he flew out to L.A. for the day to schmooze investors and impress potential advertising clients for TapNext.

I was certain she had been sent straight from Hell. The devil might as well have wrapped a big red bow around her neck and attached a note.

Dear Georgie,

Have fun with this one.

Love,

Satan

I'd seen more of her tits today than I had of my own in the past month. Either she had a severe body temperature control issue or she didn't wear a bra. I didn't care who was setting the dress code policy; nipples would never be considered business casual.

Why Kline had hired her was a goddamn mystery at this point. And I hadn't even brought up her predilection for selfies. Her social media was busier than a Las Vegas escort during March Madness. Which I guess was fine—if only she'd put the same amount of work into her actual job.

Finally at home, I settled into my favorite pastime—sweatpants, a bag of sour cream and cheddar potato chips, and a DVR'd episode of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. Despite the ridiculousness that this family had made a fortune off reality television, I still found myself recording every damn episode. It was a true mind-suck of valuable time and brain cells, but I couldn't deny my consistent guilty

indulgence. What could I say? I was a *true* American—enjoying every trashy reality show produced for my viewing pleasure and shit-talking them the next day.

Kim had just declared that women wearing the wrong foundation color is, like, the worst thing on the planet when my phone rang.

Incoming Call Kline Brooks

What in God's name does he need now? He should've been on a plane headed home from L.A. His absence was the exact reason why I would have five pounds worth of potato chips on my hips and ass tomorrow morning. Two days ago, I would have told you he'd put stars in my eyes with swoony almost kisses and confidence in my ability. Now, after a visit to the depths of incompetency hell, the blush on my feelings had more than worn off.

That cocky, demanding bastard damn well knew what he had been doing when he'd asked me if I could handle being in charge.

After five rings' worth of muttered curses, I decided to put him out of his misery. "Good evening, Mr. Brooks. What *else* can I assist you with today?"

His hearty chuckle filled my ears. "I thought we were past the Mr. Brooks bullshit?"

"Yeah, not after today we're not."

"Rough day at work?"

Rough day? Was he serious? I was still trying to scrub my brain free of the moronic comments Leslie had made all day. "Your new intern is a gem. Quite the asset to the company, I might say. It's amazing how many selfies one woman can take in a fifteen-minute stretch, and yet, she can't seem to make a single photocopy in the same amount of time."

"I know she's got some time management issues, but she's a good kid, Georgie." There was a smile in his voice.

"After today, I honestly have no idea how you've gotten anything done for the past two weeks." I strived to be the type

of woman who didn't judge other women by their brainpower, but Leslie made the Kardashians look intelligent.

"Are you concerned about my workload, sweetheart?"

Sweetheart? I hated that something as simple as Kline calling me sweetheart made my heart flip-flop inside of my chest. But it did. *Stupid heart.* The damn thing didn't have a clue. I cleared my throat, ignoring my body's reaction to his sweet sentiments. "Of course not. Why would I be concerned when *you're* the one who hired her? Plus, *you're* the one who continues to let *your* intern make a mockery of her job responsibilities."

"Is now the right time to tell you Leslie is a friend of the family? Her dad asked for a favor and I obliged. Plus, I've got Dean keeping an eye on her."

"Oh, so you're making Dean do your dirty work. I see how it is. That explains his bitchy mood today. I was worried Prada went out of business."

Kline laughed.

Good God, that laugh. It was crazy hot and had my body reacting in all sorts of dirty ways. "I'm kind of sad you didn't have Leslie reporting to Meryl."

"Meryl would have had my balls," he teased. "I've seen that woman make grown men cry. Hell, I've had to wipe a few phantom tears of my own. Plus, you asked for it."

I was two seconds away from giving him a telepathic beatdown when his voice turned warm and soft like honey. "Thanks for dealing with Leslie. I really appreciate it."

Did he just thank me? I pinched my arm just to make sure I wasn't dreaming. "Shit, that hurt." I winced.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Just...stubbed my toe," I tossed out. "Sooooo...did you just call to see how truly awful my day was? Or is there something you actually need?"

"For starters, I wanted to make sure we're still on for tomorrow night."

I sighed. “Even though you threw me under the bus and have expressed little to no remorse, I’ll be there. But it has nothing to do with you and everything to do with the delicious ten-course meal I know will occur.”

“Duly noted.” He laughed. “If their food isn’t to your standard, I’ll make it up to you. Dinner anywhere. Your choice.”

“That’s easy. BLT Prime.”

“The steakhouse in Gramercy Park?”

“You betcha.”

“Swanky digs.” A low whistle left his lips. “Consider it a deal. I’ll take you there Saturday night.”

“Slow your roll, buddy. I haven’t agreed to a second date yet.”

“Yet,” he retorted with a flirtatious tone. “Haven’t agreed *yet*. And if it makes you feel better, you can think of it as more of a deal than a date. An *I’m sorry for leaving you with Leslie* kind of thing.”

When had the tables turned? This wasn’t the Kline Brooks I had grown accustomed to. He was the quiet, reserved, yet frequently demanding boss who made a point to keep me on my toes. Our interactions consisted of cursory emails and business meetings to assess my current game plan for Brooks Media’s promotions strategy.

This playful, charismatic man requesting my presence at dinner dates and effortlessly turning me on in his office was a complete stranger. I couldn’t deny my enjoyment out of seeing this side of him, but dear God, it was completely knocking me off my game. I felt like a fish out of water, floundering for an equally charming response.

And seriously, when had I started wanting to appear enchanting to the enigmatic Kline Brooks?

I cleared my throat. “Mr. Brooks, w-why did you call me?”

“Ms. Cummings, why are we being so formal tonight? I thought we got past the formality bullshit.”

He was probably right. I'd say it happened around the time he pulled my hips into an impressively unprofessional erection in his office two days ago.

“Okay, *Kline*,” I agreed with a mouthful of sass. I didn’t really want him referring to me by my middle school joke of a last name anyway. “If you’re not calling to chat about work, why are you calling me?”

“I actually need a favor. Are you busy?”

“No, not really. I’m just sitting here...” I paused, reaching for the remote and turning down the volume. Even though we were past “formalities,” my boss didn’t need to know about my reality show obsession. “Just sitting here reading through emails.”

He chuckled into the phone. “I’m sure those emails can wait until tomorrow. I’m in a bit of a bind. Can you turn on ESPN?”

“ESPN?”

“The Western University-New York State game is on. Thatch and I can’t get the fucker to stream on the plane. I *need* to know what’s happening.”

Thatcher Kelly, the ever-mysterious financial consultant of Brooks Media. He worked as a contractor, providing expertise for several companies, or so I’d heard, but no big money decision within Brooks Media happened without him. I’d heard his husky voice and boisterous personality on several conference calls. Even received emails with his signature sarcasm. But I’d never met the man. Hell, I’d yet to successfully locate an actual photo of him. All of his social media accounts were private and most had some random sports-related profile picture.

“This is life or death here, Georgia,” Kline interrupted my thoughts. “Thatch is a big New York State fan, and I’ve got five on the fact that his Tigers are no match for the Mustangs.”

I scrunched my nose up. “So...what exactly do you need me to do?”

“I need you to give me the play-by-play for the next twenty minutes until we land.”

“Isn’t there anyone else you can bug? I’m probably not the best person for the job.” The last football game I’d watched had been the Super Bowl where Janet Jackson’s nipple had made its television debut, and I could honestly have told you more about her areola than the game. I literally knew zilch about sports, especially football.

“Please, Georgia.” He rasped his words, confusing me by making me think about sex. “I’m begging you.”

I held in my answer until I knew I wouldn’t stutter. “You owe me. Big time.”

“Anything you want, sweetheart.”

The promise of his double meaning oozed from his voice, but I ignored him, grabbed the remote, and switched the channel. “Okay, it’s on.”

Chapter Ten

Kline

Thatch waved his arms manically, trying to get an update. Our personal flight attendant flashed him a look of distaste, but with one quick wink, her contempt turned into consideration. I didn't have much to my name that said *billionaire*, but the private plane sure did. With the amount that I traveled and the necessary fluctuation in timing, it was just easier.

When his attention came back to me, I flipped him off, putting Georgia on speaker. "What's the score? How much time is left? Who has the ball?" I rambled, desperate to know if Western University was pulling through. Fucking Thatch wouldn't let me live it down if New York State won this thing. It was a nothing game—early season, Thursday night, and unquestionably obscure teams. But Thatch could turn anything into a competition, and he'd created this rivalry out of thin air years ago.

She gave us the rundown in succinct, inaccurate terms, but I got the gist of it.

Fourth quarter. Tigers were winning.

I cursed.

Thatch shouted, "Victory is mine!"

I'd honestly never seen a guy that big Riverdance.

"All of this for five measly bucks?" Georgia asked.

Thatch's loud, boisterous laugh echoed inside the cabin of the plane.

"No, not five *dollars*. A little more than that..."

"Five hundred?" Her voice was incredulous. I pictured Georgia's nose scrunching up in that adorable way of hers.

"Actually..." I cleared my throat. "Five grand."

“Five thousand dollars?” she shouted.

Internally, I cringed. Hell, externally, I cringed.

I probably sounded like a pretentious asshat. Betting exorbitant amounts of money on sports was not my usual M.O. “It’s Thatch’s fault. He won’t take no for an answer and never bets anything less than a grand. He could be the poster child for gambling addicts everywhere. His only redeeming quality is that he actually knows how to invest his profits.”

Thatch’s smile mocked me. He knew what I was doing, exaggerating his faults to help minimize my own.

“Whatever you say, Mr. Moneybags.”

Yeah, she definitely thought I was an ostentatious dick.

“Georgia girl, give me an update. What’s going on?” Thatch schmoozed, laying it on thick just to get a rise out of me.

“Uh...” she mumbled, trailing off for a brief second. “Boobear just tackled somebody.”

“Boobear? Who the fuck is Boobear?” Thatch mouthed in my direction.

I shrugged. “Who just got a tackle?”

“Boobear. He plays on the orange team,” she repeated as though it made sense. “Oh no, I think Boobear is hurt.”

It took some serious thinking, but I finally decoded the mystery. “Do you mean *Boudmare*?”

“Yeah, that’s him. His nickname is Boobear.”

“The commentators are calling him Boobear?” I asked, fighting a smile.

“No, I nicknamed him Boobear. He looks like a giant teddy bear. He’s so cute!”

“Oh, dear God,” Thatch groaned.

“Oh, thank goodness. Boobear is back up and on his feet. They’re lining up again. White team has the ball. The big guy in the middle chucked it to the thrower guy. He threw the

ball... really far..." She trailed off, and then the line went silent.

"Georgia?"

Nothing.

"Georgia!" I strived to grab her attention.

"What?" she snapped.

"The ball was thrown...*where?* What happened?"

"Coca-Cola threw it a bunch of yards to Stuart Little. They're lining up again near the touchdown box."

Coca-Cola? Stuart Little? Who in the hell was she talking about?

"Who is she talking about?" Thatch mouthed, arms wide in frustration. "I fucking knew we should've called Wes," he whispered, pacing the aisle.

"Help me out here," I said into the phone. "Who is Coca-Cola?"

"The quarterback on the white team."

"You mean Cokel?"

"Yeah, that's him."

"Is she fucking nicknaming the players?" Thatch boomed in disgrace.

"Uh-huh," she responded over what sounded like a mouthful of chips, not an ounce of shame in her tone.

I couldn't even get pissed at her. She was too fucking adorable. I glanced over at Thatch. He was wearing a figurative hole in the aisle carpet and practically pulling his hair out. I grinned. Even though I hadn't a clue what was happening in the game, watching Thatch's upset come to a crescendo was worth it.

"Touchdown!" she whooped. "Coca-Cola to Howie Mandel!"

Translation: Cokel to R.J. Howard.

"Fuck yes!" I cheered.

“Son of a bitch!” Thatch shouted.

“Go Wild Horses!” Georgia put in.

I chuckled. “That’s right, sweetheart. The Mustangs are going to pounce on Thatch’s pussy Tigers.”

While my best friend was cursing up a storm, Georgia commentated the game for the rest of our flight. She added ridiculous nicknames for every player, called running backs’ stutter steps *Icky Shuffle* steps, and gave her overall opinions on which player looked the most cuddly (Boobear, of course), the meanest, the nicest, etc. It was an endless list and I damn near forgot there was five grand and a long-standing rivalry between Thatch and me on the line.

Once we landed and were sitting with beers in our hands, watching the final five minutes of the game in the airport bar, I still kept Georgia in my ear.

I couldn’t help myself. This woman whom I’d seen handle an entire boardroom full of cocky sons of bitches without batting an eye was crazy adorable. She was tough as nails and hotter than sin. And Christ, she was hilarious. I wanted more of her. A lot fucking more.

“Sorry your flight got delayed on the runway, but I’m glad you guys got home safely.”

“Me too,” I replied in half-truths, taking a swig of beer. I wasn’t even remotely upset about the extra time I’d spent talking to her. “So, is it safe to say that Georgia Cummings is now a Western University fan?”

“Uh-huh.” She giggled. “They kick ass.”

“Next year, you’ll have to come to a game with me. It’s insane.”

“Kline Brooks, are you still trying to plan a second date before we even go on a first?” she teased.

I laughed. “You’ll find I’m a determined kind of guy.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” She yawned. “Well, that’s my signal to get my tired ass in bed. I guess I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Good night, Georgia girl,” I said, stealing Thatch’s endearment.

“Night,” she whispered, ending the call.

I set my phone on the bar and downed the rest of my beer. “Ready to hit it?” I asked Thatch, tossing money down on the bar.

He just shook his head, sighing heavily. “Glad you got time for precious pillow talk during the *fucking game*.”

I patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. I think Boobear will be healthy and ready to play next season.”

“Fucking Boobear.” He chuckled with another shake of his head. “Even I can’t deny that’s hilarious.”

Chapter Eleven

Georgia

It was Friday—the big date night with my boss—and I was sitting on the subway, heading home from work a little early. Nerves were starting to get the best of me. My brain ran through a thousand possible scenarios of how the charity event with Kline would go. Most of them were awkward and ended with me doing something outrageous. It was my M.O. I had a serious propensity for word vomit. A certified foot-in-mouth expert.

I needed someone to talk me off the proverbial ledge or else I'd end up faking the flu and backing out last minute.

Cassie was a no-go. She had just boarded a flight to Seattle to photograph an up-and-coming football star who'd signed with the Seahawks. My beautiful, spunky best friend had made a name for herself as a freelance photographer. Her photos had graced the pages of *The Times*, *Cosmopolitan*, and even ESPN. It seemed her lens had a knack for hot men flexing their muscles. Shocker, huh?

My mother was a hell-no. Ever the sex therapist at heart, she'd probably offer her sage advice of rubbing one out pre-date to stave off nerves.

My finger hovering over the TapNext icon, I finally said, "Screw it." Maybe **BAD_Ruck** could make me feel better about this situation. We'd been chatting back and forth over the past few days, and despite the absurdity of our introduction to one another, I was really starting to like the guy. He was funny, laid-back, and could give good flirt. I spent a crazy amount of my day wondering what he was like in person. Did he really look like the guy in his profile? What did he do for a living? Where did he live in New York?

We hadn't shared any intimate details of our personal lives, a la *You've Got Mail*, which I preferred at the present time. We

weren't living in the dial-up internet era of Kathleen Kelly, and it was a different world. For me, all of her dangers were magnified by a thousand—and she was worried Tom Hanks was a serial killer! These days, there was a show called *Catfish*. It seemed like people got off on it now more than ever. And, although Ruck was quite charming in our online conversations, I wasn't convinced he wasn't a complete weirdo in real life.

Funny how that didn't stop me from messaging him.

TAPRoseNEXT (2:15PM): Ruck? Come in, Ruck? I need someone to talk me off the ledge.

BAD_Ruck (2:16PM): We're talking proverbial ledge, right?

TAPRoseNEXT (2:16PM): Yes. Don't worry, I'm not literally standing on the ledge of a skyscraper.

BAD_Ruck (2:16PM): That's good news. So, tell me, why are we flirting with proverbial death?

TAPRoseNEXT (2:17PM): I've got a date tonight. I'm nervous. And freaking out. Big time.

BAD_Ruck (2:17PM): And here I thought I was the only man in your life. You wound me, Rose.

TAPRoseNEXT (2:18PM): Get over yourself. I would lay money on the fact that Mr. Charming himself has a date tonight too.

BAD_Ruck (2:18PM): Maybe.

TAPRoseNEXT (2:19PM): My point exactly. Now, help me out here.

BAD_Ruck (2:19PM): Okay. Let's start with the obvious. Why are you nervous?

Why was I nervous? That was the big question. I stared across the aisle, watching an older woman working on a crossword. The tip of her pen ran across the empty blocks as she tried to think of a four-letter word for 15A. “_____ comes trouble!”

Here comes trouble. Apt phrase for my present state. My mind had been shouting this from the second I had agreed to a date with Kline.

God, I was definitely freaking out over a bunch of things, and one thing, in particular, stood out the most.

TAPRoseNEXT (2:20PM): For one, I work with him. If things end up badly, I'm worried it could cost me my job.

BAD_Ruck (2:20PM): Ah, the old coworker conundrum. Did he ask you out? Or did you ask him out? And is it forbidden in your employee contract?

TAPRoseNEXT (2:21PM): He asked me. And I have no earthly clue. Was that something I was supposed to actually read?

BAD_Ruck (2:21PM): Okay. Different tactic. Does he normally date women he works with?

TAPRoseNEXT (2:22PM): No, never. Either that or he's a super sleuth about it. I'm not personally the office gossip, but I know someone with an ear to the ground.

BAD_Ruck (2:23PM): If he asked you out, and you've never seen him date any of your colleagues, he's probably thought this through. How long have you worked with him?

TAPRoseNEXT (2:23PM): A couple of years.

BAD_Ruck (2:24PM): And in that time, has he ever seemed like the kind of man who lets his personal life affect business?

TAPRoseNEXT (2:25PM): Actually, no. Picture of professional. Business always comes first with him.

BAD_Ruck (2:25PM): Then what's different now?

TAPRoseNEXT (2:26PM): I honestly don't know.

BAD_Ruck (2:26PM): Smart money says it's you, Rose.

He had a point. Kline Brooks had never given me any reason to doubt the decisions he made. He wasn't a player. He didn't

make a show out of fucking anything in a short skirt and pair of heels that sashayed around the office.

Leslie was a perfect example. The girl was gorgeous and made a job out of flaunting her curves for the world to see. And I'd yet to see Kline act anything but annoyed with her—no salacious glances or devilish intents flashing across his eyes. He was ever the professional when his new intern was around. Most days, he was doing everything he could to push her off on someone else.

But my dating Kline equaled us getting to know each other on a more personal level. If one date turned into more, then eventually, he would know *other* things about me. Things I wouldn't normally want my boss to know.

TAPRoseNEXT (2:27PM): Can I be frank with you?

BAD_Ruck (2:28PM): I guess. I'm surprisingly partial to Rose.

TAPRoseNEXT (2:28PM): I said frank, not Frank, Ruck.

BAD_Ruck (2:29PM): Have you ever not been frank with me?

I laughed, startling the pen out of the crossword woman's hands.

"Sorry." I cringed, leaning forward and picking it up from the aisle.

"No worries, honey." She took the pen from my outstretched hand. "Two words for puppy amuser?" she asked, grinning.

"Chew toy," I answered.

"Aha! You're right! Thank you!" And that was that. She dove right back into her crossword, tuning the rest of the world out.

I replayed past convos with Ruck in my head. I tended to be pretty open and honest with him, maybe a bit too much. The other night I had kept him up until one in the morning discussing why most men thought anal sex was a good idea.

He'd ended the conversation with, "I'm not going to speak on behalf of all men, because let's face it, there are some real

morons in my gender. But for me, when I really want a woman, I want to claim every part of her.”

See what I mean? He gives damn good convo.

That response made me instantly jealous of the woman Ruck had set his sights on. Even I couldn't ignore the sexiness of Ruck going caveman and wanting to claim every part of her, whoever she was. *Lucky bitch.*

TAPRoseNEXT (2:30PM): There's another reason I'm nervous.

BAD_Ruck (2:31PM): Okay...

BAD_Ruck (2:32PM): Are you going to freely give this reason or is this an invitation to pry?

TAPRoseNEXT (2:33PM): Ugh...

BAD_Ruck (2:34PM): Do you have a foot fetish you're trying to hide?

TAPRoseNEXT (2:34PM): No. I don't even like my own feet, much less anyone else's.

BAD_Ruck (2:35PM): An ex-boyfriend's name tattooed across your lower back?

TAPRoseNEXT (2:35PM): I do not have a tramp stamp!

BAD_Ruck (2:36PM): Hairy back moles?

TAPRoseNEXT (2:36PM): I'm a lady, Ruck. I'm smooth everywhere.

BAD_Ruck (2:37PM): Damn, Rose. Stop talking dirty to me. We're trying to talk you off the ledge, remember? Not push me out onto it.

TAPRoseNEXT (2:40PM): I'm a virgin.

BAD_Ruck (2:41PM): An anal virgin?

TAPRoseNEXT (2:42PM): No. A certified, my-pussy-has-never-been-penetrated virgin.

BAD_Ruck (2:44PM): Jesus.

TAPRoseNEXT (2:45PM): That's sweet, but we don't have time to pray right now.

For what seemed like an hour, I watched the text box bubbles move as he gathered a response.

BAD_Ruck (2:48PM): This scenario deserves a prayer. Hell, it deserves an airplane banner with the words, "Get your shit together, men, because dreams can come true. There are still gorgeous, sexy, intelligent women out there who are saving themselves for the right guy." Christ, I think you might be the last twenty-something virgin in New York.

The last twenty-something virgin in NYC? *Gah*. That did *not* make me feel better. That made me feel a hell of a lot worse. I sounded pathetic.

TAPRoseNEXT (2:50PM): That's one crazy long banner. And thanks for the vote of confidence. I feel even worse about it now. I'm not a total prude, by the way. I've been with men. I know what a penis feels like in my mouth. I've just yet to find the right penis I deem worthy of sex.

BAD_Ruck (2:51PM): You're killing me right now. Do you even realize how rare you are, Rose?

Now, I do. I was the last twenty-something virgin in New York! I might as well have offered up my vagina to the Museum of Natural History. Surely, it would be shown in the fossils display. I could already picture it, right beside Tyrannosaurus Rex's teeth.

The Last Virginal Vagina in New York.

Georgia Cummings 1990-2080

Died happily in her Chelsea apartment, surrounded by all sixteen of her tabby cats.

TAPRoseNEXT (2:53PM): Yeah, I'm the last single virgin in NYC. I might as well start stocking up on cat food because my future is looking very glum at the moment.

BAD_Ruck (2:54PM): Rose. Listen to me. This is not a bad thing. You're funny, intelligent, and obviously beautiful.

And you're confident enough to know what you want and how you want it. Your confidence and self-respect are sexy as hell.

TAPRoseNEXT (2:54PM): Well, when you put it that way, I sound really awesome.

BAD_Ruck (2:55PM): Because you are. So, tell me why your sexual history is even factoring as a problem in your mind?

TAPRoseNEXT (2:57PM): My experiences in telling a guy I'm a virgin have never ended well.

The reactions I received were not usually great. I either became a challenge, where getting into my pants became their sole purpose in life, or treated like some pariah, as if my virginity was a problem that needed a solution. Sometimes, I wondered if it would be easier telling a guy I had crabs.

BAD_Ruck (2:58PM): I can imagine. Most of us are just grunting cavemen.

TAPRoseNEXT (2:59PM): Exactly. And I can't help but wonder what would happen if I told this guy I'm a virgin. He has potential. He could end up being more than just one date. I'm just worried if I tell him, I'll end up being a challenge instead of something more.

Wow. Even I was surprised by that response. Did Kline Brooks really have the potential to be something more?

BAD_Ruck (3:01PM): If he's worth your time, he won't see you as a challenge. Of course, he's going to be silently thanking God you're willing to give him the time of day, but he won't make a one-eighty and just focus on trying to get in your pants. And from what you've told me, he doesn't seem half bad. He apparently knows how to separate his personal life from business. And he doesn't have a reputation of screwing all of the women in your office. This isn't the New York norm.

Everything he said was true. Kline's track record was a good one. He wasn't plastered all over Page Six with a different woman on his arm. He wasn't known as some playboy. He

was just Kline—handsome, attractive, and all-business Kline Brooks. Which only made me more curious what he was like outside of the office.

TAPRoseNEXT (3:04PM): So, let's just act like you're him for a second. When would you want the whole "I'm a virgin" bomb to be dropped?

BAD_Ruck (3:05PM): Before it got to the point where our clothes are off and I'm sliding a condom on.

TAPRoseNEXT (3:05PM): LOL. Obviously.

BAD_Ruck (3:07PM): If you're asking me when to bring it up...I don't really have an answer for you. It should come up organically. You know how dates go. Eventually, the whole sex topic does come up. Your being a virgin isn't a fucking crime, so don't feel like you have to confess it the second the date starts.

TAPRoseNEXT (3:07PM): Good point.

BAD_Ruck (3:08PM): Feel better?

TAPRoseNEXT (3:08PM): Consider me officially off the ledge.

BAD_Ruck (3:09PM): Fantastic. Good luck tonight.

TAPRoseNEXT (3:10PM): Thanks, Ruck. Enjoy your date with whomever the lucky woman may be.

BAD_Ruck (3:11PM): Dirty talk and a compliment in one convo? You're too good to me. And listen...

TAPRoseNEXT (3:12PM): LOL. Yeah?

BAD_Ruck (3:12PM): If all this advice turns out to be shit, I might be able to help you out with the cat acquirement. I know a guy.

TAPRoseNEXT (3:13PM): And that's my cue to officially end this convo. Bye, Ruck.

BAD_Ruck (3:12PM): Bye, Rose.

I hopped off the subway way uptown, and instead of heading to my apartment, my legs strode for the one place that always

helped take my mind off things. It was a quarter after three. I had four hours to get my hair done, get ready, and meet Kline at the event.

If there was one thing I was good at, it was choosing a kick-ass hair color to suit my mood.

And if there was one thing Betty, my hair stylist, was good at, it was fitting me in last minute. She was a genius when it came to color and cut. If I told her blonde, she'd find the perfect shade to match my skin tone and have me trimmed, dyed, and out the door within two hours.

Hmm... From red to blonde? That might be the best idea I've had all day.

Chapter Twelve

Kline

“Nervous.” I shook my head. “I can’t believe I’m fucking nervous.”

I guess Walter *was* having an effect on my life like my mother had predicted. Although, I highly doubted me talking to myself was what she’d had in mind.

That was what this was, though. It had to be. The illusion of someone being there, *listening*, and fooling me into saying all of my rambling thoughts out loud rather than reciting them internally.

Long and unkempt, his whiskers flowed freely from beneath his nose, and in keeping with his old man status, stuck out haphazardly from his kitty eyebrows. His white-rimmed eyes rooted me to the spot with their contempt, and the subtle stripes in his fur did nothing to soften his appearance.

“This is your fault,” I told him, his wolflike ears mocking me with every word.

One uninterested lick of his lips is all he gave me in return.

“What? Nothing to say? No support?”

He licked his paw and wiped his face before turning abruptly and sauntering out of the room, holding his tail pointedly straight in the cat version of a middle finger salute.

“Thanks for nothing, asshole,” I shouted after him.

Jesus.

I shook my head as I stepped in front of the mirror to adjust my tie. This was a whole new level of low. Not only was I talking to the fucking cat; I was *yelling* at him.

Tonight had my stomach on edge in a way it hadn’t been since I’d given Tara Wallowitz my first kiss behind the gym after

our seventh-grade dance. She'd had braces and I'd been drowning in all my awkward, barely-a-teenager glory. Two sets of fumbling hands, an overaggressive tongue, and a cut to my lips later, it was over.

I didn't foresee tonight with Georgia being like that at all, but the basis of my feelings was remarkably similar. Out of my element and thrown off by her initial lack of enthusiasm, I'd put in a lot of effort over the last couple of days to turn it around and smooth the way for tonight's date. But now I was invested. I *cared* how tonight went. And that hadn't been the norm in a long time. I felt a little like I was walking into a set-up with no tools to escape the consequences. That wasn't cool. MacGyver was cool, and he always made tools out of whatever he had. I'd have to do the same.

"Mr. Brooks?" my intercom squawked.

I grabbed my phone from the counter and jogged the five steps to press the button.

"Yeah?"

"Your driver's here."

"Thanks."

I snatched my wallet and keys off of the front table and slid out the door without looking at myself in the mirror again. I'd already spent far too much time questioning my tie color.

I was *not* the kind of guy who carefully considered every element of my outfit. Tonight was the closest I would ever get to contradicting that.

* * *

"Frank," I greeted as I approached the car, reaching a hand out to shake his. On days like today, I couldn't help but notice how much of his time I monopolized.

“Mr. Brooks.” His greeting was warm, and he had a face to match. A smattering of wrinkles at the corners of his eyes pointed to a life filled with laughter, and the gray of his hair hinted at the possibility of a daughter or two.

“I wish you’d call me Kline,” I said with a smile, knowing it would never change.

“I’m sorry, sir.”

I shook my head and gave him a friendly slap on his shoulder with the hand not clasped in his. “Don’t be sorry. I’m the one who should apologize—dragging your ass all over town all day and night.”

“No trouble at all, sir.”

I chuckled again. “This makes twelve hours in this shift, right?”

“Yes—”

“And you’ve still got the rest of the night to go?”

“It’s no trouble, Mr. Brooks.”

A nod was all I could give at the time, so I did. It was a gesture that made it possible to get on our way, to get to the benefit, and to get busy letting Frank off the hook. I’d embellish the not-nearly-enough gesture with a fatter-than-expected tip on the bill later.

I slid into the car and Frank closed the door behind me. I unbuttoned the coat of my tuxedo and pulled at the lapels to make it stop feeling like it was choking me.

As Frank climbed into his seat, he spoke again. “Another stop, sir?”

Forced to give an answer I didn’t like, I shook my head. “No. Straight to the benefit.”

He nodded and pulled the gearshift into drive. “Yes, sir.”

I’d been hell-bent on picking Georgia up like a proper date, but apparently, on this matter, she had a closer relationship with the devil. Refusal was too kind a word to describe her reaction when I had suggested my driver would pick her up. In

fact, she'd looked like the suggestion was more revolting than stepping in dog shit.

And I understood to a point. I personally hated taking the car, preferring immeasurably to take the subway and people-watch. I didn't even mind walking fifteen blocks on a nice Manhattan day.

But certain aspects of my life demanded the car. It kept me on schedule during the day, on time to the office, and never late to meetings. Without the motivation of someone like Frank waiting on me, and the desire to respect his time, I'd have been late everywhere I went.

I liked to wander too much, experiment with new spots in the city and observe people as they met and chatted and said goodbye.

Human behavior was fascinating, and I found the more I studied it, the easier it was to manage all of my people-based businesses.

I glanced down at my phone, feeling guilty for checking it on my way to my first date with Georgia, but at the same time, not being able to help myself.

Nothing. All quiet.

My conversation from that afternoon with the mysterious Rose burned in my mind. I hated the fact that any woman would feel like being a virgin was something to be ashamed of or even be embarrassed to talk about it. But I was also a man, and fuck, it wasn't a stretch to understand why. I could feel myself becoming more and more irrational the longer she'd talked about it, even knowing that she'd come to me for honest advice.

I'll be *honest*. I had to *advise* my dick to calm the fuck down.

Very scumbag-like of me, I supposed, but I was convinced hearing or seeing the word 'virgin' or 'anal' or 'sex' fired some kind of hormonal response in the heterosexual male mind.

Maybe it fired it in the homosexual male mind too, but I didn't have any firsthand experience to confirm.

Photographers lined the entrance as we pulled up to 30 Rock, a well-known skyscraper in New York City and home to several entities, including NBC Studios. For me, on this night, it was the Rainbow Room I wanted, an iconic restaurant on the sixty-fifth floor and host to the benefit for Mount Sinai Kravis Children's Hospital. The fundraiser was being held by an outside organization made up of the well-meaning wealthy. I wished they'd spend less money on the event and donate it all to the fucking hospital, but the truth of it was that *this* was what it took to entice people into donations and make it feel worthy of their money. Schmaltzy entertainment, expensive food, and an evening out.

I was here to hand over a check, make my mother happy, and enjoy the evening with Georgia, the level of importance of each not relative to their order.

The dog and pony show passed by in a blur, camera flashes and shouted questions melding and mixing together as I covered my eyes and stepped inside.

Security for the event had taken over two of the elevators, and a small line trickled from the doors of each all the way back to me.

I scanned the crowd for Georgia, hoping to find her sooner rather than later, but, after several sweeps, came up completely empty. It was one of the perils of coming separately, I supposed, but I didn't want her to feel awkward or alone while she waited for me.

A check of my watch confirmed that I was on time, and the line was moving fast. I'd be up there to look for her in no time.

* * *

“Macallan on the rocks, half a lime on the side, please.”

The bartender confirmed my order with a nod, turning to the glass shelves behind him to grab my scotch. It was fifteen minutes past eight, forty-five minutes later than our agreed upon time, and still no sign of Georgia. I was beginning to think she might have stood me up—hoping that she had, rather than something having happened to her—when Stacey Henderson sauntered up to me and leaned her body into my space with an elbow at the bar.

“Where’s your date?”

I grabbed my scotch and the lime as the bartender set it down in front of me, squeezing the juice into my glass before handing the carcass back to him with a smile and a nod. Plucking a napkin from the top of the stack, I wiped the remaining juice off of my palm.

“Well, hello to you too, Stacey.” I turned to her in acknowledgment, but my body did it under protest. It feared the effects of cross-contamination if it got too close.

“Your mother told me you already had a date. That’s why you couldn’t come with me.”

“I’m aware. What I wasn’t aware of was the fact that she had arranged a date with you in the first place. Don’t you think that’s the kind of thing you should be asked directly by a man?”

She waved the thought away like a pesky fly.

“If you’re not here with someone—”

“I am,” I interrupted.

Her eyes narrowed while mine searched the room nearly desperately, and my brain tried to conjure up an excuse. My face and body portrayed an outward calm.

“Where is she, then?”

“The restroom. You know how you ladies are,” I patronized in the name of inserting frivolous, vaguely-insulting conversation into a still-civil exchange. As much as Stacey Henderson was asking for a big ‘go fuck yourself,’ the Mount Sinai Kravis Children’s Hospital was not. “Always running to the restroom

to touch up something or other or to relieve your peanut-sized bladders.”

Stacey scoffed rather indelicately, an effect of too much alcohol too goddamn early in the benefit, and I winced, fearing the turn of events when no one returned from the restroom.

Then, out of the crowd emerged a frazzled—but *stunning*—Georgia. Red framed her body from breast to foot, the tight material clinging to her in all the right places. Her tan skin peeked out of a cutout just below her chest, and a matching blood red painted her lips and nails. The only thing missing red was her head, her now blonde locks cascading and curling down and around her slim shoulders and damn near robbing me of the ability to think.

Worry from her late arrival ravaged her face as she approached the two of us without pretense or fear.

“Oh my God, Kline, I am so sorry I’m—”

“It’s okay,” I cut her off, stepping pointedly around Stacey and pulling her into my arms for a hug.

“I’m just glad you’re here,” I whispered softly into her new hair. Stacey groaned audibly in begrudged response before grabbing her high-priced clutch from the bar and stomping away like a petulant child.

“Who was she?” Georgia asked, leaning back and glancing over my arm as Stacey dragged ass away.

“*That* was a day-spa-loving version of my cat.”

Her nose scrunched up adorably as she tried to make sense of my words.

“Would you like something to drink?” I offered, escorting her the few steps back to the bar with a hand at her back. I felt the warmth at my palm all the way in my dick, the need to touch her having been a palpable thing all day long.

She smiled, and it lit up her face and mine. “Can I say ‘God yes’ without sounding like a lush?”

One side of my mouth hooked up in a grin. My cock said she could say ‘God yes’ anytime she wanted, but thankfully, my

mouth said, "Sure."

I looked away long enough to grab the bartender's attention and then turned back to her.

"You look beautiful."

She started to smile but stopped herself, the skin between her eyebrows pinching slightly.

"I'm an asshole. I can't believe I'm so late. I mean, I *can* believe I'm late," she rambled. "Just not *this* late. This is a new low for me."

"You're always late?" I asked, trying to distract her from the late arrival and learn more about her instead.

"Yes. Every day of my life. Well, to everything other than meetings with you." She winced again. "The work you, at least."

"Don't worry," I promised with a grin. "Kline won't say anything to Mr. Brooks."

"What'll you have?" the bartender asked, tossing a napkin up on the bar for the anticipated glass.

Georgia looked to me in question.

"No." I waved her off and lifted my glass. "I'm good. Just got one. You go ahead."

I glanced down the line of her back as she leaned over the bar. Wide straps criss-crossed to form cut-outs in the fabric of the back as well, and smooth material hugged the curve of her hips and ass. Her body petite but curvy, I wanted to run my hands all over that fabric.

God, she looked gorgeous. It was almost unreal.

She turned to me, holding a glass of wine she had obviously ordered at some point during my ogling.

"Sorry," I apologized through a tight throat. "I was..."

She raised an eyebrow pointedly, a knowing grin on her face. "Staring at my ass."

"Yeah." I nodded. "That's exactly what I was doing."

She laughed.

“It’s a really fine ass, though. And your hair...”

She grabbed a strand of it self-consciously, twisting it around her finger. “Oh. Yeah. I have a thing for dyeing my hair. I’m not sure why, but I tend to change it like a hobby. Red or blonde or sometimes—”

“Georgia?”

She finally took a breath. “Yeah?”

“I meant what I said. You look beautiful. Own it.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, but her face relaxed.

From there on out, she seemed herself: funny, sometimes awkward, but mostly at ease.

We worked the room, schmoozing all of the people who needed it and small-talking with the others. Unable to help myself, I kept a hand on Georgia all night.

Her hand in mine, my palm at the small of her back, a set of my flexing fingers on her perfect hip. Anything to touch her. Anything to keep her in close proximity.

Finally done with my obligations, I asked her something that’d been on my mind all night.

“Would you like to dance?”

She seemed surprised. “You dance?”

“With you, yes.”

“I swear,” she whispered with a shake of her head. “Do you secretly have one of those things on your wrist that Coca-Cola wears?”

I grinned in confusion.

Her eyes searched mine like I held all the power, a sheen of fear coating them with moisture.

Only then did I realize she meant the quarterback’s playbook cheat sheet.

I took her cheek in my palm, smoothing a thumb over the apple of it softly.

Apparently, when it came to Georgia Cummings and tonight, I'd been doing just fine.

"Come on," I coaxed, setting my drink down on a nearby table, pulling her onto the dance floor with me, and pressing her body right to mine.

Hands clasped together, I pulled them into my chest and wrapped my other arm tightly around the curve of her hip.

Her eyes followed mine and mine followed hers, a closed loop of exploration into each other. The moment picked up speed as the band played a sweet and melodic tune, and the rest of the room faded completely away.

My chest felt tight with anticipation of what was to come—right now, in this moment, and beyond, as I gave myself over to getting to know this amazing woman.

Our weight shifted from foot to foot and our hips swayed, very much moving but, at the same time, fighting with everything we had to stay stagnantly lost in that moment.

Without thought or delay, I leaned in, touching my lips to hers for a full second before I felt the tension leave her body and her eyes fluttered closed.

Tentative but bold, her lips began to move under mine, exploring on their own rather than waiting for my invitation.

I abandoned her hand at my chest immediately and sought the solace of her hair instead, entrenching my hand and using its leverage to pull her lips even closer.

A sigh bounced from her mouth to mine as I focused on her bottom lip, pulling it between my own and sucking ever so slightly.

She tasted like the sweet cherry notes of her wine, and my tongue shot out to lick up another drop. When the tip of her tongue touched mine, everything else was lost.

Time.

Space.

All sense of propriety and appropriateness for a crowded dance floor at a Children's Hospital benefit. My hand left her hip, circling around on a path straight for the cheek of her ass.

When the corners of her lips tipped up despite their connection to mine, I knew I'd never experienced *anything* sexier than a woman unable to withhold a smile while we kissed.

"*Kline*," she whispered, pulling away and smiling without inhibition.

Just the way she said my name had me groaning.

"God, I know. Not the time." I pulled her close to me and practically dragged the two of us off the dance floor. The band had started to transition into an old Grand Funk Railroad song, "Some Kind of Wonderful," anyway. In the haze of my peripheral vision, I could see other couples head in the direction we'd just come, and amongst the shuffle and swing of their active bodies, our lip-locked, fully intertwined ones would have been even more obvious.

I grabbed Georgia's wrist lightly, and her pulse thrummed and fluttered under the tips of my fingers. The feeling made my grip tighten minutely as I turned her to face me.

Her hair hung in a veil around her face, but I could actually *feel* our chemistry in the air between us.

When I pulled her body flush with mine, she tipped her chin so that she could look straight into my eyes.

Her signature blue eyes were shining with emotion, but something else wasn't right.

She was still beautiful, but her face—something was different. Her lipstick-smeared lips looked to be twice their normal size.

"Um, Georgia—"

"Georgie," she corrected while looking up at me sweetly. She fluttered her lashes coyly, but I barely even noticed. I couldn't look away from her mouth.

“Right. Georgie.” I steeled myself. “Listen, I know this is a weird question, but you wouldn’t happen to have had some light work done, would you?”

“Work?” she asked, oblivious.

“Yeah, you know. *Work.*”

She shook her head and smiled a little, clearly still in the fog from our kiss. I wished I was. “I don’t know what you’re asking.”

I coughed to clear my throat and wiped the building sweat from my brow. This wasn’t a good idea. Asking women questions like this was never a good idea.

Maybe I should just pretend not to notice.

“Kline?”

Shit. Were they getting bigger?

“I don’t know,” I fumbled. “Some kind of lip filler that has a delayed reaction, maybe?”

“Wip fiwer?” She tried again, her nose scrunching with the effort. “Wip fiwer. Wipppp fiwer.”

Concern blanketed my face and hers turned distraught.

“Oh, sit. Sit sit sit.”

“Sit?”

“Not sit. Siiit.” She dropped her face into her hands. “Sit.”

“Ohhh,” I said in realization, picking her face up out of her hands to find her lips and the palms that had just touched them swelling at an alarming rate. “Shit, Georgie.”

“Exacwy.”

“What’s happening? What do I need to do?”

I moved to grab some ice out of my forgotten glass, and her eyes followed me and then widened exponentially.

“Sit, Kwine! Is where wime wuice in where?”

“Wime wuice?”

“Wime wuice!”

“Oh! Oh, yeah. Shit. Shit! Yeah, there’s lime juice in there.”

“I’m awerwic. I nee benedetto. Benedwetto. Sit! Benedwiwww.”

“Benadryl!” I shouted, victorious. Like it was some kind of game. She looked disgusted.

“Right. Sorry,” I apologized, turning my attention back to surveying her and putting my focus back on her health. “Jesus, it’s bad, Georgie. Do we need to go to the emergency room?”

“No.” She shook her head, eyes determined.

Her lips looked like cartoons. I panicked at the thought of her throat closing up with the same fervor.

“Please. Let me take you to urgent care or something.”

“No, Kwine. Wet’s wust wet ouw of hewre. Benedwiwww.”

“Right. Benadryl.” I grabbed her hand and dragged her toward the elevator without looking back. No way was tonight going to go down in history as the night I fucking killed a woman with one kiss.

I shoved through the crowd that had gathered there without apology, and Georgia shielded her face from their scrutiny. The doors propped open with my foot, I ushered her in and hit the button for the lobby as fast as I could before holding the ‘close door’ button with excessive force. When they finally shut, I pulled Georgia’s gaze from the floor with a gentle finger at her chin.

“I’m so sorry, Georgie.”

“Is wit bwad?”

“It isn’t good,” I answered vaguely. “Please, let me take you to the hospital.”

“No,” she refused, taking some of the sting out of it by offering a smile. I mean, her mouth didn’t smile—it was too swollen—but there was visible happiness in her eyes. “I’m owokay. Pwomise. Wust nee Benedwiw.”

The doors opened on the ground floor, and I peeled out of there like a drag car, Georgie in tow.

“Swow down, Kwine,” she ordered, tugging on my hand and nearly tripping on her dress.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized, knowing I wouldn’t be able to beat the panic back enough to slow down to her pace.

She smiled again, but it didn’t last long. It turned right into a shout when I swept her off of her feet and into my arms and took off at a jog again, dialing Frank as I did.

Two rings and he answered.

“Mr. Brooks?”

“I need you to meet us at the Rite-Aid on the corner!”

He wasn’t used to me shouting, but he sure as hell didn’t question it.

“Yes, sir.”

One look at Georgie’s face, and I started running faster.

For the first time in ten years, I didn’t have the first clue what I’d done with my phone after ending the call—and I didn’t care one bit.

Chapter Thirteen

Georgia

“Here.” Kline slid back into the car and handed me a brown paper bag with what I could only assume was Benadryl.

“Tanks,” I whispered, offering a small smile.

He furrowed his brow, lips fighting a wince.

Shit. How bad is it?

Seeing as it was my first date with Kline, I knew this wasn't an optimal situation. In a matter of a few minutes and one perfect, sexy kiss, I had gone from smiling and offering up charming, flirty responses to sounding like I was talking around a wiener in my mouth.

Lime juice had sabotaged me. It had been years since I'd come in contact with the allergy-inducing demon. And the last time, it was *way* worse. My throat had started to close up because I had ingested it, whereas this was just contact swelling.

Swallowing a few times, I confirmed my throat was breezy and clear.

But the way Kline was trying *not* to react to my appearance?

Well, that had me rummaging through my purse and getting my compact out. Flipping the clasp, I opened the mirror, coming face-to-face with something that could nauseate horror movie enthusiasts. Bright red blowfish lips consumed my face. The skin was stretched so tight I feared something might burst.

Bottom line: It was bad. Real fucking bad. Kylie Jenner's mouth on steroids bad.

“Ah ma gaw,” I gasped, tongue still swelling by the second.

I glanced at myself in the mirror again, which was a big, fat mistake of epic proportions. The swelling seemed hell-bent on consuming my entire face.

“Tis is ba! Tis is so ba!” I grabbed the paper bag off the seat and pulled it over my head.

On a Britney Spears’ scale of embarrassment, I had proverbially flashed my beaver to millions of people.

For the love of God, the inflammation is going to my brain. I can only think in celebrity speak. My allergic reaction had turned me into Leslie.

“Georgia, please, don’t hide your pretty face.” Kline removed the paper bag, staring back at me with serious concern.

Pffffffft. Pretty? All forms of pretty had fled the building the second I had contracted elephantiasis of the face.

I averted my eyes from his and focused on removing the cellophane wrapping from the Benadryl. “Somonabith,” I cursed, fumbling with the childproof cap.

He gently took the bottle out of my hands, detaching the cap with ease, and handed it back to me. “We need to get you to an emergency room. St. Luke’s is just around the corner.”

Oh, hell no. Out of all of the emergency rooms in New York, I was not going to *that* one.

Well, unless my reaction gets worse—then I’d reconsider. I’d face the embarrassment and my brother’s incessant teasing for a shot of epinephrine over not breathing at all. I’m not a complete moron.

I shook my head frantically. “Ma brudder. Nob way.”

He scrunched his brow up in confusion.

“Nobe. Nob hobitals.”

My brother Will was finishing up his ER residency at St. Luke’s, and I knew for a fact he was elbow deep in a twenty-four-hour call shift. If I walked into his ER looking like this, I’d never live it down.

“But—”

“Uh-uh. Nob habbenin’,” I cut him off, resolute.

And to solidify my decision, I tipped the bottle of Benadryl to my goliath lips and knocked back as much as I could.

“Shit! Georgia!” Kline grabbed the bottle from my hands, panicked. “That’s too much. Way, way too much.”

I shrugged, reaching for the discarded paper bag and pulling a pen from my purse.

No ERs needed, I’ll be fine, I wrote, holding it out to him.

He frowned. “I’m really worried.”

I promise, I’ve been through this before. The Benny will do the trick.

I reassured, hating seeing him so anxious.

His mouth offered a wry grin. “Benny?”

I nodded, my neck doing its best impression of a bobblehead doll. It was safe to say, the antihistamine was kicking in.

Yeah, Benny and I go way back. I promise I’ll be fine in a few hours.

He assessed my face. “Pretty sure you drank way too much Benny.”

I shook my head, hiding my lips with my free hand.

Just stop looking at me until the Benny kicks in. I’m sorry this is the worst first date ever.

He took the pen out of my grip and pulled the bag into his lap. His hand moved in fluid motions as he scribbled something down and then slid it back to me.

~~*Just stop looking at me until the Benny kicks in. I’m sorry this is the worst first date ever.*~~

This is the BEST first date ever.

“Thank you for coming with me tonight.” He offered a smile—a real smile, not the *I’m trying to smile, but holy shit, you look bad* kind of smile he was showcasing before. “And, Georgia.” Kline touched my cheek. “Even with an allergic reaction, you still have the power to take my breath away.”

You're gorgeous, sweetheart. Swollen lips and all, you're still gorgeous."

I stared back at him, speechless. There was still so much I didn't know about Kline, but my gut told me, at the root of his soul, he was a good man. A sweet, kind, and undeniably good man.

Despite the lime juice fiasco, I'm glad I'm here too.

My eyelids started to feel heavy, my lashes blinking past the fog. I leaned my head back on the seat.

"You okay?" He wrapped his arm around my shoulder, tucking me into his side.

I wasn't vomiting and I could still breathe, so I muttered, "Uh-huh," as I nuzzled into him. "Jus a lil sweepy."

The pull to go comatose was strong. In the back of my mind, there was a tiny bit of rational thought wondering, *Am I going to overdose on Benadryl?*

Before the urge to sleep snuffed out all the light, I grabbed my phone from my purse. Pulling up my text conversation with Will, I attempted to shoot him a message.

Me: WELLY IM BENNY

Delete.

Me: WELLIUM ODOR

Delete.

Slowly, but surely, my fingers got their shit together and autocorrect stopped trying to make me her bitch.

Me: WILL CAN AN OC GIVE A BENNY!*&

There. Perfect.

If he thinks I'm in trouble, he'll call me. Otherwise, no big dealio, was the last thought before Benny took over and said, "Goodnight, Georgia."

* * *

“Georgie. Georgie.” A hand nudged my shoulder. “Wake up, Georgie.”

“Fuuuuuuuuuck.” Someone cursed under their breath.

I opened my eyes, blinking past the blurred vision. Peeling my face off leather, I sat up, finding a concerned Kline staring back at me.

“Thank God. Are you okay?” He touched my cheek.

Mmmmmmmm. That feels nice. I had the urge to purr into his palm and beg him to scratch my belly. All of a sudden, being a cat sounded like the best idea I’d ever had.

“Meow?” he asked, all four of his eyebrows scrunching together.

“Huh?”

“Did you just say meow?”

“Meowww... Meowww...” I tested it on my tongue. My lips felt funny. “Yeah, I think I did.” I nuzzled into his palm. “Keep petting me, Kline. I might actually start purring soon.”

A deep chuckle vibrated his chest. My head moved of its own accord, leaning forward and resting against his hard pecs. For real, Kline Brooks had pecs. Hard-as-fuck pecs. Mmm. Nipples. I wondered what his nipples tasted like.

He adjusted in his seat, his hand resting at the nape of my neck. “Georgie? We need to get you upstairs. I think you might’ve had too much Benadryl.”

Me thinks so too. Suggested dosage, schmagedsted mosage.

“Hahaha. Mosage.”

My body rocked like he was shaking his head.

“I think I’m high.”

He chuckled again, pec-pulsation caressing my cheek.

“Now I remember why I loved Mary Jane so much in high school.”

“I’m going to carry you out of the car, okay?”

“We’re in a car?” I sat up straight, releasing his perfect chest from my cheek’s assault. “Whose car?”

“This is my regular car, sweetheart. Frank drove us. Are you ready?”

I glanced at his crotch. “Oh, I had no idea we were already headed in that direction. I guess this date went pretty good, huh? We’re headed for naked time. That’s gotta be a good thing.” My hand stroked his thigh, savoring the feel of muscles sheathed by soft material. “I bet you’re fuck-hot naked.”

He grinned, grabbing my hand and pulling it to his lips for a soft kiss. “How about we get out of this car and head up to my apartment?”

I nodded. At least, I thought I was nodding. I decided to nod a few more times just for good measure. You could never be sure about a nod. They could be tricky little things.

“Okay, wrap your arms around my neck. I’m going to carry you upstairs.”

“Oh, yeah. Carry me, Kline. Carry me so good.”

Big arms wrapped around my body, pulling me out of the car. Once I was airborne—swaddled up in strong muscles and delicious male pheromones mixed with sexy cologne—my voice decided to make its debut. If there was ever a time for a song, it was right now, while Kline carried me past a doorman and through a lobby I’d never seen.

“Wicky, wicky, wicky, beatbox! K-K-Kline looks like sex and he’s so clean, clean!”

I’d always had a talent for freestyling.

“Wicky, wicky, wicky, beatbox! Big-dicked Brooks in da house! Can I get an Amen! Wicky, wicky, wicky, remix!”

“Georgia,” Kline whispered through a laugh. “I need to set you down for a second while I get my keys.”

My feet touched the ground and the hallway morphed into a dervish’s wheel, spinning around in a hypnotic display of plush velvet rugs and cream-colored walls. “Whoa, settle down, hallway! You’re outta control!” I reached for the wall, but he was quicker, gripping my waist and stopping my forward momentum.

“Here we go,” he instructed, maneuvering me through the door and inside his apartment. “Let’s get you settled on the couch and maybe get some non-alcoholic fluids in you.”

I threw my body onto the leather sofa, nuzzling my face into the pillows. “Oh yeah, baby. Now, this is the kind of couch I’m talking about.”

“Georgia.” Kline’s face was inches from mine, his long fingers settling below my chin.

“Hey, where’d you come from?” I asked, peeking out from my pillow fort. “I thought you were by the door. Man, you’re quick. Are you working out?”

He smiled, blue eyes working their magic on my libido. *Li-bee-dough*. What a weird word. It sounded more courtroom than sex. “*I’d like the record to show he was badgering my key witness for a libido!*” See what I mean?

“Georgia, sweetheart,” Kline summoned my gaze. And son of a hooker nut, there were those blue eyes again. Surely, they were trying to hypnotize my vagina. It was working, by the way.

Any minute, my panties would just, *poof!*, disappear into thin air.

“Have mercy,” I whispered. “That smile, plus those eyes, it’s like a sex cream sundae. I want two scoops.”

A small laugh left his lips. “How about we start with a drink first? What sounds good? I’ve got water, tea, coffee?”

“I’ll take the vodka. But on the rocks, please.”

He shook his head, amused. “Vodka wasn’t an option.”

“It wasn’t?” I tilted my head and realized things felt so much better with my head resting on the pillows.

“How about you just rest here while I get the drinks?”

“Yes, sir.” I saluted him.

“Wait!” I shrieked before he even made it a foot. I had something to tell him, and I had to tell him *now*.

“Yeah, baby?” he asked, concern mixing deliciously with just a hint of a smile.

“You’re the best kisser on this side of the Mississippi. NO! The best kisser in the whole entire world!” My voice turned grave. “I’m talking, I’ve never had better *in my life*.”

Any concern disappeared as though it’d never been there.

“Yeah?” His blue eyes twinkled like actual glitter. Like he went to Michael’s, got a jar of it, and then poured it in his irises.

“Ohhh, yeah,” I agreed before reaching out and yanking him back to me with a fist in his shirt.

A chuckle rumbled his chest as I pushed mine to it tightly and slammed my lips to his without apology. They were just so soft and plump and *mmm, that groan tasted good*. I took what I wanted, exploring and plundering his mouth even though my face wouldn’t seem to fucking cooperate. I shoved him away softly, ordering a needy “Thirsty!” in someone else’s squeaky voice.

He shook his head and smiled, retreating without a word.

His footsteps moved farther away, toward the land of drinks, I was sure.

My fingers moved to my face, tapping my nose, and then my cheeks, and then my lips. Oh my, these things were bigger than I remembered. I grabbed my boobs just to see if other things had doubled in size.

Damn, no such luck.

If I was Goldilocks and this was the three bears’ apartment, this room was too fucking hot.

Relocation was needed. My feet flopped onto the floor. Heels were kicked off across the room, clanking against the wall. Once I got my sea legs in order, I tip-toed into the hallway.

Peeking into the room at the end of the hall, I found a king-size bed summoning me.

“Oh, yes. Come to mama!”

I cannonballed into the bed, fluffy comforter and pillows bouncing around me.

After a few body rolls from one side to the next, I found that it wasn't the room that was stifling my temperate vibe; it was my clothes. Too many clothes.

How'd I get so many clothes on?

I stood at the foot of the bed while my numb fingers worked at the zipper of my dress. It took a bit for me to figure out the zipper was just for show. Someone had superglued me into it. *Geez Louis-a May Alcott, the price we women pay for beauty.*

My hands tore at the front of the dress until the initial rip echoed inside the room.

“Now, that's what I'm talking about.”

I got down to my skivvies and decided even those were not up to par for the bed. Call it a superpower, but I could sense when a bed wanted me naked. The king had spoken, and naked was his final offer.

No one could deny the glorious feeling of rolling around naked under a soft sheet. My face met the pillow, and then my nose felt it was the perfect time to sniff the delicious Kline Brooks aroma embedded in the material. God, he smelled good. Like clean laundry and man soap and *I'm going to fuck him.*

Boy, that escalated quickly.

The Benadryl had become my truth serum. I wanted to sex him. I wanted to hand him a valentine that said, “Be my cherry popper,” and spread my legs as far as those babies would go. I knew valentines were only meant for a particular holiday, but this felt like an exception to the rule.

“Georgia?” Kline’s voice moved down the hallway.

“I’m in here!” I called back.

His tall frame moved through the doorway, finding me luxuriating in the bedding.

“Comfortable?” he asked.

“Oh yeah, baby.” I patted the spot beside me. “Come join me. I don’t know whose bed this is, but hells bells, it’s wonderful.”

“It’s my bed.” He chuckled, setting two glasses on the nightstand and sitting on the edge.

I sat up, holding the comforter to my chest. “This is your bed?”

He nodded, eyes moving to my bare shoulders.

“Well, I’ll be damned. I’m a fan of your bed. Big fan. The biggest fan.”

His eyes moved around the room, searching for something. His jaw dropped when whatever he was looking for came into view. “Are you naked?” he asked, swallowing hard enough to make his Adam’s apple bob.

“The bed made me do it.”

“My bed made you get naked?”

“He’s a real pervy bastard, but who was I to argue?” I shrugged, the comforter falling to my waist.

Kline’s spine stiffened, averting his gaze toward the floor.

I touched his shoulder. “Everything okay?”

“Uh-huh.” He coughed out a laugh.

“Is one of those for me?” I nodded at the table.

“Please.” He gestured toward the glasses. “Help yourself.”

“Only if you stop looking so uncomfortable.”

That caught his attention, his curious eyes meeting mine.

“Uncomfortable?”

“Yeah. You look really uncomfortable. I insist that you take your shoes off and sit back on the bed.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Georgia, I’m not sure that’s such a good idea.”

“Of course it is, you silly, gorgeous piece of man meat!” I got to my knees, forcing his body to lie back on the bed. Straddling his hips, I stared down at him. “See what I mean? It’s so comfortable down there, isn’t it?”

“It sure is something.” His gaze raked down my completely bare body, going darker with each second that passed.

While he made himself cozy, I grabbed a glass from the nightstand and took a satisfying drink. “This vodka is delicious. Not very strong, though.”

“That’s because it’s water.”

“Hmmmph. Well, look at that.”

Kline hesitantly gripped my waist. “I think I should grab you some clothes to wear to bed.”

My mouth formed a pout. “Do you not like seeing me naked, Kline? Naked time is fun time.”

He shook his head and muttered under his breath, “*Dear fucking Lucifer.*” He cleared his throat. “Shit, Georgie. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything better than you naked. And *God*, I want naked time to be fun time. I want it really fucking bad.”

“Well, then what’s the big rush? I’m starting to understand all the fuss about nudist colonies. There’s a lot to be said for being naked, Kline. I think you should try it.” I moved my hands to his belt, slipping the metal from the prongs.

“This probably isn’t a good idea.” He stopped my progress before I made my way to his zipper.

I looked up at him, my ass resting against Kline’s better half—his bigger, thicker half. The one that seemed to wholeheartedly—or *wholecockedly*—disagree with him. “I think you’re wrong. I think you think this is a really good idea.” To emphasize my point, I rolled my hips against him.

Jesus. His dick.

Wait, that sounded a little sacrilege.

Kline. His dick.

There, that was better.

“Kline,” I moaned, rubbing my clit against him. “This. Feels. So. Good.”

“Shit,” he groaned, his fingers digging into my hips. “We shouldn’t be doing this, but *fuck*. You’re gorgeous and naked and *wet*. So fucking wet. I can feel you through my clothes.”

“You make me crazy,” I half growled like an animal. “I want to kiss you, lick you, suck you, ride you. I want to do *everything*. Right. Now.” I leaned forward, pressing one pert nipple to his lips.

He sucked me into his mouth, his tongue flicking my nipple and urging heat to flush across my skin.

“You have the best tits, Georgia. The best fucking tits.” He moved to the other breast, kissing and sucking and licking me into a frenzy.

“God, yes. Keep doing that,” I begged.

He gripped my chin, pulling my face to his. His lips crashed against mine. We were a delicious mess of tongues and lips and hips grinding and hands groping.

“You’re too perfect,” he whispered against my skin. “I can’t get enough of you.”

“I want you to have all of me,” I urged. “I want you inside of me, Kline. God, I want it so bad. Christopher Columbus the fuck out of my pussy prideland!”

“What?” he asked as he stilled.

The words ran through my head enough to know I’d screwed some sort of pooch by alluding that my pooch had yet to be screwed.

“What?” I repeated back, attempting, and failing, to be the absolute picture of aloof.

His fingers held my hips still. Blue eyes stared deep into mine before shutting closed.

“Kline? What’s wrong?”

His gaze met mine again. “We can’t do this, not like this.”

“Of course, we can,” I disagreed. “I’m naked. You’re hard. This seems like the perfect time for screwing. It’s like Marvin Gaye himself put us in this moment and whispered, ‘Go ahead and let’s get it on.’”

A grin kissed his lips. “God, you’re adorable,” he said, biting back a laugh.

“No.” I pouted. “I’m sexy and naked and ready to fornicate.”

He quirked a brow. “Fornicate?”

“Penetrate?” I offered, hoping it sounded more enticing.

“Baby, I’m losing my mind over how sexy and beautiful you are, but I’m also trying to be a gentleman here. You’re a little under the influence, remember?”

I frowned, mentally counting the amount of drinks I’d had throughout the night.

“I didn’t drink that much.”

“I’m not talking about alcohol.”

My eyes went wide. “Did we do drugs?!”

His grin consumed his face, dimples peeking out and saying hello. “Calm down,” he said, humor in his voice. “We didn’t do drugs. Not in the illegal sense. But *you* had a crazy amount of Benadryl.”

“Oh, I forgot about that.”

“So, Benny girl, I think we should press pause on this fantastic moment—because you can bet that sexy ass of yours I want to revisit this—and let’s throw some clothes on you and find something a little less tempting to do.”

I thought it over for a second. “Do you have any pizza?”

A wry grin creased his mouth. “You want pizza?”

I nodded. “Pizza and Netflix. We’ll save the chill part for later.”

Kline lifted me off the bed and onto my feet as he sat up. “How about you rummage through my closet and find something you like and I’ll order us one?”

I pressed a soft kiss to his lips. “Deal.”

As I turned for the closet, his hand met my ass, spanking a high-pitched squeal right from my lips.

“Hey!” I shouted, turning toward him.

He shrugged, smirking like the devil. “Can’t expect a man to ignore a perfect ass shimmying around in front of his face.”

“I was *not* shimmying.”

“Baby, you were shimmying. But don’t worry, I was definitely watching and enjoying the show.”

I ignored him, striding—*okay, sashaying*—into his walk-in closet, where I enjoyed a few moments to myself to swoon over the whole “Baby” sentiment.

There may have been jumping and silent screaming. Who knows? Maybe I even buried my nose into his dress shirts and put myself in a momentary Kline-induced coma?

But I will tell you this.

The pizza was fucking delicious.

Chapter Fourteen

Kline

Confused and sleepy, Georgia stumbled out of my bedroom and into the hall, the light from my sun-beaten bedroom windows backlighting her in the doorway. My shirt hung off of her tiny frame in a bloblike shadow and covered her completely, but the image of her naked body underneath was burned on my brain from having it straddling me last night.

She'd been out of her mind, completely out of control, and most of all, irresistibly fucking adorable. She made the term hot mess look good, and the rambling thoughts of her Benadryl-influenced mind would stick with me forever.

Honestly, I didn't know if I'd ever met someone funnier—and I knew a whole lot of brilliantly funny people.

“I feel like someone buried me alive last night and I spent all twelve hours trying to claw my way out.”

I smiled apologetically.

She stopped to lean on the wall at the mouth of the hallway, putting the tips of her fingers of one hand to the skin of her forehead.

“I'm so sorry about last night,” I told her.

But I wasn't sorry. Not really anyway. The only thing I regretted was that I should have taken her to the goddamn hospital in spite of her protests. It could have turned out so much worse. My Catholic roots were a little rusty, but I'd dust off the old prayer playbook to thank the big guy for keeping an eye on this one.

Inching her way into the room, she settled on the other end of the couch and pulled her knees carefully into her chest, stretching the cotton of my t-shirt to cover them.

“Fucking lime juice,” she muttered into her knees, the skin of her now normal lips teasing the soft knit of the fabric before looking up at me. “Scotch with lime juice, really? Who even drinks that?”

I leaned back into the couch, stretching an arm along the back and propping my feet up on the coffee table in front of me to keep from reaching out and running a finger along those lips.

“Ernest Hemingway drank scotch with lime juice.”

She chewed the recently healed skin nervously, and I could imagine what she was thinking. Trying to assess how she felt about waking up here, with me, at the same time she considered what I said. She seemed genuinely intrigued that I’d know something like that, but she warred with herself when it came to concentration on it. “Really?”

I laughed, explaining, “Well, I never witnessed it for myself, but I read it once somewhere, yeah.”

A smile crept into the corners of her mouth and brightened the blue of her eyes. And the maroon of my shirt already had them blazing.

Moving her eyes from the couch to the kitchen, down the hall and back again, she asked, “What is this place?”

I pinched one eye in winklike confusion, attempted to survey the scene from her point of view, and then answered the only way I could. “Uh, it’s my apartment.”

“*Your* apartment?”

“Yeah.” I shook my head. “Why did you say ‘your apartment’ like it’s infested with bed bugs?”

“No!” she denied vehemently in surprise. “No, it’s nice. It’s just...”

Silence lingered where words should have been.

“It’s...” I prompted. “What?”

Her cheeks puffed out slightly with the sour taste of her thoughts, and I could see her run the scenario of saying it out loud through her head more than once.

“*Georgie*. It’s what?”

“*Normal*.”

A laugh slipped out. “Yeah, well. So am I.”

And it wasn’t *that* normal, I thought a little bitterly. It had a doorman, for fuck’s sake. I was a single guy. What the fuck did I need a penthouse with six bedrooms for?

I didn’t want Georgia to think I needed some big apartment. I wanted her to *get* it.

“No,” she disagreed. “*You’re* Kline Brooks.”

I just shook my head, trying to find the right words to describe how much nothing my fucking name meant to me—and how very little it should mean to everyone else.

“Trust me, that name doesn’t mean nearly the same thing to me, my relatives, or any of my friends as it does to other people.”

She untucked her knees from my shirt, stretching her long, tan legs out on the couch toward me and crossing them at the ankles. Unable to resist, I reached down and rested the palm of my hand on her bare shin.

She watched it happen and paused for just a few seconds before looking back up and into my eyes. She forced serenity over her features, but discomfort lived just under the surface. It wasn’t that she didn’t want it; she just felt awkward because it had been unexpected.

“What’s it mean to your family?”

“I don’t know.” I searched my mind for the best way to put it, ignoring her minor discomfort and running a thumb along the skin of her calf casually. “A guy who eats way more pizza than he should and has sweaty feet and a grumpy cat who hates him.”

“Meowwww,” Walter said on cue, hopping up onto the arm of the couch and startling her.

“Oh!”

“Speak of the devil.”

“Hi?” she prompted.

“Walter.”

“Hi, Walter,” she cooed, turning her upper body and rubbing his back from head to tail.

He purred and nudged into her. “Meowwwww.”

“Sure,” I scoffed. “Bond with the pretty girl. How fucking predictable.”

“Was he here last night?” she asked haltingly.

I bit my lips to stave off the urge to go into detail. “Uh...yeah. The two of you had quite the lengthy conversation.” They had. Georgia and Walter had bonded over pepperoni pizza and reruns of *Friends*. She sang “Smelly Cat” to him no less than fifteen times.

The snooty motherfucker purred for every single one of them.

She nodded as if that made sense. “He seems like the friendly sort.”

I scoffed audibly.

“Maybe that’s your problem,” she suggested simply, scratching behind his ears like they were old lawyer friends there to co-prosecute my trial. “You’re being kind of an asshole to Walter. He responds to kind words and soft touches.”

“Are you kidding me?!” I nearly yelled, pointing to myself and then back at my grumpy old cat wildly. “I’m not the asshole! *He’s* the asshole! I tried to bring that cat around to me for weeks. I’m just treating him how he treats me now.”

Walter leaned into her as if scared. That fucking cat con-artist!

“Aw, it’s okay, Walter,” Georgie swore sweetly, tucking his kitty face between her hands and rubbing their noses together. “I’ll protect you from the bad, scary man.” Her face turned conspiratorial, an eyebrow arching up menacingly to match the traitor-cat, as she looked me in the eye again. “I know how you feel. He tried to poison me last night!”

“I didn’t poison her,” I told him calmly, going along with this crazy conversation for some reason. “I ordered the same drink I’ve been ordering for ten years, and then I gave her the best kiss of her life.”

Georgie’s playful eyes jumped to mine and turned serious. Panicked even.

“It was not the best kiss of my—”

“Uh-uh-uh.” I tsked with a wave of my finger. “Don’t lie now, Benny. I know it was the best kiss of your life for a fact.”

“And how do you claim to know that?”

“Because last night you told me so yourself.”

She gasped. Walter hissed in camaraderie.

“Right before you kissed me again—”

Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment, and everything about her posture said she was two seconds away from sprinting straight out the door.

But I knew there was more, and I gave it to her, sliding a gentle hand from her shin up to her knee as I did. Walter jumped down and trotted off in protest, but we both ignored him.

“And they were both the best kisses of mine.” I decided not to focus on the fact that beyond those kisses, she’d given me much more—including a naked lap dance. With the way her skin burned red about the kisses, I thought the trauma of the rest might make her actually combust.

She opened her mouth just to close it again and forced a visible swallow down her throat. I gave her the time she needed, the time to process my words and run them through a cross-check with her emotions.

I’d had all night, listening to her and enjoying her, to prepare for the blow. She hadn’t.

Just when I thought she might actually say something in return, her phone started to play the opening beats of “Freek-A-Leek” by Petey Pablo.

It was horrendously endearing.

I had Thatch to thank for that kind of music knowledge myself. It used to be one of his favorite songs in our much wilder post-college days.

She jumped up in a hurry, pink hitting her cheeks with embarrassment.

“Sorry. For the awkward ringtone and the interruption—”

“It’s okay,” I consoled with a smile and a wink. “It would have been way more awkward had Shonda, Monique, and Christina called you last night at the benefit.” Her eyes widened in shock.

“Me, it doesn’t bother so much. I’m actually *looking for the goodies*,” I teased, referencing another one of Petey Pablo and Ciara’s masterpieces I knew she’d recognize.

And it worked, surprising her so much that she almost didn’t make it to the kitchen to answer her phone before it stopped ringing.

I really wasn’t much of a mystery, but she was convinced I was.

With the way I craved her company, I planned to enroll her in the accelerated education program and keep her there until she had me mastered.

Chapter Fifteen

Georgia

The terrace door clicked shut as I answered Will's call. "Hey, stranger, I'm surprised you're awake right now." Elbows resting on the banister, the sounds of an already popping Upper East Side hustled and bustled below me. "Rough call shift?"

"The ER was hopping last night." Will's raspy, exhausted voice filled my ear. "From the random text I got last night, it appears you had an interesting evening. Night on the town with Cass?"

"Huh?" I tilted my head to the side. How on Earth would my brother know about my night?

"Oh, come on, Gigi." He chuckled softly in my ear. "Have you checked your text messages?"

My face twisted into utter bewilderment. "Text messages?"

"You sent me a text message. To which I did attempt to respond, but honestly, I didn't have a clue what in the hell you were talking about."

I tried to recount last night's events, but my brain still had a residual Benadryl fog.

"Check your messages."

I tapped the screen, putting Will on speaker, while I scrolled through my text conversations.

Me: WILL CAN AN OC GIVE A BENNY!*&

Will: I'd like to buy a vowel, Pat.

Will: Gigi? Hello????

Will: Your Masturbation Camp PTSD is flaring again, isn't it?

Will: You're going to be so fucking sick in the morning.

Will: Seriously, text me if you need anything. I'm pulling an all-nighter in the ER.

Masturbation Camp. My adolescent nightmare that Will won't let me forget about.

Since my mother was a sex therapist, my introduction to sexual health was not the norm. Three days after my thirteenth birthday, I got my period. While most mothers took their daughters to the drug store to buy pads or tampons, my mother signed me up for Camp Love Yourself.

Before your mind wanders to weird and disturbing places, I should explain that we weren't sitting around naked, diddling ourselves to Justin Timberlake music videos.

It was a two-week summer camp focused around teaching teenage girls about sex education, as well as encouraging girls to explore their sexuality in a healthy and safe way. Which explained why my older brother called it "Masturbation Camp."

My empowered and liberated mother was a strong advocate for Camp Love Yourself and their pro rub-yourself stance. "A few rounds of masturbation a day keeps the babies away, Georgia Rose. It's proven that you're less likely to give in to your teenage hormones if you're exploring your sexuality through healthy, self-love methods."

Needless to say, my experience at "Masturbation Camp" had been about as horrifying and awkward as you'd expect.

It had taken me a good three years to get past the emotional trauma from sitting around a campfire, singing "Kumbaya" with counselor Feather (yes, that was her legal name), while she encouraged us to roast vagina-shaped marshmallows for s'mores. This was one of those life moments where, even ten or fifteen years down the road, I was still wondering if it had really happened.

"Seriously, Wilbur? How many years are you gonna hold on to the Masturbation Camp bit?"

“Forever,” he responded, laughing. “That shit will never get old.”

I sighed. “You’re the world’s worst older brother, you know that?”

The insult deflected off of him with ease.

“So, what in the hell were you up to last night?”

Glancing down at the text messages between Will and me, memories from last night hijacked my brain, taking it hostage.

The dance. That kiss. My lips. Benadryl. Kline’s bed.

My jaw hit the terrace, my eyes going wide in shock. The details were hazy, but the basics stood out enough to worry me.

Did I really get naked in his bed last night?

“Gigi? You still there?”

Moments and snapshots from twelve or so hours prior flooded my head. *“I’m sexy and naked and ready to fornicate.”*

“Oh, no.” I covered my mouth with my hand.

“What’s wrong?”

“Bye, Will.”

“Hey! Wha—”

I ended the call. I didn’t have time for his shenanigans or the hour-long physician’s lecture that would have occurred had I told him about my allergic reaction. No doubt, Will would’ve been furious I didn’t go to the emergency room last night.

This moment required an immediate call to Cassie. The line rang three times before she answered, her voice drugged with sleep. “It’s kind of early, Wheorgie.”

Forgoing pleasantries, I dove right into my current situation, highlighting the main points. My ramble lasted a good three minutes, only pausing to take a quick breath between run-on sentences.

“So, what you’re telling me is that your date with Kline started off great, until you had an allergic reaction and your face

ballooned up like a blimp? And then you chugged a bottle of Benadryl, got naked in his bed, and attempted to hand him your lady flower, but you guys just ended up eating pizza instead?”

“It sounds even worse when you repeat it back to me,” I whined.

“Where are you right now?”

“I’m in his apartment, standing outside on the terrace so he can’t hear me freaking the fuck out.”

“And you stayed at his place last night?”

“Yeah, I woke up in his bed this morning.”

“Did he try to usher your ass out of his bed the second you woke up?”

I shook my head. She didn’t respond.

“See, the way phone conversations work, is that you actually have to say the words out loud.”

“You’re such a pain in the ass,” I retorted. “And no, he didn’t try to push me out of bed and send me packing. He was actually pretty sweet.”

“I’m not sure what the problem is, then.”

“Are you serious?” I shouted. “I’m mortified, Cass! I pretty much made a fool out of myself last night! I don’t even—”

“Hey,” she interrupted my rant.

“What?” I snapped back.

“Take a breath and think this over,” she coaxed, her voice cool and calm. “Sure, things didn’t go as planned, *but*...you’re still at his apartment. He’s not acting weird. He didn’t try to shove you out the door. Right?”

I nodded.

“I’m assuming you’re nodding your head, so I shall continue,” she said, amusement highlighting her voice. “You have two options here, Georgie. You can either grab your shit and make a beeline for the door and continue to stew in your

mortification back at our apartment. Or you can get some tits and go in there and demand a re-do.”

“A re-do?”

“Demand you finish that amazing kiss. Or, you know, turn that sexy lip-lock into something else. Something more *orally* challenging.”

I ran through my options. I could either let self-doubt rule my brain or walk back into his apartment and show him what a confident, self-assured woman looks like when she’s ready to take what she wants.

“You’re right,” I agreed, steadfast in my decision. “Embarrassment can go fuck itself. It’s time for a re-do.”

“That’s my girl.”

“I love you, Casshead.”

“Love you too,” she responded, a smile in her voice. “Now, stop wasting time and go in there and kiss the hell out of Big-dicked Brooks.”

“Okay, that’s my cue to end this call,” I teased. “Have fun snapping pics of muscly men.”

“Oh, the fun has already been had, my dear. I plan on having even more fun tonight, *without* a lens in front of my face.”

I smiled, my nerves finally at ease. “I miss your crazy ass.”

“Miss you too, sweet cheeks. Call me later and let me know how things went.”

“You got it.”

“But make sure it’s tomorrow because I’m about to be balls deep in my best impression of a rodeo queen. The Italian Stallion—”

“I’m hanging up now!”

Her laugh was the last thing I heard as I tapped end on the call.

Turning for the door, I stopped mid-step, my eyes meeting my reflection in the glass panes. I did a quick once-over, taking inventory of my current state. My hair was a little askew,

pulled up in a messy bun. My legs peeked out from beneath Kline's Harvard cotton tee. My ass was covered by a pair of white cotton boy shorts. It wasn't my sexiest of days, but I didn't look awful. And surprisingly, my lips had gone back to their normal size.

I sniffed the collar of his t-shirt, and despite the clean scent, remnants of his cologne managed to linger on the freshly laundered material. *God, he really did smell good.* Kline just might have been my very own aphrodisiac.

I wanted him. And I was hell-bent on taking what I wanted.

Walking through the doors, I left any inkling of self-doubt on the terrace, finding him shirtless, standing at the sink of his master bathroom. His perfect ass was clad in boxer briefs and nothing else, wide shoulders on display, muscles stretching as he brushed his teeth. His biceps flexed as he finished up, turning off the sink.

His body was perfect. Defined with just enough bulk. Smooth skin sweetened the deal, leading from his muscular shoulders to his defined pectorals. I wanted to trace the lines with my tongue. He didn't shave or wax his chest like guys on magazine covers. No, Kline Brooks was a *man*. A beautiful, sexy man with a natural smattering of dark hair on his chest. His abdomen was defined with ridges and hard lines that led down into a glorious V, and a soft, just barely noticeable trail of hair paved a path from his belly button to territory I'd have had to remove his boxer briefs to see.

I wanted to lick that happy trail, spend some time there, make a fucking day out of it.

My body was getting way too excited over the possibilities.

Cool it, Georgia. Slow your horny roll.

I wanted a re-do of our first kiss, not the beginning of a porno flick.

Cornflower blue eyes, with the tiniest bit of yellow lining the contrasting black pupils, met mine in the mirror. "Everything okay?"

I nodded, moving toward the sink and plucking his just-used toothbrush from the holder. Without hesitation, I made myself at home, putting a glob of toothpaste on the bristles and going to town on cleaning my teeth.

Kline watched with amusement.

“You don’t mind, do you?” I asked after two circuits on my top teeth.

“Not at all,” he responded, smirking. That perfect ass of his found the edge of the sink as he continued to observe.

“I need a favor,” I stated, turning off the sink and wiping my face with the hand towel.

“Favor?”

“Uh-huh. It’s a mighty big favor, but there’s a possibility it will benefit you greatly.”

“I’m all ears, Benny girl.” He winked, amused with my new nickname. Though I was less impressed with his creativity than he was, I still felt a tingle.

“Do you have an iPod dock anywhere in the apartment?”

His gaze turned intrigued. “In my bedroom, on the dresser beside the terrace doors.”

“Perfect,” I said over my shoulder, walking that direction.

He followed me, sitting on the bed, while I set my phone in the dock and found the perfect re-do song.

The Drifters’ “Some Kind of Wonderful” filled the room.

“I know this wasn’t the song we heard after our dance,” I pointed out, shrugging, “but it’s my favorite ‘Some Kind of Wonderful.’”

“Hmm, I don’t know. The first version seemed pretty good to me.” He tapped his chin thoughtfully. “I can relate to the lyrics.”

I put a hand on my hip. “Is that so?”

He nodded. “I think most men come to a point in their lives where the concept of one right woman above all other things

seems logical—warranted, even.”

I swooned. Head, heart, stomach—my entire body was in on it.

“Well, this is *my* show, so this is our some kind of wonderful for right now.”

Kline grinned.

My bare feet moved across the soft carpet, stopping once my knees tapped his. “Stand up, please.” I gestured with my hand. “I want a re-do. I want to finish what we started, *before* you tried to kill me with lime juice.” A teasing smirk crested my lips.

“I did not try to kill you,” he said through a chuckle, getting to his feet. “But, I *am* saying yes to the favor.”

Blue-tinted tenderness gazed down at me, while strong hands slipped under cotton, finding the curve of my hips.

“I’m sorry I ruined our date last night,” I whispered.

“You didn’t ruin anything.”

I cocked a disagreeing brow.

“Georgie, I had an amazing time.” He touched my cheek, warmth spreading across my skin. “And I’d do it all over again. Allergic reaction and Benny high, I’d still do it all over again. You’re pretty damn adorable when you’re buzzing on antihistamines.”

Good Lord, I can only imagine the kind of crazy things that were coming out of my mouth last night...

Self-doubt could be a real tricky bitch. Even when you thought you had her under control, she found a way to creep back in, making you analyze everything. Despite my earlier confidence, I had reached that moment.

“Please, don’t remind me of anything I said or did. I have enough embarrassment stocked up to last a lifetime.” I groaned, burying my face in his bare chest.

Kline consumed me in a hug. He held me for a long moment, shouldering my mortification. Lips found my ear and

whispered, “Do you want to know something?”

“What?” I asked, my voice muffled against his skin.

“I’m glad you’re here.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, Benny girl, and now, I’m ready for our re-do.”

I leaned back, staring up at him. The man I’d come to know as Mr. Brooks, CEO and well-known mogul of the online dating industry, was morphing into someone different. He wasn’t just the serious man whose life solely revolved around business. He was funny and sweet and lived in the moment. He wasn’t the flashy, ostentatious billionaire I pictured living in a million-dollar apartment. He was practical and humble, so damn humble. He was someone I wanted to spend more time with. He was someone I could see myself *falling* for.

He wasn’t Mr. Brooks anymore. He was Kline, the man I wanted to take a *real* chance on. It shocked me how little time it took to recognize the difference.

I slid my hands up his back, savoring the feel of his toned and smooth skin. Gripping the nape of his neck, I rocked my feet forward, standing tippy-toed. Desperate to feel his mouth on mine, I made the first move, slowly, softly, pressing my lips to his and coaxing a kiss from him.

He responded with fervor, sliding his tongue across my bottom lip and then slipping it inside my mouth to dance with mine. In a matter of seconds, our kiss turned heated, hands groping, tongues clashing. Kline gripped the cotton material covering my skin and removed it from my body, tossing it haphazardly across the room.

My breasts pressed against his chest as he pulled me closer. I moaned into his mouth when his hands met the curve of my back, sliding to my ass and slipping under my boy shorts. He gripped my bare skin for a beat before slipping his hands back up the curve of my spine, leaving my underwear back in place in his wake.

It was a crazy-hot move.

“Get on the bed, Georgie,” he demanded, turning our bodies and guiding me toward the mattress.

I lay back, staring up at him. Uncertainty started to sneak in. I was worried he might expect more out of this moment than I was prepared to give. But the way he was looking at me—it was enough to make me forget my own name. Light blue eyes took in every inch of my exposed skin, darkening closer to navy by the second.

I couldn't think about anything else besides him touching me.

He rested his hands beside my head, body hovering above mine. His tongue licked a line down my jaw, to my neck, until his lips were sucking a sensual path between my breasts.

“Now, *I* need a favor,” he whispered against my skin. “Let me taste you, sweet girl.” He sucked a nipple into his mouth, his skilled tongue eliciting panting breaths from my lungs. “Let me taste every inch of this perfect body. Let me hear what you sound like when you come.”

“Yes. God, yes,” I whimpered.

He grinned against my skin, fingers sliding down my stomach until they found my boy shorts, slipping them down my legs and off my body. Strong hands gripped my thighs, spreading and baring me to his heated gaze.

“You are so beautiful.”

He kneeled between my legs, slipping a finger between my lips and sliding through my arousal. “You're soaked and so fucking soft. I want to lick up and down every part of this.” His finger traveled the slit and flicked the clit at the top for emphasis. “I'm hard just thinking about how good you'll taste.”

Nerves started to fill my stomach with second thoughts. He didn't know I was a virgin. And I knew, even though I was really into him, I wasn't ready to take that kind of step. “Kline,” I whispered, my voice too shaky and quiet for him to hear.

“Now this is the kind of pussy a guy can get along with,” he said, flashing a wink in my direction.

And just like that, his playfulness washed my worries out to sea.

“Just how good of friends are you?” I asked.

He smiled. The bastard.

“I know *her* really well.”

My eyes narrowed, and he smiled harder.

“But it’s the kind of friendship built on trust and respect, and I *never* have more than one friend at a time.”

God, this man. He didn’t even know how good he was for me.

“That’s good to hear because this pussy doesn’t have more than one friend at a time either. And she demands respect and trust before letting anyone *all the way in*.”

“Duly noted.” He ran his tongue up the inside of my thigh. “Let the record show, I’m the kind of man who doesn’t rush things. I like to take my time and savor every moment, *every single inch*.” He moved to the other leg, repeating the same sexy-as-hell move. “And, Georgia?”

“Yeah?”

He slipped a finger inside of me and out again before sliding it into his mouth. He moaned audibly and closed his eyes. “You’re going to melt on my tongue.”

Holy hell.

“I think I’m already melting,” I whimpered, my head falling back on the bed.

“No, baby, you haven’t even started to melt yet,” he whispered, moving his tongue against me.

God, it felt so good. So fucking good.

I swallowed my moans, gripping the sheet for support. It was intense. My orgasm was building far quicker and stronger than anything I’d experienced. My legs and hips shook as he sucked my clit into his mouth, his tongue working me into a frenzy.

But he didn’t let up.

He gripped my thighs, keeping me spread wide for his ministrations.

My fingers found his hair while my hips moved of their own accord, grinding against his mouth, riding his tongue.

This was the hottest round of oral I'd ever received in my life.

He repeatedly built me up, only to slow things down when I got too close.

He wasn't racing to get me off; *no*, he was savoring every second. He told me how good I tasted and how hard he was just from watching me slowly lose control. He told me how sexy I was and how he never wanted to stop.

"Please, Kline. Oh fuck, please," I begged. I didn't even know what I was begging for. I wanted him to get me off—*badly*—yet I never wanted this to end.

"My greedy girl." He sucked harder and my back bowed off the bed.

"Oh, God," I moaned.

"Do me a favor, Georgie. When you come, don't hold back. I *need* to hear your sounds."

"Yes. Yes. Yes," I chanted, too consumed with the orgasm about to pull me under. Hell, he could've asked me to put on a top hat and sing the "Star Spangled Banner" when I came. I would've agreed to anything in that moment. Though, that might have made things a little more awkward.

He grabbed my breasts, caressing the pliant flesh possessively, while his mouth pushed me toward the edge.

My eyes rolled back, gasping breaths escaping my lungs.

"Say it," he demanded.

I moaned, moving my hands to his hair and gripping the strands for leverage. My hips had a mind of their own, grinding into this face with reckless abandon.

"Fucking *say it*, sweet girl." The sexy growl to his voice was enough to push me over.

“Yes! Kline! I’m coming!” My body lost control—legs shaking, lungs gasping for breaths. My pulse roared in my ears.

I didn’t just melt. I *dissolved*. And I gave him my sounds. I’m not sure *what* sounds, but I remember shouting, “*This is the best orgasm of my life!*” at some point.

I’m pretty sure I lost consciousness for a moment, only to be stirred when strong hands cradled my body, adjusting me on the bed so my head rested comfortably on the pillows.

My eyelids fluttered opened to find a smirking Kline staring down at me.

He pressed a kiss to my mouth. “Thank you. That was the best orgasm of my life too,” he said softly against my lips.

His mouth crested into a wry grin as he stood, adjusting himself in his briefs. He was hard and standing at attention, making his appearance the hottest, most obscene thing I’d ever laid eyes on.

“Now, I think it’s time for breakfast. Eggs and bacon sound good to you?”

I glanced down at his crotch, shocked by the nonchalant tone of his voice. His dick was saluting me, yet he didn’t seem the least bit affected by his current *situation*.

“But you’re, uh, hard.” And I mean fucking hard. That soldier was ready for all-out war.

“Seems to be a common occurrence when you’re around.” He winked and walked toward the doorway, only to shout, “Meet me in the kitchen, Benny girl!” over his shoulder as he strode out of the bedroom.

Did he just...? He did, didn’t he?

Orgasms never helped my eloquence with words, but Kline Brooks was a giver.

Like whoa.

This wasn’t the norm. We’d all been with the norm. The guys who would only go down on you because they were expecting

some sort of oral exchange. Once you'd gotten your rocks off, they were flashing slanty-eyed glances toward their dicks, waiting for you to return the favor. They'd do everything just short of shoving their crotch in your face. They'd rattle off options like an auctioneer: *Blow job? Hand job? Just hold it for a minute? Let me hold your tit while I jerk off?*

They might as well have had flashing neon arrows pointing to their pants or, better yet, taken out a piece of paper and drawn a "here is my dick" treasure map, just in case we might have forgotten where the male member was located.

But Kline hadn't done that.

He'd straight up licked me into an orgasm and then said, "Thank you."

He had thanked *me* for letting him go down on me.

I'd never claimed to be a genius, but I was pretty sure Kline Brooks had just *wham, bam, and you can thank me, ma'amed* me.

It was the sexiest fucking thing I'd ever experienced.

Chapter Sixteen

Kline

Uncomfortable was too cushy a word to describe the kind of hell I was in right now. Hard and engorged, my ax was ready to chop some fucking wood, and because of the redistribution of blood flow, my brain was having a hard time explaining why it couldn't.

It wasn't that I didn't want to, that was for goddamn sure. But Georgie's overall discomfort was easy enough to read. I knew she'd enjoyed my mouth on her—I doubted as much as I had—but she would have reciprocated out of duty or expectation. And honestly, the first time she sucked my cock, I wanted it to be because she *wanted* to. Because she couldn't fucking stand not to.

Gripping the base tight through my underwear, I fought to stop the pulsing and bring it even a little bit of relief.

When the fiery depths of hell felt more like the heat of Death Valley, I rearranged myself into the best position and got to work digging out a skillet to make some omelets.

Eggs, turkey bacon, and cheese, I lined the basic ingredients up on the counter and put some cooking spray in the bottom of the skillet. Poised to crack the first egg directly into the waiting heat, I had a flashing memory of Georgia's swollen face last night and panicked. The egg nearly slipped from my hand, a completely graceless juggle the only thing that saved it.

I needed to do an allergy rundown with her before I even considered preparing any kind of food products.

I rounded the counter to ask her, but stopped abruptly in my tracks when she came sauntering out of my bedroom naked. She was like a new woman, confidence and determination fueling her stride as she ate up the distance between us.

My dick backtracked, immediately swelling with the excitement I'd spent the last several minutes trying to calm.

"Georgie?" I asked as she beared down on me, wondering what was on her mind while my dick prayed whatever it was would end in some form of attention.

She didn't say anything as she planted a hand on my naked chest and pushed me back until the top of my ass hit the edge of the island counter.

The heat of her palm scorched my skin and the look of her body did the same to my eyes. I couldn't focus on one place, my eyes bouncing and bounding from one glorious part of her to the next.

Everything lost focus when she sank to her knees, the room around me blurring so badly I nearly passed out.

"Georgie," I called again, hoping she'd give me something to ease my mind. A look, a comment—anything to put my racing thoughts at ease enough that I could do nothing but enjoy whatever she intended to do. I didn't want to be the guy who said the standard, "You don't have to," at the same time that I was thinking, *Oh yeah, you do* inside—because that was how it worked. But I did want some kind of reassurance that neither of us would regret this.

Finally, her eyes met mine, and she licked her lips as she shoved her hands into the waistband of my boxer briefs, sliding them down with her palms flat against my skin the whole way.

Fuckkkk. Me.

"Mmm," she hummed in anticipation, leaning forward and taking the whole head in her mouth. Just like that. *Right in her fucking mouth.*

Gun to my head, that moment, my cock would have been known as The Grinch. Because that fucker up and swelled to twice its size in the matter of a heartbeat.

"Good God," I breathed, my neck craning back in ecstasy.

She hummed at that, the vibration in her throat coating my skin along with the wet and warmth. I put my hands on the counter to stop from gripping her hair.

This ride was hers, and I was merely a passenger. So many times, women play to what they think a man wants, defaulting to him rather than owning their ability.

I'll let you in on the fucking secret—absolutely nothing I could ask her to do would be as good as letting her surprise me.

She slid her mouth down as far as it would go and back, leaving a coat of moisture behind. The chilled air tingled the skin she unsheathed and shot straight to my tightening balls.

Her hand must have sensed it or something, shooting out to cup them at the perfect pressure, just between timid and crushing, rolling each of them between her fingers like a goddamn sac expert.

My legs started to shake, but I fought it, scared she'd stop to ask if I was okay or if I needed to change positions.

A swirl of her tongue at the tip later, she took me inside again, pushing the flat of her tongue against the underside and tapping it in a rapid rhythm. Up and down she worked me, adding her free hand at the base and mesmerizing me with a frenzy-inducing twist.

My mind raced and blanked at once, knowing the cum was coming and working overtime to find the faculties to actually tell her.

“Baby,” I groaned, finally letting my hand shoot out to grip her hair. I pulled it up with a jerk, but took care not to be too rough or startle her.

Her eyes fucking destroyed me when they met mine, eating me alive with the same intensity as her mouth. She was swallowing my fucking dick like it was her last meal and she'd had a goddamn choice of the whole menu.

I couldn't hold back anymore.

“Oh shit. Oh *fuck*. I'm gonna come. *Ahhh*, God.”

She sucked harder instead of letting go, pushing me to get there faster with a strum of her fingers at my balls.

I didn't think I usually came that fast, but the surprise had everything fucked. My stamina, my mind—my ability to form complete sentences. Gone.

When the last jerk subsided, she soothed me with her tongue, sliding her loose hand up and down the shaft slowly.

“Mmm,” she moaned again, nearly knocking me on my ass. “You taste good too.”

I would never, *ever* be able to look at this woman without remembering this moment. Not for my entire life. I was fucking sure of it.

I was equally sure, as one of her greatest fears centered around being able to maintain a professional relationship with me in a work environment, she would *not* want to hear that.

She got to her feet slowly, but I sped up the process, grabbing her by the hips and slamming her naked body directly into mine. My slowly softening cock rested between our bellies, and my lips sought hers.

I fought the primal urge to eat her alive, though, teasing her tongue with mine in a sweet dance of thank-you instead.

I wanted her to feel cherished and fucking appreciated. Her bottom lip swelled in my mouth with the pressure of my suction, so I soothed it with my tongue immediately upon its release.

She moaned in my mouth, hard and deep and needy, and I took it as my completely ass backwards cue to break the kiss. My hands had already found their way to her ass, and I knew if I didn't stop now, I'd end up pushing her into something she really *wasn't* ready for.

“Go put on a shirt, baby,” I ordered softly, and then offered, “Take a shower if you want to.”

The shy girl was just under the surface, clearing the fog of lust, and I knew she'd much rather succumb to it in the privacy

of my room or the shower than have to live through it in front of me.

I pressed a soft peck to the corner of her lips and inhaled the smell of the skin of her cheek with my nose. *Subtly sweet like a rose surrounded by apples.*

“I’ll finish making breakfast,” I said into her skin before pulling away. “You’re not allergic to anything other than lime juice, are you?”

She smiled slightly before shaking her head.

“Good. I’ll turn the bacon and eggs into omelets, then.”

“Kline?” she asked, ignoring my rundown and sliding her hand up my neck to the juncture of my jaw. My throat tightened and my pulse beat double time as her thumb brushed the line of it.

“Yeah, Benny?”

“Thanks.” One soft kiss to my lips later, she turned and retreated to my bedroom and all I could do was watch as she went, my boxer briefs still twisted around my ankles.

I was fucked—really and truly fucked—when it came to Georgia Cummings.

* * *

“Omelet’s ready,” I called through the closed bathroom door after making a quick stop in my closet to put on a pair of jersey shorts until I showered. I was still sticky with the evidence of Georgia’s performance, so I opted to go commando underneath them until I could rectify it—this billionaire’s apartment only had one bathroom.

I expected her to call something back through the door, but she opened it instead, stepping into the doorway and nearly into me with wet hair, a towel around her body.

With a mind of its own, my hand reached out to wipe away the lingering drop of water on the top swell of her breast. She shivered.

I felt downright needy for more contact. Hugs, hand holding—I didn't give a fuck. I just wanted to touch her, and I wanted to do it all day.

“Spend the day with me,” I blurted.

“Kline—”

“No,” I interrupted. “Don't say no.”

She smiled, a tiny laugh coating my skin as she tilted her head to the side just slightly. “I wasn't going to.”

“Good,” I breathed in relief.

“But I do need to go home first. I need clothes. Preferably ones that fit and don't smell like you.” She held up a hand before I got defensive, admitting softly, “It's distracting.”

“Fine,” I agreed easily, countering, “But I'm going with you. Last time I let you arrive separately, you were forty-five minutes late.”

Her face pinched in annoyance.

I leaned forward and pressed my lips to hers, smoothing it away just as fast. Without moving back, I spoke my parting words right against her lips. “Any other time I'd be patient, baby, but today, when it comes to spending time with you, I find I'm a little less willing to wait.”

Chapter Seventeen

Georgia

“Cokes from a vending machine? Hot dogs from a vendor? What’s next, Mr. Spontaneity?” I nudged him with my shoulder.

He shrugged, taking the last bite of his mustard and relish-covered dog. “I didn’t really have a plan. I just wanted to make sure you spent the day with me.”

Night was settling over the city, streetlights glittering the pavement with their soft glow. We had spent the day riding the subway and making stops at random. Kline would ask me a question and my answer was what decided our next stop.

Favorite place to relax? A stroll through Central Park.

Favorite childhood memory? Feeding ducks at the Brooklyn zoo.

Dinner was outside of MoMA, after we had spent most of the evening browsing Picasso’s sculptures and Jackson Pollock’s beautiful landscapes. He had kissed me slow and deep, fogging my brain with memories of this morning. Kline waited until he had me good and turned on, then pulled away, nonchalantly asking what sounded good for dinner.

The horny side of me quickly responded, “Well, I *really* enjoyed breakfast this morning.”

“You want bacon and eggs again?”

“No,” I answered, standing on my tiptoes and kissing a sensual path along his jaw. Using my teeth to tug at his earlobe, I whispered, “That wasn’t my favorite part of breakfast.”

And that’s how we ended up at a street vendor outside of MoMA, ordering hot dogs. The cheeky bastard had made sure to order us footlongs, adding, “Just trying to get the size right.”

He found a bench, pulling me down into his lap. “Let’s eat, Benny girl,” he said, kissing my forehead and setting dinner in my hands.

I ate my footlong, enjoying every second of being in his company. Pedestrians meandered past us. Taxis sped by in their usual hurry. But the world didn’t exist in that moment. I was too busy savoring every soft kiss to my cheek and handsome smile flashed in my direction.

“This might have been better than breakfast.” I took my last bite, moaning.

He tickled my ribs with his free hand. “I never pegged you as a liar, Ms. Cummings.”

“Who said I was lying?” I winked.

“You got a little something, right here.” He wiped a drop of ketchup from the corner of my mouth, sucking it off his finger and wagging his brows. “Always so fucking good.”

I laughed, shoving his shoulder playfully. “All right, dirty boy, what’s next on the agenda?”

Helping me to my feet, he grinned. “I’ve got an idea, but I need to know if you’re ready to be a little wild.”

“How wild?” I questioned, a sassy hand on my hip.

He tossed our empty bottles and napkins in the trash.

“Crazy, insane kind of wild.” His eyes turned serious. He grabbed my hips, guiding me toward a vacant alley and gently pushing my back against a brick wall. “Can you handle getting a little crazy with me?”

I nodded, smiling up at him.

He pressed a kiss to mouth. “Are you sure, Benny girl? Because I can’t have you chickening out last minute.”

“Are you calling me out?”

“Are you too scared to take the challenge?”

I bit his bottom lip, my teeth tugging playfully. “I’ll take any challenge you throw my way.”

“Is that so?”

“You bet your tight ass it is.”

“I’ve got fifteen dollars *and* a striptease that says you’ll chicken out.”

“I’ll see your bet and raise you an orgasm.”

His mouth met mine again, his tongue slipping past my lips. He kissed me passionately, sliding his hands into my hair and taking control. His lips coaxed a moan from my throat, only to leave me disappointed when he pulled away, smirking like the devil.

“Game on, baby.” He grabbed my hand, leading me back onto the sidewalk. “Oh, and I want you wearing heels. Sexy fucking heels that’ll blow my mind.”

I giggled, shaking my head. “You better prepare yourself because I’m demanding Channing Tatum-like dance moves. I’m talking pelvic thrusts and lots of grinding action.”

We took the subway until Kline ushered us off at Midtown East. Ten minutes later, we were standing in front of ONE UN—a prestigious hotel in the business of catering to the rich and famous.

“Are we schmoozing with diplomats tonight?”

He chuckled. “No, but we’re definitely going to get a little wet.”

I raised a curious brow as he led us through the lobby and to a bank of elevators hidden on the eastern side of the facility.

The ride was quick, and once we reached our apparent destination, we hopped off and walked hand in hand past a reception desk. A twenty-something-year-old girl glanced up from her laptop, offering a simple, “Enjoy your workout,” and resumed typing. She didn’t question our motives, seemingly oblivious to the fact that we were basically breaking in to their facility.

I started to get a little nervous as Kline led me through a locker room. He held open a glass door, ushering me toward an

indoor pool. The water was enticing, lights still on and glowing beneath the clear water.

“Uh?” I asked, glancing around.

We were the only ones there, but a white sign with big red letters instructed us why.

No one permitted in the pool area after nine o'clock.

It was half past ten.

The sign also stated, Members only pool. Police will be contacted in the event this rule is violated.

Hefty warning for an indoor pool, right? Yeah, but remember, this hotel wasn't just any hotel. It was adjacent to the United Nations Headquarters. When I'd joked about schmoozing with diplomats, I hadn't been kidding.

Kline took off his shoes and socks, setting them on a chair.

“Uh, what are you doing?”

“I'm getting ready to hop in the pool,” he responded, unbuckling his belt. “You're joining me, right?”

“Pretty sure I don't have a bathing suit.” I glanced down at my attire—jeans, a cotton tank top, a light cotton sweater, and brown leather flats.

“But I thought you said you wanted to be a little wild?” he asked, amusement in his voice.

“Yeah, but...” I paused when he unzipped his jeans and slid them down his legs.

“But...what?” He looked up, his eyes filled with a playful edge.

“We're not even supposed to be in here,” I whispered, even though no one outside of the pool could hear me. “And you want me to what? Go for a dip in my bra and panties?”

He shrugged off his shirt. “You could always go without.”

My jaw dropped. “You want me to skinny-dip? In a pool that we're not even supposed to be in?”

“Are you getting ready to chicken out?” Kline taunted. His gorgeous body was on full display, only boxers covering his muscular thighs.

“No,” I retorted.

He cocked a brow. “Are you sure? Because it kind of looks like you’re ready to jet.”

I narrowed my eyes.

“Get ready to strip, baby.” A grin covered his lips. “And don’t forget the heels.”

His smug confidence had me changing my tune. I wasn’t usually the type of girl to break rules, but I also wasn’t the type of girl to back down from a bet.

My stubborn side won the battle for supremacy.

I kicked off my flats and moved toward the pool. My jeans, cardigan, and tank top were removed in quick fashion and discarded onto an empty chair. “Get ready to pay up.” I strode to the deep end, staring at his amused expression from across the water. I unclasped my bra and shimmied out of my panties, tossing them in his direction. With a sweet, devious little smile, I said, “Remember, I want lots of pelvic thrusting action,” and then dove into the pool.

After savoring the warmth of the water, I broke the surface, resting my arms on the ledge, and grinned back at Kline. “Put your money where your mouth is, Brooks.”

He laughed, sliding off his boxer briefs and turning around. He started humming a striptease beat, glancing at me over his shoulder and grinning playfully. Kline proceeded to pelvic thrust, his hands resting behind his head and his grin turning cocky with each punch forward, not an ounce of embarrassment on his face. He was visibly enjoying himself, loving the growing smile on my lips, and he was crazy adorable yet insanely hot at the same time. I watched his tight ass and muscular thighs flex with each circuit. He kept it up until my giggles turned loud and uncontrolled.

He dove into the pool, slicing through the water in succinct maneuvers. He moved toward me, his hands finding my hips

and signaling him that he had reached his target.

When he broke the surface, his face hovered mere inches from mine. Water dripped from his eyelashes, down his cheeks, and clung to the very tips of his spiky wet hair. “Are you ready to shove twenty-dollar bills in my g-string?”

“Eh, maybe *one* dollar bills?” I teased.

“One-dollar bills?” he asked. “Baby, I recall a lot of pelvic action back there.”

“Yeah, *but...*” I sighed “...I didn’t get the full-frontal experience.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “I’ll make note that you’re a fan of full frontal.”

I smiled, my cheeks damn near bursting with amusement.

He wrapped his arms around my waist, moving us in the water. It rippled into tiny waves around our bodies. “You know what you’re not a fan of?” he asked, brow quirking.

“Small wieners?”

His chest vibrated against my skin, laughter spilling from his lips. “Besides that. I’m well aware you’ve got an appetite for nothing smaller than a footlong.”

I giggled, savoring his teasing smile. “Tell me, Brooks, what am I not a fan of?”

“Emergency rooms.”

I tilted my head to the side, perplexed.

“You were really fucking adorable last night, slap-happy and high on Benny, but before you got to that point, I was worried.” His forehead touched mine. “I wanted to take you to St. Luke’s, but you’re pretty damn stubborn.”

The look in his eyes warmed my stomach. I couldn’t imagine, didn’t want to imagine, the kind of shape I had been in last night. I could recall bits and pieces here and there, but for the most part, it seemed like a hazy dream. It had been our first real date. We barely knew each other outside of work, yet Kline hadn’t hesitated to take care of me. He hadn’t freaked

out or gotten embarrassed that his date looked ridiculous. Because, let's face it, I'd looked insane. Like someone had given me botched plastic surgery kind of crazy.

Last night, Kline hadn't been focused on anything but making sure I was okay.

And it was apparent, he really was worried.

Those were not the actions of a man whose intentions were less than genuine.

He was different from anyone I had ever met, in the best way. In the span of forty-eight hours, he had somehow gained a large part of my trust. I wasn't skeptical or scrutinizing his every word; I was merely enjoying feeling safe and cherished in his presence.

"My brother is an ER resident at St. Luke's. He just so happened to be working a twenty-four-hour call shift last night," I explained.

"*Oh*," he said, understanding in his voice. "Now it makes sense."

"Yeah," I said, shrugging. "He's my older brother. My only sibling. And even though my lips were about to consume my face, no way in hell was I going to give him that kind of ammunition." If I thought Will still bringing up "Masturbation Camp" was bad, my arriving in his ER looking like a blowfish would have made that never-ending joke look easy.

"Do you have any siblings?" I asked, curious to know more about him. The short amount of time we'd spent together outside of the office had me realizing every preconceived notion I'd had about Kline was dead wrong. Hell, his small, quaint apartment was evidence of that. It truly was not the kind of flashy, extravagant place I'd pictured him living in. Sure, it was nice, but it looked more like a place I would live in, not someone who had grossed nearly a billion dollars last year with just TapNext alone.

He shook his head. "Only child."

"What are your parents like?"

“My mom is a meddler, but she means well. She’s actually the reason Walter is at my apartment.”

“Don’t you dare say anything bad about Walter,” I teased, pointing my finger at him.

“You try living with that asshole for a few weeks and see how it goes.”

“He is *not* an asshole. He’s a big, fluffy sweetheart,” I defended my feline friend, fighting the urge to grin.

Kline scoffed. “Yeah, he is. He’s the world’s worst cat.”

“Stop talking about my buddy Walter like that!”

“I’ll be more than happy to gift him to you. I can have his shit packed up and ready to go tonight,” he challenged.

“Tell me more about your parents.” I laughed, choosing to change the subject before I ended up with a new roommate.

“My father is an old school Irish Catholic who loves beer and offers a constant supply of dad jokes. Even though they drive me crazy sometimes, Maureen and Bob are pretty wonderful.”

There was a soft kindness in his voice that showed how much he adored his folks. “What about your parents?”

“My dad is a sweetheart, but he’s a total ballbuster. He has to be to keep my crazy mother on her toes.”

“Crazy mother?”

“My mom is a sex therapist. She’s just about as quirky as it gets.”

“Sex therapist?” he asked, smirking. “I did not expect that one.”

“It’s not really a common profession.”

“Wait...your mom’s last name is Cummings, right?”

“Yes.” I nodded, already knowing where he was going with this. “Dr. Savannah Cummings is my mother, the sex therapist extraordinaire. As if it wasn’t hard enough growing up with Cummings as your last name.”

“No wonder you’re so good at blow jobs,” he teased.

I shoved him away, mouthing, *Pervert*.

“Only for you.” He chuckled, pulling me close again. Our bare chests were pressed against each other. Water droplets slipped down my skin, and my nipples hardened instantly.

“Do you even know how sexy you are?” His eyes met the curve of my breasts peeking above the waterline. Strong hands slid from my hips to my ribs until they moved around my back and caressed my ass. “Baby, you drive me fucking insane.”

My heart tripped. He’d called me *baby*. Sure, he had said it before, but this time, it had just rolled off his tongue with such ease. It was a reflex, *instinctive*. I felt like we were really trying this, trying *us*.

I brushed my lips against his. We weren’t kissing at first, just teasing, breathing the same air. I could smell the chlorine on his skin, the hint of sugar on his lips from the soda we’d shared earlier. I saw my reflection in his pupils, eyes wanton and needy.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of you.” He parted his lips, pressing his mouth to mine. “I’ll never get enough of these perfect cherry lips.” He opened his mouth, sucking on my top lip, my tongue.

Heat pulsed in my lower belly, my heart racing in anticipation.

Kline moved his mouth down my neck to my collarbone and across the curve of my breasts.

I felt the shape of him against my hip, hard and prominent. I reached down to take him into my hand, but he was too quick, gripping my ass and lifting me out of the water and onto the edge of the pool.

He spread my thighs, gazing up at me with wet lashes and hooded eyes. “How many fingers does my wild girl need?” His mouth met my hip, sucking with a force that reddened my sensitive skin.

I had never been so turned on in my life. My body thrummed, blood thundering in my veins, getting off on the illicitness of our location.

And I ached. God, I ached, desperate for more than just his hands. I wanted his mouth on me again.

“Or does she need more? Does she need my lips and tongue to give her what she really wants?”

My head fell back, and I gripped the edge of the pool to hold myself up.

“*Tell me.* Tell me what you need.”

“Your mouth,” I moaned, sliding my legs over his shoulders. “I need your mouth on me.”

He licked a path down my belly. “Hold on tight, baby. This is going to be fast and you’re going to fucking *explode*.”

He ate at my pussy until my body was strung tight with the need to come. I tried to hold out, tried to let the intensity build, but Kline’s mouth was too talented, too fucking good at seducing a climax out of me.

In the distance, heavy footfalls moved toward us. Keys jingled against a hip. I didn’t know where or what or who or how those noises were occurring, my mind stuck somewhere between *suck me harder* and *make me come*.

“Shit,” he mumbled, taking that delicious mouth away from where I needed him the most.

“N-N-No,” I stuttered out my frustration, but it didn’t matter. Kline’s hands were wrapped around my waist, yanking me into the water.

My head spun, shocked from the sudden change in position.

“Shh,” he quieted me, nodding toward the entrance.

My eyes grew wide in horror, realization setting in. The footsteps, the keys, they were coming from the other side of the door. The very doorknob that was being turned.

Fuck. I was going to get arrested for not only breaking and entering, but for public indecency too. The police were going to be called while my body still throbbed between my legs.

“I got you.” He held me tighter. “Hold your breath, baby. We’re going under,” he instructed, just before sliding us

toward a darkened corner and submerging us under the water.

I shut my eyes, held my breath, and prayed to God we wouldn't be seen. Surely, I wasn't going down like *this*, naked in a pool with my boss's cock pressed against my belly.

It really was a fantastic cock, but that was beside the point. Shit was about to hit the fan.

Kline's lips found mine and I felt his smile against my mouth.

Devious bastard.

Trailing his fingers down my belly, he found the spot where I was still slippery and hot. He didn't waste any time, two fingers sliding inside of me while his thumb rubbed my clit.

Seriously? How was he even thinking about getting me off at a time like this?

But did I stop him? *Nope*. My heart pounded in my ears, the needy, orgasm-driven side of me too focused on what he was doing. I wrapped my legs around his hips like the true hussy I was. If we were going to be Bonnie and Clyde tonight, I sure as hell was going to enjoy the ride.

A few seconds later, he floated us to the top, our heads peeking above the waterline, our lungs dragging in much-needed air. The coast was clear, the mystery person no longer in sight. The lights were off, the doors were shut, and Kline was still finger-fucking me, seemingly unfazed by our almost arrest.

"Sweet, dirty, *wild* girl," he whispered in my ear, picking up the pace. "Even when we're thirty seconds away from getting arrested, you still let me slip my fingers inside your pussy. You like this, don't you? You love being bad just for me." He licked the water from the curve of my breasts.

I moaned, my teeth finding his shoulder and biting down.

"Yes, just like that. Christ, baby, when you catch fire, you motherfucking *burn*."

Hot damn, Kline Brooks was a certified, class-A, deserves-the-major-award dirty talker. His words served their purpose,

pushing me straight over the edge and spurring my brilliant response.

“Ho-ly fuck.”

Chapter Eighteen

Kline

Monday night rugby practice was gearing up, but my mind was still on the weekend—laughter and sexiness and a Benadryl-fueled trip through an allergic reaction. The mixture of all three had me smiling to myself.

Georgia Cummings was quickly becoming one of my favorite people. She made me feel high on life and like the world's biggest idiot all at once.

Curiosity about Rose's weekend was the only thing that kept me from thinking about how close I'd come to never experiencing what I had for the last week. Because I wouldn't have traded the last seven days for anything, even if it were to come to an abrupt end tonight. The memories would have been worth it.

Take note, friends. Don't close off any one section of your life from possibility. Fate gives us chances, but we're the ones who have to take them.

A touch of the icon brought the TapNext app to life. Realization swallowed me with an unexpected sense of accomplishment. This thing was my baby. I'd nurtured it, grown with it over the years like a close friend. I'd watched it make mistakes, veer off the path to greatness, but I'd pulled it back and I was proud of what it'd become. A place where people could find almost anything. A place where people who were lucky found something worthwhile like I had.

BAD_Ruck (6:15PM): Hey, Rose. You busy? I'm just curious how the date went. I didn't get to check in with you over the weekend.

I stared at the message window, waiting to see if she would reply. I was just about to give up waiting when the little bubbles popped up on the screen.

TAPRoseNEXT (6:17PM): If avoiding contracting bubonic plague from the passenger next to me can be considered busy, then sure. I'm just on the train on my way back from work.

BAD_Ruck (6:17PM): And the date?

“Put your phone down, K. Everyone is waiting on us,” Thatch shouted.

I looked up to find the team captains still in the middle of the rugby field, known as a pitch, chatting, but I tossed my phone down anyway. Any amount of dawdling would only be cause for Thatch to publicly bust my balls. As my best friend of more than a decade, he had too much ammunition and a specially made gun for the job.

I broke into a jog for extra measure, joining the group of no-good assholes I called my teammates. Sponsorship wasn't necessary for obvious reasons, but we played the league on the straight and narrow, using businesses to sponsor the team like everyone else. I'd volunteered Brooks Media, but with a dating site being one of the main focuses of the company, that had resulted in a resounding, “Veto!”

Instead, Wes's restaurant, BAD—a fucking joke of a name for all the success he had—was our sponsor and earned our team as a whole the moniker “BAD Boys.” But because everyone thought they were fucking cute, that wasn't enough, and the trio of Thatch, Wes, and I were forever dubbed the *Billionaire Bad Boys*. It was there to stay. Trust me, I'd been trying to shake it for years.

“We're skins,” John announced to the informal huddle when he came back from the captains' meeting.

“Fuck,” Thatch breathed, rolling his head in distress for some reason.

“What's the matter, Thatch?” Wes asked. “Afraid one of the boys is going to pull out your titty ring?”

“Blow me, Torrence.”

“Torrence?” I questioned, feeling a wrinkle form between my eyebrows.

“It’s a *Bring It On* reference,” John remarked casually as he stretched out his hamstring by pulling his heel to his ass, as though it wasn’t weird that he’d know that.

When I turned my curiosity from Thatch to him, he piped up again.

“What? Kirsten Dunst is in the movie, and she’s fucking hot.” He added, “And I have a younger sister,” when the group was slow to buy in.

“How *is* your sister, Johnny?” Thatch asked with a smirk.

John’s eyes flashed brightly before turning to stone. “Eighteen, motherfucker.”

Thatch turned to me, and I could practically *see* what was coming. He didn’t actually want to bone John’s little sister. Not even a little.

“What’s that he said, Kline?”

He might have been a manwhore, but Thatch fucked *women*—not girls just starting to make the transition. What he wanted was to poke at one of John’s pressure points just enough to make him explode.

I trained my face to look serious and held in a laugh. “I think he said she’s legal, Thatch.”

John lunged and my humor finally broke the surface. I grabbed his shirt with both hands and shoved him away playfully while Thatch busted out in hysterics beside me.

“Relax, John,” Wes coaxed. “Thatch doesn’t need your sister to fill his pussy punch card. He’s got all the tramps he’ll ever need right here in Manhattan.”

Thatch tsked. “There’s no card, Wes. My dick is not a Value Club.”

“It sure fucks in bulk,” John threw in, eager to even the score because of some running feud between the two of them. We were all well-off, grown-as-fuck men, but you’d be surprised by how similar we were to a group of teenage girls sometimes.

“And how would you know, Johnny? Got a camera in my bedroom?” Thatch snapped back.

“All right,” I called, babysitting like usual. “Drama club is over, assholes. Let’s go play rugby. Focus all of that energy into your attack, for fuck’s sake.”

“You’re the one who can’t manage to make it past halfway without getting tackled and steamrolled into the ground,” Wes pointed out. He laughed as he said it, though, continuing the teasing vibe by wrapping his arm around my shoulders and walking out onto the field with me.

“At least I manage to touch the ball every once in a while,” I jabbed back, shoving him away and jogging to the other side of the pitch.

At this point in the season, practice consisted mostly of scrimmages, dividing into two teams and trying to outplay each other. I was just glad that when we split up, Thatch was usually on my side. He might have acted like a clown from time to time, but the dude was one big motherfucker and had been known to do some permanent damage when he tackled you. I liked to walk without a limp, and if I was going to be told I couldn’t have kids one day, I sure as fuck didn’t want testicle mutilation to be the reason.

I shook out of my daydream when the ball slammed into my chest, a smirk ghosting Wes’s lips from the success of his unexpected pass.

I took off at a run, dodging a defender and reaching the halfway line. Pain shot through my waist as another defender made hard contact. I tossed the ball underhanded and toward my back, the only direction allowed for a legal pass in rugby, and tucked my arms to my chest to take the impact of the fall without breaking a wrist.

“Jesus,” I groaned, shoving Tommy off of me as quickly as I could in order to rejoin play.

“Lay off the cookies, Tom,” I shouted as I ran toward the ruck my teammates had going.

“Weights!” he yelled back. “I think when you said cookies, you meant weights!”

And fuck, by the way my spleen throbbed, Tommy just might have been right.

I slammed my body into the linked shoulders of Thatch and Wes, pushing them forward over the loose ball and helping the group gain momentum in the fight upstream against the defenders. Thatch fought for control in front of me, and I nearly took an elbow to the face in the process.

Rugby was a rough game, and when my organs felt like they might fall out or a limb ached like it might fall off, I wondered why I did it.

But then the ball was in my arms again, tossed underhand and over his shoulder by Thatch, and I remembered without question—the adrenaline, the thrill, the all-out expulsion of a week’s worth of tension, stress, and aggression.

I was convinced a little extracurricular rugby not only kept me in prime physical shape, but it also kept my mind at peace and on an even keel. I could only hope that as my physical health started to subside with age, my need to vent would dwindle along with it.

The weight of three bodies hit me at once as I was crossing the try line, but Thatch had them off in no time to celebrate the score. I was barely on my feet before the choreography started, Thatch firing off shots from his crotch like a semi-automatic weapon, the men of our team playing into his antics by hitting the ground one by one as he fired off “rounds.” As the scorer of the try, I was the only one who’d earned the privilege to stay on my feet.

I laughed and high-fived my teammates before jogging back across the pitch to do it all over again. Practice had just started, and now that I’d scored, my body was ready for more abuse.

* * *

I ran for the train just before it was set to depart, sliding through the doors in just the nick of time. Starving and ready to be home, all I could think about was getting there, showering, and ordering a pizza.

As my tired ass met the surface of the seat, I took a moment to be thankful for the lack of pregnant women and elderly. I was worn the hell out, but I wasn't a prick. The rest of these fuckers could fend for themselves.

I wiped some of the lingering sweat and mud from my face with my towel and pulled my phone from my bag.

A message sat waiting from earlier.

TAPRoseNEXT (6:18PM): Gah. The date. The date was amazing. And then it was pretty fucking traumatic.

BAD_Ruck (7:52PM): Traumatic??? Am I going to need to hunt this guy down?

TAPRoseNEXT (7:54PM): No, he's great, I promise. It wasn't traumatic because of him. He's...I don't know, Ruck. I've got this gut feeling that he's some kind of wonderful.

The corners of my lips started to curve, some weird, unconventional but meaningful relationship between us forming and instilling genuine happiness in me. But before the smile cycle could complete, utter disbelief washed over me in a wave of tsunami-like proportions—the conversations we'd had, the things she'd said. Work relationships and awkward yet somehow easy conversation. The way Rose, despite my more than infatuation with Georgie, managed to make me feel.

None of it made sense, not one single piece of it, until all at once, *it did*.

No fucking way.

The doors of the subway opened, and I didn't even hesitate, shoving my way through the throng of people without apology or remorse. I didn't even know what fucking stop we were on, but I ran for the stairs with single-minded abandon, taking them two at a time and reaching the top on a leap.

New Yorkers scoffed and jumped out of the way, burning me with their dirty looks and judging eyes. The yellow of a cab shone like a beacon in front of me.

I ran for it without thought or pause or respect for my surroundings. The heavy leather of a handbag may have even grazed my shoulder in a glancing blow, but I didn't care. Words thrummed in my head in time with the memory of her heartbeat, building and buzzing around my brain until I almost couldn't stand it. The not knowing, the unlikelihood—it was all too much.

“The Winthrop Building. Fast as you can go,” I demanded abruptly to the cabbie, but he didn't bat an eye at my brusque delivery—grunts and commands were the nature of more than half of New York City.

I dug in my bag for my wallet and fished out the first bill I came to. With a swift thrust, I dropped it through the plexiglass window and jumped out while the last notes of his screeching tires still rung in the air.

Pigeons panicked and people swerved as I wove my way through them, and a woman strummed a guitar on the corner.

The building was locked after hours, but being the CEO afforded me access to the keyless entry code on the main door. Until today, I could honestly say I'd never broken in to my office building before.

Sixteen smashes of the elevator call button, another code, and a fidgety ride later, I stepped off onto the fifteenth floor in all of my sweaty glory and strode straight for Human Resources.

The lights were dimmed, and once again, the outer door to Cynthia's office door was locked, but nothing could stop me at this point. Not a lock and certainly not my morals.

I ran to my office at a near sprint and around the back of my desk, yanking drawers open one by one in search of my old master key that opened all of the individual office doors. I hadn't had a need for it in years, so it took me several minutes of digging through pounds of junk to find it.

Priority for tomorrow: My desk needed to be fucking reorganized. *Stat.*

Mud under my fingernails from practice, I clutched the key tightly and jogged back down the hall.

With a turn and a click, I was in, moments away from officially violating half a dozen privacy laws.

I breathed a sigh of relief when the drawer of the filing cabinet slid open with ease, laughing maniacally to myself before trailing into words.

“Of course it's not fucking locked. It's not like she was expecting a *fucking psychopath* to break into her office and dig through it.”

Like fluttering wings, my fingers shuffled through the labels, knowing Cynthia followed an unbreakable filing system. Nothing was ever out of order or place, and finding it would be easy enough.

Not knowing the actual wording of the label challenged me a little bit, but it wasn't more than five minutes before I was pulling it out of its spot and cracking it open.

Tracing the lines of the employee names, I ran my finger down the page, muttering through last names until the one I wanted stood out in stark relief.

“Cummings, Georgia.” I slid it across the page in some kind of slow-motion daydream until the other column sealed my fate in undeniable bold text.

TAPRoseNEXT.

Some Kind of Wonderful.

Chapter Nineteen

Georgia

Gary clicked to the next PowerPoint slide, stating something about the cost effectiveness of *blah blah blah*... Who knows what he was talking about by that point? We'd been in the meeting for over two hours, and I was seconds away from losing my cool.

My stomach growled its irritation.

I glanced at my watch and noted it was five minutes past three, which meant it was five minutes past my daily scheduled sugar fix. I had a Greek yogurt and a leftover piece of cherry cheesecake sitting inside the break room fridge with my name on it.

Conclusion: Someone needed to end this or I was going to end Gary.

It was Thursday afternoon, and it'd been five whole days since I'd had any real private interaction with Kline. We'd texted a lot, snuck a few minutes to chat and say hello here and there, and even had lunch together twice, but he'd been unbelievably swamped with work and activities and I was still one hundred percent determined to keep a professional relationship in the office. The combination of all that crap had put the kibosh on substantial alone time. And let me tell you, the memory of last weekend had my anticipation riding at an all-time high.

Gary plodded over to his laptop, tapping around on the keys. The man moved like a turtle. He was a genius when it came to numbers, but a moron when it came to social cues. While everyone in the room was moments away from falling face first into a coma, he appeared to think we had all the time in the world to discuss more goddamn numbers.

I was numbered the fuck out.

“And if you’ll just give me a minute here,” he mouth-breathed, licking his lips and clicking away. “I’ll pull up another spreadsheet that documents how effective we’ve been in narrowing down our target ratios for the last financial quarter.”

Jesus Christ in a peach tree.

My stomach roared its impatience. Hunger pangs. Crazy, loud hunger pangs. It’s a mystery no one else heard it over Gary’s droning.

The flash of a text notification caught my eye.

Kline: Was that your stomach, Cummings?

Okay. Obviously, *someone* heard them.

The handsome bastard was sitting beside me. Honestly, I had no idea why he was subjecting himself to this meeting. It was solely for my marketing team. I glanced at Kline out of the corner of my eye, scratching the side of my face with my middle finger. His body jerked noticeably with the effort to conceal his laugh.

Me: It’s 3:05pm, Brooks.

Kline: Ah, right. Georgie’s snack time. What was I thinking?

Me: I don’t know, but if you don’t end this soon, I will murder Gary with my pen.

Fighting a smile, he subtly nodded his head in understanding as he set his phone down on the table. My eyes trailed to his forearms—sleeves rolled up, hard muscles and thick veins on display. To quote Uncle Jesse, *Have mercy*. If I hadn’t been so damn hungry, I’d have happily sat through this tedious meeting just to gawk at those glorious arms. They were a beacon of muscly man delight.

Gary chuckled, seemingly entertained by himself. His monotone voice penetrated my daydreams about Kline’s forearms, officially popping my Big-dicked Brooks fantasy bubble.

I tapped my pen against my notepad. *Shut Gary up. Now.*

Kline knew it was a warning. He flashed a secret grin, eyes crinkling at the corners. God, his eyes, they were this flawless shade of blue—so bright, so vibrant. Montana-sky blue.

I'd started to make a game out of nicknaming Kline's eyes. Those ever-changing blue retinas could be Montana-sky blue one day or, like today, M&M's blue. But that probably had more to do with the starvation setting in than anything else.

Mmmmmmm, M&M's. I'd have devoured a bag of that candy-coated chocolate goodness.

"Fantastic work, Gary," Kline interrupted moments later. "I think we can all agree we've gained valuable information on Brooks Media's projections for the fiscal year."

Everyone in the room nodded, agreeing far too enthusiastically.

I *knew* I wasn't the only one dying a slow death with each PowerPoint GoodTime Gary put on the projection screen.

Gary started to respond, but Kline stood up from his chair. "Go ahead and send the materials out to the rest of the team. That way all departments within Brooks Media can see how they've contributed to another fruitful quarter."

"Oh, okay, but—"

"Really great work, Gary." Kline patted him on the back, not giving him an inch. "I think we can officially say, successful meeting adjourned."

My coworkers scattered faster than roaches when light flooded the room. I followed their lead when I realized Kline would be tied up with Gary for a few more minutes. My stomach couldn't wait. I damn near sprinted to the break room, all kinds of ready to dig into my snacks. Would I start with my yogurt and then move on to the cheesecake? Or would I just go for it and dig into the cherry cheesecake first?

The world was my oyster, baby.

"Uh oh," Dean announced, walking out of the break room. "It's a quarter after three and Georgia isn't eating?" he teased, making a show of glancing between my face and his watch.

“Yeah, GoodTime Gary gave a go at murder by numbers in our quarterly marketing meeting. If Kline hadn’t cut it short, I think I would’ve staged a riot.”

“Well, I’m sorry to tell ya, cupcake, but inside there isn’t any better. Ivanna Swallow is on her selfie break and she has *blowregard* for anyone but the spoon she’s currently sucking yogurt off of for Instagram’s sake.”

I groaned.

“Head down, don’t make eye contact, and you should be fine.” He grinned, slapping my ass as he walked past me and down the hall.

Leslie was sitting at one of the break room tables, doing exactly what Dean said she was doing—taking a selfie of a spoon in her mouth. She could probably describe her life in a series of hashtags.

Hashtag, my spoon is so sexy.

Hashtag, my lips bring all the boys to the yard.

Hashtag, my life’s goal is to be a walking bonertime.

“Hey, Leslie,” I tossed over my shoulder as I headed for the most important thing in the room. The fridge.

“O-M-G. You’re, like, never going to believe how adorable people are.”

My phone buzzed in my hand. Thinking it might be Kline begging for a rescue, I let my heart overpower my stomach and paused to look. No message from Kline, but the TapNext icon was aglow with a message from Ruck. He’d been messaging me in a steady stream ever since Monday night, and I had to admit, he never failed to amuse me.

BAD_Ruck (3:11PM): Lizards or Birds?

Lizards or fucking birds? Jesus.

The sadistic bastard had talked me into this little game by starting it with normal choices. Pillows or blankets, candy or pizza—he’d been getting a real kick out of asking me which thing I’d rather have in bed with me. *You can only have one,*

he'd say. With this kind of choice, the decision was a struggle for a different reason.

TAPRoseNEXT (3:11PM): Neither, you lunatic.

My stomach growled, reminding me that I didn't have time for Ruck and his random get-to-know-you choices right now.

Opening the fridge, I started searching for my snack-time loot. I didn't respond to Leslie, knowing full well she'd just prattle on. If Gary was the prime example of not understanding social cues, Leslie was the girl who didn't care about those cues. In her hashtag and selfie-driven mind, *everyone* wanted to know what she had to say.

For fuck's sake, where is my food?

"Seriously," she called, completely oblivious that I'd left a two-minute pause for a reason. "People are, like, so cute. I just ate a turkey sandwich named Gary, and now I'm eating a yogurt named Georgia."

I stopped mid-rummage and slowly stood, glowering at Leslie over the fridge door.

Her answering grin told me that my eyes weren't *actually* shooting out death rays.

"How cute is that?" She held up the half-eaten cup of yogurt. *My half-eaten cup of yogurt.*

"People are naming the food in the break room. I just *can't even*. It's totes adorbs." She went back to wrapping her crazy-huge lips around the spoon that was feeding her *my fucking yogurt*.

It had to be severely unhealthy to want to kill two of your coworkers in the same day.

I took a deep breath, counting to ten in my head.

One-Don't-Kill-Leslie

Two-Don't-Kill-Leslie

Three-Don't-Kill-Leslie...

By the time I reached ten, my hands felt less stabby.

“Hey, Leslie?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“Uh-huh?” she responded, mouth full of yogurt.

“So, that turkey sandwich named Gary was actually just Gary’s turkey sandwich. He wrote his name on it so no one else would eat it.”

She cocked her head to the side like a confused puppy. “But what about the yogurt named Georgia?”

I fought the urge to shout, inhaling and exhaling another cleansing breath. “The yogurt wasn’t named Georgia. I wrote my name on that yogurt because I brought it in. It’s *my* yogurt and I planned on eating it today.”

She stared back at me, her pea-sized brain visibly processing my words.

The wheels were turning; slowly but surely, they were turning.

“*Ohhh*, my bad.” She held out the half-eaten yogurt container. “Here, you can have the rest of it. I’m already so full from eating that turkey sandwich and piece of cherry cheesecake.”

Wait a minute...

Piece of cherry cheesecake?

I glared the fuck out of the food-snatching idiot for a good minute before turning for the door.

“So, like, I’m just going to eat the rest of it, okay, Georgia?” was the last thing I heard as I stormed out of the break room and straight for Kline’s office. Since he had hired her, I figured it would be a nice gesture to let him know housekeeping was going to need to branch out into crime scene remediation.

His door bounced off the wall with a bang. Kline raised an eyebrow, his expression confused yet curious behind the large mahogany desk. “Everything okay?”

“Nope.” The door slammed shut, courtesy of my stiletto-adorned foot. “Everything is not fucking okay.”

I strode around his desk and planted my ass on the edge, forcing him to push his chair back to allow room for me and all of my bristling glory.

“I need housekeeping’s number. They’re going to need to bring a body bag tonight. Figured it’d be nice to give them a heads-up.”

“A body bag?”

I nodded. “For Leslie.”

He crinkled his forehead, but I guess apprehension did that to a person. “Come again?”

“She’s fine,” I reassured. “Well, right now. She won’t be fine later.”

He tilted his head. “What’s happening later?”

“I’m going to kill her.”

“Any particular reason you’re plotting her murder?”

“She’s eating everyone’s food, including *mine*! She ate my cheesecake and my goddamn yogurt!” I gestured wildly, flinging my hands into the air. “Do you know why she’s doing this?”

Kline shook his head. The hint of a smile kissed the corners of his lips.

I pointed my finger at him. “Don’t even think about smiling right now.”

He held up both hands. “I wouldn’t dream of it. I’m taking this very seriously.” He forced his mouth to the side, trying to hide another smirk, and his voice turned almost offensively diplomatic. “Why is Leslie eating everyone’s food?”

“She thought people were being *totes adorbs* and naming the food.”

Blue eyes lit up with amusement. “Leslie didn’t realize the names on food meant it belonged to someone?”

“Today, she enjoyed a turkey sandwich named Gary. And a yogurt and piece of motherfucking cheesecake named Georgia. She thought it was *like, the cutest thing ever* how her coworkers were naming food. She’s too dumb to live. Literally.”

I saw the second he couldn't hold back laughter. A grin had cracked the secret code and covered his entire face—his eyes, lips, and cheeks were all lit up with hilarity.

Like a boiling pot, it worked its way up his throat and spilled right over, coating me with its vibration. If I hadn't been so pissed, I might have acknowledged its ability to turn me on.

"This isn't funny! Your intern is a dumbass! All she does is take selfies and eat my food! Why haven't you fired her?"

"Baby," he cooed condescendingly. "She's just an intern. How picky can I be? She's not costing the company anything."

"Not costing anything!" I very nearly shrieked. "She just cost me my goddamn cheesecake!"

Kline shook his head with a smile and started to turn his leather chair in the other direction, away from my glaring eyes, but I was too quick, damn near jumping on top of him. "Don't even think about it!"

His strong hands gripped my hips and finished the job.

In an instant, his laughter was gone, a look of pure, unadulterated longing taking its place. For two days, we'd practically crawled all the way inside each other, we'd had so much physical contact, but it'd been a long time since then.

For a few moments, all we did was stare at each other. I was straddling Kline's lap, his muscular thighs forcing my legs to spread that perfect amount. Only a few measly inches kept me from finding out if he was as turned on as I was. And judging by the look on his face, if I pressed my hips to his, I'd hit the cock landmine.

"Dessert named Georgia?" He caressed the sliver of skin that was exposed above the waistline of my skirt. His lips were near my ear. "I'm certain this is something I wouldn't be able to stop myself from *devouring*."

Oh, my...

His hands disappeared under my flowy skirt and gripped my ass, pulling at the cheeks to open me farther to him. Only a minuscule piece of lace was separating his fingers from

touching my bare skin. Kline's hips ground into mine, and I had to swallow the moan threatening to spill from my lips. He wanted this as much as I did. The evidence was hard and ready between my thighs.

My breathing turned ragged, heart pounding inside my chest.

I loved seeing this side of him. The all-business, Armani-suited CEO getting messy and wild, *with me*. His reserved side morphing into a man possessed by passion and desire. I felt possessive, wanting to be the only woman who could affect him this way.

I should've been freaked out over the idea that someone could walk into his office and find us in this precarious position, but all I could think about was wanting him to push himself against me, harder, rougher. Good God, I wanted more. So much more.

His lips moved from my ear to my jaw to the sensitive, toe-curling spot on my neck. His teeth just barely scraped at the pulsing vein, and a shiver rolled down my spine. If he kept this up, I'd end up doing something I shouldn't. Like unzip his pants and offer up my V-card as tribute.

Get it together, Georgia.

"Kline?"

"Don't worry," he whispered against my skin. "I won't let this get out of hand."

But he didn't disentangle us. *No*. He did the complete opposite.

He kissed me hard, delving deep enough to brand me, while our tongues tangled in an inferno of want and need and crazy desire.

Sliding a hand up my blouse and underneath my bra, Kline brushed his thumb across my nipple.

I moaned into his mouth, biting at his bottom lip.

"Fuck," he breathed, still cupping my breast.

I sucked at his tongue as my hips circled his, savoring the feel of his cock pressed against my pussy. Even though we were both fully clothed, I could practically feel every inch of him. And hot damn, there were a lot of inches.

He pulsed upward and my pussy clenched in empty agony.

“Oh, yes, yes, Kline, yes,” I whispered, my head falling back.

Our ragged, wanton breaths were the only sounds filling the four walls of his office.

“You’re driving me wild.” His hand covered mine, moving it down to cup him through his slacks. “I want you so fucking bad.”

Self-control was nowhere in sight as I went for his belt, fingers sliding against the cold metal of his buckle. The only thing that mattered was touching him. More of him. *All* of him. I wanted Kline hard and ready and bared in my needy hands.

“Mr. Brooks, your four o’clock is here. Should I send him back?” Pam’s voice echoed from the intercom.

We froze, startled by the interruption.

“Christ,” Kline muttered, his eyes clenched and forehead pressing against mine.

My cheeks turned a terrifying shade of red once realization set in. “I-I should probably leave,” I stuttered, attempting to un-plaster myself from him.

“Hold on.” He gripped my hips, stopping my momentum. He leaned forward, one finger pressing the intercom to respond. “Just give me a minute, Pam. I’m just finishing up signing some contracts for Georgia.”

I was thankful he still had enough brainpower to think of an excuse for me to be in here. Telling Pam that he needed a minute to remove his Director of Marketing from his dick wasn’t the best scenario for either of us.

“Hey,” he whispered, cupping my cheeks. “Don’t freak out.”

“I’m not freaking out.”

“Are you sure?” He smirked. “Because that deer-in-headlights look you’ve got going on says otherwise.”

I glared. “That’s not the look I’m giving you.”

He mimicked my wide-eyed stare before his face morphed into a teasing grin.

“Excuse me for being a little freaked out that someone could have walked in and found us going at each other like a couple of horny teenagers. Speaking of which, you should probably let me up.”

He massaged my ass. “Only if you promise to let me finish dessert later.”

Dear God, what was he trying to do to me?

I couldn’t hide my smile. “You’re trouble. Big fat fucking trouble.” I shoved at his chest and proceeded to remove myself from his lap. Straightening my clothes, I glanced down at his disheveled attire. “And you look ridiculous. Like some woman was in here mauling you with red lipstick.” My crimson lips were branded across his face and neck.

It was absurd, but mostly just fuck-hot.

He stood, flashing that sexy smirk of his while I removed my lipstick smudges with my fingers. I adjusted his tie and patted him on the chest. “Don’t work too hard, Mr. Brooks.”

As I turned for the door, he spanked my ass, earning a small squeal of approval from my traitorous lips.

“Don’t worry, I’ll save up my energy for later, Ms. Cummings.”

Outrageously sexy bastard. I was certain he’d be the death of me.

“Wait.” He grabbed me before I could take another step, pulling me toward him, my back against his chest. His breath was warm on my neck. “I’m not letting you out of this office until you agree to another date. A weekend date.”

“Like a whole weekend?”

“In the Hamptons, with me.”

“You have a place in the Hamptons?” I asked, then realized what a stupid question that was. Kline wasn’t a flashy kind of man, but he had made more money from one business deal than most people make in a lifetime. Hell, he could quit working today and would be set for the rest of his life.

“Yeah, baby.” He kissed my neck, teasing the sensitive skin with his lips. “So, you’ll go?”

I turned in his arms, gazing up at him. He was business Kline laced with a little messy wildness from our earlier tryst behind his desk. The adorable grin cresting his mouth had me smiling in return. “What do I get out of it?” I teased.

His grin grew wider. “You want terms and conditions for a weekend getaway I’m asking you to join me on?”

I nodded. “Sounds about right.”

“You’re like a little shark when it comes to business.” He pressed a kiss to my forehead, chuckling against my skin. “I’ll make sure you have a good time. So good you’ll be doing a reenactment of my bedroom...and the pool. Who knows, maybe it’ll be like both combined.”

“Draft the contract, Brooks, but remember, I’m holding you to these terms.”

“Wonderful doing business with you, Cummings.”

Chapter Twenty

Kline

When the GPS told me I was two blocks away from Georgia's apartment on Friday night, I pulled over and put the car in park. My phone had just buzzed in the cupholder with a message, and I knew I wouldn't be able to answer it once I picked her up. Ignoring the blinding red light on my mail icon, I swung my thumb directly over it before landing on the TapNext app.

TAPRoseNEXT (7:04PM): HE'S GOING TO BE HERE ANY MINUTE, FOR CHRIST'S SAKE. CALM ME DOWN BEFORE HE TAKES ONE LOOK AT ME AND RUNS IN THE OTHER DIRECTION.

A smile overwhelmed me as my chuckles bounced around the echoey interior of an otherwise empty car. She was so fucking cute, I could hardly stand it.

BAD_Ruck (7:06PM): Calm down, sweetheart. Let's start slowly by eliminating the shouty capitals.

TAPRoseNEXT (7:07PM): FUCKING FUCK FUCKERS. Okay. FUCK. Okay, I think I'm good now. Move on to step 2 (the coddling).

I bit my lip and shook my head, smiling like a crazy person.

BAD_Ruck (7:08PM): Good job. Also, creative swearing.

TAPRoseNEXT (7:08PM): The calm is wearing off, Ruck.

BAD_Ruck (7:09PM): Okay, okay. Coddling. Got it. This guy is still talking to you after spending all that time with you last weekend and invited you on a weekend away, right? He sounds smart enough to appreciate a little nervous energy. Everything is going to be fine.

Okay, guys. I know. I can feel you judging me. But let's talk this over.

I knew not telling her that I knew she was Rose, and that I was Ruck, was bad form.

I did, really.

It'd been a few days since I found out, and I should have told her *immediately*.

But God, as twisted as it was, I was having too much fun. Georgia was different with me online, no pretense or fear of saying something to her boss that he couldn't unhear, the safety net of anonymity weaving the protective web that it did for a lot of people.

As easy as it was to be someone else online, it was equally easy to be yourself, no expectations or trepidation blinding the true artwork underneath. Knowing Georgia in both places, without her knowing that I knew, was one of the most remarkable experiences of my life. She was the same yet different—honest and open and unafraid of recrimination. She wasn't afraid to send me messages about freaking the fuck out. She was just her, and I liked getting to be on the receiving end of twice the interaction. She was still scared to wear out her welcome with Kline Brooks. I couldn't fucking welcome her enough. This gave us the best of both worlds.

I even found myself sending her more goddamn messages as Ruck, just to be able to enjoy what she might say. I pushed the envelope, trying to get her even more comfortable with me, even knowing that, in her mind, she was splitting her affection between two men.

It was fucked, but I knew if *she* could forgive *me*, her actions wouldn't be an issue in the slightest. Love, lust, and attraction were base instincts. They were simple and finite and somehow still infinitely complicated. She liked Ruck because *he* was another dimension of *me*.

So as much as it didn't make sense rationally, it made heart-sense. Call me a hopeless romantic, or maybe a fool, but to me, that was all that mattered.

Stowing my phone in the console, I put the car back into drive and pulled away from the curb. Cute brick-front brownstone

buildings with iron-railed stairs lined the sides of each street, mature trees casting their shadows every fifty feet. Dusk threatened as the sun made its descent, already hiding behind buildings despite its place just above the horizon.

And my heart? Well, it just about beat right out of my chest.

Georgia sat on the stoop of her building with her arms crossed on her knees and her suitcase at her feet as I pulled up.

Her hair was wild and unkempt, curling just enough that I knew she'd probably showered and left it to dry on its own. Clothed in jeans and a simple sweatshirt with just barely a trace of makeup on her face, she was still the most beautiful thing I'd seen in just about forever.

Eager to put her racing mind at ease, I pushed the gearshift into park, turned the key to off, and jumped out to round the car before she even made it to her feet.

Adorable and wondering at my hurry, her teeth dug into the skin of her lip and her head tilted just slightly to the side.

I watched her as she watched me, a fire lighting her gorgeous blue eyes just as I pulled her directly into my arms and sealed my lips to hers.

"Mmm," she moaned, melting into my frame and wrapping hers around my shoulders. I licked at her tongue and her lips, sucking the taste of her into me as I slowly released.

"Kline," she whispered, overwhelmed.

My eyes shut on their own and my forehead met hers, and I breathed her in until my lungs burned only a little.

"I missed you."

She smiled and pushed her nose deeper along the side of mine. Her voice was barely audible.

"You saw me today at work."

I shook our heads together, lips and noses and foreheads touching the whole time.

"Not like this."

“No,” she agreed softly, placing one simple kiss to the corner of my mouth before pulling away. “You’re right. It wasn’t like this.”

I took a step down to grab her suitcase but kept a squeezing hand on her hip.

“You ready?”

Her face was alive and at ease, excitement lining the corners of every angle as she nodded. I couldn’t help but return the sentiment.

“Mount up.”

She raised a brow, but I just winked, moving to the back of the SUV and lifting the hatch to load her bag.

Looking it over from back to front, she seemed to notice the car for the very first time.

“This is your car?”

I looked at her in question.

She rolled her eyes at my implication, since I was very much accessing said car and the likelihood that I had stolen it was remarkably low.

“This is my *rental* car. I don’t own a car.”

“You don’t own a car?” She was incredulous.

“Baby.” I laughed, biting my lip to summon my patience. “I live in Manhattan. For business, I have a driver because you’re not the only one with the ability to be late. For everything else, I walk, take a taxi, or ride the subway. If I need to go anywhere outside of the city, I rent one. Simple as that.”

“But this is a Ford Edge,” she pushed stubbornly, still not getting it.

“I know,” I joked. “I sprung for the SUV since I’ve yet to get a handle on your luggage habits.” I jerked my head to the back and slammed the hatch. “Just the one bag. I’ll stick to midsize from now on.”

“*Kline.*”

Rounding the rear, I walked back to her, leaned my back into the car, grabbed her hips, and pulled her body into mine.

“Baby. I can see you’re struggling to get this, but I swear it’d make sense if you met Bob.”

“Bob? Of Bob and Maureen?”

I nodded. “The one and only. Bob Brooks, my dad and the biggest influence on my life.”

Wrinkles formed on her nose as she grinned, so I kissed it.

Pushing the wild blonde hair back from her face, I trailed one finger along her jaw and then dropped it.

“Let go of who you thought I was...who you think I’m supposed to be. Be here with me now.” I grabbed her hand and pushed it to my chest. “*Feel me.*”

Her free hand shot to my jaw and stroked it, eyes bright in reaction to my so-obviously-messy emotion.

“I promise, this is who I am, and if you let go of what you thought you knew, you’ll get it. You’ll get me. I *know* it.”

I sounded desperate because I was. Desperate for her to be the woman I thought she could be. Desperate for her to let go of the *billionaire* experience and just be with *Kline*.

“Okay.” She sealed her lips to mine and the tip of her tongue ventured into my mouth briefly. An answering tingle ran down the length of my spine. “I’ll let go of it all.” She pecked me on the mouth once more. “Promise.”

“Good,” I said before slamming my mouth to hers again. A slow groan rumbled in my chest a second later at the feel of her soft tongue. With effort, I forced myself to extract my mouth from hers. “Plus, nothing humbles a man more than cleaning Walter’s litter box. I swear the little fuck flicks shit outside of it on purpose.”

She shook her head with a dreamy smile and bit her lip to stop herself from making fun of me. It didn’t matter what I did. She’d forever be on Walter’s side of this war.

“Now get your ass in the *Ford Edge*, and let’s get out of here. I’m ready to have you all to myself for the weekend.”

“Yes, sir!” she joked with a salute before reaching for the door. I wrapped an arm around her waist at the last second, swooping her off her feet and swinging her around to put me between her and the car.

She bristled, but the icy edges of her attitude melted as soon as I winked and popped open the handle myself. “What kind of a man would I be if I didn’t open the door for you?”

“The kind that fill the streets of Manhattan.”

I just shook my head and smiled, waiting patiently for her to climb in.

“Right. You’re not those guys.”

“Ahh,” I teased. “Now she’s getting it.”

She grabbed the inside handle of the door and pulled it closed as she spoke. “Get in the car, Kline.”

The door slammed in my face and I laughed. “Yes, ma’am,” I mouthed through the window, rounding the hood and climbing in.

“To the Hamptons!” she shouted.

I shook my head, fired up the engine, and pulled away from the curb with an enormous smile on my face.

* * *

An hour and a half or so into the drive, she started to fidget. And I don’t mean a little movement here or there. I’m talking, for a few seconds, I feared she was having a seizure.

“What’s up, Benny?”

“What?” Her gaze jerked toward me in surprise.

I glanced from the road to her and back again. “You literally look like your skin is in the process of *attacking* you. What’s up?”

“I just... I have to tell you something.”

Her tone was serious, and her nerves were beginning to eat her alive. I didn’t want to be presumptuous, but I had a feeling I knew what was coming. Our intimacy had been on a steady advance from the moment we’d collided, melding together and racing for the finish line like one entity. We were on our way to a weekend alone, and the relevance of her sexual inexperience had to be beating her over the head with a bat at this point.

“So tell me, baby,” I coaxed gently, trying to walk the line of someone who didn’t know what was coming and someone who absolutely did, having heard it *twice* already, and was prepared to answer in a calm, respectful manner. If it hadn’t been for the blunt conversation *Ruck* had had with *Rose*, *Kline* would have never realized that *Georgie* had already told him in a Benadryl-fueled rant.

Christopher Columbus her pussy prideland.

God, I’d laughed so hard about that when I realized how brilliant it had been.

“I’m...like...a...” *incoherent mumbling* “...virgin!”

I bit my lip and considered her words. I knew what she was trying to say, but a little *figurative* ice breaking never hurt anyone. *Literal* ice breaking—well, that hurt a lot of people.

“You want to listen to Madonna?”

I reached for my phone like I was going to search for the song.

“No,” she huffed, adorably frustrated at having to gather the nerve to say it *again*. I didn’t blame her. This was the fourth time in about twice as many days that she was admitting it to *someone*. That I knew of, anyway.

Turning in her seat, she forced herself to face me head-on. Her eyes sought mine, and I hated that because I was driving, I

couldn't fully give them to her. I had no right to it, but that didn't stop me from being proud of her confidence.

When I found a straight stretch of road and glanced her way for more than a quick, passing beat, she spoke. "I'm a virgin." Crisp and calm, her voice managed to be matter-of-fact and silky all at once.

Did I mention I was proud of her?

Was that fucked up? I didn't mean for it to be. I was just happy to see her owning it—being proud of herself and her own choices instead of feeling like she had to answer for them. I wanted to yell out some kind of cry for all of the empowered females, but I thought that might seem suspicious.

So, I went with the only other thing I could think of.

"Okay. Cool."

Eloquent, right?

"Okayyyy," she repeated, adorably confused by my non-response. "Cool."

I'm sure she'd been expecting the usual questions.

How'd you manage that?

or

Are you, like, super religious?

or

What the hell are you waiting for?

As her lover, I had a right to know she'd never taken a sexual encounter to that level before, a warning of sorts to make sure I didn't make an assumption that affected both of us. But really, the rest of it was her business and hers alone. Sharing was a staple of every healthy relationship, but she got to be the creator of the terms and conditions under which said sharing happened.

"Kline?" she called, pulling out of my thoughts.

"Yeah, baby?"

“You don’t have any questions? Or...I don’t know. You’re so quiet.”

I *was* being quiet. Obviously, it was doing nothing but torturing her.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, but it’s not what you think.”

“What do I think?” She raised a brow and I laughed.

“Okay, fair enough. I don’t know what you’re thinking. But I’m thinking you’re a fucking brilliant, beautiful woman with the most delicious pussy I’ve ever tasted. I’ll be lucky as fuck if you decide you wanna share more of it with me. But I don’t fucking expect it, and I’ve done nothing to earn it. I’m guessing none of the other fuckers in New York ever did, and I don’t mind one fucking bit.”

“That was a lot of ‘fucks,’ Mr. Brooks.”

I laughed and forced the tension in my shoulders to release. “I know. You got me all worked up. Thatch is usually the only one that can get me to utilize that many fucks in one thought process.”

Her laughter rolled through me like a wave.

“God, Thatch. I hear all sorts of lore about that guy, but the only actual interaction I’ve had with him was when you called me on the plane.”

“There’s Thatch lore?” I asked, mystified and horrified all at once.

“Oh yeahhh.” She laughed. “But most of it is from Dean, so I’ve taken any and all information with a very large grain of salt.”

I laughed.

“Like, rock salt.”

I shook my head, knowing Dean usually had a pretty good bead on the reality of things despite his juicy delivery.

“Ehhh. You can probably stick to the regular iodized kind. Thatch is a crazy asshole. Fun, though. And, occasionally, a good friend.”

“Is he really that crazy?” she asked, insistent in the belief that he couldn’t be as rowdy as people described.

As always with Thatch, examples of his depravity were plentiful, but one stood out above the rest.

“You know the scar on my abdomen?” I asked. “Lower right side?”

I glanced over in time to see her nod, eyes brimming with biblical knowledge. “It’s completely plausible I’ve noticed it.”

A smile arrested my features.

“Well, I owe its existence to Thatch and one of his half-baked ideas.”

Waiting for an explanation, she settled farther into her seat.

“One night during our freshman year of college, he got this idea that stair surfing on our mattresses on the icy courtyard steps could be the next big campus activity. Three broken fingers, one bloody nose, and a tree-branch-impaled abdominal muscle later, I decided I didn’t want to be a part of the sales pitch.”

“You could have said no from the beginning,” she suggested and I shrugged.

“What fun would that have been?”

I flipped on my blinker and turned into the long gravel drive of the Hamptons house. This had been the quickest drive of my life with Georgia keeping me company, and the salty sea air clung to my skin as I rolled my window down to put in the code for the gate. The stars were brighter now that we’d left the city behind, and when I turned to look at Georgie, I found her head hanging out of her window with her face to the sky like she’d noticed.

“Georgie?” I called, fighting back a grin.

“This place is outrageous!” she all but shouted. “Have you seen the fucking sky? And the length of this driveway?”

I shook my head and laughed some more, pulling forward cautiously so she could stay in her happy place half in, half out

of the car.

“I might have noticed it a time or two.”

She sank back into the seat and shook her hair out of her smiling face.

“You should notice more. Like, a lot more. You know, every weekend or so. Andddd, if you just happen to want some company,” she said, feigning nonchalance, “I could *probably* fit it into my schedule. I mean, I’d be willing to check.”

“I’ll make note.”

“Holy hell! Look at that house! It’s adorable!”

I followed her eyes through the windshield, smiling so much my cheeks started to ache. The little bungalow wasn’t ostentatious, but it didn’t lack space either, and the wood-shank shingle siding had seen better days. The inside pretty much matched, but I was working on fixing it. Slowly but surely.

“I’m glad you like it.”

She bounced in her seat.

“But you probably shouldn’t like it too much. I’m fixing it up to give it to my parents, and I’ll start to feel bad if you get too attached.”

“Really? You’re doing the work yourself?” If she had been a dog, I imagined her ears would have perked up.

I smiled and nodded. “Really. I had an electrician work on the wiring and Thatch and Wes have helped me a couple of times with the heavy lifting, but I’ve done most of it myself.”

She slammed an open hand down on my thigh and squeezed, her expression deadpan.

“I think I just orgasmed.”

I shoved the gearshift into park and reached for her neck at the same time. I rubbed my nose with hers and smiled before touching my lips to hers just once. “Please, Benny. For the love of all that’s holy, hold on to that thought—and the easy trigger.”

* * *

Bags inside the house, a quick dinner of sandwiches I'd picked up from Tony's deli and packed to bring along consumed, and wine in hand, Georgia demanded a tour of the house.

"I want to know every detail. What it looked like when you started, what you're in the middle of now, and what you see it being like when you're done. Don't cut corners, Brooks," she'd said.

"I intend to travel each and every curve in its entirety," I'd teased back salaciously.

She'd just laughed and shoved me down the hall we were currently walking.

She'd seen the completely redone kitchen, the room I'd tackled first. I'd known it would be an outrageously extensive job, as well as the heart of the house. Crisp white cabinets, light stone counters, and dark wood floors, I'd kept the character of the house but added a ton of modern twists and convenience.

"God, Kline. I still can't get over that island! It's freaking enormous."

"I know."

Twelve feet by twelve feet, it was nearly enough room to use as an elevated dance floor. Part of me worried that it was too much, but my reasoning was sound. Maureen and Bob Brooks lived their lives in the kitchen, hip to hip or one or the other relaxing at the counter while the other one cooked. I swore ninety-five percent of my childhood memories happened in that room.

"It's perfect, though. Like the epicenter of the house."

My chest tightened with an unexpected surge of pride and accomplishment. The fact that she understood made me feel validated in a way I hadn't even known I'd needed. I turned quickly, grabbing her hips and slamming her surprised and open lips to mine.

"Thank you," I said. "That's exactly what I was going for."

I almost couldn't handle the feeling of her answering smile.

"Watch your step," I advised as we stepped into one of the completely unrenovated bedrooms. The original wainscoting was the only thing I really wanted to keep, and it was acting more like a temporary storage room for supplies than a bedroom at the moment.

"This place is amazing," Georgie remarked in wonder. "It's almost like a time capsule."

"I know. It's nearly a hundred years old. Which was really fucking intimidating when I first started doing the work."

"I bet."

"Come on. Let me show you upstairs real quick and then we can watch a movie. I'm ready to cuddle."

"Kline Brooks, a cuddler?"

"Born, bred, and proud of it, baby."

She pursed her lips, scrunched her nose, and shook her head—Georgia's look of trying to figure something out.

"You almost never say what I'm expecting you to, you know that?"

I shrugged and nuzzled my face into her neck before touching my lips to the shell of her ear.

"Fine by me. As long as what I *actually* say is better."

She shivered and then touched her lips to my cheek. Sauntering toward the door, she looked over her shoulder as soon as her small body lined up with the frame. "You haven't failed me yet."

Chapter Twenty-One

Georgia

I slowly opened my eyes as Kline lifted me off the couch, cradling me close to his chest. I must've fallen asleep halfway through the movie. Only two glasses of wine deep, I hadn't been drunk, just a delicious mix of relaxed and sleepy—sated from resting by the fire and cozy from being wrapped up in his arms.

His eyes met mine as we moved down the hall, toward the bedroom. "I figured you'd want to be somewhere a little more comfortable than the couch." He gently set me on the mattress, pulling the covers back and tucking me in. After a soft kiss to my forehead, he whispered, "Go back to sleep, baby."

I watched him move around the bedroom—charging his phone, sliding off his jeans, shrugging out of his shirt, and turning off the lights. I wasn't sure I'd ever get used to how amazing Kline looked in just his boxer briefs. It should have been an offense to let a man who looked like *that* walk around without clothes. But I wasn't complaining.

If he is a crime, then by God, get the handcuffs ready, because there is no way I can resist him.

He slid into the bed beside me, oblivious to my awakened state and ogling thoughts.

Tonight had been so perfect. He was perfect—sexy, kind, funny, and so very sweet. He made me want things I'd spent a lot of time wondering if I'd ever have.

Under the covers, I slid toward him, moving my body on top of his.

His eyes popped open.

"Hi," I whispered.

“Hi.” He smiled softly, wrapping his arms around my back and holding me close.

“I didn’t really feel like sleeping.” I brushed my nose against his.

“And what is it you feel like doing?”

I shrugged my shoulders as my lips nibbled along his neck. Kissing a path back to his mouth, I bit his bottom lip and then licked across the plump skin to soothe it better.

He groaned, gripping my hips and flipping me to my back. His mouth locked with mine as he kissed me, long and slow and deep—so deliciously deep. I gripped the strands of hair resting at the nape of his neck. I swallowed his breaths and savored the taste of him.

My body was getting more riled, almost restless, with each heady second that passed.

He pushed my tank top up and over my chest, grabbing my breasts. He sucked a hardened nipple into his mouth, teasing the peak with his tongue, until switching to the other and repeating the same delectable torture.

The pulsing ache between my legs was proof of how badly I wanted Kline.

And God, I wanted to *feel* him, *all* of him.

His mouth found mine again. “Tell me what you want.” Our tongues danced. “I’ll give you anything.”

“I want you inside of me,” I moaned against his lips. “I want it so badly.” The need burned in a way it never had before—in a way I knew couldn’t be otherwise extinguished.

His eyes met mine, searching. “You know I’ll wait, right? I’ll wait until you know you’re really ready. There’s no rush.”

A tiny, self-doubting voice crept in. “You don’t want to have sex with me?”

“Are you kidding?” A soft laugh escaped his lips. “Baby, I’m losing my mind over the idea of feeling you come on my cock.

I'd say that's quite obvious." He playfully rubbed the proof against my thigh, spurring a giggle from my lips.

"But I'm not rushing you." He cupped my cheek, eyes tender. "You hold the power. You decide when it's right."

My hands found their way into his hair again, grasping the strands and pulling his face to mine. I kissed him like I'd never kissed him before. My mouth plundered his lips and tongue, taking what they wanted. I was out of my mind with feelings for this man. I had just told him I wanted to have sex, and he'd done the opposite of what I'd expected. He slowed us down, trying to make sure I was making the right decision for myself.

I didn't need time to think, because Kline *was* right. He was all of the rights.

And I wanted to give him another part of myself.

"I want this. I want this more than I've ever wanted anything in my life." I wrapped my legs around his hips, pulling him closer to where I was desperate for him. He settled between my thighs, his hardened cock pressing against me.

My body shook in anticipation. This moment was why I had waited so long to take this step. I wasn't naïve, expecting my first time to be beside a fire or surrounded by rose petals on a bed. I wasn't expecting cheesy lines of undying devotion or an engagement ring. I just wanted to make sure it was meaningful, that it was with someone I trusted, someone I cared about. And most importantly, I needed it to be someone who cared about me too, who wouldn't intentionally hurt me—not just physically, but emotionally as well.

Everyone had their own views on sex. Some people could have sex for the pure act itself. They could savor spending the night with a gorgeous stranger and have no lingering doubts or feelings nagging them the next day.

I had always been able to leave my emotions at the door when it came to an oral exchange. But when it came to full-on penis penetration, home run sex, I knew I couldn't approach it with that same mindset.

To me, intercourse was more intimate than oral. There was something about looking directly into a person's eyes while your bodies became one. I knew *that* type of sex had to be something more than just physical for me.

I trusted Kline so much, and I'd come to do it quickly. But I felt the way he cared about me with every kiss, every smile, every lingering touch. With him, it wouldn't just be sex. He was more than that to me. I truly cared about him. My feelings for him ran deeper than I was ready to admit. The intensity and depth of those feelings had awareness hitting me like a wrecking ball.

My heart was on the line here, and I had just realized how much I could lose.

Fear drowned my mind, spilling into my eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asked, assessing the uncertainty on my face, acutely in tune with my wavering thoughts.

"I'm scared," I admitted.

He stared deep into my eyes. "There's nothing to be scared of, Georgie. I'd never pressure you into doing something you're not ready for."

I wiped the worry from his brow. "I know that. Believe me, I know that."

"Tell me what you're scared of." His eyes were so earnest. "I'll do everything I can to fix it."

This guy. I swallowed around my heart in my throat.

"I'm scared because...it's so intense." I fumbled to find the right words. "I just...I feel like I'm falling too fast with you. It's scary as hell. I can't ignore the fear that, one day, I'll wake up and things will have ended badly between us. I don't want to associate you with hurt in the end."

He cupped my face, gazing down at me. "No matter what happens, baby, it will always be a good hurt for me. You make me feel alive. And I'll do everything I can to make sure it's the same goddamn experience for you."

That look. There was a gentleness in his eyes that let me know I wasn't the only one falling.

This wasn't going to be just about sex for him either. This was more. He and I were going places, and his look said, "I'm falling too."

And that look was why I reached for the nightstand to pull a condom from the drawer. The *empty* drawer.

His eyes followed me the whole way; I could feel them, but when I turned back to him, they were slightly pinched together.

"I thought there'd be condoms."

He laughed a little, just enough to ease the tension and make me start to smile.

"There aren't any condoms in the drawer."

"Obviously," I replied.

He smirked and rubbed at the skin of my waist. "I've never brought a woman here."

A comforting statement to all, but somehow I managed to turn it on its head, panicking slightly, thinking that things were going to come to a very abrupt stop. I didn't want them to. I was ready *now*.

"Please tell me you have condoms somewhere."

He smiled fully at that. "In my bag."

I shoved him off and jumped off the bed before running to his bag and rummaging through it without remorse. When the foil of the package met my fingertips, I took off in reverse, shoving him aside, resuming my position, and pulling him back on top of me.

He shook with silent amusement as he grabbed the condom out of my hand, setting it on the bed beside my hip. But his mirth transformed quickly to heat as he moved his hands to my panties, slowly sliding them down my legs, pressing kisses down my body in their wake.

He removed his briefs, his thick erection popping free.

My eyes went wide for a beat, distressed by the size of him. It was one thing to take a cock of that magnitude in my mouth, but it was a whole other ballgame when that cock was going to be the first to slide into home. “Not gonna lie, I wish you were smaller,” I blurted out before I could take it back.

Kline stopped mid-kiss, and his forehead fell to my abdomen as a few chuckles escaped his lips. I could feel his smile against my flesh. “No can do, Benny girl. I’m Big-dicked Brooks.”

I stilled. “What did you just say?”

“Nothing.” He laughed softly into my skin, his tongue sneaking out and licking around my belly button.

“Did you just say *Big-dicked Brooks*?”

“Huh?” He peeked up at me, amusement on his lips and his eyes feigning confusion.

My nose scrunched up. “Where did you hear that?”

“I can’t recall the exact moment.” He shrugged, playfully biting my hip. “But I really did appreciate the sentiment.” Goosebumps dotted my skin as he slid his hand up my thigh, slipping his finger inside of me. “God, you’re wet and I haven’t even started with you yet.”

A hot flush crawled up my neck, my lips parting on a sweet sigh when his thumb circled my clit.

God, if he promised to keep doing that, I’d call him Big-dicked Brooks any time he wanted.

“Remember when I had my mouth on you? How good it felt? How *hard* you came?” He licked my inner thigh while his fingers continued working me over. “In my bed, when I sucked on your pussy until you were begging me to let you come. At the pool when I had you spread so wide and my mouth devoured you even though anyone could have walked in and seen us. They could have seen my face between your legs while your tits bounced with each gasping breath that fell from your pretty lips. Remember that, Georgia?” He moved to the other thigh, sucking a soft bruise into my skin. “God, I can’t stop thinking about how perfect you taste. How sexy you

look, sound, *feel* when I make you come. I'm dying to know what you feel like wrapped around me."

I was getting so hot, so wet, just from his words alone. As he kissed a slow trail across my pubic bone, my body relaxed—legs opening up and arms falling to the sides.

"I'm going to make it so good, baby." His mouth moved to my clit, sucking and licking and caressing me into an orgasm. He didn't stop until my body quaked and my limbs turned lax and sated.

"Hey," he rasped, moving up my body and kissing me.

I moaned when I tasted my sex on his tongue.

This enormous sense of relief took hold, wringing the air from my lungs. I was thankful, so very thankful, that I had found him. Thankful that he was taking his time with me, making sure my first time was what I wanted it to be. I hoped he could feel it in my kiss, my touch, that this was more, so much more than I'd ever experienced. He was spinning my world out of its orbit, taking me to places I had never been.

I watched in rapt attention as he kneeled between my thighs and slid the condom on. He pulled back, pushing his hips forward and pressing the tip of his cock against my clit.

My eyes found his as he hovered over my body, his hands resting beside my head. His blue eyes glowed in the moonlight, tender and soft.

"You're beautiful," he whispered against my lips, deepening our kiss.

Hips pressed into mine, he started to slip inside of me. The pressure built to the point of pain as he slowly, so very slowly, slid deeper. He didn't rush, didn't hurry to claim me, just took his time. He pushed himself a little farther, then stopped to kiss me until my body let go of the tension and relaxed into him.

My eyes glazed over, overwhelmed by the intensity—not just of the deed itself, but of the feelings that passed between us. Tiny inward gasps accompanied my every breath.

Once he broke the barrier, pain consumed me and forced an involuntary whimper from my lips. I was sure he could see it on my face.

His eyes turned remorseful as he caressed my cheek.

I wanted to remove that look from his face.

“More, Kline. Don’t stop.” I wanted this. Of course, there was discomfort, but there was also a perfect ache starting to build inside of my core with each small thrust of his hips.

“God, you’re so tight. So wet. So perfect. I’m losing my fucking mind.” His lips found my neck, sucking and licking and placing little bites across my skin. Every word eased an ounce of discomfort. Every kiss, suck, and lick eased two.

“Baby, move with me,” he encouraged.

My muscles relaxed and I lifted my legs higher to my sides, allowing him to slide in farther.

He groaned.

A hiccupping breath escaped my lungs.

I needed more. I wanted Kline as deep as he could go. I rolled my hips, pulling him all the way inside of me. We both cried out. The sensations were overwhelming—his cock fully sheathed by my heat, my thighs pressing against his hips.

I let out a raspy moan, whispering, “God, this feels so good.”

“Fuck yes it does.” He kissed my jaw, my cheek, the corners of my lips.

My hips pushed up of their own accord, unconsciously telling him I still needed more. This is what it felt like to want to crawl inside a person—to be a part of them. It made me greedy; every inch he gave just made me want another one even more.

Kline moved in an easy rhythm, careful of my sensitivity but not lacking in intensity. He started to pick up the pace when I begged him to go deeper, harder, faster. He sucked savagely on my neck, growing uninhibited and frenzied, only to slow down again, finding my mouth and giving me soft, drugging kisses.

My hands explored his body, moving down his arms, his back, his ass, savoring the flex and strain of his muscles as he thrust.

“You okay, baby?” he asked, sweeping a few damp strands of hair from my forehead.

“I’m more than okay.”

“Fuck, Georgia, you look so perfect like this. Here. Under me.” His eyes turned fierce and determined, like he wanted to make me lose control, completely turn my world on its head.

My body started to shake as he sped up, only to whimper in taut frustration when he slowed down again.

“Do you trust me, baby?”

I didn’t even have to think about the answer.

“Yes. God, yes. I trust you.”

“I want to show you how good it can be when there’s no rush.” He kissed me, sucked on my lips, my tongue, stealing every one of my sounds into his mouth and swallowing them greedily.

And God, I loved his hoarse noises, how he kept telling me how beautiful I was, how good this felt, how hard he was. I loved how he took control and knew the exact way to drive me wild.

“I want to do this for hours and hours, but fuck, you’re too much. It’s too much.” He shifted his pace—lazy morphing into quick and hungry. “Tell me how good it feels,” he ground out, pressing his face into my neck. His voice was demanding, but he wasn’t chasing my climax so hard for himself. He was doing it for me.

All I could do was nod, too consumed with desire to answer. I gripped his ass, my nails digging into the toned flesh.

“Good, because I’m going to make you feel even better,” he swore. “I’m going to make you lose your fucking mind.”

He slid out of me, spurring a distraught moan to slip past my lips.

He gripped my thighs and moved his face between my legs before I could stop him. His mouth consumed me—sucking and licking and tonguing at my pussy until my orgasm started to build at an explosive pace beneath my skin. Warmth spread across my body, a thin sheen of sweat following its lead. Unintelligible words escaped my lips as I started to come.

“That’s my wild girl. Let me watch you catch fire,” he said, continuing to take me over the edge.

I squeezed my eyes closed, mouth falling open, body bowing off the bed. I didn’t just come. I screamed, exploded, burst into flames.

Time. Location. *My name*. Those things didn’t exist, my senses too consumed by what Kline was doing to me.

He moved back up the bed, gripping my thigh and pushing my knee to my shoulder, spreading me wide open for his straining cock. He pushed inside of me with ease and started fucking me deep, dragging in and out at the most mind-blowing pace.

He propped himself up on his hands, staring down at where he moved in me. “Fuck, it’s so good.”

Moving one hand between us, he rubbed my clit. “I need to feel you come around my cock.”

“I don’t think I can. It’s too much already.”

He didn’t let up, determined. “Yeah, baby, you can. Come on my cock.”

I whimpered.

“Let go.”

I was his instrument and he had mastered the skill of making me sing. My body arched into his touch, my hips rocking faster with his. “Kline... I... Oh... God...”

“Fuck yes, give me one more.” His eyes focused on his hand moving over me, his cock sliding in and out.

I closed my eyes, my mind drowning in pure sensation.

My thighs quivered, my pussy tightening rhythmically around him, and my hips threatened to cramp up from the strain. A

surprised cry escaped my lungs as I came hard and fast. My head was thrown back into the pillow, and I gripped his ass, pulling him forward while he rocked into me.

His eyes squeezed shut, lips parted as he chased his own release. His hair was mussed up, sweat wetting his brow. And God, his eyes, they were fierce and hooded with his impending climax.

“I want to feel you come.” I gasped, dragging my nails down his back. I needed to see him lose control, needed to feel his body when he came.

He stared down at my breasts that were moving with the force of his thrusts. His skin was sweaty and perfect, and I wanted to lick it off with my tongue. And when he looked up and met my eyes, I watched him lose control.

The moment felt like a dream—everything slowing down so I could imprint every second on my brain. His mouth moved in slow motion with each soft grunt, each guttural moan. And his movements echoed that I was seeing the real thing.

This was real. *We* were real. My feelings, his feelings, even though they hadn't been said out loud, they were real. Deep down, I knew—he was it. My person. My soul's infinitely interesting counterpart.

“Let's stay here, wrapped up in one another until the sun burns out,” I whispered into his ear, once his body had stilled and my burning lungs had cooled enough to fill with breath.

He lifted my chin, staring into my eyes. My heart latched on to billowing blue and refused to let go. “I know you're not ready to hear what I'm feeling, but just know, for me, tonight was *more*. It was *everything*.”

I closed my eyes, letting his words wash over me.

This moment would last forever. No matter what happened, I'd never forget the look in his eyes, the sound of his voice, and the feel of him claiming every part of me.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kline

I woke with a start, the brief confusion of my surroundings passing quickly enough that my hands slid across the sheets in search of Georgia's warm, sweet skin within seconds. The hunt for heated skin turned up nothing but cold cotton.

I lifted my head and opened my eyes to continue the search, and the mid-morning sun filtering in through the glass windows highlighted her clothes from last night, strewn across the bench beneath the bay window. Sitting up to get a better visual perspective, I blinked the sleep from my eyes and scanned the room thoroughly, but still came up empty.

With my sense of sight foiled, the others engaged, and the sound of her voice echoing from down the hall turned my short bout of panic into pride. Beautiful and brilliant, the unpredictably vivacious woman down the hall had chosen me to share last night with.

Her voice wasn't as pretty as the rest of her, though, the familiar, high-pitched, nails-on-a-chalkboard tune of her unrecognized song bringing a smile to my face. And it was *loud*. So loud—and unexpectedly inviting—that I got out of bed and threw on a pair of boxers to find out what she was up to.

Striding down the hall, I found her in one of the bathrooms. The door open and her body in motion, her back was to me as she slid a paint-covered roller across the wall and danced at the same time. Her voice boomed inside the small, confined room, and a Mary Poppins-like accent emphasized her tone. I'd never heard the song before, but I couldn't tell if that was because I didn't know the band or that she was only singing every third word.

In disbelief that I'd found her making her own episode of something on HGTV so early in the morning and without

cause, I leaned against the doorframe and just watched her, drinking her in. Blonde hair sat on top of her head, curls cascading from a messy bun. She was a mess, earbuds in with her phone tucked into the side of my boxer briefs, and her black lace bra was the only other article of clothing covering her petite and curvy frame.

Her perfect little ass shook back and forth as she danced in place, painting the wall to the rhythm of whatever offbeat music filled her ears.

I crossed my arms across my chest, smiling at her obliviousness to my presence. She was painting the room the wrong color, smearing the light shade of blue I had decided I hated weeks ago all over the unfinished walls, but I didn't care. She could paint the entire house this godawful blue—as long as she did it in her current uniform, and I got to watch. Bob and Maureen would have to learn to love it, because every time I saw it, I'd think of this—of her, of last night, and of this perfect, simple moment.

I couldn't help but think, if I only made bad decisions for the rest of my life, at least I had made one really good decision with her.

Asking Georgia out was the smartest thing I had ever done. Period.

She turned to soak more paint onto the roller, and her hands flew to her chest, droplets of blue streaming across the room and staining everything in their path.

“Christ, Kline! You scared the bejeezus out of me!” she shouted, the accent of the band still hijacking the normal lilt of her voice. She removed her earbuds, letting the cords fall past her hips.

“My apologies, love,” I said, mimicking her English brogue.

Her cheeks turned pink, an embarrassed smile cresting her full lips. “Sorry, I've been listening to English rock bands all morning.”

I grinned. “You sound like a young Julie Andrews. It's pretty fucking adorable.”

Georgia giggled, setting the roller down. She bounced around the room like a pinball, pouring more paint into the tray. Her excessive energy level piqued my interest.

“Did I wake you? God, I really hope I didn’t wake you up. I was up by five, and I couldn’t fall back asleep so I put on a pot of coffee. I watched Home Shopping Network for about twenty minutes and walked through the house, and then I saw the room and I figured why not make myself useful, right? So, yeah, I saw you had already painted one of the walls this color blue, so I decided to finish the job. Are you still tired? Hungry? I can make some more coffee if you want some?” Her words were strewn together in one giant, fast-paced, run-on sentence.

I tried to recall the last time I’d seen her take a breath.

She fiddled with bright blue painter’s tape while tapping a persistent foot against the squeaky hardwood floor.

I cocked my head to the side. “How much coffee have you had, sweetheart?”

She shrugged. “A few cups. I guess I lost count after three...or maybe it was four?”

My eyebrows popped in understanding.

“Anyway, what do you think? Are you happy with the color? I think I like it. It’s cheerful. Serene. Hopefully, your mom will like it. I guess her opinion would be the most important one, huh?”

I nodded. “I think she’ll love it,” I lied. “Have—”

“Fantastic!” she exclaimed, before I could ask her if she’d eaten anything. Her mind was like a damn hummingbird’s wing, flitting around from one thought to the next faster than the naked eye, or in this case, ear, could process.

She grabbed the roller again, sliding it into the tray, and resumed her painting with more-than-necessary focus.

“So, last night...it was...did you...” She glanced over her shoulder, eyes uncertain, and before I could offer a reassuring smile, her gaze was back on the wall, her arm sweeping up and

down in quick succession. Her feet fidgeted a few times until she just blurted out, “I had a really good time last night!”

And the light bulb went on.

Normally, I could get a pretty quick read on someone’s headspace, more quickly than this, but after waking up to find her painting my house, her beautiful mouth moving a mile a minute, I was a little off my game.

Georgia was nervous. And about a pot of coffee deep into the caffeine jitters.

She seemed uncertain if I’d enjoyed last night, which was insane. First time or not, Georgia Cummings knew just how to sexually woo a man.

A tight, hot pussy was just the beginning because the rest of it was what I would remember. The shake of her body, the gravel in her voice. The way her words turned into moans, and those, in the fiery inferno of her orgasm, gave way to nothing but enraptured silence. Her eyes held mine, and her heartbeat was my second favorite part of her chest.

Nirvana was the only way to describe it.

I knew she felt it along with me then, and I knew, deep down, she knew it now, too. I just needed to remind her.

I moved to the shower, turning the nozzle and letting the water warm up.

She glanced over her shoulder at the squeal of the pipes. “What are you doing?”

“Just want to make sure the plumbing is still good in here,” I lied. The only plumbing I cared about was hers.

I smiled in reassurance. She kept the suspicious face but turned back to her task.

Once the water hit a good temperature, I moved toward her, wrapping my arms around her waist, and whispered into her ear, kissing the soft skin of her neck.

“Hey, guess what?”

“What?” She shivered but didn’t stop painting.

I kissed her jaw and stepped back, holding my hand out. “Let me borrow that roller for a second. I have a little trick that makes it easier,” I lied again.

She shrugged, handing it to me. I set it down in the tray, glancing at the shower and noting the steam rising from the floor.

Perfect.

It was time to take this situation into my own hands. I grabbed her hips and tossed her over my shoulder before she could stop me.

“Kline!” she squeaked as I strode toward the shower, the top fragments of her bun tickling the skin of my thighs. She smacked my ass and back as I stepped under the showerhead, water drenching us both.

“Holy shit!” she shrieked as the water soaked into her skin and very few clothes. “What the hell!”

Chuckling, I set Georgia on her feet and ignored her glare. I reached around her back with a flourish, popping the clasp on her bra and dragging it off her arms and down until it landed at our feet. She was a vision, wet, waiting, and wearing nothing but my briefs.

“I enjoyed last night.” Her uncertain eyes warmed just slightly. “So much that I feel compelled to thank you—” I paused and licked my lips with a wink. “And this perfect fucking pussy.” Her eyes widened, but I didn’t wait, sliding down her body, kissing between her swinging breasts, her belly, until I reached the waistband of my underwear.

“Kline?”

“Shh,” I said into her skin, pulling a tiny section between my teeth. “I’m a little busy right now.”

She shook as I slipped the briefs down her legs and pressed my mouth against her pubic bone, licking the water from her skin. “God, Benny girl, last night, you blew my fucking mind. It’s safe to say I want to do that with you for the next one hundred years. It was the best goddamn sex of my entire life.”

“Really?” she whimpered.

“You. Were. Perfect.” My lips trailed down her inner thigh.

Her legs were trembling, her hands sliding into my hair and tugging desperately.

“Did you enjoy last night?” I prompted, putting the ball back in her court. “Was it as good for you as it was for me?”

“God, yes. Last night was perfect,” she moaned, her head falling back thanks to my suction on her pussy.

Sweet like candy, I feasted on the taste of her until her inner muscles tried to take possession of my tongue.

Goddamn, I wanted that pussy to milk another part of me.

“How sore are you, sweetheart?”

She shook her head ‘no,’ but her eyes said ‘God, yes.’

“I need to feel what it’s like to be inside you again. I want to feel that pretty pussy squeeze the cum out of my cock.”

“Yes,” she moaned. “Please. Now.”

I picked her up and wrapped her legs around me tight, moving us down the hall and into my bedroom before tossing her wet body onto the mattress. My sheets would be soaked, but fuck if I cared. I grabbed a condom out of my bag, tearing the package with my teeth as she watched from the bed.

“So, I guess this means there really weren’t any painting tips?” she teased, biting her bottom lip.

“It’s all about the strokes, baby,” I said, flashing a devilish grin as I slid the condom on, stroking up and down my length to punctuate that statement.

I crawled onto the bed, moving between her legs. She gripped my ass as I held her thighs, my fingertips branding her skin, and spreading them wider until the tip of my cock nestled against the one place I *needed* to be.

“Now, Kline. God, I can’t wait any longer,” she begged. Her hips pushed up, urging me closer.

The second I pushed inside of her, we both cried out, losing ourselves in each other and chasing *each other's* pleasure.

I spent the next two hours using my cock and mouth and hands to reassure Georgia that sex with her was the single best thing I'd ever experienced, and she gave every second of that time to confirming it.

Hands down, motherfucking *nirvana*.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Georgia

“Windows up or down?” he asked, cranking the engine and putting the gearshift into drive.

Reality started to set in. We were headed back to the city, and I knew I’d miss being wrapped up in my perfect Kline bubble. No responsibilities, no plans, just us, lazily enjoying the entire weekend together.

“Down, please.” I wanted to smell the ocean one last time. The day was beautiful, sun shining brightly and only filtered by the occasional fluffy white cloud strolling past its glow.

He rolled down the windows then leaned over the console, grabbing two pairs of aviators from his glove box and handing one to me.

“Such a gentleman.” I smiled, slipping them on and tossing my hair into a messy bun.

“For you—” he rested his hand on my thigh, squeezing gently “—always, baby.”

As we drove onto the main road, the Hamptons house slowly diminished in the passenger mirror and an unexpected surge of melancholy consumed me. I was going to miss that beautiful, rustic house. If I could’ve made a Pinterest board of my perfect home, that place would be pretty damn close. Once finished, I bet it would exceed my wildest dreams.

I was still in awe that Kline had bought a home for his mom and dad. And it wasn’t a brand new house, which he could obviously afford. It was a home he was filling with love and care and thoughtfulness by fixing it up himself.

Everything I had assumed about him had been dead wrong.

He’d rented a Ford Edge, for goodness’ sake. Nothing against that vehicle—I’d have been more than happy to drive one

around—but it wasn't the type of car you'd see a man with his kind of money drive.

A Range Rover? Definitely.

But an economy, mid-size SUV that he'd *rented*? Hell no.

He was so damn humble and endearing and *practical*. Every new facet of his personality I discovered, I adored. Kline was one of the most intriguing people I'd ever met.

"I'll drive. You handle the music. Sound good?" He handed me his phone, iTunes already pulled up.

I nodded, scrolling through his playlists and choosing Young the Giant's "12 Fingers." It was the perfect song for this kind of day. I hung my hand out the window and savored the unseasonably warm wind that caressed my skin. After slipping off my flats, I moved my feet up to the seat, knees finding their way under my chin. Catching sight of each mile marker we passed, I felt a twinge of sadness as the distance grew between us and that gorgeous beach view.

I glanced at Kline out of the corner of my eye. He was softly singing the words, tapping out a beat on the steering wheel. He looked delicious—aviators, two days' worth of scruff, handsome mouth set in a soft grin. I wanted to eat him with a spoon.

A swell of emotions tightened my chest as our weekend replayed in my mind.

It had been perfect. *He* had been perfect. Kline hadn't rushed. He'd been attentive and careful and made sure my first time was good for me. And it had been. That night had been more than good. It had been *amazing*.

He made me feel crazy, in the greatest, most overwhelming way. It was hard to describe. Hell, it was hard to even put it into words without saying things I wasn't quite ready to say.

Just... God, this man... He was *everything*.

I felt like I was on the best roller coaster ride of my life. In the beginning, when everything started with us, I had hesitantly

hopped in, mind racing: *What the hell am I thinking? Is this a good idea?*

The guy I'd known at work was a fair, honest, friendly guy but not one I'd ever considered. But then, it had been too late to back out because I'd been moving—*we'd* been moving.

We'd been climbing and whirling and twisting all crazy, and my thoughts had immediately shifted. *I'm pretty sure I'll survive, because how many people fall out of roller coasters, right?*

But I didn't really know because I'd never really paid attention to theme park statistics.

Shit, I had never really been into riding roller coasters.

Until Kline.

Every corkscrew and curve was exciting. I was enjoying every nerve-wracking minute, and I started to just let go and trust. I started to truly believe that as scary as it was, I was right where I needed to be.

Then, there was that “holy shit” turn when the bottom would drop out and my stomach would fall to my feet, but I was soaring again and screaming and laughing because I had made it. I was *alive*, and this—Kline and me together—was the most real, amazing thing in my life. And the ride slowed just a little bit, and the turns and twists were more like reverberations of the really crazy ones from before, but I was fine with that.

I was happy with everything.

And when I pulled into the place where I had started, I felt changed—overjoyed, enlightened, and knowing, without a doubt, I was right where I'd always wanted and needed to be.

In the craziest explanation, that was what he made me feel.

Complete. Alive. Amazing. The same but somehow very, very different.

The song switched to The Used's “Smother Me.” The lyrics and the slow, silky beat had me looking at Kline again, drinking him in.

He sensed my eyes, glancing in my direction and smiling. One hand left the wheel, reaching for mine and entwining our fingers.

I laid my head back on the seat and just enjoyed, savored, greedily soaked up this little moment. I memorized every second, locking it up tight with the rest of my Kline memories.

We'd made a lot in a short time, but they were good ones. Every single one.

* * *

Before I knew it, Kline was hopping out of the driver's side and opening my door. The drive had been nice and we'd made good time. He'd held my hand the entire way, his thumb caressing my fingers. We didn't talk much, just silently enjoyed each other's company.

Sometimes, words don't need to be said. Sometimes, simply enjoying someone's company, just having them beside you, just being in their presence was enough. Plus, my inner monologue had said enough for the both of us.

Since we had spent the majority of the day packing and driving, I was going to stay the night at his place. We'd take the rental car back on our way to work and get into the office a little later than usual.

That was definitely one positive for dating your boss. If he wanted to take you away on a long weekend in the Hamptons and demanded you go into work a few hours later than normal, who were you to argue?

"Let's leave the bags," he said, taking my hand. "I'll grab them later."

He handed his key off to the valet and led me into the lobby and onto the elevator.

“Did you have a good weekend, Benny?” he asked, pushing the button for his floor.

“Eh.” I shrugged. “It was okay.”

“Just okay?”

I nodded.

He stalked toward me like he was a predator and I was his prey, and he caged me against the wall. “Are you sure about that, baby?”

“It was *pretty good?*” I stared up at him, fighting the urge to smile.

“I have a feeling you’re trying to get me riled up.” His kissed the corner of my mouth. “Is that what you’re doing?”

“Is it working?”

His hand slid into my hair, gripping the strands. “That depends. What kind of reaction were you hoping for?”

“One that includes taking off your pants.”

“I think that can be arranged.”

His mouth was on me, kissing me hard, making my moan echo in the small confines of the cart.

My hands were all over him, touching his chest and stomach and then sliding up his back. I was about two seconds away from mounting him inside the elevator when the bell dinged, signaling we’d reached his floor.

He didn’t waste any time, picking me up and wrapping my legs around his waist as he carried me out, grabbing my ass.

We were a mess of kissing and groping as we reached his door. It took him three tries to fit the key into the lock and open it. We tumbled into his apartment. He kicked the door shut. My back was pressed against the wall as he continued to kiss the hell out of me.

“Kline? Is that you?”

We stopped, glancing toward the female voice coming from the living room.

“Shit,” he cursed, untangling us.

My feet hit the floor and Kline discreetly adjusted my shirt.

I looked at him, confused. What the hell?

“My mom,” he mouthed just as she rounded the corner.

Panic hit me. I was about to meet his mom. Kline’s mom. She was here, in his apartment. And two seconds ago, I’d been about to hump him in the elevator.

I mean, what were the odds? Friday night, Kline had popped my cherry, and today, I was meeting his fucking mother. I felt like I was in the Twilight Zone.

Deep breaths, Georgia. You can do this. You can get through this without looking like a moron.

“Kline, darling! We didn’t know you’d be home so early,” she greeted, moving toward her son and giving him a hug. His mother was beautiful—dark hair that was cut into a bob, bright blue eyes, blinding smile. I was starting to see where Kline got his looks.

“Uh, hi, Mom.” He cleared his throat. Scratched his cheek. “Just out of curiosity, how did you get in my apartment?”

“The spare key you gave us.”

“You mean my *emergency* key? The one I gave you just in case I lost mine or managed to lock myself out of my apartment?”

“Yeah, that one.” She nodded and smiled, not catching his drift in the slightest.

Kline sighed, scrubbing a hand down his face.

“Kline, my boy!” A tall, handsome man walked toward us. He was a distinguished kind of handsome, with salt and pepper hair and glasses covering his brown eyes.

Oh, shit! His dad is here too?

“Hey, Dad,” Kline greeted.

The two men hugged, clapping one another on the back.

His dad's focus turned to me. "And who is this gorgeous woman?"

"Bob, I was just about to ask that," his mother added, almost insulted that he'd gotten to it first. It caused a hint of a smile to spread across my face.

"This is my girlfriend." Kline wrapped his arm around my shoulder, tucking me into his side. If it hadn't been for the panic over his parents, I might have focused a little harder on the use of the label 'girlfriend,' jumped up and down a couple of times—that sort of thing.

"Georgia, these are my parents, Bob and Maureen," he begrudgingly introduced us. I had a feeling he was peeved their unexpected visit had put a damper on our little moment in the elevator.

I fought my normal urges to shout something awkward and completely inappropriate.

"Oh, hi! I'm Georgia! Your son took my virginity this weekend! You really did a great job with him! He sure knows how to please a woman!"

Yeah, don't worry. I managed to keep my foot-in-mouth syndrome under control.

"It's a pleasure to meet you both." I shook their hands. "Kline has told me so much about you."

"Oh, she's very pretty, Kline," Maureen murmured, winking at her son.

"Can't deny that," Bob added. "Looks like you're finally slowing down and enjoying yourself."

"Thank goodness!" his mother agreed. "It's about time our baby boy took some time for himself. He works too hard." She looked at Kline. "You really do, honey. You work way too hard."

Kline started to say something, but his father was already chiming in. "Definitely works too hard. You look good, son. And I have a feeling it has a lot to do with this pretty lady here." Bob nodded in my direction.

I felt like I was in the middle of a tennis match, moving my head back and forth, back and forth, just to keep up with their constant chatter. They were pretty adorable, to be honest.

“So, what brings you guys here, to *my* apartment, on a *Sunday*?”

“Your father still hasn’t fixed my washer. And I needed to throw a few loads in,” Maureen explained, giving Bob the side-eye. “But don’t worry, I went ahead and did all of your laundry while I was at it. And I cleaned your bathroom. It was a mess, Kline Matthew,” she scolded.

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Thanks, Mom. I really appreciate it.”

“Well, it was the least I could do. But really, Kline, between that and the litter box, I nearly fainted. You should think about getting a maid or something. Georgia shouldn’t have to see that.”

Pretty sure the last time I was here, what his bathroom looked like was the very last thing on my mind. The bedroom? Yes. Kline naked? Hell yes. But the cleanliness of his toilet? Yeah, not so much.

“Only one of those things is even remotely my fault,” Kline grumbled under his breath. It was one of those moves where you want to stick it to a person by saying what you’re feeling, but you don’t *actually* want them to hear you.

I tried really hard not to laugh.

“How was the Hamptons?” Bob asked as we made our way into the living room.

“Fantastic.” Kline encouraged me to sit down on the couch before settling beside me. “We had great weather.”

“Had you ever been to the Hamptons, Georgia?” Maureen asked.

“A few times, but not since I was a teenager. It was nice being by the coast. Honestly, it makes me want to live there permanently.”

Kline grinned at me, gently squeezing my thigh.

“What’d you rent for the drive, son?” Bob asked.

“Ford Edge.”

“Sensible vehicle. Not my first choice, but I guess you didn’t want to pick Georgia up in a Focus, huh?” He chuckled, smiling at Kline. “How was the gas mileage?”

“Pretty good,” Kline answered. “Twenty-eight miles to the gallon.”

“Not too shabby.” His dad scrunched his lips together, nodding his head.

The whole practicality thing was really starting to make sense.

“Darling, have you offered Georgia anything to drink?” his mother whispered, but loud enough for me to hear. “I’m sure she’s parched from the drive.”

Before I could decline, Kline was pulling me to my feet.

“Come on, let’s get you something to drink.”

“I’ll take a beer, son!” his dad called out to us as we walked into the kitchen.

“She’s so pretty, Bob,” Maureen whispered to her husband, giddy. “Do you think they’re having s-e-x?”

“Christ, Maureen, I hope to God our son is having sex by now. He’s thirty-four years old. If he isn’t, I’ve screwed up somewhere along the way.”

“Shh,” she quieted him. “Keep your voice down. And stop talking like that.”

“Pretty sure they can hear everything you’re saying, Maur. You’ve never been too good with the inside voice.” His father didn’t even attempt to keep his volume down.

“Do you think they are, Bob?”

“By the way they looked when they walked in the door, I’d say they were about two seconds away from s-e-x-ing.”

If they hadn’t already shown me approval, I’d have been burrowing myself into the floor.

The second we got into the kitchen, Kline was lifting me onto the counter and standing between my legs. He gripped my thighs.

“Sorry for the ambush,” he said, his eyes apologetic.

“It’s not like you planned it. Anyway, I really like Bob and Maureen.”

A relieved grin covered his lips. “They really do mean well. My mom can be a bit of a meddler, though. I’m sure that was apparent the second we walked into my apartment and found them making themselves at home.”

I laughed, nodding. “It’s okay. Once you meet my parents, you’ll realize you have nothing to worry about.”

He pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “I look forward to it, baby.”

“Do you think we’ll have s-e-x tonight?” I teased, wagging my brows.

“God, I was praying you hadn’t heard them,” he groaned, dropping his head to my chest.

I laughed, lifting his chin up to meet my eyes.

“I’m glad you’re finding this hilarious.”

“I can’t wait until we have s-e-x again,” I whispered.

Kline’s face cracked, a smile consuming his perfect mouth.

“I hope you put your mouth on my p-u-s-s-y, too.”

“If I put my c-o-c-k in your mouth, will you stop spelling shit?”

I nodded, my mouth twisting into a devious smile.

He tickled my ribs, urging giggles from my lips.

“Stop it!” I whisper-yelled, squirming away from him. “Now, stop being so damn ornery and get me something to drink. I’m parched.”

He rolled his eyes, turning for the fridge.

I stayed on the counter, swinging my legs and watching him rummage around for refreshments.

“Hey...psst...” I tried to get his attention.

Curious blue eyes peeked over the fridge door.

I cupped my mouth with my hands, whispering, “You have the best c-o-c-k.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Kline

“I just realized maybe I should have chosen a more professional meal. Something delicate.” Georgia rolled her eyes with a self-deprecating smile and took a sip of wine.

Professional. *Ha*. These days, professional felt like nothing more than a fancy name for a distant memory. I was so wrapped up in her, my eyes were practically staring straight down the barrel of my asshole.

It didn’t feel remotely natural, but it sure as fuck didn’t feel bad either.

“You’re not a delicate professional. You’re a take-charge, no-bullshit kind of woman. If Glen would rather watch you eat a salad than a steak, he can go fuck himself.”

“Kline!”

“Well, he can. Don’t worry about anything other than being yourself and the contract. Fuck the rest.”

It had been two weeks since our trip to the Hamptons. We were at a dinner meeting with Glen Waters, President and CEO of FlowersFirst, to button up an exclusive contract with them that I hadn’t been crazy about—until Georgia had outlined all of the guaranteed cross-advertising they were contracted to do.

Full disclosure, I still wasn’t one hundred percent sold. But Georgia Cummings was a smart, efficient employee, and that wasn’t even my dick talking. He got a vote, I supposed—not worth denying it—but that wasn’t the basis of my decision. My confidence in her ability was what had brought us to this meeting.

But the flower market share on TapNext alone was gargantuan, and I didn’t like giving any one entity the entire pie. Contracts

were airtight for a reason, but swearing yourself to one person professionally was just ripe for a fucking.

Glen better have some real unicorn and rainbow type bullshit planned for ad content or I am going to derail this train before it even gets out of the station.

“Sorry about that,” Glen apologized as he approached the table. He’d left to take an “important” phone call. It happened from time to time, so I understood, but he rubbed me as one of those people who *thinks* he’s hot shit and irreplaceable. Everyone is replaceable in business.

Some people like me, or Georgia, or maybe even Glen, could be an asset, but we sure as fuck weren’t necessities. Businesses needed competence, patience, and drive, and plenty of people had those qualities.

“No problem,” Georgia appeased easily, obviously feeling like telling him to go fuck himself a little less than I did.

“Now, we were just starting to dive into the specifics when you got pulled away,” she began, steering Glen back to the prize. I sat back to watch.

“We’d be looking at a twelve-month exclusivity in exchange for majority placement in each of your ads: television, radio, and print. In general, our website makes up twenty percent of the online daily flower market alone. Brooks Media would contractually reserve the right to approve any and all ad content that references or deals with us.”

God, she was something.

Every word she spoke made it clear—business didn’t need specific people, but love and relationships sure did. I was starting to realize my specific person was her.

I checked back into reality just in time to find Georgia looking to me in question. Of course, I’d missed the question.

Glen, the helpful bastard, filled me in, though. “Don’t you think she’d look sexy in one of the ads, Brooks?”

“No,” I answered simply, hoping he’d drop it. We’d just gotten started, and I wanted to believe he was just trying to get into

her good graces by complimenting her—inappropriate in both context and manner, but a compliment all the same.

He laughed and gestured at my girlfriend.

“Sex sells. You know this.”

I did. Sex was a huge share of marketing in the U.S. specifically. But there was a whole slew of creative ways to use it, and they didn’t include Georgia.

“Your whole market is sex, and this girl would *sell*.”

I clenched my hand into a fist under the table but worked to keep my voice and demeanor steady. I even managed a completely unfriendly smile. “No, Glen. Georgia is an executive and an asset within the company. What she *isn’t*, is *sex to sell*.”

“Kline,” Georgia whispered. My anger was building and she wasn’t oblivious to it.

“Oh, I see,” Glen said with a nod. “Her sex isn’t for sale because she’s already sexing the boss.” He reached out to brush the loose hair off of her shoulder. “Good move, sweetheart.”

My mind raced with a thousand scenarios of how I could strangle this motherfucker from across the table. *Shit*. I shoved back my chair and fished in my pocket for money at the same time. Rage bubbled and boiled under the surface, singeing the lining of my veins, but I didn’t give in to the scene. He wanted that. He’d pushed the last straw to try to get a rise out of me and draw attention to himself because he knew the contract was already swirling the drain.

Guys like Glen were snakes, slithering around until they found the perfect opportunity to pounce. He wanted a physical reaction, one that would land me in handcuffs and balls deep in lawyer’s fees. But I wouldn’t be a party to it.

He was the coward, not me. Instead of facing his poor, pathetic, unintelligible business decisions head-on, *like a man*, he’d sexually harassed my girlfriend.

“The deal’s dead, Glen,” I declared, throwing the money down on the white linen tablecloth. “Contract’s destroyed. Any future opportunity to do business with Brooks Media and any of its subsidiaries extinguished. And you’ve lost a powerful business ally, and instead, gained an enemy.”

I pulled out Georgia’s chair and forced her to stand.

“Kline—”

“Georgia, let’s go.”

She nodded, grabbed her clutch, and followed, but I could tell she wasn’t happy.

And that made fucking two of us.

Frank sat at the curb waiting, and I opened the door and ushered Georgia in without delay.

“Mr. Brooks,” Frank said as he jumped to attention in the driver seat.

“My apartment, Frank.”

“Yes, sir.”

Georgia tried several times to meet my eyes, but I couldn’t return the favor. I was too goddamn angry. At Glen, at myself, and a little at her. I hated the last most of all.

I expected her to call to me. Tell me to look at her. Something.

But the more my anger stewed, the more her own built. When I glanced her way, she was staring out the window and grinding her teeth, the curves of her nails cutting into the skin of her palms every few seconds.

The ride remained silent and tense and didn’t break until the door to my apartment slammed shut behind us.

I tossed my wallet and keys onto the counter and pulled the tails of my shirt out of my pants. As I loosened my tie, Georgia geared up for battle, turning to face me and slamming her tiny purse down on the kitchen table with force.

“I can’t believe you!” she seethed.

“Me?” I asked in disbelief, four fingers pointing to the outside of my chest and raging heart pumping under the surface.

“Yes, you! That was a multi-million dollar deal. Access to ads we don’t have to pay for for twelve months!” She shook her head. “I’ve been working on it for the better part of six months! And you threw in the towel because you were a jealous boyfriend.”

“Fuck that, Georgia!” I yelled, and she jumped. It was the first time I’d ever raised my voice at her, and it felt just awful enough that I hoped it was the last. But she needed to hear this. “I didn’t screw shit. That deal was menial at best from the beginning, signing away our lives to *him* for an entire year. And the way Glen conducts business is bullshit.”

“I’m a woman, Kline! Sometimes I have to play the game a little differently than you.”

“That’s horseshit.”

She jerked back, and her face flushed red with anger.

“The moment you lower yourself to playing into fuckwits like Glen is the moment you’ve already shot yourself in the goddamn foot *and* leg.”

“I had it under control.”

“You didn’t have shit,” I spat. “He was *touching* you. There is nowhere, not one single place, where that’s appropriate in business, man or woman.”

“Kline—”

It would be bad enough that I’d interrupted her, so I forced my voice to calm. “You are a brilliant woman. When someone notices your beauty and belittles it like that, you tell them to fuck off, and you do it immediately.”

“I was trying to—”

“No,” I interrupted again, pulling my tie from my neck and tossing it next to my keys, softening my voice even further. “You’re right about a lot of things, a lot of the time, baby, but about this, you. Are. Wrong.”

Anger lined every angle of her body, the way she stood, and the expression on her face. But she didn't say anything. She knew I was right. She knew she hadn't been on her A-game, and she was fucking pissed about it.

Pissed that women had to be in that position in the first place.

Infuriated that she hadn't held her ground when he'd pushed.

She could carry that anger for the whole night for all I cared. In fact, I hoped she did. Stewed on it. Learned from it.

I didn't mind one fucking bit as long as she got the hell into my arms.

"Be angry," I told her. "But, please, for the love of God, do it while you're touching me."

Two fuming steps ate half the distance between us, and I closed the rest, pulling her face to mine with a clutch of her jaw.

Buttons scattered as she ripped my shirt wide open and pushed the destroyed fabric from my shoulders. Heat ran down my spine like a bullet out of a gun, burning a track all the way down and gripping my balls at the bottom.

I could feel them tighten in excitement, and an aggressiveness I didn't know I possessed surged through my veins in accompaniment.

As soon as the tattered fabric cleared my fingertips, my hands went straight for her ass and around, down the backs of her thighs and back up the inside, bringing her skirt with them. Scratching lightly, my fingernails tested her skin before the urge to grab overwhelmed me. Skin bunched and moved with the pressure before forming a perfect shelf below her ass where my hands could live.

I lifted her with ease, forcing her legs up and around my hips with pressure at my pinkies, and strode for the bedroom. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders to ease the pressure on my own and redistribute it perfectly to my hard-as-fuck cock.

Uninhibited, she ate at my lips, sucking one and then the other between her own and running her tongue along the seam of

them.

A groan rumbled in my chest and her breath came out in pants, but that didn't slow either of us. Time versus pleasure was a race, the culmination of both right on the edge with no chance of stopping. I wanted her more than I wanted to breathe, and when she threw her head back, let go of my shoulders, and ripped her shirt over her head, she confirmed I wasn't the only one.

"Suck on them," she ordered, thrusting her tits in my face and reaching behind her back to unhook her bra.

With my hands at her lower back to hold her steady, I didn't delay or disappoint, pulling one cup down with my teeth before she could find the clasp.

Little nibbles and sucking kisses, I tortured every inch of skin, burrowing my face in the bottom swell and biting it enough to make a mark.

She yelped slightly, but it morphed into a moan as she pulled the scrap of fabric down her arms in between us and threw it to the floor of my bedroom.

With my back to the bed, I fell to my ass, unwilling to abandon our current position or circumstances. Her knees sank naturally into the mattress at my sides, and the newfound freedom of my hands made me test the weight of her perfect tits in each one.

"God, Kline," she whimpered. "They ache." She let out two short pants as my tongue swirled the tip and sucked it deep into the warmth of my mouth. "*I ache.*"

"Make it better, Georgie," I dared after releasing her pink nipple with a pop.

Always up for a challenge, she didn't hesitate, backing off of my lap in an instant and unbuckling the belt at my waist. Her tongue flashed out and tasted her own lips as she did, heady arousal running so hot in her blood that she couldn't stop. I nearly lost my fucking mind.

Belt undone, she made quick work of the button and zipper and shoved her hands inside before I could make a move to

reciprocate with her skirt.

Jesus Christ.

The feel of her hand diving in to grab my dick without remorse or hesitation nearly made me come in my pants.

“Georgia,” I whispered, and her bright, fiery eyes jumped to mine with desperation.

She’d been pouring all of her angst and uncertainty from the meeting into this—*into us*—and I didn’t mind. But at the same time, I wanted her to feel what was coming from me. My jealousy, my rage—*sure*—but mostly my fucking disgust at listening to someone treat her like anything less than the smart, beautiful, goddamn goddess of a woman she was.

“Come on, baby. Climb on. Fuck me until it only hurts good.”

She finally shucked her skirt and I did the same with my pants, toeing off my shoes in the process. She didn’t bother, keeping her heels on her feet and climbing on top of me again.

I reached to grab a condom from my pants, but she slid down on my dick before my fingers even met the fabric.

“*Fuuuuuck.*”

“Oh yeah,” she agreed, emphatic. “I’m going to.”

“Condom,” I reminded her, grabbing her hips to slow her already building speed.

She just shook her head with a smile, a halfway distant look in her eyes suggesting she didn’t even understand what the fuck she was doing.

If I thought for even a second there was a chance I’d hurt her in some way or give her some kind of a disease by taking her without a condom, I would have stopped her.

But I knew for a fact I wouldn’t, and if there were other consequences, like an unplanned pregnancy, I’d literally run myself ragged to make it worth it for all of us.

Because *good God*, I did not want to interrupt or ruin this show.

I eased my grip on her hips just enough that she could move freely and she took advantage.

She found her rhythm quickly, her tits swinging deliciously and the plump cheeks of her ass cradling my thighs and balls with every stroke down.

Her hair fell down and around her face, and her breath came out in staccato pants. I'd never seen a woman take hold of her pleasure so thoroughly. She squeezed me internally with every stroke, touched the skin on my chest like she couldn't get enough—*connected*—and yet, she worked me with the focus of someone doing nothing but chasing their own pleasure.

A smile swallowed my face as her pussy did the same to my cock. Up and down she went, her thighs shaking more and more with each stroke.

“That’s it, sweetheart.”

She was getting close now, and her fingernails were digging half-moons into the skin at my chest. I grabbed a handful of flesh at the sides of her hips and held on, saddling up and getting ready for what was to come.

When a moan exploded from her chest, I lost any pretense of control. A clap of sound cracked the heavy, sex-filled air as I reddened the skin of her ass with one hand and plucked at one of her perfect nipples with the other.

“Ride that cock, Georgia.”

Her pussy clenched.

Fuck yes.

“Make it yours,” I demanded, pushing her to take it to the next level. With an ab curl, my mouth lunged for her untortured nipple and sucked it with a pop. Her pussy grabbed me again, and this time was slow to let go. “Fuckkkkk. God, this cunt. It’s gonna make *me* yours for fucking ever.”

And it was. That and her mind and her single-minded determination to redefine herself—to redefine her evening’s decisions—in one dominating ride on my cock.

If this was how we fought, I’d fight with her forever.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Georgia

“Honey, I’m home!” Cassie yelled. A familiar echoing thud filled my ears as she dropped her bags to the floor. “Where in the hell are you?”

“In here!” I called from the bathroom. My lashes fluttered as I tried to apply mascara without poking my eye out. I liked makeup, loved when someone helped me apply my makeup, but I wasn’t very good at doing it myself. Which was why if Cassie—the makeup guru—wasn’t around to help me get ready, I stuck with the basics.

“Aw, isn’t this sweet,” she said, resting her shoulder on the doorframe. “My little baby is all grown up, applying her own makeup and shit.”

“I even got my period last week, Mom,” I tossed back, my voice monotone. “I think I’m officially a woman.”

“What in the hell are you doing?” she scoffed, watching my reflection in the mirror. “Are you trying to remove your eyelid with that brush?”

See what I mean? Makeup and I weren’t all that great of friends.

Lipstick? Sure.

Blush? Yeah, okay.

Even mascara I could manage.

But anything else, I was pretty much incompetent.

“Give me that before you detach a retina.” She snatched the eye shadow brush from my hand.

I scrunched my nose. “What do you know about detached retinas?”

“I dated an optometrist like a million years ago and there was —” She stopped midsentence, taking in my narrow-eyed expression.

“*Okay*, if you want to be specific about it,” she amended. “I *banged* an optometrist a few times.”

“That’s better. Keep going,” I urged her.

“Well, there was an incident, and he freaked the hell out about my eye. Mumbling something about a detached retina.”

“Do I even want to know details?”

“If you don’t want to hear about how Wally’s giant penis poked me in the eye while he was com—”

“Yep.” I held up my hand, laughing. “I’m much better without.”

“I’ll tell ya one thing.” She smirked, resting her hip on the sink. “Wally was my first uncircumcised penis.”

I stared at her.

“What?” she asked, shrugging. “I felt like I was playing with one of those toys from the ‘90s. You know, the ones filled with water that would slip through your hands. I wasn’t prepared for the foreskin.” She looked off into space, thinking about God only knew what. “But once I got the hang—” She stopped, taking in my wordless expression.

Of course, internally, I was cracking up, but I knew Cass. Believe me, I had to disengage before she went any further. Because if she continued, we’d all know far too much about Wally.

“Geez, tough crowd,” she muttered, fiddling with my makeup and finding her choice in eye shadow color before gesturing to my eyes. “This color is all wrong, by the way. You have gorgeous blue eyes. You need something that’ll make ’em pop.”

She motioned for me to sit down.

I plopped my robe-covered butt on the closed toilet seat and waited patiently for her to work her magic.

“I was trying to do a smoky eye,” I admitted.

“Yeah, but these dark tones are all wrong,” she said, moving toward me with a color palette in hand. “You can do a smoky eye, but you need neutral tones. Otherwise, you’re just going to hide that spectacular blue.”

“Close ’em,” she instructed, brush held up close to my face.

I shut my eyes, sighing in relief. My best friend was home. Sure, we’d still managed to chat nearly every day through texts and short phone calls, but it wasn’t the same. Four weeks was a long fucking time.

“I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” she responded, a smile in her voice. “I’m happy you were actually going out and having fun while I was gone.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I peeked at her out of my left eye.

She flashed an *are you serious?* look.

“I go out,” I disagreed. “I go out all the time. I party like a freakin’ rockstar!”

“Yeah.” She snorted. “A very poor rockstar, who isn’t in a band anymore, and starts yawning by nine and just wants to be home drinking wine.”

“I’m not like that *all* the time,” I denied, laughing despite myself. “But seriously, you’re never allowed to leave me again.”

The brush swiped over my left eyelid in smooth, sure movements.

“I wasn’t even gone for a month, and I’m here for tonight. Anyway, you were a busy little bee with your new boyfriend.”

Boyfriend. It felt weird to hear someone else call him that. In private, we’d exchanged the boyfriend/girlfriend sentiment frequently, but we were still keeping our relationship very much on the down low at work. My choice, of course. Kline

was more than ready to make us public to everyone, but I just wasn't in that place yet.

We had fallen into this relationship so quickly and I didn't want to be rash about letting my coworkers know I was dating the boss. I couldn't ignore that nagging thought in the back of mind that wanted to find a way to protect myself as much as possible if we didn't work out—and protect myself from the shrieks of Dean if we did.

There was no denying we were together, but in a way, boyfriend didn't feel like the right word for what Kline was to me. It was too small, too casual. In such a short amount of time, he'd become a huge part of my life.

The brush moved to my other lid, working a little quicker once Cassie had found her makeup-applying stride.

As I thought about Kline and me and everything we had together, a smile crept its way across my lips, until happiness consumed my entire mouth.

“Well, look at you, all smiley and smitten. By the looks of it, I'd say someone has got it bad.”

My cheeks flushed hot.

“Are you blushing, Wheorgie?”

“No.” My hands went straight to my cheeks. “I am most certainly not blushing.”

“Of course you're not.” She laughed. “Tilt your head back.” She gripped my chin. “So, give me the scoop. What's the boss really like?”

“He's just... I don't know even where to begin.” That smile was back, taking over my entire face—mouth, cheeks, even my eyes were crinkling at the corners.

“Dude, tone down the cheesy grin or else I'll screw up your makeup.”

I laughed, despite myself. “Sorry, I can't help it. I really like him, Cass.”

She paused for a second and my eyes opened, meeting her intrigued stare.

“What?” I asked, starting to feel self-conscious. “Does the smoky eye look stupid on me?”

She shook her head.

“Then what? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Nothing. Close your eyes again so I can finish up. Other people need to get ready around here, you know,” she teased, her hip bumping my side.

I did as I was told and enjoyed the luxury of having someone else do the tedious task of applying eye shadow and liner.

“You know,” she whispered, “I think you’re holding back on me. I think—actually, *I know*—this thing between you and Kline, it’s a whole lot more than just like.”

“I said I *really* like him,” I retorted, my mouth staying in a flat line as she slid lipstick across my lips.

“I’m aware,” she said, her voice tickled with amusement. “But I think there’s another four-letter word rolling around in your brain.”

“Fuck?” I deadpanned.

“No, but how is the fucking? Is it everything you dreamed of when you were holding on to your coveted virginity?” she teased.

“Eh.” I feigned indifference. “I could take it or leave it.” I pulled the corners of my lips down into a pout, hiding another cheesy grin.

She snorted, taking in my absurd expression—smiling eyes, frowning mouth, and cheeks about to burst at the seams. “So, what I think you’re telling me is that he’s better than you could have ever imagined? Your Big-dicked Brooks billionaire can bring it.”

I shrugged, biting back a laugh. “Something like that.”

“I knew it!” She fist pumped the blush brush. “I’m not one to say ‘I told you so,’ but yeah, I told you so!” Cassie danced

around the bathroom, shaking her ass and laughing maniacally.

“All right, crazy. Less gloating, more fixing my makeup,” I demanded, giggling at her antics.

“I feel like we need a kitchen dance party to commemorate this momentous occasion,” she announced, still dancing around in the silent room.

Kitchen dance parties were our thing. We had been doing them since college. They were used for happy times, horrible times, and everything in between.

When Cass told her nasty professor to suck it? Kitchen dance party.

When I got the coveted internship I was striving for? Kitchen dance party.

A hot barista asked Cass out? Kitchen dance party.

The time I managed to do all of our laundry with four quarters? *Epic* kitchen dance party.

There were only three rules: Rotate who got dibs on the music selection. No boys allowed. And always bring your A-dancing-game.

Some of my fondest memories of college were with Cass, dancing around in our shitty apartment, singing our hearts out. God, this girl, she was my rock. My favorite person to vent to, cry with, and most importantly, laugh my ass off with. I wouldn't have traded her for anything.

“All right, sweet cheeks, you're all set,” she announced, smirking down at me. “And your makeup is looking pretty damn fabulous if I do say so myself.”

I stood, taking in my appearance in the mirror. I touched my cheeks as I examined the gorgeous shades highlighting my eyes. She was right; neutral was better.

“Now, I didn't go crazy, just went with subtle and your signature bright red lips. I still wanted you to look like my Wheorgie.” She winked. “You're gorgeous, friend. Absolutely stunning.”

Without hesitation, I wrapped my arms around her, hugging her tightly. “Thank you. I love you so much, Cass.”

“Love you too.” She hugged me back.

We rocked back and forth a few seconds, until I whispered, “You really dated an optometrist named Wally?”

“Banged.” She laughed, shoving me away. “There was no dating. His name was Wally, for fuck’s sake.”

I pointed at her, grinning. “You’re a troll.”

She was completely unfazed by this. “I’m fully aware. I will not make apologies for my need to judge men by their names.”

“That is so weird. You know that, right?”

While some women judge men by their looks or clothes or money, Cass judged them by their names. It was one of her little quirks and it was off-the-wall bizarre, but downright hilarious. I’d seen her in action far too many times, a man asking her out or offering to buy her a drink, and her response always depended on one thing: his name.

The name was always the make it or break it in Cass’s dating life scenarios.

“I know, but I can’t help it. I can’t bring myself to date, much less marry, someone named Wally or Toby or Cliff. Just—” She shudders. “Nope, no way. I’ll never do it.”

“I need to know how staunch you are on this mindset.” My hand went to my hip. “Let’s talk hypotheticals. What if Jude Law asked you to marry him, but his name was actually Morty Law?”

She grimaced. “Nope. Sorry, Morty. Take your adorable accent somewhere else.”

“What about Angus Efron?”

A look of disgust crossed her face. “I don’t care how much cheese he can grate on his abs. Not happening.”

I stared at her for a few seconds, deciding if I really wanted to do it.

Cassie eyed me with skepticism. “Don’t you dare.” She pointed in my direction. “Don’t even think about it.”

I nodded, a mischievous grin spreading across my lips.

“Georgia,” she warned.

“What if...” I smiled, tapping my chin. “Eugene Tatum—” she gasped “—was naked, asking you to marry him while grinding against you to ‘Pony’?”

Channing Tatum was Cass’s guy. He would always be at the top of her list. When *Magic Mike* had come out, we’d seen the movie not one, but two times on opening night because she was a total hornbag for him.

“I hate you.” A hand towel was tossed into my face. “I’m going to forget you ever said that,” she grumbled, striding into the hallway.

Of course, I followed her. This was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

“You know? I think Eugene looked hotter in *Magic Mike XXL*.”

“Georgia!” Cassie threw her hands up in the air.

I leaned against the doorway as she rummaged through her closet. “What? I really think his stripteases were way sexier. Eugene can bring it. That’s for damn sure.”

“I will not let you ruin Tatum for me.”

“I’d never—” I raised both hands in the air “—ruin the appeal of Eugene Fillmore Tatum.”

“Oh my gawd!” She placed her hands tightly over her ears, la-la-ing to tune me out.

I laughed the entire way to my bedroom.

Standing in front of my closet, I was wavering between about fifty different options. I wanted to look cute—no, I wanted to look sexy. I wanted Kline to be eating...out of the palm of my hand. I swear that was where I was headed with that.

I needed a guy’s opinion.

TAPRoseNEXT (5:30PM): Psst...Ruck...Come in, Ruck.

BAD_Ruck (5:32PM): Need something, Rose?

TAPRoseNEXT (5:33PM): Little black dress (open back) and red heels OR black leather pants and lace top?

BAD_Ruck (5:34PM): Neither. Clothes aren't needed in bed. Anyway, lace isn't really my style.

TAPRoseNEXT (5:34PM): This isn't the bed game. I need a guy's opinion on outfit choices.

BAD_Ruck (5:36PM): You meeting your Some Kind of Wonderful tonight?

TAPRoseNEXT (5:37PM): You bet ya.

BAD_Ruck (5:37PM): You're really into this guy.

TAPRoseNEXT (5:38PM): Are you asking or telling?

BAD_Ruck (5:39PM): Both.

TAPRoseNEXT (5:41PM): For your information, Mr. Nosy, yes, I'm really into this guy. I'm meeting him for drinks later. And I want a guy's opinion on women's attire for date nights.

BAD_Ruck (5:42PM): Which shows the least amount of skin?

TAPRoseNEXT (5:43PM): Leather and lace.

BAD_Ruck (5:44PM): That's the one.

TAPRoseNEXT (5:45PM): Really?

BAD_Ruck (5:47PM): Less is more when it comes to showing skin. There are certain parts of you he wants to be the only one to see.

TAPRoseNEXT (5:48PM): I said the dress had an "open back" not open crotch.

BAD_Ruck (5:51PM): Just trust me, Rose. This is sound advice. I promise.

TAPRoseNEXT (5:52PM): Okay, okay. Leather and lace it is. Big plans tonight?

BAD_Ruck (5:53PM): Maybe...

TAPRoseNEXT (5:54PM): Your own version of Some Kind of Wonderful?

BAD_Ruck (5:55PM): Something like that. Be good tonight, Rose.

TAPRoseNEXT (5:56PM): You too, Ruck.

A part of me felt bad for still messaging Ruck, but we'd fallen into this odd sort of friendship, mostly chatting about one another's dating lives. We never attempted to take things to another level, never tried to meet in person. It had become a sort of unspoken rule since we were both involved with someone else.

I tossed my phone on the bed and grabbed my favorite leather pants and lace blouse. It was black with three-quarter-length sleeves, and the top revealed just enough skin to show off a bit of cleavage.

The only other things I needed were the Dolce & Gabbana leather booties I'd found a week and a half ago in SoHo. They had been a secondhand purchase, and a splurge at that, but I loved them.

"Georgia?" Cassie called from the hall.

"Yeah?"

"What time are we meeting Kline?"

"Not until eight-ish. I figured we could have a little girl time beforehand."

"Harry Potter shots at Barcelona?"

"I'm in." The bar in question specialized in shots. One in particular came with fire and was famously known as the Harry Potter.

If you've never been to Barcelona Bar, add it to your bucket list. It's not the bar you hang out in all night, but it's definitely the place you stop by to get your night started off right.

My screen flashed with a text message notification.

Kline: 8pm at The Raines Law Room?

Holy hell. It was one of those bars that had a secret door, and if you don't know somebody, no way you're getting in. It was a very unlike Kline place to go.

Me: Uh...pretty sure I don't have VIP access there.

Kline: Well, don't worry, because I do.

Me: Kline flaunting his money around? Are you feeling okay?

Kline: Not flaunting. Just using it to our advantage. Anyway, Will was pretty persistent since he's never been.

I should've known my brother was behind it. If Will had Kline's money, he wouldn't have any damn money left. Good thing Will would earn a nice salary as a physician and be too busy taking care of patients to spend it all. Where I was more frugal like our father, he was impulsive like our mother—a true American consumer who could easily be talked into buying a new car or plasma screen TV on a whim.

And I mean all of this in the most loving way.

Me: Okay. Count me in. Cass will be with me.

Kline: Perfect. Meet me there at 8. I'll leave your names at the door.

Me: Okay, I'll let Will know.

Kline: No need. He's with me now.

Me: WHAT? Are you having a bromance with my brother?

Kline and Will had finally met over lunch last week in Gramercy Park. It had taken about one minute of introductions and they were quickly bonding over rugby, scotch, and awkward stories about yours truly. By the end of the meal, they had exchanged numbers and my brother had enthusiastically agreed to guest play for Kline's rugby team the following weekend.

Kline: I had to find one somewhere. Walter certainly isn't filling the position.

I smiled at his ongoing battle with his cat. Every day I witnessed or heard about something else.

Me: What are you accusing my best friend of now?

Kline: I'm not accusing him of anything. I recount the facts. I went to all the trouble of fixing him a fresh bowl of milk, in the dish he likes, mind you, and the grumpy bastard took one drink and spit it out in front of me.

Me: That's probably because you should really be giving him water, not milk. He's probably dehydrated.

Kline: You always take his side.

Another message came before I could send a sarcastic response.

Kline: Are you standing around in your bedroom naked?

Me: Don't try to change the subject.

Kline: I'm not. I'm merely moving on to more important subjects.

I glanced at myself in the full-length mirror on my armoire, fully dressed and about five minutes away from being ready to walk out the door.

Me: Yes, dirty boy. I am very naked.

Kline: Liar.

Me: I'll never tell.

Kline: I'll tell you one thing, I'm going to take your panties off with my teeth tonight. I promise you that.

Well, shit. That had me wishing the night out was just a night in...in Kline's bed, to be specific.

Kline: We're still going out, Benny. Finish getting ready. We'll revisit this conversation later.

Did he suddenly become a mind reader?

Me: In your bed, later?

Kline: My bed. My couch. The floor. Against the wall. Shower. When it comes to my version of later, the sky's the

limit.

Me: See you at 8. I'll be the girl with red lips and sexy heels.

Kline: Tease.

Me: You know it, baby ;)

“Okay, you’ve got about thirty minutes to get ready. We’re supposed to meet Kline and Will at eight. That leaves us with about an hour to grab a drink at Barcelona,” I shouted from my room as I sat on the edge of the bed, slipping on my new shoes.

“Wait...Will is going to be there?” Her amused voice echoed down the hall.

Internally, I groaned, knowing full well where this was headed. “Yes, my brother will be there.”

“I’m definitely going with the dress, then! And sky-high stilettos!”

“I hope you break an ankle!”

“Me too! That way Will and I can play doctor and naughty patient!”

“You are not banging my brother, Cass! He is off-limits!”

“When you say bang...what exactly do you mean?”

“No touching my brother!”

This was an ongoing joke between us. Cassie loved telling me how hot my older brother was. She adored him, and he mostly treated her like his little sister, but every once in a while, she could get him to play along and tease me about the two of them hooking up.

The mere idea of them together had me cringing. They’d be like oil and water. Both were far too opinionated and outspoken. If they got together, my life would implode from their bickering.

Grabbing my silver-studded clutch, I walked out into the kitchen and got my purse in order. Phone, wallet, lipstick, and keys—that’s all I’d need for the night. When it came to New

York, you learned quickly that the less crap you had to carry around, the better.

Cass came strutting out a few minutes later, legs on full display beneath a form-fitting gray dress and black stilettos. She did a little twirl, grinning at me. “How do I look?”

“Tell me you have underwear on underneath that.”

“Of course I do.” She feigned offense. “I have a thong on, Georgie.”

“Go back in there—” I pointed toward the hall “—and put on another pair. Something that covers your entire ass. When you’re around my brother and dressed like that, you’d best be double bagging that shit.”

She laughed.

“I’m serious!”

“I know you are. I’m serious too. I’m real serious about getting Will naked. I guarantee his body is—”

“All right, that’s enough.” I held up my hand. “You made your point. Are we even?”

She nodded, visibly proud of herself for one-upping me. “Yes, I will forget about the Tatum incident.”

“Good.” I grabbed my clutch and headed for the door. “Eugene would be proud of you.”

She groaned behind me. “You’re an asshole.”

“Let’s go get drinks!” I shouted, fist pumping my clutch in the air.

* * *

Cass and I caught the train and made it to Barcelona in record time. We hung out for an hour, chatting and laughing and dancing for a few songs to the house band. We were one

flaming Harry Potter shot and a beer deep by the time we left to meet the guys.

* * *

The Raines Law Room was located in Chelsea, fairly close to my apartment. I had a feeling Kline had had that fact in mind when he'd given in to Will's demands, always trying to make things easy and convenient for me. I'd heard all kinds of cool things about the speakeasy bar, but it was my first time making an appearance.

Hesitantly, I rang the doorbell outside of the discreetly marked door.

"I feel like we're going into a top secret sex club," Cass whispered even though no one was around us. "Shit, now my hopes are up. I'm going to be so disappointed if we're at the right place."

I gaped at her. "Of all the places your mind could go, you're sticking with sex club?"

She shrugged. "I've never been to one."

"I'm pretty sure most people have never been to one."

"Guess we need to add it to our bucket list, Georgie."

"No," I responded through a quiet laugh. "That's not going on my bucket list."

"Speak for yourself."

The door was opened and an attractive guy dressed in a vest and tie answered.

I gave him Kline's name and, just like that, access granted.

In an instant, we were surrounded by silky music, velvety curtains, plush sofas, and dimmed lights. I felt like I had been

transported back into the 1920s. Any second a girl in a flapper dress with a glass of gin was going to stroll past me.

Will had already spotted us, walking toward the entrance.

“Well, hello, Cassie Phillips,” he greeted, a devilish grin on his face. He picked her up in a bear hug. The second her feet were off the ground, she squealed.

“Just so we’re clear, I’m hating both of you right now,” I teased, feigning annoyance.

He set Cass down and pulled me in for a tight squeeze. “Aw, don’t get mad, Gigi. You know I love you the most.”

“Why aren’t you with Kline?” I asked, scanning the room.

“I had to make a pit stop in the bathroom. He’s at the bar with one of his buddies.”

“Buddies?”

Will nodded. “Have you met Thatch?”

I shook my head, more than ready to meet the notorious Thatch. I’d heard enough stories to understand he was an infamous jokester and a ton of fun to hang out with, but Kline and I had yet to get around to hanging out with him.

“Well, follow me, ladies.” Will gestured toward the bar. “Your boyfriend’s been wondering where you were. I told him you guys probably stopped for shots and dancing at Barcelona before heading this way.”

“That sounds like nothing we would do,” Cass disagreed, hiding her smile.

“Uh-huh,” Will said, grinning. “I’m sure you didn’t get Harry Potter shots and request the house band to play Britney Spears either.”

I shook my head, biting my cheek. “Nope. Definitely didn’t do that.”

We totally did.

It had taken a round of beers for the band to play Cass’s request, “I’m A Slave 4 U,” but they’d done it, and we’d

danced like fools. It was an ongoing inside joke when we went out together. If we were going to request songs, it had to be a cheesy pop song. We loved seeing the reactions of the patrons in the establishment when our ridiculous request started to play—annoyed, groaning, cursing our names—but like clockwork, by the end of the song, everyone would be singing and dancing along with us.

“Yeah, no way we did that,” Cass agreed, laughing quietly.

As we walked toward the bar, I caught Kline’s reflection in the giant mirror accented by liquor bottles. My gaze moved to the attractive guy sitting beside him and déjà vu hit me full force, damn near knocking me to the ground.

Holy shit.

I stopped dead in my tracks, holding on to Cass’s arm in a viselike grip.

“What the hell?” She turned toward me, confused.

My hands shook as I realized why I knew the guy next to Kline.

It was Ruck.

Oh, *no*.

Ruck was here and he was sitting beside Kline, chatting like they were the best of friends.

Oh. Fuck.

I pulled Cassie away from the bar.

Will turned toward us, hands pushed out in a *what the fuck?* gesture.

“I forgot I need to go to the bathroom!” I called over my shoulder, damn near dragging Cassie across the floor.

“Holy hell, what is going on?” she questioned as I pushed through the crowd.

I didn’t answer her until we were safely tucked inside the ladies’ restroom.

“Oh my God, Cass!” I groaned, my voice echoing in the dimly lit room.

“I’m so confused,” she muttered. “What is going on?”

“I know that guy next to Kline.”

“Because he’s Kline’s friend Thatch, right?”

I shook my head, pacing the confined room like a caged animal.

“Are you going to give me a hint here or do I need to keep guessing?”

“He’s Ruck.”

“Huh?”

“Ruck! TapNext Ruck!” I stopped, my arms flying out in front of me.

She tilted her head. “The guy who sent the Hunchcock?”

I nodded maniacally. “Well, it wasn’t really his Hunchcock,” I started to explain, but realized we really didn’t have time for that.

“I think I’m still missing something? I’m not really understanding your panic here...” She paused, waiting for me to give an explanation.

“Well, I never really stopped talking to him,” I muttered, feeling ashamed to admit it out loud.

“Excuse me?” she asked, her eyes popping out in shock. “You’ve been talking to him this whole time?”

I nodded.

Cassie shook her head like she couldn’t process it.

“Listen, I’ll tell you all of the details later, but you need to act like you’re familiar with him.”

“With who?” She was still not catching on.

“Ruck!”

“Wait...who’s Ruck again?”

I was about three seconds away from pulling my hair out.

“Kline’s friend, Thatch! That’s Ruck!” I whisper-yelled.

“Okay, okay.” She gripped my shoulders. “Just take some breaths, G. Everything will be fine.”

I took a few cleansing breaths, calming my racing heart down.

“Just tell me one thing. Why do I need to act like I know him?”

I sighed, staring down at my feet.

“Georgia?”

“Because you’re still my profile picture,” I whispered in a rush, hoping she wouldn’t understand.

She started laughing and shaking her head in disbelief. “Remember this moment.” She pointed a finger in my direction. “Because you owe me. Big time.”

I nodded. “Anything you want.”

“When we get home, you’re going to explain why you’re still talking to other guys when you’re very happy with Kline.”

“I swear to you, it’s not like that.”

She quirked a brow.

“I promise. I really like Kline. I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize that. Ruck is dating someone. I’m dating someone. And we never make plans to meet in person.”

“Okay, I believe you.” Cass pulled me in for a hug. “Who knows? Maybe he won’t even know it’s you...well, me...fuck, this is confusing.”

I groaned. “How do I get myself into these situations?”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’ve got your back. I’ll distract what’s-his-face while you and Kline enjoy a night out.”

“Thank you.”

She handed me my clutch off the sink and moved toward the door.

I glanced at myself in the mirror, making sure I didn't look as crazy as I felt. My makeup was still intact, not a hair out of place. All I needed was another drink, or five, to calm my nerves and I'd be good to go.

Maybe.

As I walked past Cassie, she whispered, "Just so you know, this is really screwing with my big plan of seducing your brother tonight."

I rolled my eyes.

She held the door open for me. "Don't worry, I'll save it for another night," she added, a smirk on her face.

"Good plan, you slutty turncoat."

"Heyyy," she slurred, hinting at less sobriety than I'd hoped for going into a situation like this. "I'm no fucking traitor and you know it. I'm getting ready to eye-fuck the shit out of this guy for an entire evening just for you."

"No," I corrected. "No fucking, eye or otherwise. Just talking. We're friends."

She smirked as we rounded the corner and the guys came into view.

"What's his name again?" she asked, her eyes glowing like the last embers of a dying fire.

"Thatch," I answered by rote, minutely horrified that another member of my work world knew I was a virgin—or that I used to be—even though he didn't know I was me...I was Rose. Whatever. "Thatcher Kelly."

"Mmm," she moaned, fluffing her breasts into an even higher elevation in the cups of her bra and licking her lips.

"I'd thatch that."

Fuckkk. I should have known. For Cass, it was all in the name. This was going to be one long-ass night.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Kline

“This place is unreal. You come here all the time?” Will asked as we walked into The Raines Law Room, dim lights and old-style sofas filled to the brim surrounding us.

“Not really,” I answered honestly, knowing it wasn’t really the place but the actual *going* that was the problem. “This is really more Thatch’s style.” The vibe was chill, but the allure was the drama. “The cloak and dagger, the limited access.”

Will laughed and nodded in understanding.

I turned from him to the room to finish what I’d already started. My eyes had scanned the crowded bar immediately upon our arrival regardless of my knowledge that such an exercise was foolish and futile. My Georgie would be late to our wedding, the birth of our kids, and her own funeral.

Wait. *What?*

I glanced at her brother, panicked that he could read my mind, but he must have seen something other than outright terror in my eyes.

“Don’t worry, man. George’ll be here eventually.” He laughed. “But if Cass is with her, they probably stopped at Barcelona Bar before even thinking about coming this way. That girl *actually* gives *no* fucks.”

I nodded along as though I understood, but I was barely even listening.

I mean, I could almost understand the wedding thing. I was crazy about her, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. But the kids?

Jesus.

My thoughts were in a tailspin, headed straight for the harsh reality of a quickly approaching ground when my pinballing eyes caught on something unexpected and unwelcome. Loud,

boisterous, and impossible to ignore, it was quite possibly the only thing that could have superseded my line of thinking at that point.

Shoving through the crowd as gently as possible, checking to see that Will was trailing along behind me, I sought confirmation of my new, much more immediate fears.

Bodies moved with ease, and flirty smiles bombarded me from several female angles. I didn't have eyes for any of them, though, and for the first time in weeks, it wasn't because of Georgia.

Thatch turned as I approached, a shit-eating grin topping his redwoodlike frame at the sight of me. "K-man! Fuck yes! Out on the town! I thought I'd seen the last of this," he spewed out in quick succession, the effect of being several drinks deep slightly loosening his already slack tongue.

Will smiled at his greeting, and I tried not to cringe.

I really didn't need Thatch to be there tonight. I'd stupidly believed I could keep being Ruck and myself without the gun going off in my face. I was wrong. This was what happened when people played with things they weren't responsible enough to handle.

The walls collapsed, or at least, they felt like they did, and my tie set out to strangle me. Will smiled and greeted Thatch happily.

I ran through the consequences of his presence and tried not to puke.

God, if I couldn't get him the fuck out of here quickly, I was in trouble. His picture was on my profile. *His* face was the one Georgia had been associating with Ruck.

What was already a goatfuck of dishonesty was setting up to turn into an all-out cluster.

I leaned forward and right to Thatch's ear, using the crowd noise as an excuse to keep Will out of the loop.

"You need to leave," I told him succinctly, knowing that if ever there was a time my girl would be less than forty-five

minutes late, this was it.

He laughed and slapped me on the back.

“It’s good to see you too, man. I miss you. I only get to see you at practice these days.”

I shook my head in frustration.

He laughed some more.

“I’m gonna run to the restroom, guys,” Will excused himself, fading into the crowd fairly quickly.

Thatch nodded and smiled, taking Will’s leave as an opportunity to shit talk.

“But, really, I guess that’s the same as always. It’s just the reason that’s changed, right? Instead of work, it’s the mystic pussy.”

“Thatch.”

“I get it, man. Sometimes your dick just gets caught in the snare of a good snatch. Like a vise grip, am I right?”

“Thatch, listen.”

“How is Miss Georgia? Almost done with your ass and looking—”

Eyes to the door, I only heard the first half of his sentence—thank God—because, just as I knew she would, the object of my affection walked in looking like sex on legs right then. Leather and lace and enough beauty to make me think my earlier panic about kids was actually the best idea I’d ever had. Her blonde hair was styled wild, just how I liked it, and I could see the blue topaz of her eyes shining from across the room despite their failure to meet mine.

And arm in arm with her? The face of *her* profile, a woman I could only surmise was the infamous Cassie Phillips. I’d heard a laundry list of antics and anecdotes featuring Georgia’s best girl, but I had yet to have the privilege of meeting her.

Fuck.

The web of lies was starting to look more like a convoluted clusterfuck of *what are the goddamn odds?* We'd each put our friends as our profile pictures—a scenario I should have predicted but absolutely *had not*—and now, I had to sit through an evening where any second this mess could brilliantly blow up in my face.

Out of time and patience, I turned to Thatch in a flash, and when I did, I led with my fist.

“Ouch,” he said through a smile, rubbing his shoulder teasingly.

“Fuck, Thatch, fucking listen to me.”

He mocked me with wide eyes and cupped his hands around his ears.

I considered hitting him again, this time for real, but with a glance in the girls' direction, I knew I didn't have time.

“The girl in the picture from the TapNext profile, the one you took it upon yourself to—”

“Traumatize.”

I nodded. “Right. Well, I've been talking to her.”

“Behind the lovely Georgie's back?” he asked in faux outrage. Regardless of his mocking, I could tell he was curious. Talking to two women at once wasn't like me, and when it came to these “two,” he didn't know the half of it. And I didn't have the fucking time or means to explain.

One quick glance showed the women and Will together, hugging and laughing and all too close to heading this way.

I closed my eyes briefly to gain patience. He'd have to wait to hear how twisted my truth had become because that talk required more than fifteen seconds and several glasses of scotch.

“I've been talking to her ever since, and she's here. She's getting ready to come over here, right now, and she's gonna be doing it with Georgie.”

With her? Ha! Fuck! More like, it is her.

“Well, fuck me,” he said with a smile, his eyes searching mine in an effort to figure me out.

“Your picture is on that profile. You need to pretend to know her,” I urged.

He paused for a beat, but he couldn't miss how important this was to me. Whether he agreed or understood or wanted to play along, or not, Thatch would always have my back. When you pulled back all of the prank-pulling, shit-talking layers, he was unmistakably one of the best kinds of people. “Got it.”

I took air all the way into my lungs for the first time in the last two minutes and turned to greet my girl.

But she wasn't there. She and her friend had disappeared, leaving only her brother Will in their wake.

As Will made it to us, shaking his head, Thatch leaned over and added with a whisper, “And all this after I gargoyle-dicked her?” He whistled low. “You must have more game than I thought.”

“What's up?” I asked Will, pointedly ignoring Thatch and hoping my face managed to do the same.

“Who knows, man? Hell if I can understand women.”

When he provided no further information, I was sure my eyes tried to crawl all the way inside his head.

“Oh,” he said, turning from the bar to find my inappropriately intense gaze. “They're in the bathroom.”

I nodded woodenly in understanding, and Thatch nudged me as a result.

“You gotta lighten up,” he whispered, turning me to the bar and flagging down the bartender. “Order a drink, for fuck's sake, and calm down.”

I nodded again because I knew he was right, and it seemed to be the only action I could successfully complete at the time.

“Macallan,” I muttered, knowing he'd make sure my order got to someone who actually *made* the drinks. Ordering directly was too complicated for me right now.

“Yeah, man,” he said, smirking. “I know you drink Macallan. Macallan and lime, every day, every night for years now.”

The cords of my throat tightened in frightened reflex. “No lime.”

“No lime?”

I shook my head, feeling the tension drain from my shoulders a little at the memory of my sweet, doped up girl. “Georgie’s allergic.”

“Well, shit. That’s problematic.”

I laughed. “Not really,” I said, then clarified, “Not now that I know, anyway.”

“Make sure to leave out the lime,” Will interjected, coming up on my other side to join the conversation.

“I guess she told you?” I asked with a laugh.

“Eventually. I still don’t think she told me everything, but now that Cass is here, I’ll find out the rest.”

“Cass?” Thatch asked.

“Yep. Cassie Phillips. I’d say she’s like another little sister to me, but I’m not sure she’s the kind of girl who *can* be a little sister.”

Thatch’s eyes flared with excitement, and my panic came back tenfold. “Wild?”

Will just laughed and jerked his head toward the approaching women. “You’ll see.”

I forgot about everything else as soon as I saw her again. Long legs, a sliver of tan stomach, and a nervous smile, she was so fucking beautiful, I literally couldn’t take my eyes off of her.

I pulled her straight into my arms, put my lips to her ear, and breathed. “Benny.”

Out with the words and in with her smell, I held her body to mine and kept it there until she started to giggle.

“*Kline*.” I struggled to remove my face from her hair and my hands from her hips, but she helped it along, turning her body

to include her friend in the conversation and making my hand slide along the skin at her back. “This is crazy Cassie.”

“Crazy Cassie?” Cass squawked. “Is that my given name now?”

“Yes,” Georgia challenged adorably.

“Ohhh, okay then,” Cass conceded with a gleam in her eye. “I see. I’m a little slow, but I get it now.”

Her hand reached for mine and I took it without question, giving it two quick shakes. “Hi, nice to meet you,” she said.

I smiled.

“I’m Crazy Cassie. You must be Big-dicked Brooks.”

Thatch spewed his whiskey everywhere, coating us all with a layer of spit to complement the shock courtesy of Cass.

Georgie squealed and Cassie just laughed, and through the chaos my eyes met those of an amused Will. He raised his glass in a gesture of confirmation.

Wild.

And unpredictable and funny and completely apathetic.

Good God, the people in this party were going to make this one interesting night.

I hoped we all survived.

I grabbed some napkins from the bar and handed them to Georgie, watching closely as she wiped Thatch’s half-drunk whiskey from her cleavage. She shook her head slightly to let me know she’d noticed, and I felt my face dissolve into an outright smile before I turned back to Cass.

“That’s me,” I told her. “It’s a wonder your friend is still alive.”

Thatch and Cassie burst out in hysterics as Georgie slapped at my chest and Will covered his ears playfully.

“Kline!” Georgie screamed.

“Come on, baby. Let’s go sit down,” I told her, scooping her into my arms before whispering in her ear, “My legs are tired

from carrying this thing around.”

“Kline!”

“It’s a real problem, Benny.”

“Kli—” she started to chastise again, but I didn’t give her the chance. Sealing my lips over hers, I licked and sucked and nibbled out a real hello. The night had just started and the implications of my lies hadn’t even begun to be realized.

But *God*, I’d missed her.

And right then, in my mind, that was all that mattered.

“Where’ve you been all my life?” I asked against her lips as our kiss pulled to a close.

She smiled just for me, lust and like and maybe a little bit of love lighting her eyes and reflecting into mine. She rubbed the bridge of my nose with her own as I settled her into my lap, finding a space on a couch by sheer miracle. Hell, for all I knew, someone had moved at the last second to avoid having me on their lap. I wouldn’t have noticed.

“I’ve been—eeeep!” she squeaked as she was ripped from my arms.

For a full second and a half, I feared for every single patron, a hulklime rage overwhelming my emotions and tensing the seams of my clothes.

“Relax, K,” Thatch teased, cooling my rage but stoking the fire of my aggravation. “Just rearranging the seating chart.”

My eyes narrowed as he set Georgie down on the sofa across from me and pushed me back to sitting next to him.

My thoughts were nearly murderous.

“Sheathe your claws, buddy,” he cooed in my ear. “You’re gonna have to get over your tantrum because old Ruck here needs some information and there’s no one else to give it to him.”

Goddamn, I hated when Thatch was right. And I hated it even more when it meant Georgia’s ass couldn’t be in my lap.

I looked at her, across from me, and found startled eyes bouncing back and forth between Thatch and me. To her, we were both a significant part of her life. It felt weird and I felt jealous, but mostly, I just felt *bad*. Bad for lying to her and bad for putting her through the confusion she felt now.

The responsibility for all of it sat squarely on my shoulders, and believe me, I could feel the weight. The sooner tonight was over with, the better.

“Cassie, right?” I heard Thatch ask above the ringing in my ears.

“Yeah.”

“You know,” he pushed, clearing his throat. “You look familiar.”

“You too, actually. You look very Ruckish or Rucklike or something.”

I shook my head and glanced at my panic-ridden girlfriend. She couldn’t see it like I could—she was too nervous. This was like watching a bad spoof film of Ruck’s and Rose’s lives where the blind were leading the blind. We would never have reacted like this to seeing one another. Not in a million years.

Thatch’s laugh was boisterous, his body nearly falling into my lap with the action. Turning his face to mine, he mouthed “name” quickly. I had to fight the urge to sigh. If it wouldn’t have been a spectacular failure and an embarrassment for Georgia, I would have told everyone to give it up right then.

Instead, I typed out Rose on my phone and showed it to him quickly.

“Rose!” Thatch practically shouted. Cassie nodded along while Georgie’s eyebrows pulled unconsciously together. She was rightfully confused. “I thought that was you, Rose! I can’t believe how beautiful you are in person, Rose!”

I discreetly elbowed Thatch in the ribs. “Say her name one more time and I’ll kill you,” I whispered through gritted teeth.

He grimaced and shut his mouth.

“What’s going on?” Will asked, the spectacle apparently just as confusing from the outside looking in.

“I was wondering the same thing,” I said, playing along.

“It, um,” Georgia mumbled. “It seems like they know one another or something.”

“Thatch and Cass?” Will asked, confused.

“Yeah,” Cassie confirmed. “We’ve been talking online ever since he sent me a picture of his big, ugly dick.”

Will jerked in surprise. “What?”

“It wasn’t his,” I interjected at the same time Thatch taunted through a smile, “Well, you’ve got the big part right.”

Georgie’s eyes came to me.

“Or so I’ve heard,” I added.

She looked upset. “He talks to you about it? What...” She paused and swallowed. “About what they say?”

God, this was horrible. I hated this and myself and every-fucking-body right now.

“No, baby. That’s the only thing he told me,” I assured her, digging my fucking grave a couple of feet deeper.

The urge to flee was strong, but we’d literally just fucking gotten there. To hell.

The Raines Law Room was definitely what hell looked like. The devil and fire and the roaring fucking twenties.

She’d confided in Ruck, and she felt badly about what that meant to her relationship with me. I could see it written in cursive, scribbled and scrawled all over her beautiful face as she warred with herself about not wanting me to know the things she’d told him and feeling like a liar and a cheat for having hidden something behind my back in the first place.

It made me sick inside, twisted the lining of my stomach and my intestines alike, and I just barely managed to stop myself from jetting to the bathroom for reprieve.

But my face was her lifeline in this situation, for as much as she feared being outed, every smile I gave her was a comfort. I refused to leave her on her own in this stormy sea to float and flounder.

Bottom line, Rose would have ditched Ruck ages ago if I hadn't twisted every conversation to my advantage. I was the guilty party here.

As Thatch started to flirt, I pulled my attention from Georgia long enough to tell him to pump the fucking brakes. One comment about her tits and the ruse would be roasted.

"Ruck and Rose are *friends*. Ruck's dating someone else, and Rose is a virgin for fuck's sake," I informed him. "Lay the hell off."

Wild eyes jumped to mine. I wanted to shove the words back in as soon as they escaped.

"Excuse us for a second," Thatch said with a smile, dragging me from the couch and over to the bar in a way no one else could.

My ass hit the stool in front of him and he leaned in menacingly.

"You better start talking, dude. I'm fucking dying over there in the name of *your* two-timing ass, and you can't take your eyes off of your girlfriend long enough to save me."

I shook my head.

"What the fuck is up? If that woman is a virgin, I'll freeze my fucking nuts off with one of those wart removers."

I grimaced.

"Yeah." He nodded. "Not a pretty fucking picture. So tell me, what's the real deal here?"

I considered it for a second, what it would hurt if I told him versus what he would hurt if I didn't. I decided I liked all of my bones like they were. And anything I told him to keep to himself, I knew he would.

“Georgie is Rose, not Cassie. But she doesn’t know I know that, and she doesn’t know I’m Ruck.”

“Jesus.” He put his face in his hands and rubbed at his temples. “You don’t pay me enough for this level of complication.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not here as an employee. You’re here as a friend. And I didn’t invite you, if you’ll remember. I tried to get you the fuck out of here *before* they got here.”

“All right, all right, I get it. You and Georgie need to leave or something. I can’t keep this shit up, but I can’t abandon you either.”

“Noble of you.”

“Duh, dude. My character is top of the pyramid.”

I shook my head and scrubbed a hand over my face.

Realization flooded him in a surge, like the swelling of a tide.

“Wait a minute. Does this mean Georgia girl is a virgin?”

I tried not to give him anything, but my face must have conveyed some kind of confirmation.

“Oh holy hell, K.”

“Thatch—”

“But she’s not anymore, is she, you dirty dog?”

“Thatch—”

“Kline?” Georgia asked from behind Thatch timidly. My tongue made a valiant attempt to choke me. The conversation, the circumstances. All of it was fucked, and a timid Georgia was the last fucking straw.

My girl was a fucking shark, and I was completely over anything that made her feel any different.

“Hey, baby,” I greeted her from around Thatch, leaning out to make sure my eyes met hers.

“Is everything okay?”

With one last look to Thatch that conveyed *just* how important his eternal silence was, I was up, moving toward my woman to

the slow beat of the house band.

I was done with the secrets, done with the space, done with the whole scenario of the night, and nothing made me happier than dragging this woman out onto the dance floor when she least expected it.

“How about a dance, Benny?”

Her eyes cruised the room, but I made her walk as she did, a warm palm at the small of her back allowing her to lead but still guiding the way.

“But no one else is dancing.”

“I like being the first,” I teased as I pulled her around to face me and planted her square in my arms. She blushed furiously.

“*Kline.*”

“I’m selfish,” I admitted through a smile. “I don’t want to share you anymore.”

The color in her face drained to white, the transition from blush to blanched one of the fastest I’d ever witnessed. Immediately, I regretted the words despite their validity. She didn’t need any more evidence to build a case against herself in the court of Georgia’s opinion.

Lips to hers, I apologized the only way I could, loving her on an endless loop of licks and swoops and tongue to tongue connection.

She hummed right into my mouth, the rightness too powerful to be contained in silence.

My fingers in her hair, I rubbed at her jaw with my thumbs and sank every ounce of myself into her. I didn’t worry about Thatch or Cass or Will or anyone else, and for a couple of minutes, neither did she.

I’d never been this consumed. Not in my entire life, not by anything or anyone.

Wrinkles formed in her little button nose as she pulled back, her delicate hands loosening my tie just enough that I could breathe again.

Relaxed by the music or me, Georgia finally felt comfortable enough to address the night.

“It really is a small world, huh? People crossing paths and never realizing that they already had...or maybe they should have sooner.”

Complicated and twisted, she spoke of herself and me and Rose and Ruck and everyone else all at once. But the answer was simple to me.

“The world is small, baby. But love is large. Big enough that coincidence occasionally rubs elbows with opportunity.”

“Where’d you get that?” she asked. “Ernest Hemingway again?”

I shook my head and pressed my lips lightly to hers briefly.

“That one’s all me.”

I lived in her eyes as she searched the depths of mine, swimming in the pools of blue and fighting to stay there. I was so deep in her, deep in this, entrenched in the muck and lies, and I still felt high.

High on her, high on us, and high on everything I wanted us to be. The wedding, the kids, the happily ever after. I thought it because I wanted it. Every minute, every hour, every day, I wanted her to be mine.

I was in fucking love with her.

And I needed to show her.

“Let’s get out of here,” I pleaded softly, rubbing the tip of my thumb along her perfect bottom lip.

She could feel my desperation, a tremble running through her from the crown of her head to the tips of her toes. Her gaze jumped to our seats, and I followed to find Thatch and Cass deep in flirtatious conversation and Will missing.

I scanned the room ahead of her, finding him at the bar in conversation with a woman and pointing him out.

“They’re all busy, Benny,” I coaxed. “Come home with me.”

I expected her to survey them again, but instead, her eyes just found mine.

“Okay, Kline.”

Okay.

All it took was a little love making to turn that okay into a repeated *yes*.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Georgia

I was straddling the line between asleep and awake. My eyes were still shut, but the morning sun rested against my face. Kline's arms were wrapped around me, holding my back to his chest. Big spoon, little spoon, we fit perfectly.

My mind replayed last night. The bar. Finding out Kline's best friend Thatch was actually my TapNext friend, Ruck.

Talk about a twisted kind of irony.

When I'd seen Thatch's reflection in the mirror, a million emotions had steamrolled through me, but the biggest, most palpable one had been disappointment. That in itself had my gut clenching from guilt. That emotion made me feel like I had done wrong by Kline.

I couldn't deny chatting with Ruck had become one of the highlights of my day. He was funny and sweet and charming.

And the more I thought about it, the more it didn't really make sense.

Thatch was a nice guy, but he was also very different from the man I pictured as Ruck. He was boisterous and seemed to have a propensity for using the word fuck...*a lot*. In all actuality, he was Kline's version of Cassie. They were both crazy opinionated, a bit impulsive, and often tossed out humor in otherwise serious conversations.

Nothing like the Ruck I had come to know. But then again, it was the Internet, and just because we chatted often didn't mean I *really* knew him.

But I knew Kline. Despite the awkwardness of last night, it had still been a good night because of him. It was becoming a theme. If he was there, I was happy.

My own little Kline and Georgia movie played behind my lids. I curled into him more, keeping my eyes closed, and watched.

I saw us dancing on our first date, and the way I couldn't stop smiling when he kissed me. His eyes, worried and concerned, when I was having an allergic reaction to lime juice. The way he looked that morning, sleepy and handsome and *mine*.

I saw us walking through New York, holding hands, and taking it all in together. I saw him at the pool, playfully taking off his boxers and turning around, dancing for my entertainment.

I saw us in the Hamptons and the way he'd looked when he'd been inside of me, moving and kissing and loving me. And then, him laughing the next morning when I tried to feed him burnt toast and told him it was supposed to be that way.

The way he'd often sneak into my office, shut the door, and pull me into his arms.

All of the inside jokes and secret smiles that we shared.

We weren't just boyfriend and girlfriend, we weren't just lovers, we weren't just *one* thing.

We were all the things.

I was back in the present, blinking sleep from my eyes. I turned in his arms and took him in. The way his chest moved with each soft breath. The way his eyelashes separated into tiny points near the corners of his eyes. I brushed his cheek, fingers sliding past the tiny freckle near his ear.

My mind raced while my heart sped up, pounding in an erratic rhythm. And then, heart and brain collided, becoming one in the way I felt for him.

The bedroom was silent, only the faint sounds of the city filtering past us, but in the stillness, I could still hear it in the way my breath quickened. I could see it lying beside me—jaw slack and eyelashes resting against his cheeks.

And I could *feel* it. God, I could feel it.

I was in love.

I was in love with Kline.

Leaning forward, I pressed my lips to the corner of his mouth, silently saying, “I love you,” against his skin.

He mumbled something, but otherwise, barely budged.

Looking at his handsome face, blissfully content in sleep, I knew what I had to do.

Scratch that—I knew what I *wanted* to do.

I didn’t want this whole “Ruck” situation hanging over my head. I wanted to move past it, and most importantly, I wanted to move forward with Kline.

Sliding out of the bed as quietly and smoothly as possible, I threw on one of his t-shirts and headed into the kitchen to grab my phone out of my purse. I dialed Cass’s number as I stepped onto the terrace and shut the door behind me.

She answered on the fourth ring. “What in the fuck time is it?”

“I need you to take over my TapNext account.”

“Georgia?” she asked, her voice scratchy with sleep.

“Of course it’s Georgia. Who in the hell did you think it was?”

“An asshole who decided to call me at...” She paused, and the sounds of sheets rustling filled my ears. “Eight in the morning. Jesus, Georgie, couldn’t you have postponed this conversation for about four more hours?”

“I couldn’t wait. I have to fix this, Cass. I feel like the worst person in the world.”

“What? Why?”

“God, I’m such an asshole. Why did I do that? Why did I keep talking to Ruck when I knew the possibilities I had with Kline? I feel like I’ve been emotionally cheating on him the entire time.”

“Georgia—” She started to respond, but I was already chiming in, too damn worked up to stop.

“In some weird way, I think I was invested in Ruck. Not even close to how I feel about Kline, but still, I liked talking to him.

I wanted to talk to him. And you know what the worst thing is? When I found out Ruck was Thatch, I was fucking disappointed. It felt like a letdown.”

“Shut. Up,” she groaned. “You didn’t cheat on him. You were just chatting with someone, *as friends*. This is not something you need to feel guilty about.”

I stayed quiet, mentally chastising myself for being so stupid.

“Georgia. Did you ever make plans to meet up with Ruck?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “Never.”

“Did you ever tell him you love him or want a relationship with him?”

“Of course not.”

“So stop berating yourself over this. It’s pointless, and honestly, completely unwarranted. You haven’t done anything wrong, sweetheart. You’ve been completely faithful to your boyfriend.”

I took a calming breath. “You’re right. I was completely faithful to him.”

“Okay, great. I’m so glad we have that settled. I’ll call you later.”

“Cass,” I warned. “Don’t you dare hang up on me!”

“I’m so tired, Georgie,” she whined. “Why won’t you let me sleep?”

“Because I need you to promise you’ll take over my TapNext account.”

She let out an exasperated sigh. “Why would I want to do that?”

“Because you love me.”

“Just unsubscribe from the damn thing,” she muttered.

“I don’t want to be a complete asshole to Ruck. And I felt like you guys hit it off last night.”

“You’re talking about Thatch, right?”

“Yes, Thatch. Your face is the one on my profile anyway. And you can just take over and act like it was you the whole time.”

“This is a little weird, G.”

“I know, but I don’t really know what else to do.”

She was right. It was bordering on insane to have her take over the conversations, but it felt like the best option. That way, Ruck wasn’t left in the dust, and hell, maybe Thatch and Cass would be an interesting little matchup.

I’d just wait to mention all of the random jokes and personal shit I had divulged to Ruck at a later time. Like never. I had a feeling once he started chatting more with my crazy, beautiful, and smart best friend, she’d eventually just be Rose to him, without him knowing there was ever a difference.

It had to work, right?

She was still quiet and I wasn’t sure if she actually fell back asleep or was mulling over her options.

“Cass?”

“Yeah, okay,” she agreed. “Send me your login shit. I’ll message him.”

“Really? Oh my God! You’re the best!” I squealed.

“I’m not doing this for you, Wheorgie. When I said *I’d Thatch that*, I meant it. I have a feeling that man is a beast in bed.”

“Seriously—” I started to say, but the line clicked in my ear.

A word to the wise: never call Cassie before noon. I was lucky I’d managed to keep her on the phone as long as I had.

I don’t know how long I stood out on Kline’s terrace, elbows resting on the banister, eyes staring off into the distance. I watched the clouds move in, covering the sun and filling the sky with an impending sense of doom. Lightning flashed in the distance.

But the city, it still moved below me, still hustled and bustled and never quit showing off its boisterous personality.

“I missed you in my bed.” Warm arms wrapped around my waist. The smell of his soap and clean laundry and Kline assaulted my senses.

I sighed in contentment, resting my head on his shoulder.

“What are you doing out here?”

“I had to call Cassie,” I admitted, omitting the details about the actual conversation. Even though I still felt guilty about the whole Ruck thing, I decided it was best to leave it in the past. No good would’ve come from me rehashing it with Kline. Because at the end of the day, he was who I wanted. The *only* man I wanted.

“And now you’re just standing out here, watching the storm roll in?”

“Something like that.”

“God, you smell so good.” His nose was buried in my neck, inhaling for a brief moment, until he rested his chin on my shoulder.

I turned in his arms, interlocking my hands high, around his strong neck.

Playful blue eyes stared back at me. He swept my hair off my shoulder, moving his lips to my neck, and then my ear, cheek, before he leaned back, taking in my attire...or lack thereof. A rogue hand slipped down my side, gripping my thigh. “And you’re standing out here in nothing but my t-shirt. I think you need to come inside, baby.”

My lips found his, placing sweet kisses against his smiling mouth. “Are you trying to have your wicked way with me?”

He slid his fingers up my thigh and brushed across the one place I ached for him. “I’d say I’m not the only one trying in this scenario.” He bit my bottom lip, tugging on it until I moaned. His hands moved to my ass, lifting me up and urging my legs to wrap around his waist. Kline was hard beneath his boxer briefs, and the second he was firmly pressed against me, I whimpered against his mouth. And then, he was kissing me deeper, coaxing my lips open and tangling his tongue with mine.

Candles melted when you lit them.

I melted when Kline Brooks kissed me.

Into. A. Puddle. Of. Pliant. Swoony. Mush.

His mouth was my own personal brand of perfection. Every soft caress of his lips against mine only made me crave him more. I doubted I'd ever get tired of this. Him. Us.

My breathing sped up, his touch sparking every tiny nerve ending inside of me. His hands, God, whenever they were touching me, I was losing my mind.

I shuddered against him.

He felt it, smiling as he kissed me.

Thunder filled the air as the sky opened up and started to pour over the city. The wind caused drops of rain to slide into the terrace and onto us.

He didn't break our kiss, whispering against my mouth all of the dirty things he wanted to do to me as he did. My hair was wet and his t-shirt stuck to me like a second skin, but I barely noticed, too consumed by him. My hips moved of their own accord, desperate for the hardness he was so graciously offering against me.

"Fuck, you're perfect," he growled. Yes, he actually growled. I always thought the growl was bullshit, a mythical unicorn put into romance novels, but the guttural noise that came from his lungs proved me wrong.

He moved us back inside the apartment, kicking the door shut with his foot. We were walking across his bedroom one second and then tangled on his bed the next, our mouths never leaving one another.

I giggled against his lips as my ass bounced on the mattress.

Kline pulled back, staring down at me as he moved the wet strands of hair plastered to my cheeks.

I shivered against him. I couldn't help it. Having him this close, wrapped around me, completed me in some odd way. I'd never felt this before, for anyone. And it scared me to think

I could have messed this up by never agreeing to that first date or meeting Ruck in person. I could have lived an entire life without getting to feel *this*.

His eyes turned concerned. “What’s wrong, baby?”

“Nothing.” I swallowed down my emotion and distracted him with my lips. “I want you,” I whispered against his mouth.

He grinned, purposefully taking in my soaked attire. “Is that why you’re doing your best impression of a wet t-shirt contest?”

I bit my lip. “Am I being too obvious?”

His large hands caressed my breasts through wet cotton, thumbs brushing across my nipples.

“I’ve never been to a wet t-shirt contest, but is it normal to grope the contestants?”

He waggled his eyebrows. “This judge does.”

“What else does this judge do?”

He leaned forward, sucking my nipple into his mouth and licking around the sensitive peak. I felt the warmth of his tongue and the cool wetness from his t-shirt all the way down my body and between my legs.

My fingers found his hair, gripping the strands tightly as he moved to my other breast.

“I think I need to enter these contests more often,” I said, moaning.

He glanced up, shaking his head. “No one else is ever going to lay eyes on this perfect fucking body.” He held my hips and pushed his pelvis against me, spurring another moan from my lips. “No one else will get to hear your sounds or watch your lips part when you’re losing control.” He nipped at my bottom lip and then trailed his mouth across my jaw to my neck, until his breath was hot and seductive by my ear. “But, if you promise to be in my bedroom, you can do it any goddamn time you want.”

“Deal,” I whispered. “Now, less talking and more getting me naked and fucking me until I forget my name.”

“Fucking you until you forget your name?” His eyes turned heated, mouth curving into a devilish grin. “I think I can work with this.”

And believe me, he did. I had praised Mother Teresa, Jesus, Buddha, and was calling myself Oprah by the time he was finished blowing my mind.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Kline

“I’m sorry,” Georgia apologized for the twenty-ninth time as she knocked on the door to her parents’ suburban New Jersey home.

“Baby, it’s fine. I want to meet them. Didn’t I tell you I wanted to meet them?”

“Yes, you did. But I don’t think you meant *this afternoon*.”

I had to laugh at that. It was true, when I’d had Georgia wrapped around me in bed this morning, I hadn’t envisioned meeting her parents only five hours later. But when her mom had called on FaceTime that morning and Georgia had run away to take the call in private, I hadn’t been able to resist popping in for a hello.

“It’s my own fault. You told me not to show my face on the call,” I reminded her.

“I know. It is your fault. Maybe I’m mad at you.”

“You’re not,” I disagreed.

“Okay,” she conceded. “I’m not. Honestly, I’m just sorry that when Savannah makes demands, I can’t turn her down.”

“The power of a mother’s guilt trip is compelling. Trust me, I’m familiar. I’d love to bottle it and use it at the office,” I consoled just as the door swung open to a man with slightly wild hair that grayed around the edges.

“Georgie!” he called, engulfing her in a hug and pulling her through the door. He nuzzled her hair and breathed her in for a good five seconds before his eyes met mine and turned hard.

“Who’s this clown?”

“Dad!” Georgia chastised, her cheeks going cherry with mortification.

I couldn't help but smile. In his most laid-back tone, her dad had thrown the ultimate insult my way. No warm-up or pretense or gestures of fond small talk. This was a man who cared about one thing in this scenario—his daughter. I liked him immediately.

“Kline Brooks,” I introduced myself, offering my hand.

“Dick. Dick Cummings.” He shook my hand with fervor, purposely trying his damndest to crush my fingers.

Dick Cummings? Thank God Thatch wasn't here. He would have had a field day with that one.

“His full name is Richard,” Georgia's mother interrupted, forcing her way into the open doorway. “I'm Savannah, by the way. It really is a pleasure, Kline.”

“Stop with the formality shit, Savannah. If the man can't handle that I'm Dick Cummings, then he's not the right man for our Georgie,” he retorted, eyeing me with slanty eyes. “Does it bother you, Kline?”

“No, sir,” I answered, fighting the urge to laugh. I literally hadn't even set foot inside of the door to their house yet, and a full-length daytime drama was rounding its way into the second arc of the storyline.

“Son.” He patted me on the shoulder, nudging the girls out of the way and pulling me inside.

“When you've got a last name like Cummings, you can either be a chickenshit, or you can grow some balls and roll with it. That's why I go by Dick and I had my son go by Willy for most of his life. Hell, Georgia's lucky we didn't name her vagina,” he said through a laugh. “Plus, it's pretty fucking enjoyable to watch someone squirm when they meet me.” He grinned, big and wide, his eyes turning jovial. “You handled yourself well. Much better than the other idiots Georgie's brought home. I like you already.”

“Jesus, Dad.” Georgie sighed. “Think you can tone done the F-bombs for now? It's not even five p.m.”

“No siree, Bob. You're in my home and I'll do anything I damn well please. If I want to walk around in my underwear

all night, I'll fucking do it," he responded, unfazed. "Anyway, like you should talk. Last phone conversation I had with you, you were ranting about 'the *fucking* subway.'"

"And five o'clock is an antiquated schedule associated with alcohol, Georgia. The fucks have always been given free rein," Savannah put in.

Georgia's parents were a trip. I was having a hard time keeping my smile in check.

"Come here and give me another hug," her dad ordered. "I've missed you, baby girl."

She flashed a pointed look. "Only if you promise not to bust my boyfriend's balls all night."

"Deal." He grinned.

She hugged her dad, a genuine smile on her face, and then moved to her mom. Hugs and smiles overflowed the small space of the foyer. It was apparent she was close with her folks. I loved we had that in common.

"And Richard." Savannah tsked. "You know the no-pants rule doesn't start until after dinner."

He growled under his breath, wrapping his arm around his wife and whispering something I could only assume was full-on dirty into her ear.

"Later." Savannah giggled, a perfect incarnation of what I knew as her daughter's laugh, and slapped him on the chest.

He chuckled, waggling his brows at her, visibly amused with himself.

"Why don't you two make yourselves comfortable and freshen up from the drive. There's fresh sheets on Georgia's bed and clean towels in the bathroom."

Dick abruptly turned for the hallway, striding toward the kitchen, muttering something about "the fucking grill."

Her mother still remained, smiling at both of us in a way that made me a little concerned about what would come next.

“There’s also a box of condoms on the nightstand,” she whispered. “Feel free to put them to good use.”

“Gee, thanks, Mom.” Georgia sighed, tipping her red face to the ceiling in an effort not to meet my eyes.

“Anytime, baby girl.” Savannah patted her cheek, smiling. “I’m just thrilled you’re finally being adventurous with your sexuality.”

This meet the parents visit was getting more interesting by the minute.

“Dinner will be ready in about fifteen minutes,” she called over her shoulder, following her husband’s lead.

The second they were out of eyesight, Georgia sagged against the door.

“I told you they were a little offbeat. Please don’t hold it against me.”

I grinned, pulling her into my arms, and avoided the urge to tell her that her definition of a little felt more like a lot. “I love everything about your parents.”

Her eyes showed she was skeptical, but I spoke only the truth. I’d take a free spirit and a ballbuster over two sticks in the mud any day.

“They’re *your* parents, baby. Believe me, I like them. Dick and Savannah are great.”

“Yeah, they’re *real* awesome. I mean, how great is it that my mother thought to put condoms in my bedroom, you know, just in case we decide to bang it out when they’re two doors down.”

“Very practical.” I fought my smile, rubbing her shoulders to ease the tension in her muscles.

“Come on.” She took my hand. “Let me show you my childhood bedroom. Who knows? Maybe my mother left a complimentary bottle of lube on the nightstand.”

I stopped her before she could head up the stairs, pulling her tight against me, her back to my chest. “Like you’d even need

lube when I've got my hands on you," I growled into her ear, then kissed along her neck.

"Okay." She let out a soft sigh, head falling to my shoulder. "Maybe we can follow the no-pants rule after dinner too."

"Wouldn't want to go against house rules," I added, smirking against her soft skin.

"We *are* guests," she said, lifting her chin and urging my lips to continue down her neck.

"Definitely wouldn't want to come across as rude." I nibbled along her neck a bit more, until I pinched her ass, earning an adorable squeal. "Show me your bedroom, baby."

The stairs creaked as we climbed, and pictures of Georgia and Will lined the wall. One of a toddler Georgia stood out in particular.

"Aw, look at your cute little—"

"Don't even say it!"

"What?" I asked innocently.

"I know you! I know where you were going, and we're *not* going to talk about the fact that my mother keeps a naked picture of me on the wall."

"I was just going to point out that your tushy then was nearly as cute as it is now."

"Kline!" she snapped with a finger in my face.

I threw her over my shoulder in a fireman's hold and slapped at said ass.

"Don't worry, baby. I'll pay special attention to it tonight. Especially if there's lube."

She shrieked and kicked as I ran up the rest and paused, throwing her to the hallway carpet at the top of the stairs and tickling her sensitive sides.

"Kline! Stop!" Her breath heaved. "Stoooooop!"

When I removed my hands, she scurried up and out from underneath me, slapping at my shoulder lightly.

“What is it about being in a childhood home that makes a man act like a child?”

“Fun. Freedom.” I smiled. “Memories.”

“I just bet. Were you a bad boy in your youth, Kline?”

“Nope,” I answered honestly. “As a boy, I didn’t know enough to be bad.” I wagged my eyebrows. “I’m much more convincing now that I’m a man.”

She ran again at that, shrieking the whole way and trying to close her bedroom door between us. I played tug of war with the handle convincingly enough, reserving my full strength in an effort not to hurt her, before finally busting through and tackling her cackling form to the bed.

She turned her head to the left and sighed. “Ah. The condoms.”

I pulled her eyes to mine and touched our lips together softly before rubbing my nose along the line of hers. “We didn’t use one the night that we fought,” I whispered. I hadn’t even thought about it until now, too consumed by lies and love and the complicated mix of the two, but the box on the nightstand brought my oversight into stark relief.

She nodded.

“I’m okay with that in all the ways I can be. Are you?”

She nodded again, and a shiver ran through her body. I pulled her closer.

“I’m on the pill, and I trust you.”

“I’ll do every single thing I can to deserve that, baby,” I promised.

She looked back over to the nightstand.

“I feel like we have to use a condom tonight because my mom put them there.”

“Do you even know what you just said?”

“Kline!”

“Okay.” I laughed. “Just tell her we used our own because she failed to get magnum.”

Her body shook with laughter despite her stern face.

“Get cleaned up for dinner!”

“Yes, ma’am,” I agreed with a wink, sliding my body all the way down hers and pushing my face to the front of her pants.

“Mmm.” I inhaled. “I think I should help you clean up here. I’ll lick up all of my mess,” I promised, pledging my truth with a hand at my chest.

She just shook her head and smiled, sliding a hand into my hair and yanking up on my head. “Go get changed and throw some cold water on your face, you bad *man*, you.”

I reached into my pants with a grin and adjusted my dick to a more comfortable position.

“I can’t help it, baby,” I teased. “It’s the house’s fault.”

She shook her head again, climbing to her knees and pushing her lips softly to mine. She spoke softly right there. “What am I gonna do with you?”

“Keep me.”

“What am I gonna do with me?” she whispered. “So lost in you.”

I squeezed her tight and answered with a prayer.

“Stay there.” *Forever.*

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Georgia

“Let me show you one of my favorite places in the house,” my father instructed, leading Kline toward the garage. This was another one of his tests.

Hell, he’d been testing my boyfriend all weekend.

There had been the beer test. Dick had offered Miller Lite and Guinness. Kline had chosen Guinness, and my father had patted him on the shoulder, adding, “I’m happy Georgie didn’t bring a light-beer, piss-drinking pussy into my home.”

There had been the liquor test. Dick had offered him a martini. Kline had politely declined and asked if there was any bourbon or whiskey in the house. Dick’s response: another pat on the back.

There had also been the pizza test. Last night, my mother hadn’t felt like cooking, so Dick had handed Kline a menu from Pappadoro’s—a mom and pop pizza shop up the street—and told him to order a bunch of pies for everyone. Kline had gotten another pat on the back when he ordered three large meat lover’s supremes and cheesy garlic bread.

Sports. Cars. Politics. You name it, and Dick tested. Surprisingly enough, Kline had passed every one with flying colors. How’d I know this? The pat on the back, of course.

We stepped out into the three-car garage, and Kline immediately removed his arm from my shoulder, walking over toward one of my dad’s cars.

“A 428 Cobra Jet Mustang. Wow.” He let out a low whistle, eyeing my father’s car with an appreciative gleam in his eyes. “She’s a beaut.”

“Probably my favorite person in the house.” My father patted him on the back, chuckling.

“Bought her in sixty-eight. She’s in prime condition. Engine was restored a few years ago.”

“Tell me you kept the Low Riser cylinder heads,” Kline added, moving around the car with his hands on his hips, his eyes plastered to the red paint of my father’s most prized possession.

Sometimes, I wondered if he loved this car more than he loved his own kids.

“Of course I did.”

“Thank God.” Kline skimmed his fingers across the paint, light enough that he wouldn’t leave a mark, and a giant smile consumed his face. “This, right here, was the game changer for Ford.”

Dick stared at my boyfriend like he was falling in love. “She redeemed the Ford name in the factory of horsepower.”

Kline nodded and glanced up at me, a boyish smile still etched on his handsome face. “Why didn’t you tell me your father had this in his garage?”

I shrugged. “I had no idea you’d get such a hard-on for a car.”

“Are you kidding me?” Kline laughed. “This is one of my favorite cars. Ever. My father’s a Ford man, through and through. He’d lose it if he got his hands on this car.”

“I think your dad and I would get along just fine,” Dick said with a smile.

Jesus. I’d never seen my dad smile so much in my life. The pulsating vein in the center of his forehead, yeah, I’d definitely seen my fair share of that, especially when I’d missed curfew in high school. But this giant smile that had taken up residence on my father’s face? It was so rare that it was almost creepy.

Dick Cummings was a pretty happy guy, but he didn’t usually pass out smiles and giddy looks on a daily basis. Honestly, I think the last time I’d seen him smile like this, my mother had brought home three bags from Victoria’s Secret.

“I’d let you take her for a spin, but I’ve gotta take her into the shop come tomorrow morning. She’s having issues when I try

to crank her.”

“Mind if I take a look?” Kline asked.

By the sounds of their conversation, you’d think my dad’s car was an actual person, a female, at that. Men were so weird.

“By all means.” My dad gestured toward the car. He grabbed the keys from the hook and tossed them to him.

Kline hopped in the driver’s seat and attempted to turn the engine. It didn’t start, and I’d never claimed to know car sounds, but whatever abnormal sound was coming from the car couldn’t have been good.

“See what I mean, son?” Dick asked, elbows resting on the driver’s side window.

Son? One bonding moment over his car and my dad was calling him son. I was sure any minute he’d give Kline his blessing and tell my mother to start planning my bachelorette party. No doubt, Dr. Savannah Cummings would prefer picking out penis straws to floral arrangements.

If anyone bought me dicks for my bachelorette party, it would be my mother. Cassie would provide the liquor and gift bag filled with crotchless panties. Now that I thought about it, it was a wonder I’d stayed a virgin for as long as I did. I was surrounded by a bunch of horny floozies.

“Dick, I think it’s the starter motor relay.”

“Really?”

Kline nodded. “I can hear the high-load relay engaging. Mind if I pop the hood and take a look at the engine?”

“Of course.” My father stood back from the car as Kline hopped out and busied himself under the hood.

After a few minutes, my boyfriend was convinced he knew the issue and could fix it. And by the look on Dick’s face, I was starting to wonder if *he* would be the one to marry Kline.

“I’m grabbing something to drink. You guys want anything?” I offered.

“I’m good, babe,” Kline declined, while my father merely mumbled, “No,” too damn entranced by what was going on underneath the hood of his car.

I walked out of the garage and into the kitchen, leaving them to their man time. Popping the tab on a can of Coke, I leaned my hip against the counter and took a gulp from the sugary soda.

To say I was shocked by the open-armed, constant-back-patting greeting my father had been giving Kline, would be the understatement of the century. My dad was never this nice to any guy I brought home. Growing up, it had been a common occurrence for Dick to clean his guns in the living room if he knew a boy was picking me up.

Sheesh. No wonder I’d fallen so fast for Kline’s charms. He practically had my dad, the boyfriend ballbuster, eating out of the palm of his hand.

I walked past my mother’s office, finding her typing away on her laptop. She paused, sliding her glasses to the brim of her nose. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing much. Dad and Kline are in the garage talking car shit.” I shrugged, leaning against the doorframe.

“Seems like they’re hitting it off.”

“Pretty sure Dad’s going to propose to my boyfriend before we head home.”

“I hope he lets me plan his bachelor party,” she joked.

See what I mean?

She smiled a wistful smile. “It’s always been a dream of mine to jump out of a cake and do a sexy striptease for your father. The closest we ever got to that was when I—”

I held my hand up. “For the love of God, I do not want to hear about you and Dick doing the nasty.”

“Georgia, sex is a normal human urge. It doesn’t matter how old you are or how many kids you have, you’ll still want to do it.”

“Are you finished psychoanalyzing my views on human sexuality, Dr. Cummings?” I asked, raising a skeptical brow.

Her smile turned curious and I braced myself for the next question that would come out of her mouth.

“Speaking of sex, how are things with you and Kline?”

“I’m not talking about my sex life with you.”

She pouted. “Oh, come on, sweetie.”

“Nope.” I raised both hands. “Not happening.”

My mother cupped her mouth, whispering, “Last night, it sounded like things were going *really* good.”

I groaned. “I get that you’re a sex therapist and you’re extremely open when it comes to talking about sex, but it’s a little creepy you were eavesdropping.”

“Actually, I wasn’t eavesdropping. You were just *that* loud.”

I gaped.

“I can’t tell you how happy this makes me.”

“You realize this isn’t a normal mother-daughter conversation, right?”

“It’s not the normal conversation society thinks we should be having, but I know it’s the conversation we should be having. Just know, I’m beyond thrilled you’ve found someone who makes you happy in every facet of your life. Not just in bed, which I have to say, from the sounds of it, Kline knows what he’s doing.” She winked. “But it’s obvious he makes you really happy. And anyone who can make my daughter walk around with a constant glow and a gorgeous smile is someone I hope she keeps around.” She paused as I smiled, and she considered me closely. “He seems like a really good man, Georgia. And he’s extremely lucky he found you.”

Although my mom was her own type of crazy, she was still my mom and I loved her. I’d always want her acceptance. And I’d definitely want her to like the man in my life.

I walked toward her, leaning down and wrapping her in a tight hug.

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too, sweetie. I’ve missed having you home. I hope you’ll start visiting more often.”

“Consider it a done deal.” I squeezed her tighter. “As long as you promise not to eavesdrop.”

“Deal,” she agreed, laughing.

As I walked out of her office, she added, “But seriously, sweetie. I was a little jealous. That orgasm must have lasted a good two minutes.”

“Three minutes,” I called over my shoulder. “It was three minutes and it might have been more, but I’m pretty sure I lost consciousness.”

I heard her laugh the entire way to my bedroom.

The second I stepped into my room, I threw my body onto the bed, my back hitting the mattress, causing pillows to fall onto the floor. My eyes took in the many nuances of my childhood stronghold. My parents hadn’t changed a thing since I’d left for college. Everything was as I had left it. Old pictures of prom and homecoming littered my desk. My graduation cap hung next to the door. And the pink and yellow flowered wallpaper still lined the walls.

It was hideous by all accounts, but it was still my room. The bedroom I had grown up in. The place I’d had sleepovers and gossiped with friends about our latest crushes. The place I’d had my first kiss with Stevie Jones, even though we were supposed to have been studying for our algebra exam.

Nostalgia was potent, filling my lungs and plastering a reflective smile on my face. So much in my life had changed from the day I’d grabbed my last suitcase and headed to college. I had a great job, amazing friends, and now...Kline. It was funny how two years ago, I’d thought of him only as my boss, refusing to see him as anything else, and now, he had become this fixture in my life, one I was starting to hope would be permanent.

The sound of a phone vibrating across the surface of my nightstand caught my attention. I picked it up, tapping the

screen, wondering if Cass was getting ready to harass me about using the last of the coffee creamer and leaving a sink full of dishes before heading to my parents’.

The screen lit up with a TapNext notification.

TAPRoseNEXT: Hey you, how’s your day going?

I tilted my head, confused. Why was I getting messages from my account? The one I’d told Cassie to take over?

Turning over the phone, my mind registered the case. Not the glittery sparkle one I’d bought a few weeks ago, but plain, old, simple black.

Kline’s phone case.

Not mine.

Kline’s.

I dropped the phone like it had caught fire. It hit the hardwood floor with an awful thud and I cringed, wondering for a brief second if I had broken his phone.

But then the shock of the entire situation took over.

If he...

Wait a minute...

Is this?

No way.

NO WAY.

I just stood there, staring down at the screen and the profile name **TAPRoseNEXT** glaring back at me. If he was getting messages from my TapNext account, then that meant...

I gaped, my eyes popping wide. Jesus Christ in a peach tree, did this mean that when I had been messaging Ruck, I had really been messaging Kline?

My heart pounded in my chest, erratically enough that I was a little concerned I might go into cardiac arrest.

Slowly, I bent down and picked up the phone. My mind warred between my options. I could either do the right thing

and set the phone back down and act like I had never seen it, or I could swipe the screen, put in his passcode, and see if it was really what I thought it was.

The only reason I knew his passcode was because I'd had to retrieve a few emails for him while we were in the Hamptons. He had remembered he needed to check on a time-sensitive contract and just so happened to be elbow deep in soapy water and dishes. So, he'd told me the passcode, and I just so happened to still remember said passcode.

I scrubbed my left hand down my face while my right white-knuckled his phone. I was sure the correct choice was to act like I had never seen it, set his phone down, and walk away, but I needed to know if what I was seeing was real.

Which was why my fingers slid across the screen and pulled up the TapNext icon. I took one glance at his profile, and when the username **BAD_Ruck** met my confused gaze, I refused to invade any more of his privacy and immediately locked his phone, setting it facedown on the nightstand.

He. Was. Ruck.

My hands went into my hair, resting on top of my head, as I paced my bedroom. I felt like I couldn't breathe, the four walls closing in on me. I had been messaging Kline the entire time, without even knowing it. And he had been messaging me, but he didn't know it was me.

But wait, he *had* met my best friend. He knew her face was Rose's profile picture, but he hadn't known I was the one to put it there.

Irrational jealousy and anger started to build inside of my chest.

Had he still been chatting with Rose *after* meeting Cassie?

Fuck.

I picked his phone back up and quickly unlocked the screen again, pulling up the TapNext app within seconds. My heart threatened to thrash its way out of my body as I found the lone conversation in Ruck's message box.

I felt insane, completely off my rocker, as I found the last few messages and scrutinized the timestamps.

Relief robbed the breath from my lungs as I met the realization that the last message Ruck sent Rose had been *before* we had met up at The Raines Law Room.

Before he had met my best friend.

The edges of my anger, my jealousy, still shook my hands. I couldn't deny I felt betrayed over the fact that he had been chatting with another woman, while dating me.

But I breathed through it, slowly talking myself off the illogical ledge as I set Kline's phone back on the nightstand.

How could I be mad at him when I had been doing the exact same thing?

Of course, I was upset he had been chatting with another woman, not really knowing that woman was me. It hurt. A lot. But I couldn't deny it made sense. It made sense why we would continue to talk, even though we were dating other people. We were drawn to each other, in every possible way.

I was filled with this odd feeling of relief, but it was quickly pushed aside when I started to realize the consequences of my decisions.

My world had officially turned on its axis. I was in the *Twilight Zone* and playing the star role in a weird, modern remake of *You've Got Mail*. The only difference was that I wasn't Kathleen Kelly in this scenario. I was Joe Fox.

Holy. Fox.

And I had gone off script. I hadn't planned a big grand gesture where I would unveil it had been me the whole time.

No.

Not only had I given my best friend free rein to message my boyfriend, I had all but forced her to do it.

Holy. Foxing. Shit.

Finding my phone on my desk, I dialed Cass's number and went into the bathroom, shutting the door and sitting in the

bath tub fully clothed.

“Hey, sweet cheeks, how are the parental units?” she answered, her voice too goddamn cheery for the shitstorm that was my life.

“Do not message Ruck ever again.”

“Huh?”

I shut my eyes, resting my head on the edge of the tub. “I fucked up, Cass. I fucked up big time.”

“Whoa, slow down, Susie. What’s going on?”

“Thatch isn’t Ruck. Kline is Ruck.”

The phone was dead silent.

“Do you hear me?! Kline is Ruck!” I shouted, my voice echoing in the bathroom. I clamped my hand over my mouth, realizing anyone walking by my bedroom would be able to hear me screaming like a lunatic.

I listened closely for any sign I wasn’t alone and was relieved when I didn’t hear anything but my erratic breathing.

“Okay,” Cassie started. “I’m officially confused, so please, spell it out for me in slow, clear sentences.”

I rambled on for a good two minutes, giving her the step-by-step details of how I had discovered my boyfriend was Ruck.

“What are the fucking odds?” she asked, sounding just as shocked as I felt.

“I know. I should probably buy a lottery ticket today,” I muttered.

“You realize what you’ve done, don’t you?”

“Screwed up big time?”

“No, you catfished your boyfriend.” She laughed. “Holy shit, G, he catfished you too.”

“This is so messed up,” I groaned.

“You’re like two fucking catfish, sitting at the bottom of the lake, doing fish shit and stuff.”

“Okay, enough with the fish,” I snapped. “I’m freaking out here, Cass. What have I done?”

“You haven’t done anything wrong,” she placated me.

“Oh. M-my. God,” I stuttered, panicked and overwhelmed over the entire fucked up situation. “How do I fix this?”

“Jesus, Georgia, relax,” she sighed. “Stay calm. Act completely aloof. I’ll send him another message and nip this crazy-town shit in the bud.”

“What? What are you going to say?”

“For fuck’s sake, stop panicking,” she chastised. “I’ll say something along the lines of ‘I’m happily involved with someone else and I can’t continue our conversations. Have a nice life.’”

Okay, that would work. It would put an end to the confusion. Rose would message Ruck, they’d stop chatting, and the world would be right again.

Would it work? And is this even the right way to handle this mindfuck of a situation?

I warred with myself over pretending it never happened versus telling Kline the truth. But then I started remembering the many conversations I’d had with Ruck. My openness. My flirtation. Questions and commentary about *anal*.

Jesus. I cringed in embarrassment. The mere idea of talking to Kline about it had my stomach clenching in discomfort.

I just wanted to leave the whole Ruck and Rose debacle in the past. Truth be told, if I could’ve paid someone to bury it in a shallow grave somewhere in the depths of the Pinelands along with my stay at Masturbation Camp, I sure as fuck would’ve done it. Not that I knew anything about that sort of thing.

I sighed. “Could this be any weirder of a situation?”

“Well,” she said, deadpan. “Considering he had foreskin, Wally sure put a weird spin on the old phrase ‘Taking ol’ one-eye to the optometrist.’”

“Old phrase?” I snorted. “I didn’t even know that was a phrase.”

“Savannah would be so ashamed of you right now,” she teased.

That spurred a few giggles from my lips.

“Hey, I hate to do this, but I gotta scoot or I’m going to be late for my shoot,” she updated. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good. Thanks, Cass. I honestly don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Probably live a horribly miserable life trying to find your own way out of your crazy-ass situations.”

“So true,” I agreed, smiling.

After we hung up, I was so damn exhausted from the roller coaster of emotions that I stayed in the bathtub until I drifted off to sleep.

A throat being cleared startled me awake.

“Fully clothed, bathtub nap?” Kline asked, squatting down beside the tub.

“Would you like to join me?” I grinned and scooted over.

He didn’t hesitate, squishing his large frame beside me and wrapping his arm around my shoulders.

“Fix my dad’s car?” I asked, resting my head on his chest.

“Yeah. Pretty sure your dad thinks I’m a mechanic now, but honestly, it was an easy fix.” His fingers found their way into my hair, running through the strands so softly I nearly purred.

“I think my dad is falling in love with you. He might propose marriage before we leave.”

“Don’t worry, baby. I won’t let your dad steal me from you.”

I laughed. “I’m not sure we’re going to be able to fit that giant head of yours out of this house.”

He wrapped both arms tightly around my body and slid farther into the middle of the tub, forcing me to lie on top of him.

“There, that’s much better.”

“You’re too damn big.” I nodded toward his feet that were hanging over the edge.

“I thought we already figured this out, Benny. I might be Big-dicked Brooks, but your perfect, tight—”

I clamped my hand over his mouth, laughing.

He licked my palm, wagging his eyebrows.

“Gross,” I scoffed, feigning disgust and wiping his spit on his own shirt.

He chuckled a few times and then his eyes turned soft and he brushed a few strands of hair out of my face. “I’m glad you brought me this weekend. I had fun meeting your parents.”

I rubbed my nose against his. “Thanks for coming with me and being such a good sport. My mom and dad can be a little overwhelming.”

“Your dad is a riot.”

“He really likes you.” I grinned. “That’s huge, by the way. Dick doesn’t like anyone.”

“After you left the garage, your dad and I had an interesting conversation.”

“What was it about?”

“I’ll tell you, but you have to promise not to freak out or get embarrassed.”

“I’m not sure I like where this is headed.” My nose scrunched up in skepticism.

His index finger tapped my nose. “Just promise.”

“Fine. I promise.”

“Your dad asked me for a few tips.”

“Car tips?”

Kline shook his head.

“I don’t get it. What kind of tips?”

His eyes creased with amusement.

My jaw dropped to his chest. “Oh God,” I whined. “Please tell me what I’m thinking you’re about to say is not what happened.”

“Apparently, your mother encouraged him to talk to me about sex, particularly two-minute orgasms. I’ll be honest, I have no idea why your mom thought I knew anything about that.”

I shut my eyes and buried my face in his chest. “She heard us last night.”

“What?”

“Well, she heard me last night.”

“Oh, shit,” he said before quiet laughter started vibrating his body.

I rested my chin on his chest, glaring at him. “Thanks a lot, asshole. You and your Jedi sex tricks had me screaming like a lunatic while my parents were two doors down.”

“You didn’t seem to be complaining about my Jedi sex tricks last night,” he teased, grinding his hips against mine.

“Don’t even think about it,” I warned, poking him in the belly. “You will not get all frisky with me in this bathtub.”

He wagged his brows. “What about in the bed?”

“No,” I retorted. “I refuse to go into an orgasm coma again.”

He tilted his head, an endearing smirk highlighting his lips.

“Well, not *ever*, just not here.” I quickly backtracked because, yeah, no way in hell would I deny myself that kind of orgasm forever. I wasn’t a crazy person.

He laughed, kissing my nose. “Whatever you say, Benny girl.”

Chapter Thirty

Kline

As the plane throttled forward and took off down the runway, Georgia screamed like we were on a roller coaster, shrieking at every bump, lump, and wind gust.

“Jesus,” I shouted over her squeals and rubbed at the meat of her thigh. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you’d never flown before!”

We’d both been surprised by the trip, a last-minute meeting with a vendor that wanted to go live on our site ASAP. It didn’t happen often, but when people jumped up and down and waved money around, we jumped back. This was one of those times and the reason we found ourselves San Diego bound this early in the day on the Tuesday after a weekend with her parents.

“It’s different on a private plane,” she yelled back, even though there wasn’t a need. I’d only had to yell before to be heard over her screeching, but she wasn’t concerned. And she didn’t seem tired either. I, myself, was exhausted from a weekend filled with Savannah and Dick. And Georgia and my dick. Truly, the D was everywhere.

Gemma, my regular personal flight attendant, smiled happily from her jump seat. Thankfully, she seemed rather amused by it all.

“Baby, it’s the same as a normal plane,” I argued at a conventional volume. “Just smaller.”

“No. Nuh-uh,” she disagreed. “This is *not* like regular planes. Regular planes make you feel like a poor, desperate vagabond, willing to subject yourself to any treatment just to make it to your destination.”

“What airline are you flying?” I laughed. “Third World Air?”

She shook her head and smiled before looking out the window again. “It’s more whoopy or something,” she tried to explain.

“Whoopy?”

“Whimsical. Roller-coaster-y.”

I smiled and she laughed, throwing her hands up and pointing to her face in confirmation. “Fun!”

I leaned over and kissed the apple of her cheek. “I’m the fun part.”

“You are,” she agreed with my lie.

She was the fun. Hands down.

“You mind if I take a little nap?” I asked, knowing I’d need my business brain later instead of the current mush.

“Aw, Kline. My old man is tired, huh?”

I had to laugh as I nodded. “He is.”

Her body seemed to deflate all at once as she laid her head on my shoulder. “I am too. I feel like I haven’t slept in ages.”

“We haven’t,” I pointed out. Weeks of courting and falling and fucking had taken its toll. “Just snuggle into me, baby. We’ll both catch some shut-eye. We’ve got about five hours until we get there.”

She didn’t say anything out loud, just nuzzled the top of her head farther into my neck and crossed an arm over my body.

I breathed in the smell of her shampoo and rubbed the soft strands of her hair with my fingers. I wanted to stay awake and savor it, talk to her, laugh with her, soak more of her in. But the lull of the plane and the hum of the engine enhanced a pull into sleep that already needed no help.

With my eyes shut and heart full, I was mere moments away from a deep sleep when Georgia called my name.

“Yeah, baby?” I asked, my voice thick and sluggish with the impending doze.

“I’ve never been happier to miss sleep in my life.”

Ditto.

* * *

“Just one room,” I told the front desk clerk as she handed me our cards. My assistant, Pam, had, of course, made the arrangements, and she’d have had no way of knowing Georgia and I were following a one-room sleeping plan.

Personally, I didn’t have even one fuck left to give. But Georgie cared. And I cared about what she cared about. It was a really mushy, complicated web of romance, but in the end, all that mattered was her.

“Yes, sir,” the young girl agreed, taking the keys back and tapping away at the computer.

We’d gone straight from the airport to the meeting, and from the meeting to dinner. Thanks to one of the best plane catnaps I’d ever had, we had just enough time to spend another night *not sleeping* before Georgia had to be on a plane back home in the morning.

“Here you go,” the desk clerk offered, handing me back a solitary key. “Room 554. The elevators are down the hall behind you and on the right.”

“Thanks.” I smiled and grabbed my small bag from its spot at my feet.

Georgia was already down the elevator hall, pacing the tile floor in front of them as she talked over the details of things she needed for tomorrow’s meeting with Dean. As imperative as the phone call seemed on the surface, I had a suspicion it was more of an excuse to avoid awkwardly standing next to me at the desk than a necessity.

“Ready?” I asked as I came to a stop in front of her.

Her finger shot to my lips and pushed to say ‘be quiet’.

“It was just Mr. Brooks,” she said into the phone, rolling her eyes. “No, I’m still in the lobby.”

I went to speak, but she pushed on my lips harder. “Nope. The meeting ran really late and we still have a couple of things to go over before we call it a night.”

I smiled. No one here was going to be calling it a night.

She shook her head in the negative and bit her bottom lip. My balls tightened immediately. Even they knew it was time to play.

“Georgie girl,” I whispered mischievously. She shushed me and waved me away, pointing at the phone with wild eyes. She was just too easy.

“Come tuck me in,” I teased, grabbing at her hips and backing her toward the elevators.

I pushed the up button to call the car and pulled her hips into mine. Hair loose from its earlier binding, she looked wild and willing and altogether too much like sex to stop.

“Dean, Dean,” she called, obviously trying to break into his end of steady conversation. “You know, you’ve got this covered.”

I smiled bigger. Pulled her breasts tighter to my chest.

“It was really just my neuroses calling. You’re plenty competent to have everything ready on your own.”

“Mm-hmm,” I hummed, moving the hair off of her neck and sucking at her skin greedily.

She was dying to give me one of her signature, scolding *Kline!*s, I could feel it in her posture and staccato-timed wording, but with Dean on the line, secrecy won out.

“I know. I’ll be sure to give Donatella Versace my recommendation, should I ever run into her on the street.” She nodded at the phone, at something Dean said, a gesture he obviously couldn’t see, and I swooned.

Hands down, Georgia Cummings was one of the most charmingly fascinating women I’d ever encountered.

Dichotomous in nearly everything she did, I never knew which way was up or which version of her I would get. Awkward or easy, bold or shy, endlessly clever or laughably bumbling. Every time, day or night—work or play—I'd take any version I met.

"Hang up the phone, baby," I coaxed, pushing her gently into the open and waiting car.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said into the line. "Yes, butt-fucking early." We both smiled like lunatics. "I'll see you then."

Finally, blessedly, she cut the call just as the doors of the elevator shut out the people.

I grabbed her hips, groping and squeezing at the top of her ass.

"God. It's about time," I teased, running my tongue along the closed seam of her lips.

"Fuck," she breathed as her head fell back and her hair hung well past her shoulders. I gripped the ends of it and yanked her throat open even farther.

"Ahh," she moaned, shoving her tit right into the palm of my waiting free hand.

"That's it," I cooed, circling her hard nipple with the tip of my thumb.

"Kline," she breathed. She could barely keep up with the rhythm of her pants.

"I can't wait to hear you say that again. On my face, on my cock...I'm gonna strip you down and sit you up on every fucking thing I can think of."

"God," she moaned as the doors opened on our floor. I scooped her up and into my arms, glancing at the sign that would tell me which way to go to our room.

Too fucking far from the elevator, at the end of the hall, I finally came face to face with our door. Georgia clung to me as I set her down to pull the plastic key card from my pocket. I couldn't wait to *make love* to every single inch of her petite body.

As the door clicked open and I slid our intertwined bodies inside, I knew without a doubt that was what this was.

Just lust was gone, like had grown, and love was positioned in Georgia's sumptuous mouth—right at the tip of my tongue.

Chapter Thirty-One

Georgia

“Just three more questions,” Kline demanded, his voice raspy and sleep-filled.

We’d been at this game all night. Asking random questions to one another in between bouts of kissing that always ended in more. Crazy, sexy kind of more.

Best game ever.

But it was half past three in the morning, and I had a six thirty-five flight to catch. A contract meeting was sending me home today, and because he’d tacked on an additional meeting tomorrow morning with one of our regular investors in the name of efficiency, *today* meant *one day earlier* than Kline. *No need to make more than one trip*, he’d said. Now we had to face the consequences of that decision.

I hadn’t packed a thing and needed a shower. As badly as I wanted to stay in bed, wrapped up in him, I had to get my ass moving.

I sat up, the sheet pooling around my waist. “You said that three hours and two orgasms ago.”

“Two orgasms? I thought it was three...” He was lying on his belly, resting his chin on the pillow, his eyes locked on my bared breasts. “If you can’t remember the last one, I’m demanding a re-do.”

A re-do. The bastard.

He licked his lips and moved his gaze from my breasts, to my waist, until finally making the slow circuit to my mouth.

Jesus. Kline flashing me smoldering glances during business meetings was dangerous enough, but this? That look. Those heated blue eyes. His sexy, bedhead hair. And that tight ass. It should be illegal.

“Stop smoldering at me!” I smacked his shoulder. “I have to get in the shower. I have a flight to catch, remember?”

He pounced on me, wrapped his arms around my body, and slammed my back into the bed before I could stop him. “Don’t leave.” His mouth found mine, his teeth tugging on my bottom lip.

“Stay here with me. Let me ask you questions and kiss these lips.” He kissed me deeper. “And touch this perfect body.” His fingers slid up my sides, resting below the curve of my breasts. “And put my mouth on you.” He punctuated that statement by gliding those devious hands down my belly, until his fingers were touching me where I throbbed.

I’d never had marathon sex. Okay, before Kline, I’d never actually had sex. But I’d never experienced this feeling before. I’d never been so attracted, so turned on, so undeniably in love with someone, where the only thing I wanted to do was spend every day for the rest of forever touching him, kissing him, fucking him.

It was overwhelming. And amazing. And should have had me running for the hills. But when it came to Kline, I didn’t want to run, unless it was toward his opened arms.

I trusted him. Cared for him. Loved him. I wanted him and only him. He was everything I’d always dreamed of, plus a million things I never even knew I wanted.

“Kiss me, baby,” he whispered against my lips.

“I *am* kissing you,” I retorted, my mouth still pressed against his.

“No. Fucking kiss me,” he growled, his tongue slipping past my lips and making me moan. “I’ll never get tired of this. I’ll never *not* want this. With you. Only you.”

“I’m going to miss my flight and it’ll be all your fault,” I whimpered.

“Fuck the flight. Fuck the meeting. Stay here and fuck my brains out.” That devilish mouth moved to my neck and then my collarbone, sucking softly while his tongue licked along the sensitive skin.

My hands found his ass, tugging him toward me. “You don’t play fair.” My hips arched up into his, my body begging for him to connect us.

“With you, I’ll never play fair.” He pressed against me, the tip of his cock moving through my wetness. “I’ll do whatever it takes to get you to keep doing this with me. *For-fucking-ever.*”

“We’re gonna fuck forever?” I teased.

His laugh vibrated my skin. “Yes. Me and you. Fucking, kissing, groping, making love, *coming*. All the goddamn time. Forever.”

“I want this in writing.”

He moved away from me, rustling inside the nightstand and finding a complimentary pen clipped to a notepad with the hotel’s logo written along the top. He tossed the pad across the room and put the pen in his mouth, removing the cap.

“Pretty sure contracts need paper...”

“Not this contract.” He settled between my thighs again, eyes locked on my belly. The tip of the pen touched my skin and I shivered. “This is a different kind of contract, baby.” Blue eyes peeked up at me, smirking.

The pen moved across my skin, but I couldn’t see what he was writing, his messy hair blocking my view.

“Excuse me, sir, but what are you doing? Are you branding me?”

“Stop calling me sir. I’m trying to focus here and you’re making me hard.”

“You’ve been hard for the past eight hours. What’s new?”

“You’d think you would have tried to help me with this difficult situation. Honestly, Georgia, I’m disappointed. You really need to work a little harder at this whole girlfriend thing.”

I fought my grin. It was stupid that I *still* felt giddy over hearing him say girlfriend. I had officially reverted back to

high school. But I didn't care. I loved that he made me giddy and girly and head-over-heels in love.

"Oh, so when I did that thing where I put my mouth on your dick and then didn't remove it until you came, that wasn't what a good girlfriend would do? I'm sorry I did that. I'll make a note to *never* do that again. Don't worry, baby, I'll learn from my mistakes."

"Now, wait a minute. Let's not get too hasty here," he backtracked, still focused on tattooing something on my skin. "I think you need to do that thing a few more times. Like every day, for the next five years or so, before I can really decide if I like it."

I grabbed his hair, pulling his head up so he looked at me. "You didn't like it?" I asked, my eyes narrowed.

"I can't really remember." He shrugged, fighting a smile. "Why don't you do it again and then it might help me give you a proper answer?"

"Oh." I feigned innocent understanding. "So, I should just put my mouth on your cock again? You know, slide it in real deep until it taps the back of my throat, and then suck *hard*, while I run my tongue all over you. Would that help? Or should I do something else?"

"No," he said, swallowing hard enough to make his Adam's apple bob. "You should do those things." He cleared his throat, his body's answer growing hard and straining against my thigh.

"All of those things you just said—yeah, do those."

My face cracked into a smile, amused by the strain in his voice and his, um, *yeah*. That too. I was definitely enjoying that reaction.

"Okay, all set. Per your request, the contract is in writing." He tossed the pen back onto the nightstand. He gripped my thighs as he kneeled on the bed between my legs.

"Now, let's get back to what you were saying before. I believe you said something about putting your mouth on me?" He smirked, waggling his brows playfully. "Or do you want me to

just slide inside of you? Because I'm a big fan of this perfect pussy." He ground against me.

"The biggest fan, actually. No one loves this pussy as much as I do. Which is why no one else will ever see it, touch it, taste it. Consider me your orgasm donor for life. Any time, hour, second of any day, you need to come, I'm your guy."

I giggled. "Like my orgasm soul mate?"

I was rewarded with a smile. "Exactly like that."

He brushed his fingers across my belly and hip bone, where the pen's previous ministrations still had my nerve endings tingling. "This is the sexiest thing I've ever seen."

"What did you write?" My eyes followed his, to the place where his hand rested on my skin. "Move your hand," I urged. "I swear to God, if you drew a penis or—" I stopped mid-sentence, my gaze locking onto the straight and narrow lines of his masculine script.

My heart in your hands and you in my arms, that's all I'll ever need.

"I mean it," he whispered. "I mean every word, Georgia."

I looked at him, *really* looked at him, hovering above me, his hands now resting beside my head. His heart was in his eyes—tender, loving, *perfect*.

What simple words for such a profound declaration.

Kline had just laid it all out there. He'd just told me I had him. He was mine. His heart was in my hands. And all he wanted was *me*. And that would be enough for him.

"I love you," I said, my voice choking on emotion. "I love you so much, Kline."

"I love you, too." He kissed me hard, deep, and desperate. His lips, his touch, the way he made love to me, it told me everything I needed to know.

This was real, him and me. This was it. And the best part of that revelation was that we were both certain. Neither of us

was in limbo, waiting for the other to catch up or decide if this was right. We were all in, both of us, in love.

Intense, life changing, forever a part of one another kind of love.

* * *

I handed my boarding pass off and walked onto the plane. I was beyond exhausted, my arms damn near giving out as I lifted my carry-on up and stowed it away. Kline had switched my seat without my knowing. Yesterday, he had seen my boarding pass on the nightstand and asked if I was in coach because the flight was overbooked. When I responded that I didn't want to take advantage of the company's budget, he told me to *never* book a seat in coach again.

I'd acquiesced with a sassy, "Yes, sir."

Apparently, he'd appreciated that answer because I had been generously rewarded with his talented mouth between my legs.

The second I arrived at the airport and got through security in record time—thank God, considering I was running thirty minutes behind schedule—I was called over to the gate, where an attendant instructed that I had been upgraded to a first class window seat.

He sure was one sneaky, adorable, demanding man when he wanted to be.

I clicked my seatbelt into place and grabbed my phone from my purse as passengers continued to board the plane and find their seats. Even though he was probably sound asleep, I decided to send him a quick text.

Me: Someone changed my seat. I'm currently relaxing in first class, enjoying the view from the window.

Kline: I think you should thank whoever did it with that really awesome thing you do with your mouth.

And I thought *I* had sex on the brain all the time. *Pervert.*

Me: When I figure it out, I'll keep that idea in mind.

Kline: If I told you it was me, would you make that idea a reality?

Me: I don't know...I'm an in-the-moment kind of gal. I'm not very good with hypotheticals.

Kline: It was me. I'll fit time into my schedule tomorrow night so you can properly thank me.

Me: Now that I'm in the moment, I'm not feeling all that into your idea...

Kline: Did I mention there would be an exchange? You thanking me, me thanking you kind of thing.

Me: Slot me in for tomorrow night at seven.

Kline: Sudden change in feelings?

Me: You presented a very attractive offer, Mr. Brooks.

Kline: Always a pleasure doing business with you, Ms. Cummings.

Me: Likewise...I miss you.

God, I really was a goner. It had only been an hour since I'd kissed him goodbye while he was all sleepy and adorable and begging me to stay, and already, my chest ached over the idea that I wouldn't get to see him again until tomorrow night.

Kline: I haven't stopped thinking about you since you left. I think you should quit your job. You should still be in this bed beside me and not on a goddamn flight back home.

Me: I'll let my boss know ASAP.

Kline: Good idea.

The third round of passengers started to filter down the aisle, heading through the curtains and into coach. I tapped the email icon, drafting a quick message to my "boss."

From: Georgia Cummings
To: Kline Brooks
Subject: My Boyfriend's Requests

Mr. Brooks,

My boyfriend isn't too happy I'm on a flight instead of in his hotel room fucking his brains out. I'm requesting that this doesn't happen again. He's very upset.

Sincerely,

Georgia Cummings
Director of Marketing, TapNext
Brooks Media

From: Kline Brooks
To: Georgia Cummings
Re: My Boyfriend's Requests

Ms. Cummings,

I am taking this concern very seriously. From now on, I guarantee any business trips you are scheduled to attend, you will be booked in the same room as your boyfriend. I will also make sure there is plenty of time scheduled in throughout your day to allow you to fuck his brains out. And just because I feel terrible about this, I'm requesting you leave work early tomorrow and go to his apartment (his front desk probably knows you need a spare key) so you're there when he gets home. (I bet he'd prefer you to be naked and lying in his bed, too.)

Sincerely,

Kline Brooks
President and CEO Brooks Media

From: Georgia Cummings
To: Kline Brooks
Subject: I think my boyfriend will be very happy...

Mr. Brooks,

Thank you for your utmost concern. I will be sure to leave work early tomorrow and wait for my boyfriend at his apartment. I will also use your suggestion about my attire. Although, I think my boyfriend would prefer me to be wearing the sexiest pair of heels I own while I wait.

Sincerely,

Georgia Cummings

Director of Marketing, TapNext

Brooks Media

P.S. I'm crazy in love with my boyfriend.

From: Kline Brooks

To: Georgia Cummings

Re: I think my boyfriend will be happy...(YES, he will)

Ms. Cummings,

I think your boyfriend would love that. Actually, I bet he'd insist on that.

Sincerely,

Kline Brooks

President and CEO Brooks Media

P.S. He's crazy in love with you too. For the sake of everything that's right in the world, don't forget the fucking heels tomorrow.

Eyes tired, I set my phone in my lap and rested my head on the seat. My mind replayed last night, highlighting everything from Kline stealing kisses between asking me my favorite bands, movies, and vacation spots, to him making love to me, over and over again.

My fingers touched my lips, hiding my ridiculous smile.

"I know that look," a woman softly whispered beside me.

My eyes blinked open, finding an older lady with salt and pepper hair and a rounded, smiling face in the seat next to

mine. “You’re thinking about someone special, aren’t you?”

“Am I that obvious?” I laughed, my cheeks flushing.

“Don’t be embarrassed. Love is a beautiful thing when you find it. It’s something to be happy about, something to cherish, something to wear on your face every single day,” she said, genuine happiness in her voice. “Is he a good man?”

I nodded. Kline’s handsome face flashed in my mind. In that moment, I could picture every one of his smiles—happy, teasing, playful, loving. It was an endless list and one that I wanted to memorize and keep with me forever. “Yeah, he is. He’s definitely one of the good ones.”

“Is he your husband?”

“No.” I shook my head. “He’s my boyfriend.”

She grinned, her cheeks puffing out in soft delight. “By the looks of your glow, I’d say you’re headed in that direction.”

Were we? My rational head wanted me to slow the hell down, but my heart was already picking out invitations and flowers. Even though we had just started exchanging I love yous, there was no denying I’d fallen hard for Kline. I was in so deep I honestly couldn’t picture myself without him. *Ever.*

Before I could respond to her statement or ask her something about herself, she was adjusting in her seat, placing a pillow around her neck. “I wish you the best of luck, dear. I hope you and your wonderful man get a very happy ever after. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to rest my eyes. I can feel my Xanax kicking in.” She flashed an apologetic smile. “It’s for the best, though,” she added. “I’m a very nervous flyer.”

She closed her eyes, and within seconds, soft snores fell from her lips.

I made a note to tell my doctor I was a nervous flyer too. The long flights I often took for business trips would have been much more tolerable with the magic that was Xanax. I’d much rather have slept through a four-hour flight than toss and turn without getting any rest.

“Sorry for the delay,” a woman’s voice filtered through the speakers. “We will be taking off shortly.”

My phone buzzed in my lap, catching my attention.

It was a picture message from Cassie, with the words, ***“I’m so sorry, Georgia.”***

Huh?

I tapped the photo and it filled the screen, zooming in so I could figure out what she was talking about.

It was a screenshot of a TapNext conversation.

TAPRoseNEXT (7:00PM): You’re a very nice guy, but I can’t continue talking with you anymore. I’ve gotten more serious with the man I’m seeing and this just doesn’t feel right. I’m sorry. Good luck with everything, Ruck.

BAD_Ruck (6:45AM): I get it. I do. But I think we should meet in person, just the two of us. Please, Rose.

I white-knuckled my phone as I stared down at the screen in disbelief.

I don’t think I breathed for an entire minute. I felt like someone had reached down my throat and pulled my heart straight out of my body.

My eyes closed of their own accord, my mind in self-preservation mode. My heart roaring in my ears, I took a cavernous breath and found the strength to open my eyes again, hoping—no, *praying*—I had missed something along the line.

But I hadn’t. *I fucking hadn’t.* The screenshot, Kline’s response, it was real. One-hundred percent real.

I scrubbed a hand down my face, pressing into my lids to stop the tears wanting to spill down my cheeks. A shaky sigh escaped my lips as I tried to focus through the blurry mess of emotions.

His message was timestamped from this morning at 3:45 a.m. Pacific.

My throat constricted, cheeks straining in agony to stop myself from losing it.

I won't cry. I will not sob in front of a plane full of strangers.

This morning. He sent that message in between playfully asking me questions and making love to me. Or was it *faking* love to me? Because that was what it felt like now. I'd never felt so betrayed, so utterly devastated in my entire life.

The pain built in my chest, burning like I had swallowed hot coals. I was hanging by a thread, my free hand gripping the armrest in a pathetic attempt to hold myself together.

"Miss, we're about to take off. You need to turn your phone off now."

I pulled my eyes from the screen, finding a flight attendant with long blonde hair and a pink smile standing above me.

All I could do was stare at her. Honestly, I didn't even know what she was saying to me.

"Your phone?" She nodded to my hands.

I followed her eyes and realized what she was asking. "Oh, sorry," I mumbled, and with shaky hands, turned it off.

I felt like I was a passenger in a crash-and-burn landing, going from the highest high, only to be catapulted into the lowest of lows.

Memories flooded my mind.

The night at the Hamptons, when I had given myself to him.

I choked on a sob as a few tears slipped down my cheeks. I swiped at the liquid emotion, telling myself I could do this. I could get through this flight.

A man across the aisle glanced in my direction, his head tilted to the side in concern.

Oh, God, don't look at me like that! I wanted to scream at him. I did not want pity. I couldn't handle someone recognizing that I was falling to pieces. *That* would for sure make it impossible to hold this in until I was somewhere private.

Long, slow breaths were inhaled through my nose and exhaled from my lungs. I stared down at a nonexistent piece of lint on my pants, plucking at the material just because it was something to do, something else to focus on besides my heart falling out of my chest.

More memories drowned me.

Last night, with each kiss, each touch, each soft caress, he had silently been asking me to fall the rest of the way with him. And I had. I had followed his lead, and on the way down, he had made love to me until my heart was beating like he'd wanted it to. Like I'd wanted it to. My world had changed. Inside, my walls had fallen down and he was all around me. All I knew. All I wanted to know.

Kline had gone from being my boss to my best friend, my lover, and my intoxication until he let the needle break off in my skin. This wasn't a little cut that would scab over and flake off. *No*. He had cut me so deep I hadn't even bled.

The pain was so unbearable that all my emotions fled the scene. I switched from distraught—fighting the sob threatening to bubble up from my lungs—to robotic.

I didn't want to talk to him. I didn't want to ask him why, after the night we had shared together, he would still want to meet someone who *wasn't* me. Initially, when I'd found out Kline was Ruck, and he had been chatting with **TAPRoseNEXT** without knowing it was me, it didn't upset me. I looked at the entire situation with a rational, understanding head. Because I had done the same thing.

But the second I had met Thatch, the guy whose picture was on **Bad_Ruck's** TapNext profile, I'd known I needed to stop. I knew I wanted Kline. I knew I was falling in love with him, and I didn't want anything to ruin that. Which was why I had told Cassie to take the reins. Who would've thought that the whole time I was chatting with Ruck, I was actually talking to Kline?

It was the ultimate mindfuck.

Unfortunately for me, that mindfuck had just gotten a whole lot worse.

This was different from a simple response to another woman on an online dating profile. He was requesting to meet someone that wasn't me, someone he *knew* was my best friend.

What on earth did he think he was going to gain from that? Was he planning on being in a relationship with me while screwing Cassie on the side?

God, it didn't add up, didn't seem like the Kline I knew, but the proof was right in front of my face.

I felt so devastated. Knowing what we shared and all of the possibilities of what we could have been, why would Kline have risked that? In a matter of a few sentences, he had just ruined everything. Destroyed us. Destroyed me.

I felt sick. Nausea coiled my stomach, constant and unrelenting.

The minute the seatbelt lights went off, I made a beeline for the lavatory. My breakfast filled the small metal toilet within seconds. It took a good five minutes before I could stop dry heaving. I held myself up over the sink, staring at a woman I didn't even recognize. I did my best to clean up, splashing cool water on my face and rinsing my mouth out, before I made my way back to my seat.

God, I had never felt so cold, so fucking alone.

I didn't want to feel like this. I wanted the pilot to turn the plane around so I could talk to Kline. I wanted to forget that TapNext conversation had ever happened.

But I wasn't going to be that woman who couldn't step back and face the facts.

Even though it was going to kill me, I was going to be the woman who knew when to end things. The woman who could end a relationship with a man—even though she loved him—because she knew she didn't deserve to be treated like that.

He had told me he loved me, he had touched me and kissed me in ways a man would only do when he was in love. But while he had been doing that, he had also found time to request to meet another woman. These were not the actions of a man I wanted to be in a relationship with.

For the entire five-and-half-hour flight, my mind raced. Every memory was a picture in my head, his betrayal scratching across the surface of each photograph and tainting it forever.

I was fucking miserable, stuck on an old airplane with no Wi-Fi after finding out the man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with was going behind my back and requesting to meet other women on the side.

If he did that knowing it was my best friend, what else was he doing behind my back?

I knew it was crazy to go in that direction, but who could blame me?

Trying to talk this out with him was pointless. I could only take so much, and a nasty breakup would push me over the edge. I was afraid of what I might say to him. Hell, I'd have to hold my breath if I was in the same room as him, because breathing the same air meant breathing him in.

And my heart couldn't take any more.

* * *

I walked off the plane, my mind fogged with heartbreak and anger. I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry. I wanted to curl up in the fetal position and sleep for forty years.

Pre-life-altering screenshot, I would've sent Kline a text message telling him I had landed, but I didn't even bother turning on my phone. What was the fucking point? I had nothing to say.

Eventually, I found baggage claim and grabbed my suitcase.

I had options. Either I could let this drag me down and turn me into someone I didn't want to be, or I could find a way to get past this.

My decision was made and there was no going back to what we had.

There was no explanation he could give that would fix this, save us.

Steadfast in my choice, I hailed a cab and threw my bags in the back before the driver could even get out of his seat.

“Winthrop Building, Fifth Avenue,” I instructed without a second thought.

When he pulled up to the building, I tossed money in the front seat and hopped out, grabbing my suitcases from the trunk. It was afternoon and everyone would be there. My coworkers would be roaming the halls. Dean would be waiting for me to attend the meeting.

Fuck.

No way could I handle sitting through a meeting. I had to go in, do what I needed to do, and get the hell out of there with as little interaction as possible.

I was striding off the elevator within minutes. I offered a few small waves to Meryl and Cynthia as I passed them in the hall before ducking into my office. Leaning against the closed door, I shut my eyes, biting my cheek to hold back the tears.

God, I didn't have time for a breakdown. I had about twenty minutes before Dean would stroll in, ready to escort me to the conference room.

I sat behind my desk and booted up my computer. My hands shook, and my foot tapped against the tile as nervous energy radiated off of me in unpredictable waves.

A letter of resignation was typed out at a quick, efficient pace. I sent a screenshot of the TapNext conversation to my email and printed it out.

And then I was walking down the hall, toward the one place I didn't really want to be.

"Oh, hi, Georgia!" Leslie stopped me as I rounded the corner. "Is Mr. Brooks back? I forgot to give him a few messages last week about some meeting..." She scrunched her eyebrows, her pea-sized brain trying to remember. "I think it was important, but, like, I'm not really sure."

"He won't be back until tomorrow."

"Oh." Her huge mouth jutted out into a pout. "Are you feeling okay? You look, like, really terrible today."

Wow. As if my day wasn't already fantastic.

I didn't even have the energy to form a sarcastic retort. I just nodded, because she was right; I looked like shit.

"Hey, do you mind going into Dean's office and letting him know that I had to go home? Tell him I'm sick and I'll call him later."

He would be crazy pissed at me but would understand. Plus, I was betting on the fact that Leslie would ramble on and on about my haggard appearance. It was the first time I could use her obsession with being the prettiest girl in the room to my advantage.

"Uh...okay," she begrudgingly agreed.

You'd think *I* was the intern in this scenario, asking my superior for a favor.

The second I stepped into Kline's office, my heart clenched. I glanced around at the familiar surroundings, taking everything in. Knowing I wouldn't last long, I pulled open a drawer on his desk in search of paper. My eyes got blurry when they caught on a photograph of us in the Hamptons resting on top of everything else. We were sitting on the porch, his arm wrapped around my shoulder. I was looking into the camera, grinning, while he gazed down at me, a soft, smitten smile on his lips.

What should have been a happy memory only made me want to throw up again.

I was starting to wonder if I ever really knew Kline Brooks.

I had to get out of his office and back to my apartment. The impending breakdown was sitting in my throat.

Slamming the drawer closed, I wrote out a simple note on the top edge of the screenshot Cassie had sent me, placing it on top of my resignation letter.

Walking out of his office and getting on the elevator, I was certain I'd never be the same after this. I knew getting myself to a place where I even felt like smiling was going to be the hardest thing I ever did. I knew there was no getting over Kline.

But I also knew I deserved better.

I'd find a new job. I'd find a way to move on.

And I'd be just fine pretending that I was.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Kline

I shook the ice in my glass, watching as the cubes moved from side to side and melted into one another. One water droplet plopped from each surface to the next until it finally disappeared into the shallow amber liquid at the bottom.

I'd taken to drinking scotch on the flight to pass the time, the bouncing of my knee having grown old within the first fifteen minutes. Georgia was still on a plane too, having taken off precisely two hours and seventeen minutes ahead of me—according to the FAA—but every minute felt like a lifetime, and it took real concentration to keep myself from bombarding her turned-off phone with a stream of sappy messages.

Last night—the last few weeks of nights—had been the best of my life. Everything I'd worked for, built for myself, and strived to keep healthy felt like a drop in the life-bucket. Finding someone who made me anticipate each day and crave her company—someone who made me feel even more like me—well, that was what made a man realize the truth, *the importance*, in working to live rather than living to work.

I wanted my days to start and end with her, and I wanted the privilege to have even more of her in the middle.

Put simply, I was in love.

And it was irrevocably clear why I never had been before. *None of them were her.*

“Gemma?” I asked like the pathetic shell of a man I had become. I'd told Georgia I loved her, but it hadn't been enough. I needed some kind of confirmation. Some kind of peace. Some kind of promise of forever.

Gemma had the grace to smile. “She should be landing sometime in the next five minutes, sir.”

I could have been the butt of many jokes, the object of numerous men's end-of-world postulation, but I couldn't find it in me to care. And it was clear I'd been feeling that way for the greater part of the morning.

Cutting short a meeting with Wallace Fellers, one of my biggest regular investors, and heading straight for the airport only to chase Georgia's plane across the country was not exactly precedented behavior.

The flight attendant's phone rang, and my head jerked up from my lap at the sound.

Gemma laughed as she hung it up and showed compassion for my pitiful existence by delivering the news from air traffic control immediately. "She should be on the ground, sir."

Phone in hand from the cupholder at my side, I scrolled to her number and dialed.

Two short rings gave way to her voicemail, and I hung up without leaving a message.

I knew it was crazy, dialing someone the moment the wheels of their plane touched the ground, obsessing over their arrival so valiantly in an effort just to hear their voice that I couldn't wait the five-minute security delay a Google search would imply.

But I was a very sick man, the first stages of love overwhelming my cells and multiplying by the minute. It was aggressive like most terminal cases, taking down one organ after the next until I had no choice but to succumb—succumb to the crazy, desperate lengths to make contact and the desire to swaddle myself in her presence and never unwrap.

I typed out a text instead.

Me: After a few bribes and several heinous displays of my money and influence, I got the FAA to give me an exact schedule of your arrival time. Call me as soon as you can.

Several minutes and an intense one-man conversation later, I added the words I should have included in the first place.

Me: PS-I love you.

When she didn't answer immediately, I knew I was one short step away from throwing myself off the proverbial ledge. I couldn't take it anymore. I had to do something else, be something else—if for nothing more than the sake of my poor, overexcited heart.

A nap. That was the only answer.

Determined, I sunk into my seat, reclined the back, and forced my eyes closed.

I pictured her smile and her hair, and as I focused really hard and gave myself over to the dream, I could even smell her perfect Georgia smell.

* * *

I woke hours later to the jolt of our wheels meeting the pavement of the runway. Gemma smiled and waved as my eyes met hers, and I jumped to pull my seat back to upright and grab my phone from the cupholder.

No messages showed on the screen, so I unlocked it to be sure, but no amount of hope could make the status change.

Nothing.

No calls. No texts. No messages from Rose. I checked each and every folder rigorously, searching for some phone-cyberspace loophole that'd robbed me of the one thing I desired so much.

But ten minutes and a mild case of carpal tunnel later, I still came up empty.

I prided myself on being a smart man, and something didn't feel right.

But I quieted my thoughts with the power of sheer will and unbuckled my seatbelt as we pulled to a stop.

She'd had a meeting to get to immediately upon landing, and as much as I'd bitched about her waiting for a later plane, she'd already had it scheduled to the very last possible minute.

With New York as her habitat, it probably took every ounce of concentration and a pledge of sainthood to make it there on time, in one piece, and with an inkling of schmooze left in the tank. She wouldn't have much left for me.

I moved to the front of the plane, re-strategizing on the fly and focusing on the element of surprise. I was here, in the same city, free to chase her down until the sun came up if I had to. She didn't know I'd flown home earlier than expected and keeping it that way would only amplify the reunion.

Jesus. *Yeah*. I liked the sound of that.

"Thanks, Gem," I said, giving her a genuine smile as she stepped to the side of the main cabin door to let me by.

"Anytime, Mr. Brooks."

I took two steps down the stairs when she called my name again. I looked back at her over my shoulder.

"She's very lucky, sir."

I shook my head and laughed.

"Me," I corrected, tapping my chest with a wink before scooting down the rest of the stairs to a waiting Frank.

He stood, holding an open door and wearing a smile.

"Mr. Brooks."

"Hey, Frank," I greeted. "Straight to the office, okay?"

I'd start at the beginning and work my way around the city until I found her from there. I couldn't wait to see her face.

"Yes, sir."

* * *

The lights of the office were dimmed enough that they rubbed off on my hope, but I headed for the back anyway. As long as I was here, I'd check my desk for messages and change into one of my spare shirts before heading for Georgia and Cassie's apartment.

I kept my pace to a near jog, but considering the strength of my desire to run, I counted it as a victory.

My door was cracked, the lamp at my desk illuminating the immediate surrounding space softly. My eyebrows pulled together at the sight, but I didn't slow my gait, striding for the beckoning light at a canter.

The surface was clear except for two loose sheets of paper. I shuffled them to the side in a hurry, grabbing for the tray at the back where Pam often placed my messages when the photocopy caught my eye.

It looked like a screenshot of a message window on a phone.

At the top, a few short strokes of delicate scrawl demanded my immediate attention.

Ruck,

Of all the people in the world...my best friend?

I hate that I still love you after seeing this,

but I can't be with someone who lies to me.

This doesn't hurt good.

Benny

One word bled into the next as I tried to make sense of the simple sentiment, but a mushrooming cloud of dread jumped and swooped, swallowing me whole.

Bold and cruel, the screen of the messaging page of the TapNext app taunted me.

TAPRoseNEXT (7:00PM): You're a very nice guy, but I can't continue talking with you anymore. I've gotten more serious with the man I'm seeing and this just doesn't feel right. I'm sorry. Good luck with everything, Ruck.

BAD_Ruck (6:45AM): I get it. I do. But I think we should meet in person, just the two of us. Please, Rose.

"No," I muttered, reading the words in a flash and reliving each of the seconds that led up to them and followed. "No, no, no, noooooo!" I screamed into the echoey silence.

So lost in the haze of new and all-encompassing love, I'd foolishly, faithfully believed I'd get the chance to straighten everything out in my time. Practiced, planned, and in a completely unmessy setting. That was what I'd been after, the meeting in person. I figured I could control the situation. She'd have the space to react and I'd have the chance to explain. I'd naïvely thought an in-person revelation could even be a little idyllic. But as I ran through the hours and the days I'd kept it to myself—the time I'd harbored my secret even after learning of our faux foursome with our friends—I knew I'd missed my chance.

Sometimes time is valuable, but it can also be your worst enemy. Because, no matter the root of my intentions, lies never led to romance.

This. This moment, this feeling.

This was hell.

I jumped into action, pulling the phone from the pocket of my pants and considering all the ways I could fix it. I was a fixer, a problem solver. *I could fix this.*

Couldn't I?

I fought the tightness in my throat, but it was potent in a way I wasn't prepared for.

I opened my text messages and typed out several drafts.

Me: Please, let me explain. I know it doesn't look good.

Delete.

I shook my head and scrubbed at my face, willing the right words to come.

Me: I love you. God, let me explain.

Delete.

Me: Georgie. Please talk to me. I've known it was you for a long time now.

Delete.

I opened the TapNext app and drafted a message to Rose.

BAD_Ruck (6:54PM): You've got this all wrong, Rose. I know who you are.

Delete.

Accusing her of *any* wrongdoing in this scenario was probably not a good idea.

BAD_Ruck (6:55PM): Remember the gargoyle dick, Rose. Not everything is what it seems.

Delete.

Goddammit. This was definitely not the time to be a smartass, either.

None of it was good enough. No words powerful enough to convince the invincible.

My nose stung and my eyes burned and the screen of my phone blurred before my eyes.

I'd fucked up in a way I didn't know how to fix—didn't know how to *breathe* through the fucking pain.

Jesus. If I couldn't even put together a few fucking words that sounded convincing *to myself*, she was never going to believe me. *Not ever.*

“FUCKKK!” I screamed until fire raged in my throat and chucked my useless phone clear across the room and watched it shatter.

I punched at the top of my desk over and over until my hand developed a throb, pulling the pain and blood away from my pathetic pumping heart. Each thud enhanced the ache, and I prayed that somehow, someday, I'd find a way to make it end before the cycle purged my vital organs of enough blood to end me.

Time.

I needed it. Time to think, time to plan, time to understand what this was going to take.

Taking a deep breath and blowing it out, I pulled the sheet of paper over to expose the one beneath it and immediately lost my footing. I turned just in time, sinking to the floor with my back to the mahogany of my desk and clutched at the paper.

Her resignation letter, effective immediately.

She didn't want my hollow words or pleading looks.

My little shark had bitten the lines of contact clean through.

It was done. Done in a way that I wasn't remotely ready for. Done in a way that I couldn't even conceive.

Done in a way that would never actually be done, *not ever*.

This pain would haunt me for the rest of my life.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Georgia

I gave myself twenty-four hours to wallow and cry and browse Reddit “my boyfriend is a cheating, cock-sucking, piece-of-scum dirtbag” threads. Okay, maybe they weren’t really titled that, but I’d always enjoyed nicknaming shit.

And when I wasn’t trolling Internet threads, I could’ve been found doing any of the following:

1. Crying. *A lot.*
2. Turning my phone on and off every five minutes, in hopes that Kline would attempt to contact me. He didn’t, by the way. Not a text, a call, nothing but complete radio silence.
3. Re-watching the first four seasons of *Gilmore Girls*. If only we could combine Logan, Jess, and Dean to form the perfect man.
4. Eating all of our food. (Cassie was not happy about this.)
5. Taking one thousand BuzzFeed quizzes. I was a Hufflepuff, who should live in San Francisco and preferred NSYNC over Backstreet Boys. Chris Pratt should have been my celebrity husband, I’d have two kids, and my chocolate IQ was insane. Just in case you were wondering.

When BuzzFeed told me *The Notebook* was the Nicholas Sparks book that best described my love life, I gave it both middle fingers and shut my laptop.

If I was a bird, Kline Brooks could go fuck himself.

But you know what the hardest part was?

I still loved him. God, I loved him. I loved Kline just as much as I had before I’d seen that screenshot from Cassie. And this voice in the back of my head kept insisting something was off.

That Kline wouldn’t have broken my trust like that.

Stupid voice. It was that kind of voice that made people stay in relationships with someone who didn't deserve them. I also gave that voice both middle fingers. Frankly, I was ready to give every-fucking-body the middle finger. Misery loves company and all that jazz.

* * *

Day Two, Post-Kline-breaking-my-heart:

I had managed to get myself out of bed, shower, and make some phone calls to a corporate headhunter so I could find a new job. Sure, I'd slept in Kline's t-shirt that night and cried myself to sleep, but at least I was taking a step in the right direction. And it should be noted, I left my cell phone *on* and only checked for missed calls or texts every ten minutes that day.

Baby steps, folks. It was all about the baby steps.

* * *

Day three, Post-Kline-breaking-my-heart:

I woke up red-eyed and snotty but had several voicemails with possible job prospects and interview requests. One good thing out of the entire Kline mess, I had a killer résumé and other companies really wanted me on their payroll. I took an interview that day. It was a marketing position for an NFL team, popularly known as the New York Mavericks. They'd had a recent change in management that had left them in dire straits.

I didn't know anything about football, but I knew marketing. When I sat down for the interview with Frankie Hart, the Maverick's GM, I reminded myself of that very fact. It didn't matter how much I knew about the game; all that mattered was if I could market their franchise in a way that was both profitable and creative.

I showed him slides of the successful campaigns I had done for Brooks Media. I asked questions about their current marketing outlooks and financial profitability. And then I showed Frankie the kind of ingenious skills I had by tossing out a few possible changes that would help build the Maverick name.

He loved my ideas. I left the interview feeling really proud of myself. And I hated that the first person I wanted to call was Kline. I hated that he had become such an important part of my life in such a short amount of time.

After drowning my hate and irritation in three beers and a plate of nachos at the bar up the street from my apartment, my headhunter called with a job offer. The New York Mavericks wanted to hire me and presented their offer with a generous salary and investment plan. I was shocked by their quick trigger. My experiences with getting a response from corporations was *never* this prompt. *But maybe football franchises are different? Who knows?*

I didn't waste time trying figure it out.

Immediately, I accepted the position. Even though football, or any sport for that matter, wasn't my forte, I was excited about the challenge, and honestly, I couldn't afford to sit around for months without a paycheck. Student loans and rent did not accept IOUs.

That night, I slid into bed and checked my phone one last time.

Still no response from Kline.

I clutched my aching stomach and forced my racing mind to sleep.

God, I missed him so much I felt physically ill from it.

* * *

Later that week, Cassie surprised me by coming home a few days early from her shoot in San Francisco. This was why she'd always be one of the most important people in my life. I needed her, desperately, and she didn't hesitate to rearrange her schedule to be my shoulder to lean on.

We ordered Chinese, gorged ourselves on chicken fried rice and crab rangoon, and lounged on the couch for a *Friday Night Lights* marathon on Netflix.

If anyone could brighten my mood, it was Tim Riggins, right?

Wrong.

I only got a few episodes deep before I was on the verge of losing it. The second I saw Lyla Garrity smile against Tim Riggins' mouth mid-kiss, the emotional dam was ready to burst.

"Are you okay?" Cass asked as I strode into the bathroom.

All I could do was shake my head. Because I was very far from okay. Probably the furthest I'd ever been from okay.

I stared at myself in the bathroom mirror, my legs trembling and hands gripping the sink like it would somehow give me the strength to fight my pitiful emotions.

Don't cry. He does not deserve your tears.

When that didn't work, I attempted to distract myself by peeing. But I quickly found it didn't serve as any type of distraction, because after about fifteen seconds, I was just peeing *and* crying at the same time. If you'd ever found yourself in that horribly tragic set of circumstances, you'd have understood it was the worst feeling ever. Not only could you not stop peeing, but you couldn't hold back the sobs. Pathetic was the only true way to describe it.

Cass found me in the bathroom that way—pants around my ankles and tears streaming down my cheeks.

“What can I do?” Her face was etched with concern.

“Nothing,” I cried, shoving a clump of toilet paper against my nose. My elbows went to my bare knees—yes, I was still on the toilet—and my head was in my hands.

“Have you talked to him since?” She rested her hip against the doorframe.

“Nope. It’s been a week and he hasn’t tried to contact me. Hasn’t called. Texted. Fucking tapped out Morse code. No skywriter or carrier pigeon. Nada. Zip. Zilch.” I stared up at her, my chin resting in my hands. “He even knows I was out looking for a new job. How do I know this? Because when the headhunter called with the offer, he also mentioned my prior place of employment provided an amazing recommendation.”

“But—” she started to interrupt, but I kept going.

“So, basically, Kline Brooks doesn’t give a shit. He saw my letter of resignation. He saw the screenshot with the note I left him. And guess what? He never attempted to contact me. Plus, he was more than happy to give my future job prospect a glowing recommendation. Am I going crazy, Cass? I mean, was I completely deranged and thought Kline and I were way more than what we actually were?”

“No, sweetie,” she responded. “I saw you two together and it was more than obvious he adored you.”

“Then why did he want to meet up with you? Why did he want to meet up with my best friend?” I stifled a sob, pressing more toilet paper against my eyes. “Obviously, this is nothing against you, Cass,” I muttered.

“I know, Georgie. And seriously, you don’t have to apologize to me. This entire situation is fucked up, that’s for damn sure.”

I nodded, blowing my nose.

“How about you get off the toilet and maybe we can find something else to watch? It’s safe to say Tim and Lyla are little too much for you at the moment.”

“Okay,” I agreed through a hiccupping breath.

“I’ll give you a minute to get yourself together,” she called over her shoulder, moving into the hallway.

I stood by the sink, washing my hands and face. I would not spend another night bawling my eyes out. It was just getting pathetic at that point. Obviously, what I’d thought Kline and I were, and what he’d thought we were, were two very different things.

The voice in my head tried to remind me of the way his blue eyes had looked the night he told me he loved me—tender, vulnerable, his heart resting in their depths.

I told that voice to fuck off. He wouldn’t be the first man or woman in the world to profess love to someone they didn’t really care about. Believe me, I had seen the threads on Reddit.

People did some horrible shit to one another. Relationships, that were otherwise amazing, could end on the worst of notes. That was not how I had pictured things happening with Kline and me, but that was life, right? Sometimes things didn’t go as you planned or hoped they would. Sometimes bad things happened to good people.

Sometimes you just had to suck it up and move on.

I just hated that I missed him as much as I did.

I missed his laugh and his smile and his teasing comments.

I missed my big spoon.

As I wiped my face and hands off with the towel, I glanced down at my pants and noticed a giant grease stain in the crotch region. Normally, I would have just left it, but that night, I needed to *not* feel like the most pitiful person in existence.

I took off the sweats and headed toward my bedroom to grab a new pair of pants.

“Hey, Georgia, what do you think about *The Walking Dead*?” Cass asked from the other end of the hallway.

“Sure, why not?” I shrugged. Zombies seemed like a good, safe choice. How could I think about Kline when I was watching humans turn cannibalistic?

She started to turn back toward the living room but stopped in her tracks. “Hold up...are you wearing boxer briefs?”

Ah, fuck.

“No,” I answered, covering my underwear. Well, Kline’s underwear.

She flashed a skeptical look.

“Fine!” I threw my hands in the air. “I’m wearing Kline’s briefs because I’m pathetic and I miss him and they smell like him!”

“*Smell like him?*” She fought the urge to smile.

“This isn’t funny!” I groaned.

She held up both hands. “I never said it was.”

I pointed toward her mouth. “Yeah, but you’re about two seconds away from laughing your ass off!”

“Honey, you just told me you’re wearing your ex-boyfriend’s underwear because you miss him and they smell like him. *His underwear*. The material that literally cradles his balls.”

“Oh, God,” I whined, face scrunching into an agonized expression. “This is definitely a new low point in my life.” I leaned against the wall, head falling back. “I’m so desperate for him that I’ll take smelling like his sac over not smelling like him at all.”

Cass moved toward me and immediately pulled me into a tight hug.

“It’ll be okay, Georgie. I promise it’ll be okay.”

I sniffled back the tears, resting my chin on her shoulder and squeezing her tight.

“Do you want me to try to call him? Maybe it isn’t what you think? Maybe he has an explanation?”

“Doubtful,” I muttered. “He would have called. If there was an explanation, he would have called.” I needed to say the words for myself just as much as I needed to say them for her. Her face reflected my misery perfectly.

“I just want to forget him, Cass. I just want to wake up and not have to go through an entire day of missing him and wishing things were different.”

“I know, honey. I know. It’ll get easier, but it’s just going to take some time.” She ran her fingers through my hair. “But you know what? You’re still doing your best to move forward. You went out and got a new job. You’re not just sitting around and moping like most people would. I’m really proud of you.”

“Thanks for coming home early. I really needed you.”

“I will always be here for you. Even when you smell like ball sac,” she teased, a smile in her voice, “I’ll still be here.”

I laughed and groaned at the same time. “God, I know I said they smelled like him but I didn’t even really do a sniff check on these. I mean, Kline is usually a clean, well-groomed kind of guy, but for all I know, I’m wearing a post-rugby practice pair.”

A quiet laugh escaped her lips. “How about you go take a hot shower while I make those amazing Ghirardelli dark chocolate brownies we have in the pantry? Then we can watch humans turn into zombies and eat one another?”

“I really love you.”

“I love you too. Now go rinse the ball sweat off and meet me in the living room.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Kline

A knock at my door picked at my already raging headache with an ice hammer.

“Yeah?” I asked, my voice heavily laden with days’ worth of heartbreak and aggravation.

The door swung open and closed without delay, Thatch starting on one side and ending on the other.

“Good morning, my old, melancholy friend.”

My eyes narrowed in a power-glare. He noticed immediately.

“Right. Not the time, I can see.”

Definitely not. I shook my head.

“You’re missing out, K. I’ve got some really fantastic new material I tried out on Gwendolyn last night.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and tilted it toward the ceiling.

Please, God, give me patience right now.

“All right, all right,” Thatch conceded. “Not in the mood for Gwendolyn either. I get it.”

I sighed.

“I mean, I have a hard time actually *getting* it, you know? I’m pretty much always in the mood for Gwendolyn. Or Amber. Or Yvette.”

“Thatch.”

“Definitely, Yvette. She does the best work with her tongue.”

I had never been less in the mood for his teasing than I was right now. I wasn’t sleeping, barely eating. I missed my fucking Benny. I didn’t want to hear about any-fucking-body and I didn’t want to listen to jokes.

Nonexistent patience tapped out, I scrubbed through the mess on my desk and shoved the bulleted proposal at him. I'd done my best to outline everything I was looking for it to say, but I was no goddamn lawyer. Neither was he, but he'd know what to do.

Wrinkles formed between his eyes as he concentrated and read.

"Are you serious right now?" Thatch asked, shaking the paper in front of him and looking deep into my eyes. He'd never looked at me that seriously. I was obviously scaring him.

"As a fucking heart attack," I confirmed.

"K—"

"Just do it!" I snapped, rolling my neck from side to side and blowing out a deep breath to calm down.

Fuck, I was tense. More so than I'd ever been in my entire goddamn life, and my nerves were shot. If people didn't start doing what I said, right when I said it, I was liable to lose my fucking mind.

He shook his head disdainfully, but either my totally fucked up head was playing tricks on me or the curve of his smile was growing with each pass.

"You are one crazy motherfucker, you know that?" he asked, his lips turned up in a full-on smile. I knew I wasn't making it up now.

I nodded a few times before the intensity of his happiness had me shaking my head. "Why are you smiling like a goddamn lunatic?"

"Because," he said in another uncharacteristic display of seriousness. "I'm fucking thrilled to see you this happy."

Happy? Was he high? I'd never been this fucking heartbroken.

"Dude, I've never been this miserable."

He nearly choked on a laugh. "Yeah, but see, that's the flip side. Crazy in love can only mean one of two things." He ticked each option off on his fingers. "Maniacally happy or

butt-fuck desolate. It's one or the other, and it all hangs on the notion of said person loving you back."

He shook the paper in his hands. "I admire you. Fucking up but fucking doing something about it. *This* is what makes a man. Buried to shit in the weeds so he takes out a machete."

I cracked a smile for the first time in two days.

"Just make sure it doesn't take me four fucking years to cut my way out, okay?"

"I'll have the contract ready by Friday at the latest. There's some red tape, but you can thank me again for stopping you from caving to a structure with a board of directors. If you had, you'd have been fucked."

I shook my head.

He turned an ear toward me, cocked a brow, and waved a hand in invitation.

I rolled my eyes but played along. "Thank you, Thatch, for having the foresight to make it possible to make a last-ditch grand gesture in the name of love without being completely fucked."

He bowed slightly, tucking one hand to his stomach and the other to his back. "You're welcome."

My office phone ringing had me rounding the desk and meeting his eyes in question. He waved his permission.

"Brooks," I answered shortly.

"Kline, Kline, Kline." Wes tsked in my ear.

Jesus. I didn't know if I had the energy for both of them.

"This really isn't a good time, Wes."

"It never is—"

True enough.

"But I think you'll want to hear this," he taunted.

Like a starving fish, I took the bait on the line without question.

“What?”

“We just interviewed a new employee—”

Goddamn, everyone was making it their fucking mission to annoy me today. New conquests from one and new hires from the next, I had no desire to hear any of it.

“Wes—”

“Pretty little thing. Can’t be more than five one, five two, but by God, she’s got a body on her.”

My stomach jumped with excitement and roiled with sick all at once. He sat silent on the line, just waiting.

“You saw her?”

“Nope, not me. She’s in with the GM now. He wanted me to call and look into her references while she’s in there, though, seeing as he liked the girl so much and didn’t want to waste time getting an offer together.”

The words burned my throat as I said them. “You’re a fucking moron if you don’t hire her.”

“No kidding.”

I’d never wanted to slit the throat of a friend before, but I guessed there was a time and circumstance for everything.

Thatch looked on as I worked hard to compose myself. Sure, I had a plan, but I had no idea how she’d react. I could very well still be royally screwed.

If that was the case, I still wanted the very best for her.

“Just...look out for her, okay?” My voice didn’t even sound like my own, and Thatch looked away. The big fucking ox couldn’t stand it either.

“You know I will, dude.”

I nodded at the phone, too choked up to speak, and when it made me think of her, a single tear broke through the last goddamn barrier.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Georgia

“Girl, it’s pandemonium here! Where in the hell have you been? Do you even know what’s going on?!” Dean shouted into my ear, not even offering a simple “Hello” or “How are you?”

I yanked the phone away from my face, my mouth contorting in pain.

Jesus, he was worked up about something. I could picture him pacing, his body vibrating with the need to tell someone whatever gossip he’d grabbed ahold of. If there was one thing Dean was great for when I was at...*yeah, that place I’d rather never speak of again*, it was keeping his ear to the ground and getting the down and dirty scoop on *everything*.

“Give me a minute, Dean. I’m trying to hear you over my ruptured eardrum.” I sat down at my new desk, in my new office.

Even though it was a great job with amazing benefits, and the salary alone had me blinking twice when my eyes scanned the contract, it still didn’t feel like home. I didn’t have that sense of relief I had hoped for. I just felt...numb. I felt like someone had picked me up from my apartment and dropped me off in the middle of nowhere, without a lick of instructions or reassurance.

But I knew I could step up to the challenge and rock this job. I had learned from the best, a man who had started building his multi-billion dollar empire when he was a nineteen-year-old college student at Harvard.

Fuck you very much, Kline Brooks.

“Georgia,” he said, ignoring my jab. “Listen. To. Me. Shit is crazy. I think everyone at Brooks Media is losing their ever-loving minds!”

Okay, that definitely caught my attention.

“W-what? Why?”

“Kline’s moods revolve around colossally awful and biggest dick around. And *not* in the good way.”

I blinked several times, attempting to process that information.

“Georgie? *Hell-o?* Are you still there?”

I swallowed past the shock. “Yeah, I’m here.”

“Can you believe it? Kline Brooks, the man who rarely raises his voice and makes a point to be a gentleman, *no matter what*, has turned into the kind of guy his employees want to avoid at all costs. Talk about—”

I couldn’t take any more. The last thing I wanted to hear was about Kline and his bad moods.

“Dean, I can’t do this,” I chimed in before he could continue. The mere thought of Kline had my stomach cursing me for eating a sausage biscuit from McDonald’s for breakfast. “I just can’t listen to this. I love you. I miss you. But I can’t listen to anything related to Kline Brooks.”

“Oh. My. Gawd!” he exclaimed. “My spidey sense told me something was off with your rash departure, but I brushed it off, figuring maybe you just wanted to see tight asses in spandex all day. And, girlfriend, I didn’t blame you one bit for that. Hell, I would’ve done a whole lotta things—*emphasis on dirty*—that would’ve made them football boys blush to snag that job.”

“I didn’t take the job for the tight asses in spandex, Dean,” I muttered.

“Well, I know that now! I can’t believe I didn’t see this sooner!”

“Didn’t see what sooner?”

“You banged the boss.” He sighed dramatically. “I am *so* jealous.”

“Don’t be.” I snorted in irritation. “Kline Brooks might be good in bed, but he’s even better at tearing your heart to

shreds.”

“Oh, no he didn’t!” I literally heard his fingers give three quick snaps through the receiver. “What happened?”

“One day, when I don’t feel like throwing up and crying when I hear his name, I’ll give you all of the gory details. I just can’t talk about it right now.”

“Damn girl. I’m so sorry. It was that bad?”

“Times it by about a thousand and, yeah, it was that bad.”

“If I wasn’t wearing my new three-piece Gucci suit, I’d strut my ass right into his office and slug him.”

That had me laughing. “You’ve never ‘slugged’ anyone in your life.”

“That’s only because I’m a bottom, sweetheart. The men in my life prefer me well-groomed and well-manicured. Slugging would mess up my pretty hands.”

“*Wait...* you’re a bottom?”

“Well...not *every* time, but yeah, I prefer to be ridden.”

I grimaced. “Jesus. That’s too much information for nine a.m.”

“Pretty sure you asked, doll,” he said through a laugh. “I miss having my little diva around. Tell me we can meet up for drinks soon.”

“Definitely.”

“And if you’re curious and want to know what a certain someone—”

I cut him off before he rehashed that argument. “Nope. Not gonna happen. But I will make time for you. Call me this weekend and we’ll make some plans.”

“Okay, lover. We’ll chat later.”

After we hung up, I busied myself with the one hundred pages of Excel spreadsheets management had sent my way. I was finding out quickly the asshole who had run this position prior to me didn’t give a shit about tracking expenses. The franchise would be lucky if their marketing investments broke even by

the end of the fiscal quarter. No wonder he got the boot and they offered me the job at the drop of a hat.

Three soft knocks at the door grabbed my attention.

“Come in,” I answered, glancing up from my computer.

A young man in his early twenties, and pretty much too adorable for words, hesitantly walked in. The Breakaway Courier logo was etched on his navy blue polo. His hands gripped a thick envelope.

“Georgia Cummings?” he asked, standing in front of my desk.

“That’s me.” I got up from my chair. “What can I help you with?”

“I’ve got an urgent delivery for you.” He pulled a small black tablet from his backpack. “Mind giving me a signature?”

“Uh, sure...” I responded, slightly confused. “But are you sure this is for me? I wasn’t expecting anything today.”

“Definitely for you. I had strict orders to make this my next stop.”

My brow rose. “Really?”

He nodded, holding the tablet out for my signature.

“Did they tell you who it’s from?” I asked, signing and taking the package from his hands.

He shook his head and shrugged. “No clue, but apparently, it’s really important.”

“Okay, well, thanks.”

I scanned the front of the manila envelope for a clue. Only my name and office address were written across the center, along with the words, *Urgent. Open and read immediately.*

“Have a nice day, Ms. Cummings.”

“Thanks. You too,” I mumbled.

My fingers slid beneath the lip of the envelope, breaking the seal. Still bewildered, I pulled out a thick stack of legal documents and skimmed the first page.

Business Purchase Agreement

This agreement is made on Monday, October 15th.

Between

1. Kline Matthew Brooks, Brooks Media, (the “Selling Party”) and

2. Georgia Rose Cummings, (the “Buying Party”)

This Business Purchase Agreement (this “Agreement”) is made and entered into on Monday, October 15th, by and between, Kline Matthew Brooks, having its principal office of business at Brooks Media, 15 Fifth Avenue New York, NY (“Seller”), on the one hand, and Georgia Rose Cummings (“Buyer”) on the other hand. Buyer and Seller are collectively referred to as (the “Parties”) and are sometimes referred individually as a (“Party”).

RECITALS:

WHEREAS, Seller is the owner of Brooks Media at 15 Fifth Avenue New York, NY, collectively, the (“Business”).

NOW, THEREFORE, for and in consideration of the mutual covenants and benefits derived and to be derived from the Agreement by each Party, and for the other good and valuable consideration, the receipt and sufficiency of which are hereby acknowledged. Seller and Buyer hereby agree as follows:

Agreement to Sell:

Subject to and in accordance with the terms and conditions of this Agreement. Buyer agrees to purchase the Business from Seller, and Seller agrees to sell the business to Buyer. Seller represents and warrants to Buyer that it has (and Buyer will have) good and marketable title to the Business free and clear of liens and encumbrances.

Purchase Price and Method of Payment:

Brooks Media, all stock and investments, and corporations under the Brooks Media name are net worthed at 3.5 billion dollars, along with the ownership of one fluffy cat, Walter Brooks.

Buyer's price will include a 10:00 a.m. appointment at Brooks Media offices on today, October 15th. Buyer will give Seller fifteen minutes of uninterrupted time to give an explanation to the Buyer. Once the fifteen-minute time period is up, Buyer may sign the contract and claim the title, CEO and President of Brooks Media, free and clear.

I stopped reading, staring down at the words in utter dismay.

He was selling—*no*—giving me his company? Just like that? Kline Brooks was just handing over his company and fortune for fifteen minutes of my time?

Oh, and he was tossing in Walter to, what, sweeten the deal?

What in the ever-loving kind of shit was this?

My knees buckled and I was thankful my ass was near the edge of my desk. I gripped the mahogany edge and tried to breathe through the intensifying tightness in my chest.

He had really, truly lost it. What did he think this would solve? Did he think I would just fall into his arms because he was worth over three billion dollars? That he could just buy me back with money?

Fuck. Him.

I would not be bought. *Never.*

He'd messed up. He'd ruined us. Our breakup rested solely on his shoulders, and I was more than ready to throw this stupid, insulting contract back in his face.

In. Person.

I grabbed my purse from my desk and stopped dead in my tracks as I reached the door to my office.

"Well, good morning," Frankie Hart greeted, flanked by a very attractive man who immediately had red flags raising in my mind. I knew his face from somewhere...

"Georgia, I'd like to introduce you to Wes Lancaster, the Mavericks' owner. He's very excited about—"

"*Wes Lancaster?*" I cut in, my jaw practically falling into my purse.

And just like that, the red flags turned to puzzle pieces as everything fell into place. I knew his face because I'd seen his picture, *in Kline's apartment*.

He was the Wes in the Kline, Thatch, and Wes trio. Which, *seriously?* Did they all have to be good looking?

"That's me." He nodded, a handsome smile consuming his stupid, perfect mouth. "Frankie's had nothing but good things to say about you. I'm excited to have you on board with our franchise."

I just stared at him. Speechless. Everything I thought I had earned in the interview went up in flames. I had a feeling I was only here because of Kline. How could I have been so stupid? No one got a call back after an interview that fucking quick, no matter how fast a company wanted to fill the position.

"Tell me, *Wes*, did you consult with Kline before the interview or after?" I snapped.

Obviously, I had lost it. I was standing there calling the owner of the Mavericks out.

My boss. I was calling my boss out on my first day on the job.

"Well..." He cleared his throat, visibly uncomfortable. "He told me I'd be an idiot if we didn't hire you."

I glared. At. My. New. Boss.

"It wasn't just because of him that we offered you the job. Frankie showed me slides from your previous marketing campaigns. He told me your ideas. And I loved them."

For some unknown reason, he seemed more concerned with calming me down than offended by my unprofessional behavior. Because, let's face it, I was being far from professional. So far, I had snapped at him, glared at him, and taken it upon myself to be on a first-name basis with him.

And I knew the reason why he wasn't acting insulted.

Kline motherfucking Brooks.

Wes caught sight of the contract balled up in my hand. "Obviously, we've come at a bad time, and I just remembered

I had a nine thirty phone conference.” He made a show of looking at his watch. “And it’s already nine thirty-two. I better get moving.”

Frankie’s head tilted in confusion. “But...I thought that wasn’t until noon?”

“Nope. It got changed.” Wes shook his head. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Georgia,” he said, ushering a confused Frankie out of the doorway. He pointedly glanced down at the contract before meeting my eyes again. “I’ve been friends with him for years because he’s one of the good ones. Don’t be too hard on him,” he added before heading in the other direction.

First, Kline Brooks got me to fall in love with him, before breaking my heart.

Then he called in a favor to his best friend so I’d get a new job, before couriering over a contract to sign his entire business over to me.

Was this real life? Was he fucking joking with this right now?

The shock of meeting Wes was quickly replaced by anger.

I strode out of my office and didn’t even bother telling my secretary I would be gone. Hell, with the floor show I had just provided my new boss, I’d have been shocked if they’d let me come back.

But I didn’t even care to rehash that horribly awkward meet and greet in my head. I was solely focused on getting to Kline’s office and letting him know how I felt about his offer.

Once my feet hit the sidewalk, I hailed a taxi and felt a surge of adrenaline rush through my veins because I was ten minutes away from shoving that ridiculous offer straight up his ass.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Kline

“In all the pining and whining you did over this chick, you failed to ever mention she was scary,” Wes said into my ear.

I rolled my eyes. He’d had to listen to me talk about her for a fucking week. That was it.

“Scary?” I asked.

“Fucking *scary*. I wouldn’t want to be you right now.”

Hope bloomed and blossomed in my chest. “She’s on her way?”

“Yep, as we speak. And she. Is. *Pissed*.”

I smiled. God, I loved when she was fired up.

“How long ago did she leave?”

“Oh, about twenty minutes or so,” he relayed in my ear as bedlam broke out in the office outside my door. I could see Dean running toward the office through the window, a look of pure glee on his face, and Thatch gave me the nod from the other side just as Georgia burst through the door.

She looked like Heaven and Hell and the sole reason for the constant ache in my chest for the last several days.

Hate and love and uncertainty all lined the edges of her face as she warred with herself at the sight of me.

I wanted desperately to pull her into my arms and feel the warmth of her seep into the cold of me, but I knew I had work to do before it was even a remote possibility.

I steeled my features and rounded my desk, leaning into the edge of it with the calm of a man who wasn’t mere seconds away from coming out of his skin.

“Good, you’re here.”

Thatch slammed the door behind her and held it shut. Unable to resist, she ran to it, testing the effectiveness of all of his muscles with three sharp tugs. He didn't budge, one hand on the knob and the other still free to throw her a jaunty wave and a smile through the window.

She growled as she turned to me, stomping her foot in the most adorable way, and then made every effort to kill me with her eyes.

I put everything I had into not smiling and glanced at my watch.

It almost worked.

“And for the first time in your life, you're on time.”

She pinched her eyebrows together in question and didn't do it lightly. There was real anger there, harnessed between them. She was *raging*, and every single piece of her wanted me to know it.

I nodded to the tattered remnants of the contract, another victim of her wrath, clutched in her hand. “The meeting at ten?” I explained with the lilt of a question. “It was all outlined in the contract.”

“Right,” she scoffed. “The fucking contract. What kind of a sick fuck does something as mentally unstable as this? Your company?! The whole motherfucking company,” she shouted and rambled. “An insane person. You've obviously lost all your marbles. Maybe *Walter* stole them, I don't fucking know.”

She shook her head, her wild *brown* hair cascading and swinging and reeling me the fuck in. A handful of days without her, and she'd dyed it again.

She sure was something.

“What I do know is that if the meeting is at ten—” she glanced at her watch “—and it's nine fifty-nine, that makes me *early*.”

I bit my lip and pressed my palms into the top of the desk to keep me there.

Her eyes shot to mine at the jagged sound of my whisper. “I’m so sorry, Benny.”

Her slender throat jerked with a forced swallow.

“I know I fucked it all up,” I admitted, working the edge of my tooth into my bottom lip to keep the pace of my words in check. I wanted to race and ramble like her, but I knew it wouldn’t do me any favors.

“But I’m begging you to listen. Watch. Take it all in.”

She shook her head and clenched her hands into fists.

“You don’t have to change your mind,” I offered—a desperate man clinging to whatever scraps he could get. “I want you to.” I closed my eyes and prayed as I spoke. “God, Georgie, I want you to.” When I opened them again, done with wasting any opportunity to see her, I made sure I didn’t even blink. “But all you have to do is this. Be here for a few measly minutes. At least I’ll get to fucking look at you. After that, you’re free to go.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Georgia

I shook my head, staring at the ground. I needed a reprieve from the havoc that pleading look on his face was doing to me.

“Please, baby, just five minutes of your time.”

Immediately, I looked up, glaring at him. “Do *not* call me that.”

He lifted both hands in the air. “I’m sorry, Benny.”

I cringed. He knew what he was doing, the clever bastard, and that wasn’t much better.

“Yeah,” I spat. “Me fucking too. I’m sorry about a lot of things.”

His face looked pained, but he quickly pushed the emotion down, forcing a soft smile onto his handsome lips instead. “Just fifteen minutes and then you’re free to go. I promise.”

“Promise?” I scoffed. “I’ve heard your promises. They’re about as empty as my pathetic heart.”

He couldn’t hide that pain, couldn’t push it down like he had before. His eyes creased at the corners, his lips mashed in a tight line. My chest ached as I watched him inhale a shaky breath.

I knew I wasn’t being nice and I should have stopped, but I couldn’t help myself. Awful words just kept flowing past my lips. Deep down, I wanted to throw knives his way until one of them stuck, cutting him as deep as he cut me.

“I know you’re mad and you have every right to be.” His voice was calm and composed and it only pissed me off more.

“I don’t understand what this is going to help,” I spat. “There is nothing you can show me that will change my mind, that will make me trust you again.”

He ignored the tight lines of my body language—back stiff, fists clenched at my sides—and guided me to a chair. He gripped my shoulders, urging me to sit down. “Just a few more minutes of your time, Georgia. That’s all I’m asking.”

I sat, but I didn’t want to sit. I wanted to be anywhere else but in that room with him. The simple touch of his fingers on my shoulders, his voice, soft and caressing near my ear, and those blue eyes, fucking slaying me with their pleading intensity—it was too much.

My heart was a rubber band and Kline was pulling too hard. Another glance into his saddened gaze, another tug on my emotions, and it would snap. I would end up doing something I regretted. And I’d be left with nothing.

Screw that. I wasn’t going to be convinced. There was no amount of begging and pleading and lines of bullshit that would get me to change my mind. I’d stay strong. I’d watch whatever he wanted me to watch, and then I would leave. We’d both have closure that way.

Once this was over, I was going to be out of that door faster than I’d barged in.

He fiddled with his laptop until the projection screen came to life. I huffed.

Did he really have to make it this dramatic? I could have just watched it, whatever it was, on my laptop—even my phone.

He stood behind me, hands on my shoulders again, and lips near my ear. “I’ve only lied to you twice. The first time was when I didn’t tell you I knew you were Rose.”

My head jerked to look at him in surprise and disbelief, a nasty rebuttal on the tip of my tongue, but on the way around, my eyes caught on the video playing on the screen.

Security footage.

It took a minute to recognize the location, but it was Brooks Media’s Human Resources. Cynthia’s office, to be exact. My brows rose when a crazy person dressed in muddy clothes burst through her doors. He scanned the room until he found what he was searching for. In three quick strides, he was at her

filing cabinet, yanking open the drawer and fingers sliding through the files.

The messy hair. The taut, tight muscles of his back, stretching and flexing. And that ass covered in shorts. I knew that body.

My breath caught in my lungs when the camera zoomed in, moving past his face quickly, but not too quick that I didn't recognize the jawline, especially the way it looked before he shaved, covered deliciously with two days' worth of growth.

It was Kline.

My mind tripped into realization that he was filthy and sweaty because he had come from rugby practice. Which also explained why no one else was in the office.

But why was he rummaging through Cynthia's files?

More importantly, why did I need to see this?

I caught sight of the timestamp in the corner. I counted the days in my head. It was a few days after our second date, where he had convinced me to go skinny-dipping at ONE UN. It was nearly eight-thirty in the evening and he was going through one of his employee's offices like a lunatic.

The camera zoomed closer, showing the file in his hands. I couldn't read the label on the edge quick enough before Kline was opening it, his finger tracing down the list of employees names.

The camera zoomed in again, blurry for a second before giving me a clear view. I watched his finger pause on one name.

Cummings, Georgia.

Then it slid across the page and came to a dead stop.

TAPRoseNEXT.

Adrenaline took over. My heart thrashed inside my chest as it furiously pumped the rush through my veins.

He knew.

He knew.

He knew.

It was the only thing my brain could compute.

He was in front of me, squatting down so we were at eye level. “The only other lie I’ve told you is that I liked you when I knew I was already in love with you.”

My vision blurred, an unnamed emotion filling my lids.

Shock? Happiness? Relief? *Love*? I wasn’t sure which. I was too overwhelmed.

But my heart, my heart knew what it wanted. It was on an escape mission, frantically trying to pound its way out of my chest, begging to return home.

I blinked, once, twice, three times. The room was clear again, and those blue eyes of his, they were staring at me, intense and pleading and so damn full of love I felt it bursting out of him and into me.

He’d known I was Rose. He had known since a few days after our second date.

Which meant, when he had messaged Cassie, he’d thought he was messaging me.

“W-why didn’t you tell me?” I stuttered past the thickness in my throat.

His hand found mine, fingers entwining. “I should’ve told you. I know I should’ve told you, but I loved how open you were with me as Rose. I loved how you never held anything back. You were never afraid to tell me what you were thinking or how you felt.”

He *would* think that. For the love of Christmas, we’d had a conversation about anal!

“I didn’t want to lose that side of you until you were comfortable enough to be that way with me.” A heavy sigh left his lips. “When I sent that last message, I thought I was sending it to *you*. I wanted to be open and honest with *you*.”

He kissed my hand and then moved it to his chest. “This is yours. It’ll always be yours.” A frantic, erratic beat vibrated against my palm. “Please, tell me I haven’t lost you for good.”

I wanted to laugh. I wanted to smile wider than my cheeks would allow. I wanted to jump into his arms and never let go.

But I was scared. The remnants of the past few days had left a scar across my heart. I never wanted to feel like that again. I never wanted to feel so fucking lost.

“I love you,” he whispered, his eyes staring into mine, deep and unrelenting. “I love you so much. Please tell me you feel the same.”

No longer broken, his words stitched up that last remaining bit of my heart.

“Baby, say something.” His voice cracked, desperation highlighting the edges. “Please, say something. Anything. Except for no. Anything but no.”

God, he looked broken and defeated. I hated it. I didn’t want him to be so sad, so anxious. I wanted him to laugh and smile and be the happy, charming, adorable Kline I had fallen in love with.

“You broke into my company?” I blurted out, trying to take him—take us—back to that place.

He paused, eyes searching mine. “Your company?”

I tilted my head, trying my damndest to hold back a smile. “You wanted me to sign the contract, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I did.” His eyes lit up, mouth quirking up at the corner. “But I want you to sign another contract too.”

“What?”

He slid a small, black box from his pocket and went down on one knee.

My hand covered my mouth. “W-what are you doing?”

“You know what I’m doing.” He gazed up at me, grinning. “Georgia, you are the only person I want to spend the rest of my life with. I knew it from the second you came barreling into my world with your rap lyrics and swollen lips and cute smiles and beautiful laughter. I knew the night of our first date, when you were buzzing on antihistamine and beatboxing

about my huge cock, that you were the only woman I wanted. The only person that could make me happy for the rest of my life.”

“I beatboxed?”

His grin grew wider. “Yeah, baby, you fucking beatboxed. It’s one of my fondest memories.”

My cheeks heated. There was no doubt in my mind, beatboxing took the cake over Masturbation Camp.

“God, you’re so fucking adorable. I can’t stand it.” He laughed softly, fingers brushing across my cheek. “I can’t let you go. I want you, with me, forever. My heart in your hands and you in my arms, that’s all I’ll ever need.” He repeated the words he’d tattooed across my hip. “I said that then because I meant it, and I still mean it now.”

Happiness and relief and love, so much love, it bubbled up past my throat and urged tears to spill past my lids. And when I smiled, I tasted the saltiness on my lips.

He brushed the tears from my cheeks with a soft stroke of his thumb. “Georgia Rose Cummings, will you marry me?”

I inhaled a hiccupping breath, smiling down at him.

And then I nodded my head a thousand times.

I was saying, “Yes, yes, yes,” over and over again as he slid the ring down my finger and pulled me into his arms.

“I love you,” he whispered into my ear.

“I love you too...so much.”

He brushed his lips over mine, kissing me soft and sweet, until his tongue slipped past the seam and danced with mine. His fingers slid into my hair, gripping the strands and tilting my head as he kissed me deeper, stronger, pouring everything he was feeling into that perfect kiss.

Kline Brooks had just asked me to marry him.

And I had said yes.

“Baby, will you beatbox your vows at our wedding?” he teased, face pressed against my neck, lips sucking softly.

“I want a prenup,” I teased back.

He leaned back, his eyes meeting mine.

“See,” I said, unable to stop the smile consuming my face. “I have all of this money now. And I own this awesome business. And I really need to start looking after myself. I don’t think you’re a gold digger, but—”

He cut me off with another kiss, chuckling against my lips.

“Does this mean you’re agreeing to it?” I asked, feigning concern. “Because it’s really important to me.”

“I’ll agree to anything you want as long as I get to keep you forever,” he added, a mischievous smirk taking over his mouth. “But first, before we get into all the legalities of your money, we’ve got some more important things to do.”

“Wait...you weren’t kidding about signing your business over to me?”

“Fuck no. It’s yours.”

“Why would you—but that’s—” I stuttered, jaw dropping. “Kline, that’s ridiculous!”

“The only thing that’s ridiculous right now is that we’re still standing in this fucking office and not in my bedroom where I can take off that skirt with my mouth.”

“Oh,” I said, shocked by the sudden change in pace and my body’s quick response to that specific pace. My nipples tightened under my blouse, and I was already throbbing in anticipation between my legs.

“Baby, don’t get mad, but you’re not going to be able to move fast enough in those heels.”

“Huh?” I asked two seconds before I was airborne and thrown over Kline’s shoulder.

“Kline!” I shouted, gripping his arms for balance.

“Just hold on, Benny,” he said, chuckling, as he strode out of his office. One of his hands held tight to my skirt, keeping me covered and safe from flashing the entire office my ass cheeks.

“This is so embarrassing!” I shouted as we passed through the door and into the hallway where most of my former coworkers were gawking at us.

But he didn’t care. He was a man on a mission, solely focused on getting us the hell out of there.

“Pam! Hold all of my calls! I’ll be busy for the rest of the day!” he called over his shoulder.

“But I thought I owned the company?” I retorted, laughter spilling from my lips.

“I mean, hold all of Georgia’s calls! She’ll be too busy ri—”

I reached out, covering his mouth.

He laughed against my palm. His finger smashed against the elevator call button, practically breaking the down option.

He didn’t waste any time, getting us on and off the elevator in what felt like seconds.

And then we were at his car, Frank opening the door.

Kline tossed me into the back, moving in beside me and telling his driver to get us to his apartment. He was itching with impatience, adding, “And don’t worry about the cops. Just gun it. I’ll cover the speeding tickets.”

I loved that he was that anxious to get me alone in his bed. I loved that he was willing to put everything on the line to prove to me he was the man I had originally thought he was. I loved that he had proposed. I loved that he had carried me out of the office like a man possessed.

I loved him. God, I loved him.

I was so far gone on this man, I felt drunk from it.

I moved over to him, straddling his thighs, gripping his shoulders.

His eyebrows rose, blue eyes twinkling with intrigue.

“I can’t wait,” I whispered against his lips. “I need you. Right. Now.” My finger found the button for the privacy window, shutting it before Kline could refuse.

It was just the two of us in the back seat, Frank’s eyes in the rearview mirror no longer visible.

“Fuck, I’ve missed this.” Kline’s hands found their way to the hem of my skirt, moving it up my thighs and over my hips. “I was afraid we’d never be here again.”

“I’ve missed this too. I missed you so much.”

His heady gaze moved up my body until they found mine again. “You’re going to marry me?”

I nodded.

“You’re going to move in with me?”

I nodded again, smiling this time.

His cock grew hard and strained beneath me.

“You mean, I get you, every day, for the rest of my life?”

“Yes,” I said, a giddy laugh bubbling up from my throat.

“I get live-in Georgia. And beautiful, sleepy Georgia waking up next to me. And singing in the shower Georgia. And dancing around my kitchen Georgia,” he rambled, eyes bright with excitement and adoration. “And I get—”

I stopped him with my lips, pressing my mouth urgently against his.

We kissed until we were out of breath, our bodies instinctively moving against one another.

“Baby,” he moaned into my mouth. “Not here. Not like this. I want you in our bed.” But he didn’t stop kissing me, his perfect lips never leaving mine.

Our bed. I smiled, unable to control the love I had for this man.

He chuckled, pulling back to look at me.

“What?” I asked, a crazy, ridiculous smile still consuming my face.

“I love it when you do that.”

“Do what?”

“Smile while I’m kissing you. It’s like you’re too happy to control it.”

“I am.” My cheeks burned, the goofy grin still intact.

He kissed my nose. “It’s like I’m kissing a jack-o’-lantern.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You calling me a pumpkin?”

“Yes.” His teeth found my bottom lip, tugging gently. “Baby... Georgie... Benny... pumpkin. Mine. All fucking mine.”

“Oh, no,” I groaned, head falling back in defeat. “Not another nickname.”

“Get used to it.” He laughed, his tongue soothing the bite. “Remember? I’m Big-dicked Brooks, baby. And I’ll call you whatever I want while I’m driving you crazy with my fingers...my mouth...my cock.”

And then I was moaning. My eyes rolled back as he kissed down my jaw and sucked at the skin on my neck.

“God, Kline, I ache. I ache so bad right now,” I whimpered when his hands slid up my thighs, fingers sliding my underwear to the side.

“Don’t worry, soon-to-be Mrs. Brooks.” I felt his grin against my skin. “It might hurt, but I’ll always make sure it only hurts good.”

Epilogue

Cassie

“Wheorgie, we need to go!” I exclaimed, grabbing our bouquets from the table and moving toward the door. We were sitting in the bridal suite, waiting for the ceremony to begin.

“Pretty sure you shouldn’t be calling me Wheorgie on my wedding day,” she retorted, her eyes still focused on the paper towel her pen was quickly scrawling across.

I stomped my heel, my flower-filled hand going straight to my hip. “Well, you’re being a bit of a Wheorgie, considering you’re going to be late for your big bridal entrance.”

She held up one finger. “Hold on, I have to finish these.”

I walked back over to her, glancing down at what she was writing.

“For real? You’re writing your vows...like, three minutes before you’re supposed to walk down the aisle?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m writing Kline’s vows.”

“He’s too lazy to write his own vows?”

Talk about a broke-ass motherfucker, having his bride write his vows.

“No, we’re writing each other’s vows.”

Oh, never mind.

“God, you guys are so cute that it literally makes me throw up a little in my mouth.”

“Ew.” She scrunched her nose. “Stop being so gross on my wedding day.”

Three hard raps on the door startled us both. “Goddammit, Georgie! Get your ass out here. It’s time,” her father shouted from the other side.

“Just a minute, Dad!” she called back.

“Ah, shit. You’ve even got Dick mad,” I teased.

“He’s just mad because I’m marrying the man of *his* dreams.”

We both laughed. It was one hundred percent the truth. Dick Cummings was in love with his soon-to-be son-in-law. He thought Kline walked on water. And after Georgia accepted his proposal, we later found out when Kline had asked her dad for his blessing, Dick had responded,

“Are you sure you want to do that, son? Georgie’s a bit of a ballbuster.”

Not, “You better protect my baby girl.” Or, “If you hurt her, I’ll kill you.”

Nope. He had basically given him an out, or tried to keep Kline for himself, however you wanted to look at it.

“Finished!” She tossed the pen down and stood up, fluffing her dress. “How do I look?” she asked, taking one last glance at herself in the floor length mirror.

“Like the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen.” Because she did. Georgia was absolutely stunning.

She turned toward me, pointing an accusing finger in my direction. “Don’t start. If you start crying, then I’ll start crying.”

“I’m not!” My face contorted into that awful expression you get when you’re trying to hold back sobs.

“Goddammit, Cass!” Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

The processional music started to filter into the bridal room, and we both looked at each other with *Oh, shit!* expressions.

“Georgia! It’s time!” her mother sing-songed from the other side of the door.

“Am I really getting married today?” she asked, bewildered, taking the bouquet of white lilies from my outstretched hand.

“Yeah, sweet cheeks, you’re really getting married. My little, virginal best friend is all grown up. Marrying the man of her

dad's dreams.”

She giggled, flipping me the bird in a way only my best friend could pull off in a wedding dress. It was a beautiful dress—elegant mermaid cut with a small train. And it was simple yet blinged out with tiny clear crystals sewn into the bridal-white material.

Georgia had found it at a vintage store—*big surprise*—in Chicago, when we went there for a girls' weekend. It was Vera Wang, which was all Kline's doing. He'd made sure she spent a boatload of money on her dress, refusing to let her come back in the house unless she had drained at least several thousand dollars from their bank account.

Yes, *their* bank account. Even though she refused to sign his ridiculous contract and was adamant on keeping her new job with the Mavericks, he'd made sure to add her to all of his accounts right after she'd said yes. And he'd done this *without* the cushion of a prenup.

If that didn't tell you he was more than sure she was the one, I didn't know what would.

Before we walked out of the bridal suite, I wrapped her up in a tight hug.

“I'm so happy for you. You deserve all of this happiness and then some.”

“I love you, Cass.”

“I love you too. Now, let's go get you hitched!” I hooted, opening the door.

* * *

The wedding party was small, but it was perfect for them. Wes, Thatch, and Will were Kline's groomsmen, while Dean and I were Georgia's bridesmaids.

I walked down the aisle with Dean and took my place on the opposite side of the groomsmen. I couldn't help but notice the intrigued yet slightly salacious smile I received from Thatch. I assumed it was my tits' doing because my cleavage looked pretty damn fantastic in the little black dress Georgia had chosen for me.

And I didn't miss how delicious Thatch looked in his tux. I eye-fucked that Jolly Green Giant for a moment, moving from his brown eyes, to the broad shoulders filling out his jacket *like they fucking owned the joint*, to the noticeable bulge—not, *I'm the weirdo with a boner at a wedding bulge*, but *I'm packing bulge*—in his pants, and then back to his mouth.

Man oh man, those lips looked like they could do *things* (to my puss-ay).

Hey, cool your jets. It doesn't count as wedding inappropriate if it's in parentheses.

Seriously, I'd Thatch that.

The quartet of violins and harps Georgia hired for the ceremony music abruptly stopped. I glanced around, not sure what was happening. This definitely wasn't on her schedule.

Kline looked toward the side of the room and nodded at a woman with a guitar. She smiled, adjusted the microphone near her mouth, and started to strum a song that wasn't the planned "Bridal Chorus."

The crowd stood, turning toward the back doors.

And when they opened, there stood my beautiful best friend, her arm tucked into her father's, her mouth morphed into the biggest smile I'd ever seen.

Every wedding I had ever been to, while everyone was watching the bride, I always snuck a glance at the groom. When my eyes found Kline's face, my heart damn near skipped a beat. Though a sight far more masculine, his smile mimicked Georgia's in all the ways that counted. He looked like a man who had just received everything he'd ever wanted. And it was obvious that everything was Georgia, walking straight toward him without looking back.

I had never seen a man look so in love.

The woman started to sing, softly playing her guitar, and that's when I put the pieces together. It was a slowed down, acoustic version of "Some Kind of Wonderful."

Their song. The song Georgia would always associate with Kline. And he'd done it, knowing how much that song meant to her, to them. Somehow, that sneaky bastard had arranged it on the sly.

It took every ounce of strength for me not to start crying. I was overwhelmed by them. My best friend and the man who'd swept her off her feet. They were happy. They were in love. And God, they were so perfect for each other. The world wouldn't be right if they weren't together.

As Georgia got closer, she was mouthing the words to the song, gazing at Kline.

And when she reached him, Dick hugged them both, and Kline pulled her into his arms. She whispered something into his ear and he nodded, his face pressed against her neck. And then he leaned back, staring down at his bride, and said, "You're so beautiful."

I'm pretty sure every woman in attendance swooned. I sure as hell did.

They stood before the minister, hand in hand, ready to profess their love and the rest of their lives to one another.

The minister greeted the attendants and proceeded to say nice, beautiful things about the happy couple. He was actually one of Dick's closest friends, which was probably a good thing, considering most of the people at this wedding tended to toss out the F-word more often than not.

And when the minister announced it was time for the vows, Dick cheered, "Hell yeah! Let's do this!"

See what I mean? Good thing he knew the kind of room full of morons he was walking into.

Kline pulled a neatly folded piece of white paper from his inside jacket pocket while Georgia slid the balled up paper

towel out of her cleavage.

They handed each other their vows.

He glanced down at his tattered version and started laughing. “You finished these about two minutes before you walked down the aisle, didn’t you, Benny?”

“I’ll never tell,” she said through a giggle.

He chuckled again. “God, I love you.”

“It’s not time for that!” Thatch yelled behind him. “Vows first!”

The crowd laughed.

“Okay, I guess I’ll go first,” Kline announced, unwrinkling the paper towel.

“Georgia Rose, I promise to trust you even when you deviate from our grocery list and convince me to buy six boxes of Dunkaroos and three bottles of wine I know you’ll never drink.

“I promise to give you all of the love and support that I don’t give Walter. Also, I promise to be nicer to Walter.” He paused, glancing up at her and shaking his head with a giant grin.

“I’m not saying that.”

She tapped the towel. “You have to. They’re *your* vows, remember?”

He turned toward the attendants, letting everyone else in on the secret. “We wrote each other’s vows, if you couldn’t already tell.”

“I warned you, Kline!” Dick shouted toward him. “Ballbuster.”

“Daddy!” Georgia scolded. “There will be no talk of balls during my wedding ceremony.”

The room filled with more laughter.

Once everyone settled down, Kline cleared his throat and continued, “He’s a really good cat. The best cat. Man, I sure love Walter.” He rolled his eyes, but said it nonetheless.

“I promise I’ll never keep anything from you because there are no secrets between us. I vow to love you through the difficult and the easy. I promise to never put you or myself in danger. This includes me never drinking lime juice with my scotch ever again.” He winked at her.

“I vow to never change from the amazing man that I already am. I promise to never lose my huge, strong, kind, and determined heart. I will never stop teasing you, making you laugh, or flashing smoldering blue eyes your way. I will always greet you with the smile that’s only yours. And when it’s just the two of us at home, I vow to only wear boxer briefs around the house. No matter what I’m doing, I’ll either be naked or just wearing boxers.” His blue eyes found hers, his brows wagging in agreement as a few women in the crowd hooted some catcalls.

“And I vow to listen, for as long as it takes for you to feel heard. I vow to be your unrelenting cheer squad on the days it feels too much. I vow to pick the important fights with you, especially when I know you’re selling yourself short or not being treated with respect.

“I vow to spend the rest of our lives laughing, smiling, going on crazy adventures, and most importantly, loving each other through the good times and the bad. And if there are bad times, I promise the kind of makeup sex that has your blouse buttons hitting the floor.”

And on the last sentence, he stared deep into her eyes. “I vow that I will love you, Georgia, every day, for the rest of forever.”

Georgia sniffled a few times, and I handed her a tissue to wipe her eyes.

“Don’t cry, TAPRoseNEXT,” Kline whispered, brushing away a few tears. “You may have written those vows, but I’ll stand by every last word.”

She giggled at his sincerity, but I wasn’t used to it, and therefore, found myself completely ill prepared. I dabbed at fresh tears with the back of my hand as she unfolded the paper in her hands.

“Kline Matthew, I stand before you today to become your wife.” She paused for a second, looked up at him and then back at the paper. “I think everyone here knows that already, but I’ve got this feeling that you really wanted to hear me say it.”

She turned to the crowd and remarked, “I’m not improvising.” She turned the paper toward them. “It really says that.”

Everyone laughed and he nodded. “Keep going, Benny.”

She looked back to the scrawl of his words.

“From this day forward, I am yours and you are mine. I promise to remind myself of this most important fact every day and smile when you do it for me. I promise not to give up or run away when you make the kinds of mistakes that every man makes, and I promise to use my heart, rather than my ears, to really hear you.”

Sweet cookies and dildos, this guy had a knack for saying the right thing.

“I promise to rap my way through our days and beatbox for you each night because it’s times like those when I’m so...” She paused and glanced to the crowd. “I’m so...effing... adorable you can’t even stand it.”

Her amused eyes met his again. “You really wrote the F-word in my vows?”

He shrugged. “Adorable wasn’t enough.”

She shook her head, smiling, and continued, “I promise to keep you on your toes with my hair and my words and always stand up for myself with the backbone you love and expect.”

“And, I promise to be late as often as I want because you’ll always be waiting. But when it comes to lovin’—” Georgia stopped midsentence, giggling at her groom. “Kline, I’m not saying that in front of the minister.”

“Baby, you have to. They’re *your* vows, remember?”

She leaned forward, whispering something into his ear. His mouth twisted into a devilish grin and he whispered back.

Georgia turned toward the attendants. “Please feel free to cover your ears during this part.”

She cleared her throat, cheeks pink, and said, “I’ll come early and I’ll come often because the power of Big-dicked Brooks compels me.”

“I knew it!” I shouted. “I told you!”

Pfffft. I knew my cockdar wasn’t on the fritz.

Everyone in the crowd was a mixture of laughing, clapping, and wolf whistling.

Once we settled down, Georgia gazed at Kline like she would happily crawl inside him and stay there and said the rest of her vows.

“But most of all, I vow to love you with everything that I am, no matter the circumstances, because I know, from the very depths of my tiny, perfect being, that you will be there, doing your best to love me more.”

And when the minister told Kline to kiss his bride.

He motherfucking kissed his bride so good it made *my* toes curl.

* * *

Cassie

“Congratulate me, boys,” Kline toasted with a glass of scotch in the air, the happiest I’d seen the fucking sap in ages.

His body was here with us, but his mind and his eyes were on his boogeying bride on the other side of the dance floor. The space was fairly small. At least, this room known as The Greenhouse was. They’d rented out the entirety of The Foundry out of nothing more than necessity. Kline liked to think his life was boring and normal and that no one cared at all, but the truth was they did. They cared *a lot*. And keeping

such an important event completely private was the only way to maintain his happy little bubble of make-believe.

“That,” he said with a slightly tipsy gesture, “is *my* wife.”

I laughed and slapped him on the shoulder, exchanging smiles with Wes behind his back. I raised my eyebrows in question, and Wes gave me a pursed-lip nod of agreement.

“Go get her,” I urged simply, knowing he wanted to be with her a million times more than he wanted to stand here and shoot the shit with us.

And, regardless of what people might have thought they knew about me, that was fine by me. My oldest, closest friend had found it. Found *her*.

Always loyal and loving, I couldn’t think of anyone who deserved it more than he did.

“Benny!” he yelled, pulling her attention from the crowd of women around her to him. “Make room on the floor. I’m coming for my dance!” The wattage of her smile was blinding.

I stood next to Wes and watched as Kline danced his way over to her, pulling her into his arms and handing off his drink to the first, unsuspecting free hand he came to so he could hold on to her with both hands. Hands to her jaw and lips to hers, he kissed her in a way that I felt all the way in my stomach.

“Good God, he’s a goner,” Wes remarked, sinking into the wall and tipping his drink to his lips.

“Yep,” I agreed, thinking about the vows they’d exchanged during the ceremony.

“It’s nice,” I added without thought—because it was.

Wes laughed way harder than I thought was appropriate. “Jesus. Who are you and what have you done with Thatcher Kelly?” He morphed his face into what he thought was a good impression of me and mocked, “It’s nice!” with a wobble of his head.

I punched him hard enough in the shoulder that he stopped laughing abruptly.

“Ow! Fuck, Thatch! Christ.”

“It *is* nice,” I told him again, further delving into the teachings of his lesson. “Take fucking note from your most experienced of friends. Multiple flavors of pussy are great, but what our fucking goner of a friend found is better.”

He looked at me like he didn’t know what to make of me.

“The two of them stood up in front of God and us and committed to each other forever with enough trust in each other to speak one another’s words rather than their own. *That*, motherfucker, is love.”

Powerful speech performed, lesson conveyed, I felt content with my message until Wes went and fucking ruined it.

“Jesus, fuck, The Foundry must be some sort of *Twilight Zone*. I don’t even know who you guys are anymore,” he teased, chuckling into his bourbon.

“One day, Lancaster, when it happens to you, I will remember this moment.” I drained the rest of my drink and walked away.

* * *

Moving away from the bulk of the crowd, I sat down at a table that was mostly empty. My phone buzzed in my pocket.

I thought it might be the tattoo shop, checking in to see if I’d be there tonight, but instead, I found a number I didn’t recognize.

Unknown: She’s a lot older than you normally go for, but it looks like you’ve got a chance.

I looked around, wondering what the fuck whoever this was was talking about. Quickly, I typed out a message.

Me: Who is this?

A reply came almost immediately.

Unknown: Your mom.

I was no less confused, but hell if I didn't fucking laugh.

Me: WTF. Who is this?

Unknown: The hot bitch at the head table.

I looked up across the dance floor as the crowd parted in front of me. Cassie, the craziest bitch I'd ever encountered and Georgia's maid of honor, sat all by her lonesome at the wedding party's table, one leg cocked and her bare foot in the chair beside her. She popped her eyebrows in a mischievous challenge.

This chick had balls, sitting there by herself, just kicked back and relaxed with zero fucks given about it. Fuck, Cassie's balls might have been bigger than mine, and that was saying something.

Me: How'd you get my number?

Unknown: I have my ways.

Cryptic. Another message came right on its heels.

Unknown: But good luck with that pussy tonight.

I looked at her as she raised her glass in cheers and then looked at the area around me. Not even one prospective lay stood out in the nearest twenty-foot radius.

Me: What pussy?

Unknown: The silver-haired cutie beside you.

I looked to my left and then to my right, and what I saw had me smiling like a lunatic. Kline's grandma, Marylynn, sat clapping along to the heavy beat of the music and swaying back and forth. She was cute, but she was no less than eighty-five years old. I looked down to my phone and typed as quickly as my big thumbs would allow.

Me: You should be ashamed of yourself. This is Kline's grandma. But I'll be sure to tell her you find her attractive.

I shifted my gaze from the phone to her table as soon as I was done, but when the dancing crowd finally moved out of the

way, she was gone. Gone from sight and gone from my phone, but she'd found a home somewhere else—stuck in my head.

THE END

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Want more from Max Monroe? Read on for a sneak peek of [*Tapping Her*](#)...

Tapping Her Sneak Peek

Chapter One

Cassie

New York, Thursday, April 20th, Early Morning

Georgia: Good Night from Bora Bora!

Ah, Georgia. My beautiful, sweet, funny, newly married, currently annoying as *fuck* best friend.

Her lovely text included a photo of her and her hot husband, lounging in the tropical sun, on a private beach in Bora Bora. They'd been on their honeymoon for no more than three days, and I'd already received fifteen nauseatingly happy messages.

Me: You. Are. An. Asshole. Another picture of you and Big Dick at the beach, and I'll drop Walter off at the Humane Society.

Georgia: If you fuck with my cat, I will disown you.

Me: Your cat is Satan. Seriously. I think the devil was reincarnated inside him. He's evil.

Did I fail to mention that while Georgia and Kline were on their honeymoon, I had been given the responsibility of taking care of Walter? And not in the cool way that a mobster would. Georgie actually wanted me to look out for his *well-being*. Well, Thatch and I had been given that task, but I was the one at their apartment, spending time with their asshole of a cat.

Georgia might've thought he was a big sweetheart, but he was the opposite—a big feline dick. That cat's life mission was to make everyone else's life a living hell. And he did it often. So far, in the span of forty-eight hours, he'd pissed on my favorite pair of Chucks and left a generous gift of his shit—*yes, his actual cat shit*—inside my overnight bag.

Which explained why I was tits out, standing around in only my thong and rummaging through Georgia's closet. Fresh out of the shower, I needed something to wear that didn't smell like feline feces.

“Thanks a lot, douchenozzle,” I said out loud, looking directly at Walter—who was currently lounging on their bed, licking himself. “Nice. Real classy, Walnuts.”

He just stared back, irritated and completely aloof, all at once. I guess that’s the look you get when a good fifteen hours of your day is used up by licking the rim of your own asshole. He eyed me for a solid ten seconds without a single blink and then strode out of the room, kitty paws tip-tapping across the hardwood floor. I couldn’t put my finger on the exact reason, but everything about the way he moved screamed *fuck you*.

“Yeah, walk away, buddy! Walk the fuck away!” I shouted toward him as my phone vibrated on top of the dresser next to the closet.

Georgia: He is not evil! He’s just a little hesitant with new people. He’ll warm up to you.

Me: Ohhhhh...so when he pisses on my shoes, that’s just him being “hesitant”? Or is that him “warming up to me”?

Georgia: Another 24 hours and you guys will be buddies. I promise.

Me: He shit inside my overnight bag, Wheorgie. This tells me that your promises mean nothing. I hope you don’t mind me going through your closet. Because I already am.

Georgia: You can wear anything but my favorite LuLaRoe leggings.

Damn, she makes it too easy. Looks like hot dog leggings will be worn today.

For all I knew, those leggings were an inside joke about Kline packing a foot-long in his pants, but whatever. I’d make those stretchy pants my bitch. Hell, maybe I’d take a leisurely seventy-mile jog in Central Park just to make sure my twat left her mark.

Gross? Definitely.

But should I remind you her cat has been using my personal belongings as his litter box?

Point made.

Georgia: Wait. Why did you bring an overnight bag to my apartment?

Me: Because I'm watching The Asshole.

Georgia: That still doesn't answer my question. We just asked you to check in on Walter and feed him twice a day, not move in.

Me: Yeah, but I can't rummage through your kinky sex box at my apartment.

This was me calling Georgia's bluff. I had no idea if she had a freak-a-leek box of goodies, but I was real curious. She had always been a bit reserved when it came to sex. I mean, she was a virgin up until she let Big Dick inside. Which honestly surprised the shit out of me. It was how I knew, when she gave it up to Kline, he would become a permanent fixture in her life.

To quote Phoebe Buffay, *Kline Brooks was Georgia's motherfucking lobster.*

Okay, so the profanity was all mine. The lobster part was a la *Friends*.

Needless to say, I was the over-sharer in our relationship. Georgia had nailed down the "I don't kiss and tell" role from the very beginning. And I couldn't deny the enjoyment I got from pushing her boundaries and making her blush.

Georgia: Do NOT go through my shit, Casshead.

Me: But this vibrator looks really cool. And a ball gag? Shit, G, I didn't know you had it in you. Color me impressed. Kline's dick looks good on you.

Georgia: Shut. Up. I'm done with this conversation.

Holy mother of awesome. My best friend had a stash full of sex goodies somewhere in her apartment, and I was going to find it.

Me: I was kidding. But now, I'm not kidding. Canceling my "get rid of Walnuts" mission. New mission: Find Georgia's box of freak. I'm so proud of you.

Georgia: Greetings from Bora Bora, asshole!

Attached to that text? A lovely picture of Georgia flipping me off while she stood on a deserted beach, twinkling water and her fucking beaming, handsome husband behind her.

Me: One question before I start my search in your closet. Do you clean your bag o' dildos after each use? Because if you don't, you'll need to pick up a new box of magnums on the ride home. I don't have any latex gloves, and one of these isn't big enough for my whole hand.

Georgia: You've already gone through Kline's nightstand?!

Me: Oh, come on. That's the first place you ALWAYS look. Does Kline really fill the entire magnum? Because if he does, I'm convinced his cock is a mythical unicorn.

Georgia: I'm not discussing my husband's penis with you.

Me: Haha! I could literally hear you say the word penis like a schoolmarm. "Peeee-nis."

Georgia: I'm disowning you when I get back from my honeymoon.

Me: Just remember to pick up milk too on your way home. You're almost out.

Georgia: Since you've made yourself at home. House rules: NO sex in my bed.

Me: Okay, but those rules start right now, right? Yesterday shouldn't count.

Don't worry, I'm not that much of a weirdo. I don't make a point of using my best friend's bed as my own personal brothel. But it's too funny not to make her think that.

Georgia: WASH MY SHEETS.

Me: I love you, Wheorgie. Go back to enjoying your honeymoon and riding Kline's peee-nis with the glow of the sunset behind you. I'll take care of everything here like it's my own.

Georgia: Ugh. I love you too, Casshead. Replace everything you destroy.

I swear, my best friend was far too easy to rile up. I probably shouldn't get that much amusement out of it, but I did. She pulled off adorably embarrassed like no one else. And I wasn't the only one who noticed. Kline used it to his advantage, *frequently*. It was one of the reasons I loved him. He knew Georgia better than she knew herself sometimes, and he also respected her, cherished her, and treated her like a goddamn princess—all the requirements for avoiding genital mutilation, courtesy of me.

Since I was alone and there was absolutely nothing more fun than walking around without a bra on, I stopped my clothes search and placed my phone in their speaker dock. Once my playlist was set, it was time to search this place like I was a key investigator for the FBI.

Rhianna's "Cockiness" was speaking to me, echoing throughout the apartment and getting my exploration mojo off to the right start.

"I love it when you eat it," I sang, shaking my hips to the seductive beat and moving back toward Georgie's closet.

And then, in my peripheral vision, my eyes caught sight of a large, looming figure in the doorway.

"Ahhhhh!" I screamed. "Holy son of a whore tramp!"

~END SNEAK PEEK~

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Word on the street is that Thatcher Kelly is about to make his debut. ;) ;)

The Worst Best Man

Lucy Score

“Newsflash. You don’t buy me. You earn me.”

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Dedication

To Joyce & Tammy for your hours of time, your gentle guidance, your pointed reminders, and your unwavering support.

Chapter One

It was the bridal party from hell. The gold leaf, crystal chandeliers, and acres of Italian marble of the Grand Terrace Ballroom couldn't dress up the fact that a hot mess was currently in progress. From her vantage point on the upper balcony that ringed the hotel's sunken ballroom, Frankie could see it all.

The groomsmen, in their Armani and Brioni, were overgrown frat boys destined to spend their lives reliving their prep school glory days. Their trust funds were cushy enough to buy their way out of any real trouble.

The bridesmaids were worse. All working on landing husband number two—or three in Taffany's case. They were on the prowl for men who came with a favorable prenup and a yacht in Saint Tropez.

To Frankie, it was a literal circus. But there wasn't much she wouldn't do for the bride, including standing up for her best friend in a three-ring mess of a \$350,000 wedding. Pru and Chip were the golden couple of the Upper West Side. College sweethearts who had found their way back to each other. And Frankie was more than happy to be a part of their extravagantly special big day.

If this engagement party was any indicator of how fabulous the destination wedding would be, Frankie wasn't sure how a poor, sarcastic girl from Brooklyn with big hair would fare amongst the who's who in Barbados. But for Pru, she'd give it her best shot.

Besides, it gave her a chance to ogle the best man in person. She snagged a champagne glass from a passing tray, winking at the server who joined her against the balustrade. She eyed Aiden Kilbourn across the room. Impeccable, aloof, and painfully beautiful.

"I can't believe we got this gig," Jana, the server hissed. "I never in a million years thought I'd see Manhattan's Most

Eligible Bachelor in person, let alone serve him champagne!”

“Don’t spill anything on him, Jan,” Frankie cautioned.

“You mean ‘don’t pull a Frankie.’” Jana smirked.

Frankie lifted a shoulder. “The guy grabbed my ass. What was I supposed to do, not drop a tray of canapés on his lap?”

“You’re my hero,” Jana sighed.

“Yeah, yeah. Get back down there before they start sobering up. And tell Hansen to maybe migrate away from the ladies’ room. He’s not getting any phone numbers tonight.”

Jana tossed her a mock salute. “On it, boss.”

Frankie watched Jana nimbly skip down the stairs, tray aloft. As soon as Pru and Chip had announced their engagement, she’d snapped up a second job with a catering company, knowing the cost of doing business with the privileged. She wasn’t about to let Pru pay for her bridesmaid dress or her plane tickets, though the offer was there. Frankie was determined to hang with the socialites just this once without being a charity case, even if it bankrupted her.

She ran a hand over her two seasons-old Marchessa that she and Pru had found at an upscale consignment shop in the Village. It was hard to find couture that fit her curves. Pru and the rest of the bridesmaids were nymphy waifs. All blonde, all thin, all B-cups. Well, except for Cressida. Her double Ds spilled out of her size zero Marc Jacobs. Either the woman was blessed with incredible genetics, or they weren’t real. But without getting a handful, Frankie couldn’t tell for sure.

Speaking of good genes, she turned her attention back to the man in the white tuxedo jacket. He had a hand in his pocket in that effortlessly casual stance that the rich were born with.

At forty, Aiden was Manhattan’s unicorn bachelor. Never married—just a rotating cast of arm candy, the longest of which had lasted nearly three whole months. He rarely smiled, unlike the rest of the cast of characters who pasted on their phony “great to see you” grins. It looked as though he was perhaps as uncomfortable as she was in the thick of things.

Pruitt waved to Frankie from the center of the throng. Maid of honor duty engaged. Frankie pasted on a smile of her own before taking to the stairs to join the party. She wove her way between gold cushioned chairs and ivory linen-draped cocktail tables. It's funny how good the wealthy smelled. All subtle, rich scents as if it emanated from their pores.

"You look amazing, Frankie," Pru told her, dropping the double kiss on the cheeks and squeezing her hand.

"Me? Have you looked in a mirror tonight? You look like a high-fashion model pretending to be at an engagement shoot."

"Good enough to eat," Chip, the golden groom, said swooping in to kiss his bride-to-be.

They glowed at each other, and Frankie felt like she was intruding. "Well, I should get back—"

"Uh-uh. Not until you meet Aiden," Pru said, dragging her attention away from Chip. On cue, Chip waved at the man.

"That's okay. I can meet him at the ceremony," Frankie said.

"Frankie doesn't like high-society people," Pru stage whispered to Chip.

Chip slid an affectionate arm around Frankie's shoulders. "Good thing she made an exception for us, seeing as we're classy as fuck."

Franchesca laughed. "You should have put that on your wedding invitations."

Hansen the server approached with a tray of beef crostini, and Chip snatched one off the tray. He popped it into his mouth, eyes rolling back in his head. "Ummm. Frankie, we owe you for the catering recommendation. Delicious."

Frankie gave Hansen a nod in the direction of where Pru's father was glowering in the corner. The man hadn't gotten over the fact that Chipper Randolph III had unceremoniously dumped his little girl in the months after college graduation when she'd been expecting a ring. But he was picking up the bill for this shindig, and Frankie was determined to make sure his stomach was full to prevent any hangry outbursts.

“Chip. Pru.” The voice was a full octave deeper than Chip’s. Smooth, cultured. Frankie considered asking him to read the grocery list she had stashed in her hand-me-down clutch just so she could listen to him pronounce edamame.

“Aiden!” The good breeding kicked in automatically, and Chip turned to his best friend to make the introductions. “Frankie, this is Aiden Kilbourn, my best man. Aiden, this is Franchesca Baranski, the maid of honor.”

“Frankie,” Aiden said, extending his hand. “That’s an interesting name.”

Frankie gripped and shook. “We’ve got a Taffany and a Davenport in the bridal party, and I’m the one with an interesting name?”

His already cool expression chilled a few degrees. Obviously, he wasn’t used to being educated by an underling. “I was merely making an observation.”

“You were pre-judging,” she countered.

“Sometimes a judgment begs to be made.”

She was still holding his hand. Annoyance had her tightening her grip. He returned the squeeze, and Frankie dropped his hand unceremoniously.

“So, Aiden,” Pru began brightly. “I met *Franchesca* my first semester at NYU. She’s brilliant—full-ride scholarship—and she graduated a semester early with a 4.0. Franchesca works part-time for a nonprofit while pursuing her MBA.”

Frankie shot daggers at Pru. She didn’t need her best friend trying to talk her up to a snobbish ass.

“Aiden is COO of his family’s business. Mergers and acquisitions,” Chip supplied. “I don’t remember his GPA from Yale. But it wasn’t as good as yours, Frankie.”

She was about to excuse herself and track down another tray of champagne when the DJ changed it up. The first beats of “Uptown Funk” brought half of Manhattan’s elite rushing to the dance floor like someone had announced the new Birkin bag was available.

Pru's hand clamped down on her arm. "It's our song!" she squealed. "Let's go!"

Frankie allowed Pru to tow her toward the dance floor. They slid seamlessly into their choreographed dance crafted two years earlier after one of Frankie's moderately disappointing breakups. They'd polished off two entire pizzas with three bottles of wine and spent the rest of the evening choreographing the perfect ass shaker.

"I couldn't tell if you two were fighting or flirting," Pru yelled over the music.

"Flirting? You're joking, right? I'm way out of his league."

Chapter Two

Aiden had a headache by the time he'd crossed the marble lobby of the Regency Hotel, one of the bride's family's holdings. And he knew an evening spent in the company of the Brat Pack of groomsmen and a few dozen people looking to marry him off, secure his investment, or beg some free advice would only make it worse.

But it was the price he paid for privilege. He handed the empty champagne flute to a passing server and wished for scotch. But drinking away his headache wouldn't do anyone any favors tonight.

"How about Margeaux?" Chip asked, jerking his chin in the direction of the model tall, waif-slim blonde. She wore a gold gown with a slit practically to her chin. She was ruthlessly styled, hair perfect, makeup impeccable. She never ate or smiled in public.

"How about not on your life? She looks like the equivalent of an ice cube in bed." Since Chip had found his lasting happiness with Pruitt, he'd made it his mission to drag his best friend Aiden along with him for the ride.

"Yeah, she's horrible," Chip agreed. "But Pru was her maid of honor so..." he winced. "I'm going to do you a favor and skip over Taffany."

"Thanks," Aiden said dryly. The woman rebranded herself as Taffany after a second cousin named her baby Tiffany. She was the quintessential party girl. A week didn't go by when she wasn't plastered across the gossip blogs flashing her crotch in dresses short enough to be shirts and falling out of rock stars' SUVs in front of clubs.

"How about Cressida?" Chip offered, pointing his glass at yet another blonde. This one's breasts couldn't be bothered to stay within the confines of her couture corset. The rest of her was a tan skeleton. She was frowning fiercely and pacing in a short six-foot radius as she yelled into her cellphone in German.

“She seems nice,” Aiden observed sarcastically.

“She seems like she’d cut your balls off and then ransom you for them,” Chip said cheerfully.

“How about Frankie?” Aiden asked, warming to the game. His gaze flicked to her on the dance floor. Her hair was dark, thick, heavy with curls. Her body was lushly curved as highlighted by the simple gold slip gown she wore. Her wide mouth was curved in a generous smile as she laughed at something Pruitt said.

“Oh, she’s too good for you,” Chip said. “She’s smart and sarcastic. She’d be too much work for you.”

“I see what you’re doing,” Aiden said. He flagged down a server and ordered a Macallan. One wouldn’t hurt. One might take the edge off a bit.

“What am I doing? I’m trying to save you from a woman who clearly isn’t your type.”

“What’s my type?” Aiden asked, already regretting it.

“Tall, painfully thin. Doesn’t smile or speak too much. Someone looking to add you to her bedroom portfolio to make her more attractive to the next potential husband.”

“That’s not necessarily my type,” Aiden argued. “That’s just who doesn’t take offense to the arrangement.”

“Frankie would take offense,” Chip predicted. “But I think she might also make you regret temporary. She’s a hell of a girl, Aiden.”

Aiden watched the woman in question as she shimmied and strutted in unison with Pruitt. She moved like a goddess, tempting mortals with her sinful body. In his experience, women tended to highlight their appeal either across the dining table or in the bedroom. And Franchesca was all bedroom.

He turned his back on the dance floor.

“When are you going to give up on dragging me into monogamous bliss?” he asked Chip.

His friend grinned. “When you find someone who makes you feel the way I do about Pru.”

“I’m a Kilbourn. We’re not capable of feelings. Only beneficial mergers.”

“That’s a sad statement to make,” Chip said, slapping him on the shoulder. The server, a slip of a girl with a navy streak in her dark hair, hurried to his side. A glass of scotch clutched in her hand.

“Here you go, Mr. Kilbourn,” she said in a breathless whisper.

“Thank you... Jana,” he said, eyes flicking to her name tag.

Her mouth dropped open, and she backed away with stars in her eyes.

“See. Why don’t you work some of that charm on Frankie?”

“I’m not interested in something that...”

“Fun? Smart? Sexy?” Chip supplied.

“Flashy,” Aiden corrected. “She dances like she’s got experience on the pole. And she’d probably take that as a compliment.”

“No. She wouldn’t,” a husky voice behind him announced.

Fuck.

Chip, ever the tension diffuser, slapped an innocent grin on his face. “Frankie! Aiden didn’t see you there,” he said pointedly.

“Aiden doesn’t seem like the type to notice much of anyone under a certain tax bracket. Why waste his time?” Franchesca announced.

She didn’t hesitate to make eye contact. No, she used those blue-green eyes to bore holes into him. He’d been an ass. Usually he was much more careful about voicing his opinions in venues where they could be overheard, misconstrued. He blamed the headache, the three glasses of champagne on an empty stomach.

“Pru asked if you’d get her a drink and save her from the Danby twins. They’ve got her cornered by the stairs.” Frankie

pointed to the opposite end of the room.

“If you two will excuse me, I’ve got to go rescue my fiancée. No bloodshed,” Chip ordered, pointing a stern finger at Frankie.

“No promises,” she called after him. She turned back to him, eyes flashing with temper. “Well, if *you*’ll excuse me—which I don’t give a flying fuck if you do—I don’t want to spend my evening looking at you.”

She dismissed him, turning on her heel and whipping that curtain of hair over her shoulder.

“Hang on,” he said it quietly, fingers closing around her wrist.

“Hands off, Kilbourn, or you’ll be Deadbourn by the time I’m done with you.”

He released her but stepped into her path. “Let me apologize.”

“*Let you?*” Franchesca crossed her arms over her chest. “Look, I’m sure you’re used to talking to servants and underlings, but a word of advice? Don’t demand that someone listen to your shit show of an apology. Got it?”

The headache was throbbing behind his eyes. No one talked to him that way. Not even his oldest friends.

“*Please* allow me to apologize,” he said, his jaw clenching. He cupped her elbow in his hand and guided her toward an alcove behind a heavy gold curtain.

The darkness made the pain in his head ease just a bit, and he pinched the bridge of his nose, willing the rest of it away.

“How about I save us both some time?” Franchesca suggested. “You don’t bother apologizing because we both know you meant to be a dick, and I won’t bother pretending to forgive you because I don’t give a shit what you think about me. Fair enough?”

There was a cream-colored settee covered in silk, and Aiden sat. The dull throb was making his stomach roll. “Look. I’m not putting my best foot forward, and for that I apologize.”

“Future reference again? ‘I apologize’ doesn’t come across as sincerely as ‘I’m sorry.’ You got a headache?”

The change in subject had his head spinning. He closed his eyes. Nodded.

“Migraine?” she prodded.

He shrugged. “Maybe.”

She mumbled to herself, and he opened his eyes to watch her dig through her clutch. “Here,” she said, offering him two pills. “Prescription.”

“You get them, too?”

“No, but Pru does when she’s stressed. I didn’t want her muddling through her engagement party wanting to puke.”

“That’s very kind and prepared of you.”

“I’m the maid of honor. It’s my job. Now take them like a good little boy.”

He lifted his glass, but she stopped him with a hand on his wrist. “Don’t be a dumbass. Alcohol makes it worse.” She took the glass from him and stuck her head out of the curtain. He heard her give a little whistle, and in a moment, she was thanking someone by name and handing him a glass of ice water.

“You know the catering staff?” he asked, making conversation while he washed down the tablets.

“I am the catering staff. Second job. It’s my night off.” She said it as if she were daring him to find fault with that. “You want me to call you an Uber?” she offered suddenly.

“I have a car downstairs.”

“Of course you do.”

“Why are you being nice to me?” Aiden rubbed a hand over his temple.

“Maybe I’m doing it to rub your face in the fact that you’re an ass. And maybe I gave you two birth control pills instead of headache meds just to watch you suffer.”

“Maybe I’d deserve it.”

The curtain twitched, and the server with the blue hair poked her head in. “Here’s the soda,” she whispered. Her eyes widened when she spotted him, and she backed out of the alcove.

“I make her nervous,” Aiden observed when the server left.

“It’s a good thing you’re good-looking and rich because you definitely don’t have the personality thing going for you. Here, drink this. The caffeine will help.”

He drank it down and rested his head against the back of the settee. “Thanks.” She was taking care of him after he suggested that she had experience as a stripper. He was an asshole and wondered when that transformation had become complete.

She took the glass from him. “Stay until it kicks in,” she ordered and turned for the curtain.

“Where are you going?”

“Back to the party so I can shake my stripper ass at all those eligible bachelors.”

“I’m sorry I’ll miss it.”

“Shut up, Kilbourn.”

Chapter Three

The plane dropped like a stone onto the runway, and the violently applied brakes had everyone in coach jerking forward and back. Frankie couldn't see much of the tropical paradise outside the window from her middle seat vantage. She was crammed in between a guy who smelled like he hadn't showered in four days and a little old man who had fallen asleep at twenty thousand feet and slept on her shoulder for an hour.

She had to pee and could have killed for a roast beef sandwich, but at least the flight was over and she only had to fight her way through customs and immigration now. In an hour—two tops—she'd have her toes in the white powdery sand, a drink in her hand, and that sandwich.

Frankie waited for the elderly narcoleptic to stand and then wriggled out into the aisle behind him to help him with his carry-on.

She lugged her own carry-on with her, thankful that Pru had insisted on flying the bridesmaid dresses down on her father's plane. The rest of the wedding party had arrived on private planes they'd chartered together.

She waddled down the aisle toward the ever-smiling flight crew and the humid breeze. Frankie stepped out onto the rolling staircase and slid her sunglasses on. Eighty-three degrees with a beautiful, balmy breeze. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all. Even though her hair had just doubled in volume.

She followed the rest of the passengers onto the tarmac and into the long, low building of Grantley Adams International Airport. The line zig-zagged its way between the ropes. Anxious travelers ready to see paradise thumbed over the screens of their phones. But Frankie was content to people watch. The residency line for immigration was short and brutally efficient as Bajan passport holders were welcomed

home. To her right was the expedited line where travelers with Louis Vuitton luggage and oversized sun hats were guided through the process by resort staff dispatched to collect them.

Frankie's line crawled along at a snail's pace as harried parents tried to juggle official questions and cranky toddlers and young backpackers zoned out on their phones, needing a prod forward every time the line moved.

One such backpacker caught her eye and gave her a smile. "Hi there," he said softly, pushing a shock of blond hair off his forehead.

Oh, sweet baby Jesus, he was Australian.

"Hi," she returned.

"Come here often?"

She laughed.

"Can I buy you a drink?" he teased.

"If you can find a bartender in here, yes, you can buy me a drink."

The line moved and the woman behind him—in a sun visor with flowers on the brim and a Hawaiian shirt—prodded him forward.

"See you around," he winked.

They caught up again when the lines froze at exactly the right place.

"We meet again. It must be fate."

"Oh, you're good. I bet that wouldn't work as well without your accent," Frankie told him.

"I like yours," he confessed.

Boca Raton Grandma gave the Aussie another push. "Sorry, honey. But I got a frozen margarita waitin' on me," she said to Frankie as they passed.

Frankie's immigration officer was an unsmiling girl in her early twenties with YouTube tutorial-level makeup. "Have a nice stay," she said, shoving Frankie's passport through the

slot in the Plexiglass. Her tone implied she didn't give a damn whether Frankie's stay was nice or not. But dealing with three plane loads of grumpy tourists would do that to a person.

Frankie pushed on past baggage claim. With Pru bringing her bridesmaid dress, she'd been able to shove everything else she needed into her carry-on and saved the checked bag fee. A small victory in what had been a year of hemorrhaging money. The two bridal showers, the girls-only engagement party, engagement party, the pre-emptive bachelorette party, and now the destination wedding. She should have taken a third job. But a few more weeks with the caterer, and she'd have the credit card paid off and could stop spending money like it magically appeared replenished in her wallet every morning.

Customs was much faster. A quick scan of her bag, and she was pointed toward the exit. Her phone started ringing in the beach bag she'd dual-purposed as a purse.

"Hey, Ma."

"Oh thank, God! I thought you were dead." May Baranski was nothing if not dramatic.

"Not dead, Ma. Just in paradise." The automatic doors parted and she walked into the heat. It was a covered area rife with tourists who looked lost and cab drivers who looked like buzzards circling carrion.

"Why didn't you call me when you landed? You said you'd call me." Her mother had infused normal protective instincts with steroids until she was convinced that all of her children were in constant mortal danger or worse—destined to remain single and childless while the rest of her friends became nanas and grammas.

"I literally just walked through customs, Ma. They don't let you chit chat on your cell phones while you're in there."

Her mother scoffed. The idea that anyone could keep her from a safety report on one of her children was ridiculous to May.

"Tell me all about your flight." It wasn't a question. It was a demand. Frankie blamed herself. She liked her parents, liked talking to them, and somehow that had evolved into almost

daily calls “just to check in” or “catch up.” Hell, half the time she was the one doing the dialing. Her mom was a fount of information on old neighborhood and family gossip.

“It was crowded and long,” Frankie said, squinting at the taxi sign. It listed island destinations and their rates, but she needed to check what parish the resort was in again.

“Your father and I went to the Florida Keys for our honeymoon forty-one years ago,” May announced. “Is it as nice as the Keys?”

Frankie had never been to the Florida Keys, nor had she seen anything of Barbados beyond the tarmac and the cab line. “I’m sure the Keys are beautiful,” she told her mother. “Look, Ma. I gotta go. Can I call you tomorrow?”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I have to grab a cab.”

“Why didn’t Pru send a car for you?” her mother squawked. “You’re just going to get in a car with a stranger?”

“A driver Pru sent would still be a stranger.” Frankie made the point in vain.

“I forbid you to get mugged or molested!”

Frankie bumped into someone and turned to apologize.

“There you are. I was worried that we were star-crossed lovers, destined never to meet again.” The Australian was adjusting the backpack she’d nearly knocked off his shoulder.

“I gotta go, Ma.”

“What now?”

“There’s a cute guy looking at me.”

The Aussie grinned.

“Hang up and flirt with him! Come back engaged!” Her mother disconnected the call to start planning the overdue wedding of her only daughter.

“Sorry,” Frankie said with a soft smile. “I wasn’t paying attention to what I was doing.”

“You can bump into me anytime you want.” He wasn’t devastatingly handsome. Not like Satan-in-a-Suit Kilbourn. But he was cute and charming and very, very tan. His hair was a bleached-out blond that was in need of a cut. His clothes were wrinkled and comfortable.

“Tell me you’re an Australian surfer,” Frankie sighed. It had been a while since she’d had a second-party-induced orgasm. She’d been lazy in the dating field, and working two jobs hadn’t left her much time for naked fun. Maybe a tropical fling with a sexy surfer would cure her sex blahs?

“As a matter of fact, I am. Tell me you’re into Australian surfers and that we can share a cab so I can charm my way into a date.”

Frankie laughed. Easy, charming, funny. Perfect.

She lowered her lashes. “I’ve never had an Australian surfer before, so I can’t vouch for my preferences in the area.”

His blue eyes, the same color as the sea they’d flown over, widened in appreciation. “Where are you staying?”

“Rockley Sands Resort.”

“Bugger me.” His face fell. “That’s north of Bridgetown. I’m on the other side of the island.”

“Franchesca.”

A good stiff breeze could have knocked Frankie over. It had to be a mirage. She was certain of it. That was not Aiden Kilbourn leaning against a Jeep in shorts and a sexy short-sleeved button down. Boat shoes and Ray-bans. His beard looked a little scruffier than the last time she’d seen him.

“What the f—”

“I take it you’re Franchesca?” the Aussie asked.

“Yeah, but... we’re not together.”

Aiden straightened from the fender and crossed to her. “Let’s go.” He reached for her bag.

Instinctively, Frankie snatched it out of his reach. “I’m taking a cab,” she insisted.

“No, you’re not.”

“Aiden, I told Pru I’d take a cab.”

“And I told her I’d pick you up.”

“Franchesca, it was lovely meeting you, but I’ve got to go,” the Aussie said, backing away.

“Oh, but...”

“Maybe I’ll see you around the island.” He blew her a kiss, dropped a “mate” in Aiden’s direction, and sauntered off in search of a cab.

“Damn it, Aiden. I didn’t even get to give him my number.”

“Pity.” He hefted her bag into the back of the Jeep and secured it with a tie down strap.

“So, what’s this? You’re doing your good deed for the day and giving a poor stripper a ride?” she shot back.

“I already apologized for that.”

“And it was touchingly heartfelt,” Frankie reminded him.

“Get in the damn car.”

Chapter Four

Aiden waited until she was belted in before pulling out onto the main road. He hadn't exactly told Pruitt that he'd be picking Francesca up. He'd overheard her talking about the maid of honor's arrival time the night before. He'd flown down with them to keep an eye on Chip. He'd screwed up Chip and Pruitt's happiness once before and wasn't going to let anything happen to them the second time around.

Besides, it gave him an excuse to spend some time alone with Francesca. He'd thought of her—a lot—since the engagement party. She was... interesting. And damned if her headache cure hadn't worked like a charm.

He needed to do something about those headaches, about the root of them. And he'd decided to use this trip as planning time. Plotting time. It was long past time he did something about the mess.

"Did you have a good flight?" he asked.

"Great. Would have been better if I could have gotten surfer guy's number."

"That's your type?"

"Ah ah ah!" she pointed a finger at him. "You of all people don't get to comment on my type."

"Me of all people?" he asked, stepping on the gas to go around the roundabout.

Frankie grabbed on to the handle mounted on the dashboard but didn't tell him to slow down.

"If we flipped back through some of your latest conquests, we'd see one blonde skeleton after another shopping and smiling and getting her picture taken."

It was the truth. But that's what Manhattan had to offer. Hundreds of well-to-do socialites that looked alike, acted alike, and had the same goals in life.

“Conquests. Is that what Hang Ten back there would have been?”

“Shut up.”

Aiden slowed abruptly to slip around a pick-up truck stopping at a roadside coconut stand. He drove rarely in Manhattan and had been delighted to find that traffic laws were more suggestions than actual laws on the island. It took him back to his racing days. The one time in his life that he'd ever really felt carefree.

“Jesus, Aide,” Frankie said, gripping the handle as they entered the next roundabout.

The nickname, freely given, felt strange to him... warm, familiar. “Welcome to Barbados,” he offered, slipping out the other side of the traffic circle.

She let go of the handle to harness her hair that was blowing wildly in all directions. She coiled it on top of her head and secured it with an elastic band. He let his gaze travel down her body. The pink tank top and white cotton shorts showed off the lovely olive tone of her legs. She had Mediterranean in her lineage. He'd bet money on it. No blonde skeleton was Franchesca Baranski.

“Eyes on the road, buddy,” she said dryly.

“I was just wondering if it was casual day.”

“This is the one and only outfit of the whole trip that didn't have to be coordinated with the bridesmonsters, and you won't ruin my enjoyment of it.”

“Coordinating outfits?” He was so glad he wasn't a woman.

“Price you pay for having friends,” Frankie said. “But I'm sure you wouldn't know anything about that.”

And that was why Aiden kept his circle small. Miniscule really. He wasn't social, didn't enjoy attention or parties. He liked making money, rising to a challenge, finding the most creative solution to obstinate obstacles.

“Wow. Look at that water.” She pointed an unpolished finger to their left and leaned closer to him to get a better view. The

highway paralleled the turquoise of the Caribbean Sea. He caught the scent of her hair, something exotic, spiced. And for one glorious second, the image of Frankie naked and sprawled across his bed materialized, unbidden in his mind's eye.

"Picture perfect," Aiden agreed.

"Have you ever been here before?" Frankie asked, digging through her bag. Triumphantly, she pulled out a tube of sunscreen.

"Are you making small talk?" he asked.

"Figured we wouldn't fight as much over 'pretty ocean' and 'come here often?'" She squeezed the lotion onto the pads of her fingers and rubbed it onto her face. Aiden wondered when was the last time he'd seen a woman in anything other than full makeup and perfectly coiffed hair. The women he dated preferred to leave "natural" a closely guarded secret.

"Oh, I think we can find contention on any topic," Aiden predicted.

She hummed an answer and didn't elaborate.

"What?" he asked.

"I'm *trying* to be polite. We're here for Pru and Chip, and I'm not going to spoil their wedding by fighting with you."

"You really don't like me, do you?" Aiden asked with a grin.

"Nope. But that doesn't mean I have to be an asshole about it. Some of us were raised better than that." It was a jab at him, but rather than piss him off, it amused him.

"How were you raised?" he prodded.

"Uh-uh." She shook her head. "We're not going to play getting to know you. We don't like each other, and we don't need to. You do your thing, I'll do mine. We'll get through our formal portraits and our bridal party dance, and then we never need to see each other again."

Aiden laughed. The sound of it foreign to his own ears. "I don't *not* like you."

“I’m not biting, Kilbourn. So, you just demolition derby us to the resort in silence, and I’ll sit here and pretend you’re a cute Australian surfer.”

“I’m not trying to start a fight—”

“Uh-uh. No words. Drive. Quietly.”

He grinned, shaking his head, and let her have her way. They zoomed along the skinny highway, swerving around potholes and stopping for the occasional pedestrian. They passed sandy white beaches with swaying palms and sunburned tourists. The street narrowed as he steered them into Bridgetown. They whizzed by store fronts and sidewalk produce stands, past a handful of luxury brand stores, and on by the cruise ship port.

Frankie’s attention was glued to the water view.

It was beautiful. The kind of blue that only existed on postcards. And the constant tropical breeze made the mid-eighties feel balmy, not oppressive. Not that he’d enjoy it. The long weekend was chock full of the downsides of wealth and privilege. Social obligation, familial responsibility, and—because he was closer to Chip than his own half-brother—gratuitous celebration. Was a marriage really worth this kind of fanfare? Shouldn’t the bride and groom want it to be something more private, more meaningful? He accelerated up a short hill, frowning.

“What could possibly be making you make that face while you look at this?” Frankie demanded, extending an arm to the sweeping vista before them.

“I thought we weren’t talking?”

“Right. I got distracted watching you look like you swallowed a lemon whole. Back to silence.”

On cue, his phone rang in the cup holder. Aiden glanced at the screen, his frown deepening.

“What is it, Elliot?” he asked, keeping his tone clipped. His half-brother’s calls only ever meant one thing.

“How’s paradise?”

The less Aiden gave his brother, the easier the damage was to minimize.

“What do you need, Elliot?” Aiden asked, ignoring the pleasantries.

“We need to talk about the board vote.” He heard the shift in his brother’s voice from charm to calculation.

“We’ve already discussed the vote. I’m not changing my mind,” Aiden said brusquely.

“I don’t think you’ve really thought it through—”

“I’m not naming Donaldson CFO. He’s under investigation for fraud from his last company. You can’t expect me to put our entire holdings at his feet and turn a blind eye.”

“The rumors about the fraud are completely overblown. It was just an ex-mistress with an axe to grind.” Aiden heard the distinct click of metal connecting with a ball followed by polite applause.

“On the course again?” Elliot spent more time golfing and drinking and fucking his way through the city’s female population than he did behind his desk in his very nice corner office one floor below Aiden’s.

“Just squeezing in a quick nine with a client.”

It was bullshit, but Aiden didn’t have the energy to call him on it. The fact was running his family’s company and extensive holdings was falling more and more on his shoulders as their father seemed to be taking a step back. Elliot could only be roused to care about business when it was something that affected him personally. He hadn’t figured out Elliot’s connection to the thieving, cheating Donaldson, but Aiden wasn’t about to step aside and let his brother name the next CFO of Kilbourn Holdings.

“My vote stands. No on Donaldson. I have to go.” He disconnected before his brother could object and then turned his phone off to avoid the inevitable barrage of calls and texts.

“Business drama?” Frankie asked without looking in his direction.

“Family drama with a side of business.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t do business with your family.”

He shot her a glance. She had her face lifted toward the sun, a sly curve to her lips.

“It’s not that easy.”

She deigned to look at him now, lowering her sunglasses. “Nothing worthwhile is.”

* * *

The resort was walled in against the ocean behind soft yellow stone walls and a gate. He’d paid little attention to it when he’d arrived last night. But watching Frankie ooh and aah over the lush landscape and the curving drive, he tuned in and let himself forget about his family, his business. The hotel rose up three stories of stucco and stone, two wings joined by a two-story, open-aired lobby. The greenery continued inside, colorful pots clustered around a stone fountain. There was a bar on either end of the lobby and a straight through view to the water.

“Wow,” Franchesca whispered behind him.

The woman behind the desk with the cheerful knotted scarf in canary yellow looked up from her computer. “I hope you’re enjoying your stay, Mr. Kilbourn,” she said with the subtle accent of the island adding music to her words.

“Of course,” he assured her. “Ms. Baranski is checking in.”

“Yes, of course. Welcome, Ms. Baranski.”

“Thank you. Your resort is beautiful,” Frankie said with an easy smile she’d never given him.

As if she’d heard his thoughts, Frankie turned to him. She looked him up and down and arched an eyebrow. “Thank you for the ride. You can go now.”

He gave her a slow, dangerous smile. Franchesca Baranski had no idea who she was taunting. He wasn't a man who was dismissed. He stepped closer to her, crowding her against the desk, and saw the surprise, the concern in those big eyes. There was something else too. A little flare, a spark of desire.

Aiden reached for her hand and brought her knuckles to his lips.

"The pleasure was all mine." He saw the goosebumps that rose on her arm and grinned.

"I'm sure it usually is," she shot back, yanking her hand free and turning her back on him.

Chapter Five

Aiden left Frankie at the desk and followed the sound of the waves. He paused at the bar, debated, and then changed his mind and continued outside.

He'd been drinking too much. A medication of sorts for the chronic stress that plagued him. His family seemed hell-bent on making every bad decision they could with regards to the business. He'd ignored it for far too long, preferring to focus on his own responsibilities. But now he needed to be present. He'd be damned if he let anyone—family included—destroy what had been three generations in the making.

Hands in the pockets of his shorts, he strolled across the coral stone terrace, his shirt fluttering in the breeze. The infinity edge pool sparkled under the sun to his right. A handful of mid-afternoon guests enjoyed ceviche and champagne at the outdoor seafood restaurant to his left.

He followed the path down the stairs and to the right where it meandered between beach and vegetation. Pruitt's father might not think much of Chip as a son-in-law, but he wasn't going to let that stand in the way of spending lavishly. He'd been willing to rent out the cordoned off section of the resort to ensure his princess had a special and private day.

Aiden found the bride and groom sunning themselves at the edge of a freeform lagoon overlooking the beach and ocean. The bridesmaids—bridesmonsters, he corrected himself with amusement—were lounging in studied positions of perfection that best accented their appeal. He noticed the straightening of shoulders, the jutting of chests when they spotted him. They were always on the hunt.

But he was no one's quarry.

He dropped down at the end of Chip's lounge, his back to the monsters. "Your maid of honor has been delivered," he announced.

Pru peeked up at him from under the brim of a ridiculous sun hat. “Aiden! I scheduled a car to pick up Ms. I’ll-Just-Take-a-Taxi.”

“I canceled it,” he said with a shrug. “I was already heading in that direction.”

“He’s just trying to get back into Frankie’s good graces,” Chip said loyally. His friend waved his empty glass at a passing pool server and circled his finger signaling a round. It looked like Aiden would be getting that drink after all.

“Uh-huh.” Pruitt wasn’t believing either of them. Not for a second.

“Did you pick up my genius best friend to pick on her? Because if you did, I’m not going to be happy with you, Aiden Kilbourn,” Pruitt said, jabbing a finger into his arm.

“Pick on her? What is this? Second grade?” Aiden teased.

“What exactly did you say to her at the engagement party?” Pruitt demanded.

“She didn’t tell you?” Aiden was surprised. He thought Frankie would have run tattling.

“My beautiful best friend doesn’t want me to worry about a thing. And apparently that includes whatever idiotic thing you said or did at the party.”

Aiden shared a look with Chip. Neither of them were enthusiastic about repeating the insult.

Pruitt snapped her fingers. “Oh, no! Uh-uh! Don’t you look at him, Chip. Spill it right now.”

Chip’s resolve crumbled faster than a cookie in the sticky hands of a toddler. “Aiden may have mentioned that Frankie danced like she had experience on the pole.”

“You called her a *stripper*?” Pruitt’s screech could probably be heard by the catamaran five-hundred yards off the coast.

Aiden winced. “In my defense—”

“There’s no defense! Damn it, Aiden. She’s one of my favorite people. You can’t treat her like she’s nothing.”

“I understand, and I apologized, and I tried to make amends by picking her up today.”

Pru cracked a slight smile. “Tried to, huh? She wasn’t amenable?” she asked innocently.

“Not exactly,” Aiden admitted. Not at all, really.

Chip slapped him on the shoulder. “Sorry, man. Our Frankie’s not the most forgiving person in the world.”

“So one slip up, and that’s it?”

Pruitt peered at him over her sunglasses. “Why? Are you interested in her?”

“As she so astutely pointed out, I’m no more her type than she is mine,” Aiden said, side-stepping the question. He wasn’t interested in Frankie. He was intrigued by her, but that was different.

“Why couldn’t you have been nice and polite or, God forbid, friendly?” Pruitt sighed.

“I don’t want to be friendly. I don’t have time for friendly.”

Pruitt flopped back on her lounge chair pouting. “And now we have a maid of honor and best man who hate each other.”

“We should have eloped,” Chip said, squeezing her thigh with affection.

“We are eloping. We just took everyone with us.”

Aiden bit back a quip about knowing better for next time. Thanks to him, there almost hadn’t been a first time.

The server returned with a tray of pink frothy drinks with umbrellas and enough fruit to build a salad. “Mr. Randolph,” he said with a flourish. Chip grinned and passed out the drinks. “Hatfield, you’re the man.” He slid a twenty onto the tray.

Aiden took a sip of his drink, winced, and set the glass down on the table next to the chair.

“Well, if it isn’t Mr. and almost Mrs. Randolph.”

Pru squealed and jumped out of her chair. “You’re here!” She threw her arms around Franchesca.

She'd changed, he noted. Gone were the very small white shorts and entertainingly tight tank. In their place was a flowy cover up with a deep v that showed an eyeful of breathtaking cleavage and a hint of the black bikini beneath. Her hair was still piled atop her head. She looked exotic, curvy. And if he wasn't careful, he'd have a hard-on like a teenager in a moment.

There was nothing subtle about Franchesca.

"I made it," she said, grinning down at Pru.

"How was your flight? Do you want a drink?"

"Here." Aiden pressed his pink concoction into her hand.

She stared at the glass with suspicion.

"Oh, for God's sake. It's not poisoned. Just drink the damn thing," he ordered.

"Remember what we were talking about, Aiden?" Pru warned him. "*Friendly?*"

"You're in trouble," Frankie sang under her breath so only he could hear. She took a sip of the drink. Her full lips closed over the straw where his had been only moments ago. "Don't you worry about Aide and me. No drama. Scout's honor. Even if he did cockblock me from a sexy surfer at the airport."

Pru linked her arm through Frankie's and led her away, shooting him a dirty look over her shoulder. "Come on, Frankie. Let's go spend some time with the girls. Now, tell me about the surfer."

Aiden and Chip watched them go.

"Surfer, huh?" Chip asked.

"Shut up."

Chip laughed. "Come on. Let's play some volleyball."

Chapter Six

“Ladies, our maid of honor has arrived,” Pruitt announced cheerily to the reclining goddesses.

“Yay,” Margeaux said without looking up from her phone. Her blonde hair was rolled in a chic chignon at the base of her neck. She looked regal, even in a bikini.

Pruitt dragged Frankie toward a pair of sun loungers. She took another sip of the pink frozen tartness. It tasted vaguely of grapefruit and vodka. But it would do.

“Now, sit. And spill,” Pru ordered. “The story, not the drink.”

Frankie handed over the glass with a sigh. She stepped out of her sandals and pulled the cover up over her head.

She felt a heated gaze on her skin and turned to see Aiden standing in the sand looking at her. He flashed her a cocky grin and shucked his shirt. He wasn't lean like the rest of the groomsmen. He was bigger, more muscled. His chest alone made her mouth water. They stared admiringly at each other.

“Staaaalling,” Pru sang, drawing her attention.

“Ugh. Fine.” She turned her back on the beach, on Aiden. “What do you want to know?”

“How did your ride in from the airport go with Aiden?”

Margeaux dropped her phone and her jaw. Taffany, who had been busy swilling tequila straight from the bottle in a one-piece with less fabric than Frankie's bikini, sat up.

“You and the very good-looking best man?” Cressida wondered, her accent seeming to shift between Austrian and Russian. Frankie couldn't stop staring at the woman's breasts that seemed hell-bent on escaping the scrap of fabric masquerading as a bandeau top.

Self-consciously, Frankie reached up to adjust the ties of her own suit to make sure her girls didn't escape.

A chorus of “Oooooohs” rose from the volleyball court, and the girls craned their necks to see what had happened. Aiden, still spectacularly shirtless and ripped, was holding a hand over his eye.

“What did I tell you guys?” Pru yelled.

“No bruises!” they parroted back to her.

“No bruises, no cuts, no scrapes, no freak hair accidents. I need your faces perfect for pictures,” the bride reminded them.

“Sorry,” they said as one.

“Aiden was distracted,” Chip added with a wink.

Aiden gave Frankie a long look, and she dropped her hands from where they were fiddling with the strings of her suit. *Had he been watching her?*

“Can’t you guys just sit and read?” Pru begged.

“No more overhand serves,” Davenport, the peacemaker and resident drunk, offered.

“Ugh. Fine. But keep your attention on the ball, Aiden.” Pru sat back down. “It’s like herding kindergartners at a candy factory. Now, sit down Frankie before Aiden loses an eye checking you out.”

All attention on her, Frankie sank down on the chair and stretched her legs out in front of her. “He picked me up at the airport,” she said. She wasn’t a fan of gossip in general and feeding anything to these hellhounds was a bad, bad idea.

“Why?” Margeaux asked, wrinkling her nose. “Was there a mix up?”

In Margeaux’s beautiful, pristine, gold-dipped world, that was the only plausible reason why Aiden Kilbourn would offer a ride to someone so lowly. Riled now, Frankie gave a lazy one-shoulder shrug as she plucked at the ties of her top. “Nope. He was waiting for me when I got off the plane.”

“He canceled the car I had scheduled to pick her up,” Pru added.

Taffany picked up the tequila again but handed it to Frankie.
“Way to go, Francine.”

“Frankie.”

“Whatever.”

“I don’t understand,” Margeaux announced. She took her sunglasses off and arranged herself on her side, a model taking directions from an invisible photographer. “Why would Aiden go out of his way for *you*?”

“Hey, why don’t we leave the cat claws at home, Margeaux?”
Pru warned the woman.

“Do not listen to this angry woman,” Cressida said, pointing in Margeaux’s direction. “She has bet she can fuck Aiden this weekend.”

“Fuck you, Cressida,” Margeaux spat out.

“That was not the bet,” Cressida insisted, frowning. Frankie couldn’t tell if she was purposely poking at Margeaux or if the language barrier made for accidental insults.

“Ladies,” Pru sighed. She rubbed absently at her forehead.

No drama, Frankie reminded herself. *She was here to make sure Pru had her perfect day*. She took a drink straight from the bottle. “Not to worry, *Margie*. Your odds are still excellent for luring him into your Venus Fly Trap vag. He was just being nice. There’s no interest on either side,” Frankie promised.

“Aiden isn’t nice,” Margeaux argued, ignoring the slam on her vagina.

“Then why do you want to bang him?” Frankie asked in frustration.

Taffany launched into a fit of giggles and hiccups. She reached for the bottle. “*Hello*. He’s gorg *and* rich. What else is there? A preup from him would set a girl up at least into her fifties.”

“I have heard that he is quite excellent in bed,” Cressida added. “His children would be prime specimens.”

These women were from a different planet. Planet Crazy Bitch.

Frankie's parents got married because they fell in love in high school and got pregnant on prom night. They fought about toilet paper and which one of them was supposed to call the accountant. That was normal. That was love.

This? This was what happened with too much inbreeding amongst Manhattan's wealthy.

"Don't you want to meet a guy and fall in love?" Frankie asked the group in general.

The blondes shared a baffled look and broke out into a delightful cultured laughter—plus hiccups from Taffany.

"That is so *poor people*," Taffany announced. "Poor people have to look for love because they can't have money."

"So, money is better than love?" Frankie reiterated the point.

"Duh. And what's better than money?" Taffany chirped, taking the tequila back.

"More money," Margeaux and Cressida chimed in.

"To trophy wives," Taffany said, holding the bottle aloft. Margeaux and Cressida raised their glasses and Pru, looking slightly embarrassed, raised hers.

"To trophy wives," they echoed.

"Well, I've been doing this all wrong then," Frankie announced cheerfully. "Teach me your ways."

Margeaux slid her sunglasses back on. "Sweetie, no amount of education can make *this*," she circled the palm of her hand in Frankie's direction, "trophy. You're more participation medal. Anyone can have one."

Fucking asshole. Frankie hoped Margeaux would get backed over by her own limo.

Frankie smiled sweetly. "When you marry husband number two, does the prenup state that you have to have that giant stick removed from your ass, or does that get to stay?"

Taffany choked and sprayed Margeaux with a fine cloud of tequila.

“You fucking idiot!” Margeaux sprang to her feet. She grabbed the bottle out of Taffany’s hand and tossed it into the pool.

“Hey!” Taffany reacted as if Margeaux had thrown her teacup Chihuahua off an overpass. She lowered her shoulder and charged, sending them both into the water.

Cressida said something that sounded like a derisive four-letter word in German and stalked off.

“How do you know these clowns again?” Frankie asked as Margeaux grabbed a handful of Taffany’s hair.

“Don’t fuck with my extensions!” Taffany screamed.

“Oh. Shit. Here we go again,” Pru muttered. She put her fingers in her mouth and whistled. The sand volleyball game came to a screeching halt as Chip called a timeout.

“Babe?” he called from the beach.

“They’re fighting in the pool again,” Pru called back and pointed.

The groomsmen, ever the gentlemen, sprang into action echoing gleeful shouts of “cat fight.”

Davenport, tall and skinny, took up position on a lounge and pulled out his phone. “Okay, I’m recording!” Digby, the shorter blond with eight-pack abs that he was constantly showing off dove into the water like an Olympian with Ford—Bradford on his birth certificate—hot on his heels. Ford let out a war whoop and cannonballed into the fray.

Aiden surveyed the scene from the safety of the beach.

In moments, Digby and Ford had wrestled the girls apart. “I hate all of you,” Margeaux shouted, slapping the water in disgust.

“I hope your herpes flares,” Taffany screeched, trying to claw her way over Ford’s shoulder.

“Jesus, if my dad catches wind of this, I’ll never hear the end of it,” Pru lamented. Chip pulled her into his arms.

“Don’t worry, babe. We’ll get them drunk and make them sleep it off in their rooms.”

“My hero,” Pru sighed, turning to kiss her groom.

Frankie watched the groomsmen drag the girls and the bottle out of the pool. “Let’s do shots,” Digby decided.

“Shots!” Taffany made a mad dash toward the bar.

“Hey there, maid of honor,” Ford said, flashing Frankie a wink and a grin. He was ridiculously good-looking. They all were. But Ford had a boyish charm that was hard to resist and was constantly falling in love. It never lasted longer than a week or two. But every time, he insisted that “this girl is the one.” He’d tried to convince Frankie to go out with him for going on three years now and vowed that he wouldn’t rest until they were married with eleven grandchildren and a house in the Hamptons.

“Don’t talk to her!” Margeaux hissed, sliding her arm around his wet waist. “Pay attention to me.”

Frankie wiggled her fingers in greeting and watched Ford wrangle the angry blonde away.

“God, I hope he doesn’t fuck her again,” Chip murmured as they watched the sloppy foursome make a spectacle at the bar.

“That would be unfortunate,” Pru agreed. “Davenport, you remember you signed a non-disclosure agreement, correct?” She looked pointedly at the man reviewing video on his phone.

“Come on, Pru. This is like debutantes gone wild.”

“No.”

“Don’t make me delete it. This is ideal blackmail material if Margeaux ends up landing a senator or something.”

Pruitt’s lips quirked. “Fine. Keep it, but don’t post it. This is a low-key, private wedding.”

Frankie shook her head. She would never understand the upper class. You could be ostracized for carrying last season’s bag, but wrestle a rich bimbo into a pool over a bottle of tequila and that was fine. “I need a drink,” she announced. “And not from that bar. Also, food.”

“I would be honored if the lady would accompany me to dine upon whatever this humble establishment can supply, though it will surely dim in comparison to the delectable nature of one as lovely as she.”

Frankie blinked at Davenport. “Oh Jesus. Are you reading Chaucer again, Dav?”

“Ladies love a man with a romantic turn of phrase. Plus, Digs bet me I couldn’t pick up a chick spouting off classic literature.”

“Well, it worked on me. Feed me, and tell me I’m pretty, and I’m all yours,” Frankie joked.

Davenport offered her his arm. “Dost the lady care for seafood or pizza?”

“Definitely pizza. And a beer.”

Pruitt moaned. “Carbs. I want.”

“Come with us,” Frankie told her.

“I can’t. I’m vegan until the reception. Otherwise they’ll have to sew me into my dress.”

Pruitt had dropped twenty-one large on her custom, one-of-a-kind dresscavaganza. She’d been off carbs—except for the allotted alcohol—for sixty-four days. All of the bridesmaids had done the same to ensure that their size zero designer gowns would fit perfectly. Frankie was happy with her eight and the Spanx she’d packed in her suitcase.

Life was too short to not eat pizza.

“You’ll be beautiful,” Frankie promised her. “Chip here will get you a salad and a yummy green juice, and you won’t even miss the pizza.”

Lies. Dirty, dirty lies.

“Anything you want, babe,” Chip promised.

Pru sighed. “Will you eat with me?” Chip, whose metabolism had remained the same since he was twelve, looked crestfallen for just a moment before his resolve kicked in. “I’d be honored.”

“Maybe you should ask your best man to join you,” Frankie suggested, jutting her chin down to the sand where the shirtless Aiden was glaring at his phone. “Come on, my dear Davenport. Mama needs food.”

Chapter Seven

Oistins Fish Fry was the kind of human meat market that should have bothered Aiden. It was a press of bodies on all sides. Tents flapping wildly in the constant breeze. Neon lights, dancers with glow sticks, and open grills everywhere. But it wasn't the wild crowds lining up for a spot at picnic tables where they'd be served freshly grilled fish and cold beer that concerned him.

It was the fact that no one else seemed to be bothered by the fact that the bride and bridesmaids were half an hour late and no one was answering their phones.

Why Chip and Pru needed yet another bachelor and bachelorette party was beyond him. He'd attended the one in the city. A steak and scotch dinner followed by one of the more tasteful strip clubs that the groomsmen had done their best to debauch.

Today, they'd hit three rum shops and a distillery for a private tour. No strippers this time, not with the wedding less than twenty-four hours away. But the girls had been cagey about their plans, and now they were MIA. Aiden was not happy.

The band struck up another energetic song, and Aiden brushed off a few invitations to dance. Chip and the rest of them were happy to be swallowed up by the crowd, making a mockery of the dance.

"Shake your ass, Kilbourn," Digby shouted from the middle of a dozen ladies. They encircled him, moving as one, and Aiden pondered punching Digby in the face. But that would upset Pru, and Digby was drunk enough he might not notice the blow.

"Best bachelor party ever," Chip announced at the top of his lungs. The crowd around him cheered. He'd said the same thing at the steak dinner and again after a particularly creative lap dance. Chip was an effusive kind of guy. He loved everything, and it was hard not to love him back.

Aiden waded through the crowd to his side. “Where are the girls?” he demanded.

Chip closed one eye and tried to focus. Aiden, for once in recent memory, was the only sober member of the party. “Girls? They’re everywhere, man.” He waved a hand in a wide circle.

“Not those girls. Our girls. Your bride, Pru? Frankie? The bridesmaids?”

“Ohhh, those girls! They’re awesome, aren’t they?” Chip said, leaning hard on Aiden. “Well, Pru and Frankie are. The other three are kind of scary. But totally in an *al-shome* way.”

“Yeah. Totally *al-shome*. Aren’t they supposed to be meeting us here?”

“Oh, yeah! I forgot.” He fumbled through his pocket for a phone. “Let me call my beautiful bride. I’m getting married tomorrow. Did you know?”

Aiden bit back a sigh. “I’m aware. Dial.”

“Okay, okay.”

Chip stabbed at the screen.

“Baaaaaaaaby!” Pru, drunk as a skunk, answered the video call. She was listing to the right on one of the blonde bridesmaids.

“Babe! I’m so drunk!” Chip shouted cheerfully.

“Oh, my God! Me too! Taffany threw up twice so far!”

The girls whooped in the background. “Puking rally,” Taffany crowed.

“Jesus. Where’s Frankie?” Aiden asked.

“She’s right here,” Pru sang. “Isn’t she beautiful?” The camera switched to an extreme close up of a very sober, very annoyed Frankie.

“Yeah, I’m gorgeous. We’re all aware. Pru, drink your water.” Frankie took the phone from her friend.

“For the love of god, Aide. Tell me someone there is sober. I need to get food into these girls before they turn to drunken cannibalism.”

“Cannonball,” Taffany shouted, leaning over Frankie’s shoulder and planting a wet kiss on her face.

Frankie rolled her eyes.

“Where are you?” Aiden demanded.

“How the fuck should I know? It’s dark, and there’s potholes so we could be anywhere on the island.”

Aiden sighed. “Ask the driver where you are and how long it’ll be before you’re here.”

From his angle, Aiden watched as Frankie climbed her way over a seat around a blonde and stuck her head between the driver and passenger seats. Her breasts were exploding out of the low neckline of her dress.

“Don’t put his eye out,” Aiden said mildly.

Frankie looked down, looked up, and flicked him off. “Deal with the view for two seconds, ass. Excuse me, Walter. Do you know how long it’ll be before we get to Oistins?”

Aiden couldn’t hear the driver’s reply. He wasn’t sure if it was because of the noise around him, the drunken hysteria of the women on Frankie’s end, or the hypnotic view of her breasts.

“Five minutes,” she repeated. “Thank God. We need food.” Her eyes went wide.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Which one of you just bit me in the ass?” Frankie yelled.

“Cannonball,” Taffany squealed.

Pru popped up on the screen again over Frankie’s shoulder. “What are we doing? Are you two making out on my phone?” she asked.

“We’re not making out,” Frankie told her.

“You guys totally should. I bet it would be SO. HOT. Cause you both are SO. HOT.”

Frankie stared into the camera. “Christ, can’t you wealthy folk buy constitutions? Learn to hold your liquor, people!”

“I’ll glue Chip to a table and meet you on the street. We can revisit the making out suggestion when you get here,” Aiden offered.

“Ha.” She disconnected the call, and Aiden dragged Chip and Ford out of the crowd. A flash of cash gave them an entire turquoise picnic table at Uncle George’s Fish Net.

“Stay here,” he ordered and waded back into the crowd. By the time he found the sidewalk, he could hear them and felt a wave of relief wash over him. *If this were his wedding, his bride would not be roaming the island. If this were his wedding, it would be him and his bride. No one else to distract or dramatize.*

“It’s her bachelorette party!” one of them shouted, pointing at Pruitt who was wearing an upside down I’m The Bride sash and a tiara in case anyone had any doubt.

“Please tell me you have food for us in the next seven seconds,” Frankie called, pushing through the crowd to get to him, dragging Pruitt with her. She was wearing a short black dress with a deep scoop in the front. More of her was covered than the rest of the bridesmaids combined. He could see Taffany’s flesh colored underwear... or bare labia. He wasn’t sure.

Aiden clamped a hand on Frankie’s free wrist. “Follow me.”

“Hello to you, too,” she grumbled.

He surged into the crowd, nearly a head above everyone else. Uncle George’s white tents were ahead. He felt Frankie stumble behind him and paused. “Why did you insist on wearing those?” he asked, surly for no reason other than he’d been worried. She wore four-inch heeled sandals that wrapped up her calves.

“Ask the bridesmonsters,” Frankie grumbled. “Coordination.”

“Aiiiiiiiden!” An animated Margeaux threw herself into his chest hard enough that he had to catch her. “I missed you!” He

saw it coming, was powerless to stop those two over-inflated raspberry lips as they came at him.

She laid a kiss on him that was sixty steps beyond friendly. She pulled back and looked up at him, squinting with one eye. “You and me are gonna have sex.” She poked him in the chest with a talon-like fingernail. “S-E-X.”

“Can we please get something to eat before you two decide to fuck?”

“I know what I’m hungry for,” Margeaux said, saucily. She slid her hand from Aiden’s chest to his crotch and squeezed. Aiden’s first reflex was to swing at her. The best offense was a good defense. But before he could decide whether to hit his first woman ever or just cower in fear, Frankie swooped in.

She slipped an arm around Margeaux’s swan-like neck and tightened her grip. “Get your hands off his junk or he’ll sue you for sexual harassment, Marge.”

Margeaux stumbled under the weight and pressure Frankie was applying. “’s not sexy harassment if I’m a lady. And I’m a fucking lady!”

“My lawyer and I would disagree,” Aiden said coldly.

“Oh, hell. Get, Pru,” Frankie ordered, pointing behind him. “I’ll contain Slutzilla here.”

Pruitt had decided to take a rest and was sitting on the sidewalk holding her shoes in her hand. Aiden was too tired to fight the shoes back on her feet, so he tossed the bride over his shoulder and hoped the scrap of white dress kept everything important covered.

She was singing “Here Comes the Bride” when he dumped her in Chip’s lap. The drunken couple was ecstatic to see each other. Frankie was ecstatic to see plates of fish and rice piled on the table. She slapped the beer out of Pru’s hand and waved over the server. “Is there any way we can get a ton of water?” she asked, laying a hand on his arm. The guy grinned at her as if she were asking if she could give him free blow jobs for life.

“Anything for you, miss.”

“Keep the miss and call me Frankie,” she insisted. “Water for everyone, and I’ll be in your debt forever.”

“Look! Frankie’s making friends with the help again,” Margeaux crowed. “It’s cause she *is* the help.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, why are you such a c-word?” Pruitt demanded from Chip’s lap.

Margeaux apparently had built up quite an immunity to being called the c-word. She was too busy laughing at her own joke to respond and fell off the bench backwards. No one stopped to help her up.

Digby and Davenport materialized out of the crowd and pounced on the food. Davenport was sporting a hickey on his neck. Digby was wearing a hat he hadn’t had ten minutes ago.

Taffany eyed the table with skepticism. She nearly tackled a server who was carting a tray of beers. “Excuse me. Where is the VIP section?”

The server laughed so loud and for so long that Taffany forgot what she’d asked and sat down next to Cressida who was enthusiastically making out with a stranger.

Aiden slid onto the bench beside Frankie, who was so busy shoveling food into her mouth, eyes rolling back in her head in pleasure, that she didn’t even notice him. The moans escaping her mouth were not G-rated, and Aiden felt his blood warm.

“Nice night,” he commented.

“Oh, the best,” Frankie agreed with sarcasm, spearing a piece of grilled fish. “I can’t think of anything I’d rather be doing.”

He leaned in, crowding her. “I can.”

Those big, bright eyes looked at him warily. “What? Get mauled by Marge?”

“Not at the top of my list. Not actually anywhere on my list. She’s terrifying.”

Frankie snorted. “Well, at least you’re not completely stupid.”

“Not completely,” he agreed.

Aiden dropped his hand to the sliver of bench between them, his knuckles grazing her bare thigh. Testing. She jumped at the contact but didn't bite his head off. And what he read in her eyes? It was that quick spark of desire. He wanted to see it again. He wanted to watch it blaze to life.

Testing, he placed his hand on Frankie's knee under the table. Her skin was smooth, silk-like under his palm. And he wanted more.

She was still watching him. "What's your game, Kilbourn?"

"I'm not sure," he admitted. He moved his hand an inch higher, watching her watch him.

He was hard, not just half-mast but achingly, throbbingly hard, and all he'd touched was her leg. Testing again, he let the tips of his fingers trace small circles up the inside of her thigh.

She reached for her beer and drank deeply but didn't ask him to stop. Didn't call him an asshole. He didn't know what he was doing, what he hoped to gain from it. He wanted to keep touching her.

Another inch, another circle. Was it his imagination? Was she opening her legs just a little wider? Her knee pressed into his. His food was forgotten in front of him. The laughter and chatter around the table disappeared as his world refined itself down to only Franchesca. The only thing he was aware of was Frankie's silk-like skin and the hem of her dress, the way her lips were parting as if to draw a breath.

When would she stop him?

"This is stupid," she whispered, her eyelids heavy.

"So stupid," Aiden agreed.

"I don't like you."

"Yes, you do."

She dropped her hand to his thigh and squeezed. "I don't like to be left out." His cock throbbed painfully an inch from her fingers. He gritted his teeth. He felt like a horny teenager, unable to control his body in the presence of a pretty girl. But Franchesca was more than just pretty. She was a temptress.

He toyed with the hem of her dress. Another inch higher and he'd catch a glimpse of what she wore underneath. He wanted to stroke his fingers over the lace or silk or cotton whatever she'd covered herself with. Wanted to trace the edge of it until she was begging with her body. Then he'd slip his fingers underneath and trace that wet seam that protected what he wanted most—

“Franchesca, right?”

She jumped a mile, yanking her hand away from his lap. He missed the contact immediately. Aiden could practically hear his dick whimper.

“Oh, my God. Hot Aussie Surfer,” Frankie breathed, shoving Aiden's hand away from her promised land.

Chapter Eight

Frankie was one second away from spontaneously combusting. Why had she let Aiden Kilbourn take his fingers on a walking tour of her inner thigh? And why had hot surfer guy magically appeared the second that she was going to let Aiden do dirty, evil things to her?

“It’s Brendan, actually,” he told her with a crooked grin. His hair was still messy, his eyes still blue, and his body was still rocking under a t-shirt and worn cargo shorts.

“Still Frankie,” she said, smiling until she felt Aiden’s fingers skim up the back of her thigh.

She slapped at his hand behind her while grinning maniacally up at Brendan. Aiden captured her hand and gave it a hard squeeze. Message received.

“’Scuse me!” Taffany waved and crawled across the picnic table revealing her nether region to all of Uncle George’s. “I’m Taffany,” she announced extending her hand, knuckles up to Brendan.

The surfer shot Frankie a “what the fuck” look before accepting Taffany’s hand.

“Taffany, yeah? That’s an... interesting name.”

“I rebranded myself,” Taffany announced proudly, shoving her hand toward his mouth. “Kiss it!”

Frankie stepped between them and broke Taffany’s hold on the surfer. He shook his hand to get the circulation back.

“Anyway, I’m happy I ran into you. I was hoping I’d see you here.”

“Yeah, me too,” Frankie said. Her brain wasn’t working fast enough. She could *feel* Aiden glaring holes into her. “You want to dance? Way over there. Away from here?”

He flashed a dimple at her. “Love to.”

Frankie wrestled her hand away from Aiden. “Be back in a few minutes, Pru,” she called to the bride.

“Have fun storming the castle,” Pru sang.

“Feed her and water her,” Frankie ordered Chip as Brendan led her into the crowd.

She’d held hands with two men tonight. One she didn’t like at all and one she’d developed an insta-crush on. So why didn’t insta-crush give her the pterodactyls in her stomach like Aiden had?

Brendan spun her around, and the crowd flashed by in colors and scents. He pulled her back, and she laughed.

“So, what’s a pretty American like you doing in a place like this?” he asked, dimpling adorably for her.

Frankie felt... nothing. God. Damn. It. A cute, sexy, funny guy who was built to be on some kind of fundraising calendar holding a puppy was swirling her around a dance floor, and all she could think about was Aiden’s finger prints on her thigh. That son of bitch was ruining her life.

“I’m babysitting several drunk women so everyone will show up for the wedding tomorrow. How about you, surf here often?”

He grinned, and again she felt less than nothing. Aiden Kilbourn was the fucking devil, and she was going to murder his face.

Brendan launched into an explanation of his travel habits, following the surf and whatnot. She should have been charmed, excited, hell, she should have been wet. She must have had some bad rum or beer or fish. It was the only logical explanation.

“Excuse me, Franchesca.” The hand on her shoulder sent a prairie fire racing through her veins. “Pruitt requires your attention,” Aiden announced a bit too smugly for Frankie’s liking.

Cressida, all five foot eleven of her, was peering over his shoulder. “I will dance with you,” she announced, pulling

Brendan into her leanly muscled arms.

“Uhhh,” Brendan looked over his shoulder at Frankie as Cressida dragged him into the night.

“What the hell was that?” Frankie hissed.

Aiden gripped her around the waist. “Exactly what I was wondering. I’m not used to being thrown over, Franchesca.”

“Look, we either had too much to drink, or we’re coming down with food poisoning. Those are the only explanations I can come up with for why—”

He cut her off and pushed her behind a fish stand. She could hear the cooks and servers shouting at each other from the open window above her head. “I thought you said Pru needed me,” she snapped.

He reached out and tucked a wayward curl behind her ear, and there were those fucking pterodactyls. *It wasn’t fair.*

“Maybe it wasn’t Pru. Maybe it was me.”

“Aiden, this is a terrible idea. And *maybe* Brendan showing up was the best thing that could have happened. He saved us from making a huge mistake.”

“Don’t fuck him.” He laid down the gauntlet, and despite the lack of pterodactyls where Brendan was concerned, Aiden’s proclamation made the surfer more attractive.

“I fuck who I want, when I want.”

“You want me.”

If Aiden put his hands on her here, there’d be no denying it. She’d be too busy climbing him like a mountain and unzipping his shorts. Distance was her friend. Distance would keep her sane.

She held up her hands. “Let’s not get carried away. We’re here for Pru and Chip and their wedding. That’s it. Not some tropical sexathon.” Though when she put it that way and Aiden was looking at her like she was a popsicle begging to be licked, Frankie had trouble reminding herself why she couldn’t have both.

“Franchesca.” The way he said her name sounded like a threat.

“Aiden,” she shot back.

“Fuck.” He took a step back, rubbing absently at his forehead.

“I don’t know why you’re saying no.”

“I’m worth more than a quick bang on the beach. I take sex seriously. I have to like the person I’m fucking.”

There was a tic in his jaw.

“You were seconds away from letting me shove my fingers—”

“Stop!” She cut him off, not mentally prepared to hear what he’d been about to do with those beautiful fingers. “I made a mistake. I got carried away. But I have the right to change my mind at any time whether your dick’s out or not.”

“I would never force you to do anything you didn’t want to do.”

“Damn it, Aiden. Look. Maybe my body wants your body. But if I don’t want the rest of you, then it’s not happening.”

“I don’t do relationships. But what I can offer—”

“Christ, I’m not talking about relationships. I’m talking about liking you as a person.”

“You keep saying you don’t like me, but I think you’re trying to convince yourself.”

“My prerogative. Got it? Bottom line, you’re not getting in my pretty pink thong. I don’t like you enough for that. Now, I need a minute and some air. Do me a favor and check on Pru and the rest of those idiots.”

She turned, ruining her exit by tripping over an empty crate outside the shack’s back door. But she didn’t fall on her face. Picking her way toward the sidewalk, Frankie didn’t relax until she could no longer feel the burning weight of Aiden’s gaze on her.

“What is with that guy?” she muttered under her breath. She didn’t like him, yet she was more than happy to let him meander a trail up her thigh to her happy place. She felt like her blood had turned to electricity, zinging through her veins at

impossible speeds. He was cold, judgmental, reserved. Hell, he'd assumed she was a stripper. That alone should banish him from her bed for life.

Frankie picked her way through the crowd on the sidewalk. Cab drivers catcalled fares, and drunken tourists stumbled into ZRs, the island's minivan transportation. For a buck U.S., you could get pretty much anywhere from Bridgetown to St. Lawrence Gap. A group of local girls dressed to the nines wandered by giggling as a group of boys followed a half step behind.

She spotted Chip ahead, looking around as if he was lost. He was standing on the sidewalk ahead of the cab line weaving like a man who'd ingested nothing but rum for an entire weekend.

She raised her hand to hail him. But before she could call out to him, a dirty white van roared up to the sidewalk, the rear door sliding open before it stopped. Chip leaned in, and that's when Frankie saw the hands reach out. They dragged him into the van.

"Hey! Chip!" She started running. The driver, a red cap pulled low, looked her way. "Stop! That's my friend!" Frankie yelled.

"Hey, Mami," the driver said, tossing her a wave as he floored the accelerator. Tires squealing, the door slammed shut with Chip inside, and the van sped away from the curb.

The groom had just been kidnapped.

Chapter Nine

Aiden was under a full head of steam as he stormed his way through the fish festival crowd. When he found Frankie, he was going to explain that she was being an idiot. Which would probably go over well. Aiden liked having the edge, the advantage in negotiations. And Frankie's weakness was when she let her emotions off the leash. Mad, turned on, that's when she was vulnerable to suggestion.

It was callous, calculating. But he was a Kilbourn. It's what they did.

He spotted her on the sidewalk, and his calculations disappeared as if they'd never been when he saw the fear on her face. She was hailing a cab.

"Franchesca!" he pushed his way to her just as a rusty ZR van clunked to a stop in front of her. There were a half dozen people already on it.

"Aiden!" She grabbed his arm. "Get in!"

Instinctively, he followed her onto the torn-up vinyl of a bench seat.

"What's wrong? What happened?"

"Where you going?" the driver asked.

"Follow that car," Frankie announced, pointing at taillights ahead.

The ZR lurched to a start, and Aiden braced his hand on the seat in front of him. "What in the hell is going on?" he demanded.

"They took Chip." Her breath was coming in heaves as she peered over the front seat...

"What? Who took Chip?"

"I don't know. One second he was standing on the sidewalk, and the next, someone was dragging him into a minivan."

Aiden yanked his phone out. And dialed Chip's number. There was no answer.

A bell rang and the ZR jerked to a stop in front of a sports bar.

"Why are we stopping?" Frankie asked. "They're getting away!"

"Lady, this is a Zed-R. We stop for everyone."

A man dressed in all white with a hand carved cane climbed out of the back and over Frankie to the door. The van sat as he shuffled his way across the street toward the bar.

Aiden reached for his money clip. "How much for no more stops?" he questioned, handing twenties to the remaining passengers.

"I can be late," a woman with a sleeping toddler in her lap said with a smile stuffing the twenty into her bra.

"WooHoo!" A man in an orange and black Hawaiian shirt with a peeling sunburn on his nose and forehead triumphantly held up his twenty. "I love this country! I'm getting' paid to take public transportation."

"Whatever you say, mister," the driver said, accepting his bill and flooring it.

The minivan was well out of sight and Franchesca was practically vibrating beside him. Aiden slid an arm around her shoulder, anchoring her to his side.

The ZR shuffled forward slowly building speed like a freight train. The driver cranked up the volume of a reggae song and merrily swerved around a trio of potholes. Aiden dialed Chip again. Still nothing.

He swore quietly, his brain turning over the problem. *Who would take Chip the night before his wedding, and why?*

"Franchesca, tell me everything you remember," he said, squeezing her shoulder.

"Everything I remember? Our friend was just dragged off the sidewalk into a fucking van!" Conversation in the ZR shut down as everyone leaned in to listen.

“I got that part already. Now, walk me through everything that you saw.”

She went over it again and then once more as the van careened north. Her body shifting against his around turns.

“The driver—he looked at me when I called for Chip—he had a gold tooth and a dirty red cap. But he had it pulled low over his face. That’s all I saw. I didn’t see who grabbed Chip, but the drunk dumbass stuck his head right in the van. He made it easy for them.”

They careened around a sharp turn, slipping into a traffic circle six inches in front of a city bus. The driver tooted the horn in either a friendly thank you or a fuck off. Aiden couldn’t tell.

Frankie’s hands were white knuckled on the seatback in front of her.

“Are you sure he didn’t get in willingly?” Aiden asked squeezing her arm.

She shook her head. “I didn’t hear him scream or anything, but he didn’t climb into that van by himself. Everyone he knows here is back at the fish stand. Who would do this?”

It was a question Aiden had been asking himself. Chip Randolph was squeaky clean. No gambling debts, no secret second lives. Just a trust fund kid amiably enjoying his very privileged world. Aiden scrolled through everything he and Chip had discussed in the past few weeks. Had his friend mentioned any issues? Any squabbles in the family? At work?

“You don’t think Pru’s dad would have done this. Do you?” Frankie asked, eyes wide.

“He hates Chip,” Aiden conceded. “But I don’t see R.L. Stockton plotting an abduction. He’d stick it to Chip in the prenup.”

“Which he did,” Frankie pointed out.

“That he did,” Aiden agreed. He’d cautioned Chip against signing it, but his friend wouldn’t hear of it.

“Still, maybe something Chip did pissed R.L. off?” Franchesca mused.

There was a loud bang, and the ZR slowed. Smoke rose from its engine. The driver swore over the reggae pouring from the speakers as the dashboard lit up with warning lights. He pulled off to the side of the road and jumped out, a small fire extinguisher in his hand.

“Get out,” Aiden said, nudging Frankie to the door.

“How are we going to catch them?” she asked, ducking to hop out of the door and the hem of her dress rose indecently high over the curve of her ass. Aiden gripped the material and pulled down as he pushed her out of the vehicle. “We can’t give up.” She slapped at his hand.

“We’re not giving up,” Aiden insisted. “We’re refocusing. Come on.” They left the van and its now ride-less occupants and started walking briskly.

The night air was thick with humidity. He could hear the steady thrum of ocean waves on the beach over a thousand tree frogs chirping.

“Shouldn’t we be heading north?” Frankie asked, trotting in her heels to keep up with him.

Aiden slowed his pace in the hopes that she wouldn’t break both ankles.

“We’re not going to be able to catch them.”

“So where are we going?”

“I don’t know, Franchesca. I need to think.”

He hadn’t brought any security with him, doubted that the Randolphs or Stocktons had either. The hotel had its own. Why would they need a personal security detail in paradise? He cursed himself for it now. His friend was missing, and he had no one but the local authorities to turn to.

Frankie stumbled and yelped.

“Your shoes are ridiculous.”

“I wasn’t planning on walking eighteen miles tonight.”

“Clearly,” he said dryly. He stepped in front of her. “Get on.”

“I beg your pardon?” She sounded haughty as a queen who had just been asked to perform the Cupid Shuffle.

“Hop on and save your feet.”

“You’re not lugging me around Barbados on your back, Aide,” Frankie argued.

“Get on my back now, or I throw you over my shoulder and show the entire island your pretty pink thong.”

She hopped nimbly onto his back, her thighs settling on his hips, arms wrapping around his shoulders.

“This isn’t exactly how I saw the night going,” Aiden announced conversationally. He cupped his hands behind his back under her ass. “I thought I’d have you on your back.”

She pinched him through the crisp cotton of his button down. “Hilarious, big guy. Fucking hilarious. Come up with a plan yet?”

“Still thinking,” he said, boosting her up higher.

“I don’t think it was random,” Frankie said thoughtfully. “I don’t think it was like ‘Hey, nice watch, now get in my van.’”

“Which means he was specifically targeted,” Aiden added.

“This is going to crush Pru,” Franchesca said half to herself. “She loves him so damn much. Did you know that when he broke up with her after college, she couldn’t get out of bed for a week? We just laid there and stared at the ceiling. She wouldn’t eat, wouldn’t get dressed. She didn’t even really talk for days. Her dad had the family doctor visiting her every day.”

Aiden felt the stirring of guilt. “I didn’t realize she cared so much for him back then.” He hadn’t. Had thought she’d been indifferent and immature.

“He crushed her when he left, and it took her a long time to get back on her feet. Now, if I were her, I would have spent the rest of my life hating him. But not Pru. She never stopped loving him. And now here we are in paradise for their wedding all these years later, and look what happens.”

“We’ll get him back,” Aiden promised.

“Do you think they’ll hurt him?” Her arms tightened around him.

Aiden heard the fear in her tone and reacted to it. “No,” he said, his voice gruff. “Odds are they took him for money. They lose their bargaining tool if they rough him up or—”

“Or worse,” she finished for him.

“They’re supposed to get married tomorrow. What am I going to tell her? God, why would anyone do this? Money? Ransom? Oh, Jesus. He doesn’t have ties to the mob, does he?”

“Doubtful,” Aiden said wryly.

They heard the groaning of brakes as a city bus eased to a stop beside them. Aiden let Frankie slip off his back to the ground. “Let’s go get some answers.”

Chapter Ten

As much as Frankie enjoyed seeing all six-feet four-inches of Aiden Kilbourn crammed onto a bus seat, nothing could take away the icy feeling in her stomach. Someone had taken her friend right in front of her and who knew what was happening to him right now. She hated the not knowing.

Her phone buzzed from inside her clutch.

“Oh, shit.” She showed the screen to Aiden.

“Answer it. Maybe someone contacted her?”

“Hey, Pru,” Frankie said.

“Where are you, Frankenstein?” It was Pru’s drunken moniker for drunken Frankie.

Frankie eyed Aiden for a moment. He shrugged. “I’m with Aiden,” she said.

“Ohmygod. I knew it!” Pru’s shriek put a couple of pin holes in Frankie’s eardrum. “I knew you two would hit it off. I’m like literally the smartest person ever.”

“The smartest,” Frankie agreed.

“Ask her about Chip,” Aiden whispered.

Frankie held the phone out so Aiden could listen too. “Sorry for bailing on you. Is everyone else still there?” she asked.

“Well, I think so. Margeaux passed out under the picnic table, so we had the driver carry her back to the car. And I haven’t seen Chip for a little while. I think he went to the bathroom a few minutes ago.”

Frankie covered the phone with her hand. “That’s Pru’s drunk clock. She couldn’t tell time right now if there was a Birkin bag on the line,” she explained to Aiden.

“We need them back at the resort with security,” Aiden told her.

Frankie nodded, not wanting to consider the possibility that Chip's disappearance was just the beginning. "Is anyone there sober?" she asked.

"Oh sure. Lotsa people. There's this guy over here. He's got poodles on his shirt. I think he's sober."

"No, I mean a person you know."

"Huh?"

Oh, for the love of god. Why was talking to a drunk adult harder than prying information out of a kindergartener? "Is Cressida there?" Cressida had the tolerance of an Eastern European man, a big one.

"Sure! Watercress! Phone's for you!" Pru crooned.

"Yes? What is it you want?" Cressida answered.

"Cressida, it's Frankie. I need you to keep a close eye on Pru."

"Why? Will she attempt a crime?"

"No, nothing like that. Just... don't let anything happen to her."

"That is annoyingly vague," Cressida said.

"Yeah, I know. But I can't help it. Can you get them all back to the resort? Just tell them that's where the after party is."

"I will do this. Mainly because my feet hurt, and I would like to swim naked in the lap pool."

"Uh, okay. Great?"

"Goodbye now."

Aiden snatched the phone out of Frankie's hand. "Just a minute, Cressida. Put Pruitt on the phone again."

They heard wild laughter and some yelling.

"Hellooooooo!" Pruitt sang into the phone.

"Pruitt, it's Aiden," he said.

"Aiden! I knew you and Frankie would fall madly in love! I totally knew it! I even told Chip so. Chip? Chip!"

Frankie covered her face with her hands. “She thinks her fiancé is going to come running.”

“Pruitt, do you need Frankie or me for the rest of the night?” Aiden asked.

“Ooooh la la! No!”

Aiden glanced at Frankie. “Good, then I’ll keep her to myself a little longer. Get some sleep tonight,” he ordered.

“Yes, sir! I hope you two don’t get any sleep if you know what I mean,” Pruitt yelled.

The entire bus knew what Pru meant even without the help of speakerphone. “Great. Thanks a lot, Aide. Now she thinks we’re banging on a beach somewhere.” Frankie shoved the phone back in her impractical clutch.

“It’s better than knowing the truth at this point.”

“*At this point?*” Frankie screeched. “At what *point* do we call the cops? At what *point* do we have to sit Pru down and tell her the wedding isn’t happening.”

“Calm down.”

“Oh yeah, because saying that to a person who’s freaking out *always* helps.”

“Franchesca.” He gripped her chin and made her look at him. “I will fix this. I will find Chip, but I need your help. We’re in a foreign country. Yes, quite possibly the friendliest foreign country in the hemisphere, but it’s still different from the United States. How many drunken tourists do you think stumble off and disappear for a few hours? How many men fight with their wives and jump in a cab to go someplace else?”

“But that’s not what happened,” Frankie argued.

“You and I both know that. But a local cop is going to tell you to sit and wait for him to show up.”

The hell she’d do that.

Half an hour and what felt like sixty-four bus stops later, they were back at Oistins. The crowds were thinner now nearing

midnight and even more inebriated than when they'd left before. But the cab line was busy. Frankie suggested they split up to cover more ground, but Aiden wasn't having it. He stuck by her side like a shadow as she quizzed the first two cab drivers. Had they seen this man? She showed them a picture of Chip taken earlier that day. No, they hadn't. How about a van driver with a gold tooth? No.

It went like that for an hour. No, no, no. No one had seen anything or anyone. There was, of course, the helpful cab driver who announced that all drunk tourists look the same to him, which drew laughter from his friends. But it didn't help.

Frankie was losing hope fast. Every minute felt like Chip was getting farther and farther away from them. He could be anywhere on the island by this point.

She saw the cop whistling on the corner and remembered Aiden's warning. "Fuck it," she whispered, ducking away from Aiden as he quizzed a couple of local fish fryers near the sidewalk.

"Excuse me, officer?"

He tore his eyes away from the in-progress argument that was happening over a parking space. "Yes, ma'am."

"My friend is missing."

"Um-hm." His gaze was back on the two women and the parking space. He clearly wasn't impressed by her story.

"I saw him get taken by someone in a van. He was kidnapped right here about an hour ago."

The cop sighed. He lifted the brim of his hat and wiped his brow. "Miss, just because someone gets into a van doesn't mean they've been kidnapped. They're called ZRs, and they're public transportation. Maybe your friend went back to the hotel early."

"No, you don't understand. He's getting married tomorrow, and he wouldn't do that. He wouldn't leave his fiancée and not tell her where he was going."

The shouting at the parking space got louder. Horns were honking in the street as the argument spilled into traffic. The yelling turned to shrieking as one woman grabbed a fistful of braids and yanked.

The cop sighed, swearing under his breath. He yanked a whistle out of his pocket and blew it furiously as he ran into the fray.

Frustrated, she turned and found Aiden standing much too close to her. He didn't say a word, but his face did the talking for him.

"Yeah, yeah. You told me so. I get it."

"They're not going to take a disappearance seriously for at least twenty-four hours."

"Fine, smarty pants. What do we do now? We lost the van. We have no idea where he could be or what they want with him or even who they are."

Aiden's phone rang and he fished it out of his pocket. "Unknown number," he read from the screen.

"Maybe it has something to do with Chip," Frankie said, eyes full of hope and dread.

"Kilbourn," he answered. Frankie snatched the phone away from him and hit the speaker button.

A garbled voice on the other end of the call chuckled. "Well, well, Aiden. It looks like we have some business to do after all."

"Who is this?" he demanded.

"That's not important. What is important is the fact that we have a mutual acquaintance."

"Where's Chip? Why did you take him?"

The voice laughed. "I'm going to fuck him up when I meet him," Frankie hissed.

"Patience. All will be revealed."

"Who does he think he is? A Bond villain?" Frankie hissed.

Aiden rolled his eyes and mouthed the words “Shut up.”

“If you hurt him or so much as mess up his hair, I will hunt you down,” Aiden promised.

“Then let’s not let it come to that,” the robotic voice on the other end said amicably. “What I want is easily within your grasp of giving. You give me what I want, I give you your friend back, and we all go home happy.”

“What is it you want?” Aiden asked.

“I want you to be ready for a meeting tomorrow. I’ll contact you with the time and place.”

“A meeting?” Aiden repeated.

“It’s just business. Nothing personal. Oh, and don’t tell anyone. No cops, no security. Just you, me, and Chip.”

The call disconnected and Aiden swore.

“Christ. Now what the hell do we do?” Frankie asked. “They make contact and give us nothing? Why didn’t they ask for money?”

“Because they don’t want money,” Aiden said quietly.

Frankie stopped in her tracks. “It’s you isn’t it? This isn’t about Chip at all. They called you because you have what they want.”

Aiden wouldn’t meet her gaze.

Chapter Eleven

“Great. Just fucking great. You do something stupid or illegal or whatever, and innocent people have to pay the price. My best friend’s wedding is ruined, her fiancé is missing, and now we have to wait until tomorrow to find out who has him and what they want?”

Frankie ticked off the infractions on her fingers. And Aiden rubbed a hand over his forehead. He’d feel guilty if necessary later. Right now, he needed answers.

“Jesus, Franchesca. Will you shut up for two seconds so I can think?”

“Think? How about we do something? How about we find the driver with the stupid gold tooth and dirty red ball cap and beat the ever-living shit out of him until he talks?”

“By all means. Go ahead and find him. Call me when you do,” Aiden snapped back.

“Do you mean Papi, miss?”

Frankie and Aiden both whirled around. And then looked down. The boy couldn’t have been more than twelve or thirteen. Skinny with a big grin. He wore a white short-sleeved Oxford and neatly pressed khaki shorts. The ball cap he wore on his head was clean but rakishly askew.

“Papi?”

“Yeah, gold tooth.” The kid pointed to his own pristine front tooth. Gray hair. Greasy hat that looks like it was used to soak up motor oil? Calls all the ladies Mami?”

Frankie dug her fingers into Aiden’s arm. “That’s him.”

“Does he drive a white van with a red square sticker by the taillight?” Aiden asked.

The kid’s head bobbed. “Oh sure. He borrows it from his brother-in-law sometimes when he has a driving job.”

“Where can we find Papi?” Aiden asked.

“You want a taxi? Glass bottom boat ride?” the kid asked.

“No—”

He snapped his fingers. “I know. Swim with the turtles. Snorkeling, lunch, lots of rum punch.”

“No—”

“Ah, drugs then? I can get you better than Papi,” the kid promised.

“Excuse me?” Frankie blinked at him.

“Ganja, coke, X—”

A natural born salesman, Aiden decided.

“Christ kid,” Frankie groaned. “Look, we need to find Papi he knows where a friend of ours is.”

The kid clammed up.

Frankie looked like she was going to shake him like a ragdoll until he coughed up some answers. Aiden put his hand on her arm. “Let me handle this businessman to businessman.” He opened his wallet. “You look like an entrepreneur who recognizes a good opportunity.”

* * *

“Are you even old enough to drive?” Frankie asked clutching the back of the passenger seat as the little van climbed a steep hill.

The boy—Antonio, their new personal tour guide—shrugged and laid on the horn as a car swerved into their path to avoid a pothole the size of a city block in Manhattan. “What’s really in an age?” he waxed philosophically. “Over there is where my grandfather grew up.” He said pointing into the dark. “And Rhianna, too.”

Aiden's wallet was significantly lighter thanks to Antonio's entrepreneurial nature.

"We don't need the full island tour," Aiden reminded him mildly. "We're looking for Papi."

"Papi's got five, six rum shops he hits after a good night's work."

"Does Papi kidnap people often?" Frankie wanted to know.

Aiden laid his hand over her thigh and squeezed, telegraphing a message to shut the hell up.

"Papi's like... what do you call them? A jack of all trades? He does whatever needs doing. Then he goes and celebrates."

"At a rum shop," Aiden filled in.

"Exactly. First one coming up." He pointed at the shack on their left. It sat smack against the road with six generous inches of sidewalk between its occupants and the stampede of traffic. He yanked the parking brake and opened the door.

"You can't just park in the middle of the road," Frankie protested.

"Lady, this is Barbados. We park wherever."

They piled out after him, and Aiden put a possessive arm around Frankie's shoulders. Who knew what they were walking into or how friendly the welcome would be when word got out why they were looking for Papi. Antonio pushed open the door. Its hinges creaked in protest.

"Come on."

It was surprisingly clean inside. The wood floor was neatly swept. The miniscule bar jutted out from the corner eating up most of the space in the twelve by twelve room. All five of the patrons stopped what they were doing to stare.

"Anyone seen Papi tonight?" Antonio asked.

They stared some more. The bartender spoke first. Aiden thought it was English, but the jumble of words and phrasing was beyond him. The kid answered in kind, and Frankie met Aiden's gaze over Antonio's head.

“Not here. Come on, let’s go,” Antonio said, grabbing Frankie’s hand and pulling her toward the door.

“What was that?” Frankie asked as Antonio towed her back to the van, Aiden behind her.

“What was what?”

“That language you were speaking.”

Antonio laughed and they climbed back in the van. “That’s Bajan slang. Everyone speaks it. Come on, let’s go. Birdspeed.”

“Birdspeed?” Frankie asked.

“Yeah, quick fast.” He nodded.

They barreled down the road at “birdspeed” before Aiden could ask the question. “Had anyone there seen Papi?”

Antonio shook his head, bouncing in his seat over a bump. “No. No Papi there tonight. We’re trying the next rum shop.”

“How many rum shops are there?” Frankie asked.

“About fifteen hundred,” Antonio answered without batting an eye.

They hit four of the fifteen hundred in half an hour. It was midnight now, and Aiden was beginning to wonder if the kid was taking them on a wild goose chase. Frankie was dejected beside him. She didn’t even fight it when he pulled her into his side.

At least not until the zombie-like moan erupted from behind them. Frankie shrieked and put up her hands like she was going to karate chop the zombie while Aiden tried to push her away from the danger.

It was a man, not a zombie, that slowly rose from the rear bench seat.

“You okay back there, Uncle?” Antonio called.

The man grumbled something incoherent. He raised a small bottle of rum to his mouth, gulped some down, and then collapsed back on the seat.

“That’s my Uncle Renshaw,” Antonio announced.

“What the hell’s wrong with Uncle Renshaw?” Frankie demanded, reluctant to lower her hands.

“He got a big fare. Six tourists. Americans. They needed a ride up north. Big money.”

“Looks like he celebrated a little hard,” Aiden commented.

Frankie slapped a hand on his leg. “That’s it!”

“What’s it?”

“He’d make more cash kidnapping someone than just driving a tourist around, right?”

“Presumably.”

Frankie leaned between the front seats. “Antonio, where would Papi go if he had some real cash? Where would he celebrate?”

Chapter Twelve

Big Chuck's Groceries, Fish, Lotto, and Rum Shop was a ramshackle abode perched atop a steep hill with what was probably a breathtaking view of the Caribbean. However, seeing as how it was pitch dark and there were no street lights, Frankie could only assume the view was beautiful.

"I have to pee," she announced. "You two look for Papi, and I'll meet you in the bar."

Frankie found the tiny bathroom crammed in between shelves of canned goods and bags of cookies and chips. The whole place smelled like fried fish sandwiches. And when her stomach growled, she remembered how much of her dinner she'd left on her plate back at Uncle George's. A lifetime ago, when all she had to worry about was Aiden's hand on her leg. She wondered if Cressida had devoured Hot Surfer Guy.

Leaving the bathroom, she stopped and ordered four fish sandwiches and a round of Cokes to go. Holding the greasy paper bag, she went in search of Aiden and Antonio. She found them in a conference with Aiden staring at his phone in a dark corner of the nearly lightless bar. It was a ramshackle shed held together with sheet metal, wood, and prayers. The floor was dirt. The bar was greasy. And there were only a handful of wooden stools for seating.

"What's going on? Is he here?" Frankie asked.

Antonio pointed to a man holding court at the center of the bar. Dirty red hat? Check. Glinting gold tooth? Oh, hell yeah.

"What are we doing over here when he's right there?" she hissed, pointing wildly.

"He's not interested in talking," Aiden said succinctly. Clearly he was pissed. The tic in his stupid perfect jaw was working overtime.

"Yeah, he told Mr. Money Bags here to *leff he*."

"Translation?"

“Leave him alone,” Antonio supplied.

“We’re going to have to do this the hard way,” Aiden said, dialing the phone.

“What’s the hard way?”

“I’m hiring some private security who won’t ask too many questions about why we need this asshole to talk.”

“Private security? Are you going all Blackwater right now?” Frankie hissed.

“Let me handle this,” Aiden insisted. “We’re not leaving without answers.” He turned and walked out of the bar.

Fuckity fuck fuck fuck. Frankie watched Papi, the big man with his circle of friends, buying rounds, telling stories.

She shoved the bag of fish sandwiches at Antonio. “Hold these, don’t eat mine, and go find Aiden. I’ll meet you outside in a minute,” she ordered. She sidled up to Papi and his gang. They made way for her, eagerly parting like the sea for Moses.

“Papi, Papi, Papi, you’re a hard man to find.” He was in his late sixties, she guessed, by the fuzzy gray hair under the hat and the softly wrinkled skin around his eyes. He had dark dots on both cheekbones, grizzly stubble on his weak jaw.

“Hey, Mami. What can ol’ Papi do for you. Bradley, a drink for my lady friend.”

Frankie took the vacated bar stool next to him and picked up the rum the bartender poured for her.

“Papi, you took my friend. You can tell me where he is.”

Papi laughed, and after a second, the rest of his friends joined in. “I already tol’ your friend. I don’ want his money. I don’ need his money. You get me?”

“If you don’t want money, what do you want?” Frankie said, lowering her voice to a flirtatious purr.

“I’ve got me mates, me rum, and a good story for the day. What more do a man want?” Papi asked.

“How about another story?” Frankie offered.

“I’m listenin’.”

Frankie was desperate. The man had information she needed, and if she didn’t get it out of him the nice way, Aiden was going to throw tens of thousands at some mercenaries to drag the truth out of him.

She leaned in and whispered her offer to him. Papi’s eyes widened to the size of the soggy coasters on the bar.

“You tell me everything you know in return?” Frankie asked, clarifying.

He nodded as if in a trance. “Oh yeah. You got a deal. But you first.”

Frankie shot a glance at the door to the grocery and made sure Aiden and Antonio were nowhere to be seen.

“A deal’s a deal,” she said, untying the halter top to her dress.

Her unbound breasts enjoyed the temporary freedom and the weak breeze pushed down from the drooping ceiling fan above. Papi’s jaw dropped, hypnotized. The rest of his cronies followed suit.

She counted to five, making sure everyone had seen what needed to be seen and then tied her dress neatly back in place. She downed the shot of rum in one swallow and slapped the glass back on the bar.

“Drinks for everyone,” Papi announced coming out of his breast trance and tossing his arms in the air. The crowd cheered.

“Talk, Papi,” Frankie insisted.

“Okay. Alls I know is dis guy calls me up and says he got a driving job for me. He needs me to pick up his frien’ at Oistins. Oh, and his frien’ might not want to get in the car so I should bring some help.”

“He asked you to kidnap someone.”

“No, no, no! Dis man, he gives me your friend’s number. I call him and tell him I have a surprise for him. Drunk Americans

are not bright, not bright!” Papi pointed a gnarled finger at Frankie.

“Preaching to the choir, Papi. Keep talking.”

“So, he’s like ‘Cool, man. A surprise.’ An I’m like, I’ll see you on the sidewalk. I’m in a white van. And he went there willingly, and my frien’ helped your frien’ into the van, and that’s that.”

Poor, stupid, drunk Chip.

“Where’d you take him?”

“Rockley Ridge Resort by Sandy Lane. But good luck getting’ in dere. Some big to-do tonight. All Hollywood an’ stuff. Lotsa security.”

“Who took Chip off your hands when you got to the resort?”

Papi shrugged and pushed another glass of rum at her. “Don’ know. He did not feel the need to introduce himself. He pay me. I leave.”

“What did he look like?”

“Big burly like guy. Like a bear. I dunno. But he was just hired muscle, I think. He said his boss would be happy.”

“What did they do with Chip?” Frankie asked.

Papi tapped her glass with his and they drank.

“Ahhh, that’s the good stuff,” Papi hissed out. “Anyway, your friend was sleepin’. He passed out drunk on the ride. So, the big guy carried him toward the elevators like a bride.”

“And you left and came here.”

“To celebrate an easy night’s work.”

“Thanks for your time, Papi,” Frankie said, sliding off the stool.

“Thanks for your boobs,” he said enthusiastically.

“Yeah, yeah.”

She found Aiden and the kid pacing the sliver of front porch of the shop. Aiden was dialing. Antonio was munching on a fish

sandwich.

She plucked her own sandwich out of the bag and grabbed one of the Cokes she'd stashed in there. "Call off the cavalry, Aide. We got a location."

Aiden hung up the phone. "Where?"

"Rockley Ridge Resort," Frankie announced, pleased with her investigative abilities.

"Let's go!" Antonio said, waving them toward the van. "My uncle will wake up soon and want to go home."

"The fourth sandwich is his," Frankie told him.

"Thanks, Frankie. You're a hell of a girl," Antonio said, wrestling the wheel one-handed while clutching his sandwich in the other.

"Here. You might as well eat," Frankie said, handing Aiden another sandwich.

"How'd you get him to talk?" Aiden asked, peeling back the wrapper and eyeing the fish.

Frankie looked everywhere else but his face. "I asked, and he told me."

"Bullshit," Aiden said.

"I told him what information I needed, and he was happy to share," she lied.

"So, you're not going to tell me how you dragged the information out of him when he turned down a thousand bucks just a few minutes earlier?" Aiden pressed.

"I guess some things are worth more than money," Frankie said innocently.

"Kid, you know anything about the Rockley Resort?"

Antonio whistled. "FAN-cy. Good security, too," he said cagily.

Frankie whipped out her phone, praying it still had a charge. It was dead. "Shit. Gimme your phone, Kilbourn."

He handed it over, and Frankie opened the browser. “Why were you googling me? Creeper!” She slapped Aiden’s arm. His last tab was an image search of her.

“I told you. I’m interested in you, and when I’m interested in something, I do my research.”

“First of all, I’m a someone, not a something, buddy. Secondly, where do these pictures come from?”

“Social media mostly,” Aiden said, leaning over her shoulder to look.

“Excuse me, guys,” Antonio called from the driver seat. “I think you’re getting off track.”

Uncle gurgled from the backseat and dragged himself into a seated position. He cleared his throat. “Ah ah HEM!”

Frankie handed him the bag with the last sandwich and Coke.

Uncle nodded his thanks and dug in.

“Right. I’ll yell at Aiden later.” Frankie decided. She typed in the resort’s name and hit the news tab.

“Double shit. This is not good. Little Miss Trellenwy—what the hell kind of name is that? You rich people are the worst at naming kids.”

“Back to the matter at hand,” Aiden nudged her.

“Right. Trellenwy Bostick, Hollywood star and heiress to Napa Valley wine fortune got married there today,” she said reading from a gossip site. “So far no pics because the security’s too tight. How are we getting in there?”

“I can get you over the wall about a half kilometer down. You’ll have to fight your way through some vegetation, but you can come out on the beach,” Antonio put in.

“Antonio, I hope you only use your powers for good,” Aiden said to the boy.

“Mostly good,” Antonio promised.

“We can’t sneak into a wedding like this,” Frankie said looking down at her mini dress.

“What else do you have with you?” Aiden asked.

“Nothing good enough to crash high society except for my bridesmaid dress.”

He stroked a hand over the hair on his chin. “That’ll do.”

Chapter Thirteen

Frankie didn't know who Aiden called or how they managed it, but as Antonio buzzed up to the front door of their hotel, the concierge was waiting outside with two garment bags.

Aiden swung the side door on the minivan open just wide enough to grab the bags and throw cash at the man, and then they were off again.

Uncle was snoring peacefully in the backseat having washed down his fish and Coke with the rest of the rum.

"If this dress gets wrecked, Pru is going to kill me, and then she's going to kill you because I'm going to tell her this is all your fault," Frankie announced. She slid onto the bench seat behind Aiden and unzipped the bag to reveal the reason behind her second part-time job. The two-thousand-dollar bridesmaid dress. The one Pru had offered to buy for her. The one Frankie insisted on buying herself even though her fingers physically cramped while signing the credit card slip. The gold sequined V-neck gown cost more than the entire rest of her wardrobe combined.

He turned around. "What makes you think this is my fault?" Aiden demanded.

"Eyes up front, mister. Both of you," she said, when Antonio adjusted the rearview mirror. "I'm saying it was your idea to use the wedding clothes to sneak into another wedding. I'm sure Pru's no bruises, no cuts, no hickeys also extends to no destroying your couture."

Aiden slid over in his seat to block the kid's view. Frankie did her best to shimmy into the dress while keeping everything important covered with her mini dress. Finally in the gown, but without the proper undergarments, she twisted in the seat.

"Zip me, Aide?" she asked, offering her back to him.

She peered over her shoulder as he abandoned the buttons on his Oxford shirt, leaving it delectably open. Regrettably, she'd

missed him getting into his pants.

She felt his hand at her hip, holding her in place while he guided the zipper up to the middle of her back. Her flesh burned where his hand still lingered, and she scooted away from him.

She'd already come to her senses once tonight. Once was more than enough where kajillionaire ladies' man Aiden was concerned. Besides, they had a groom to find.

"Rockley straight ahead," Antonio announced, pointing in the direction of the van's headlights.

"Drive past it and then turn around," Aiden ordered peering through the window into the night.

The resort was walled off quite literally by a tall stucco wall painted a soft, sandy yellow. It seemed to go on for a mile. Not only was the gate closed, but there were half a dozen security people standing at attention in front of it.

"Who did you say was getting married?" Aiden asked Frankie.

Frankie consulted his phone. "Trellenwy Bostick. Technically she and her groom got married last weekend in Napa at her family's vineyard. This is the party. Ultra-exclusive, all the non-wedding guests at the resort had to sign non-disclosure agreements," she read. "Private security to ensure Trellenwy's privacy. Blah blah blah. Basically, we're screwed."

Antonio drove past the resort and pulled into a gravel parking lot that flanked the beach. "I can get you in," he announced confidently.

"What are you going to do? Forge us an invitation?" Frankie asked.

"Me and my brother used to walk to the resort on the beach. Sold a few bracelets before security chased us out."

"The beach will be crawling with security," Aiden pointed out.

"Yeah, but between the road and the beach is like a jungle. Trees, bushes, no lights," Antonio grinned.

“And if the gate is guarded and the beach is guarded, no one will be looking in the jungle,” Frankie said triumphantly.

“Exactly. Hang on, guys.” Antonio floored the old van past the hotel gate as if he were a man on a mission.

“Slow down, desperado,” Frankie yelled.

“If we go by all slow and pokey, they’re gonna get suspicious.”

Aiden laughed softly.

“I’m going to let you out down here, further away from the hotel in case you make a lot of noise climbing the wall.”

“Let’s do this.” Frankie wedged her feet into her incredibly impractical wedding heels. She hoped the jungle was more of a neatly trimmed landscape that she wouldn’t break both ankles exploring.

Aiden eyed her in the dark interior of the van. “Maybe you should stay put. Let me go find Chip.”

“Please. Like I’m going to let you go in there alone. Besides, a couple dressed for a wedding will be a hell of a lot less suspicious than James Friggin’ Bond wandering up the beach in a tux. You’re not leaving me.”

He looked like he wanted to argue further but wisely shut his mouth when Antonio swerved across the road and pulled up to the curb. “Good luck, guys.”

Aiden pulled out another bill from his billfold. “You’ve been immeasurably helpful tonight, Antonio.”

The kid pocketed the money cheerfully. “If you get caught, don’t mention my name.”

Frankie threw him a salute as she stepped out the door. “Thanks, kid.”

“Here’s my card.” Antonio shoved a business card out the window at her. “Call me anytime you need anything.”

Frankie took it and tucked it into her clutch. “That kid is either going to end up running a drug cartel or a small country

someday,” she predicted as she watched the taillights recede in the dark.

“Uh-huh,” Aiden said, noncommittally. “How good are you at climbing walls?”

It turned out not very. She ended up needing a boost from Aiden, whose hand lingered a lot longer than necessary on her ass. But in the end, she made it up and over, landing hard enough to knock the wind out of her. The sound of snagging chiffon on the way down made her wince. She was still gasping for breath when Aiden nimbly landed beside her, her shoes in his hand.

“You okay?” he asked, pulling her to her feet.

“Fine. Totally fine,” she wheezed. She stepped away from the flowering shrub she’d flattened with her comical landing and brushed the dirt off of the skirt of her dress. She’d felt the fabric tear as she flopped over the wall graceful as a humpback whale and hoped she hadn’t done any real damage. Pru would kill her... if there was a wedding to be killed over. “Crap! I tore the skirt. It’s okay. I can fix it.”

“Come on,” Aiden whispered. He grabbed her hand and led the way into the dark.

Frankie couldn’t see shit. But Aiden seemed to have night vision, pulling her through the vegetation and around trees in the scant moonlight. The peepers chirped in a loud, never-ending serenade to the night. The air was thick with exotic fragrances. Aiden’s feet were sure beneath him while she tripped over roots and branches and god knew what that weird squishy thing was. All that she could see was the broad shadow of Aiden’s shoulders in front of her as he towed her through the forest.

They were getting closer to the ocean. She could hear the waves, taste the tang of salt on the air. Aiden stopped in front of her and she walked into his broad back.

She heard the far-off beat of club music.

Up ahead, through leafy palm fronds and a smattering of moonlight, Frankie could see lights. Purple and silver flashes

seemed to pulse to the thrumming beat of music. Someone had brought L.A.'s hottest club to paradise or at least a very expensive DJ to an heiress's second wedding.

"I think we've found the party," Aiden said quietly.

"Okay, so what are we supposed to do?" Frankie asked. "Roll up out of the shrubs and order a round of shots?"

"Tequila or whiskey?" he asked.

"Tequila is always the answer."

"Let's try to get a little closer," Aiden said. "Then we'll discuss our bar order."

"Wait, what's our backstory? Who are you? Who am I? How do we know Trel?"

"Trel?" Aiden asked, his lips quirking on one side.

"Obviously if we're her friends we don't call her Trellewy."
Duh.

"Fine. I'm an old friend of Trellewy, and you're my date."

"Why aren't I an old friend of Trellewy?" Frankie demanded. Her foot caught on a thick root and she went sprawling to the ground. "Oh, man! How am I going to get poison berry juice out of this?" she rubbed at the stain from the plant she'd landed on. It looked like the period fairy had pointed her wand all over Frankie's hip. "Crap. Okay. I can fix this. I'll soak it in... something."

Aiden sighed. "Franchesca, what's more believable? A socialite has an acquaintance with a wealthy New York business owner with a reputation for dating women just like her or the daughter of Brooklyn deli owners?"

"Excuse me. Are you saying I can't pass for upper class?" Frankie challenged.

"Shut up."

He clamped a hand over her wrist and dragged her forward, skirting the lights and music.

It was nearly one a.m. in paradise, and she had a sexy, crazy rich bachelor who could have made a lucrative career out of being beautiful dragging her around in the dark. Frankie should have been squealing with joy on the inside. Instead? She was pissed. Annoyed at the whole thing. That someone would take Chip. That she couldn't "pass" for being some dumb socialite with more money than street smarts. That some security guard would potentially believe Aiden would have a better chance of knowing Trellewy. That they didn't exist in the same worlds. And she didn't know why that mattered.

Sure, she could let Mr. Big Deal Kilbourn put his hands on her. But in the eyes of the entire world, she was the lesser partner here. He had the power, the control. He'd tire of her and move on, as he had with every other woman in his life.

The sound of the waves was louder now. The lights and thump of the music was behind them. She could see moonlight dancing on the ocean through the trees that separated them from the beach. There was no more talking now. They were just a billionaire and his nameless date out for a late-night stroll.

A twig snapped under her foot, and Aiden swore quietly. He turned and pulled Frankie against him. She wanted to tell him to get his damn hands off of her. To go to hell.

He took her down to the sand in a move so smooth she barely felt the shift in her gravity.

"What are you doing?" she hissed as he covered her body with his. She shoved at his shoulders and froze when she felt his cock twitch against her as it hardened.

He didn't bother answering her before his mouth crushed down on hers. She wasn't prepared. Couldn't have prepared. Not for the rush of heat that washed through her, the electricity that coursed through her. His lips were strong and firm, demanding. But Frankie wasn't one to give up the upper hand. She gripped his lapels and fought for control of the kiss. When he opened his mouth, it was her tongue that surged forward. Aiden growled low in his throat and stroked into her mouth, tasting and toying.

She felt dizzy with power, with madness.

His erection was thick and hard against her center, and Frankie opened her legs so he could settle between them. When he grinded against her, Frankie's world went black. She could come like this, dry-humping a billionaire on a beach.

She should have been embarrassed, should have had better judgment. But before those thoughts could take hold, Aiden trailed one large, capable hand down over her breast and surged against her again.

She murmured meaningless words against his mouth. *This. Now. Here.* She didn't care.

"Fuck," he whispered, before diving back into the kiss. Her blood had gone molten. Lava flowed through her veins now. More was the only word left in her vocabulary.

Aiden abandoned her breast, and when Frankie moaned her disappointment, he made up for it. That hand was now shoving the skirt of her dress higher. Her body sang to the heavens. If he didn't shove a part of him inside of her in the next thirty seconds, Frankie knew she'd die a slow and agonizing death.

He was grinding against her thigh now, prodding her with what felt like a painful erection.

"More, Aide," Frankie whispered. Begging. She never begged. But in this second she was happy to plead her way to orgasm.

"Hang on, baby," he murmured against her lips. "I want you so fucking bad."

This was not the ice-cold man she'd met in the ballroom. Or the game-playing chauffeur from the airport. No, the man whose hand danced over the satin of her thong was a sinful lover, all heat and dark promises.

"Fuck," he whispered again when he pressed the tips of his fingers to her center.

She cried out, softly, brokenly as he started one of those tiny circles he'd worked his way up her thigh with under the table. He knew how to touch her. Whether it was instinct or obscene experience, she didn't give a good damn.

“You’re so damn wet, Franchesca. So wet for me.”

Frankie bucked against his hand. “Touch me,” she commanded. When he looped two fingers under the seam of her underwear, when his knuckles brushed her soft folds, she reached for him.

He grunted his approval when she gripped his hard cock through his pants. “I want your hands on me, your mouth,” he growled.

“Right back at you, Kilbourn,” Frankie murmured.

His knuckles brushed her again, and she melted under him.

“*I’m* going to fuck you, Franchesca. Not that surfer, not Davenport. Me.”

Her body thrilled at the words while her mind reeled at the possession in his tone.

“Shut up and kiss me.”

His fingers were poised at her entrance, her tongue buried in his mouth when Frankie found herself squinting into a blinding light.

Chapter Fourteen

Aiden contemplated killing the security guard with his own two hands. If the man continued to shine his flashlight in the direction of Francesca's nipples that were trying to cut their way out of her gown, Aiden was going to break his fucking neck.

Francesca stood full of fury, hands on hips. He'd forgotten himself, forgotten where they were and why they were here. He'd heard the guard's approach and had gone with the lovers out for a romantic stroll-slash-fuck story. Touching her? Tasting her? It had wiped out all instincts besides the need to take her.

He could tell by the way she refused to look at him that she thought he'd taken advantage of her. And he had, or at least he'd taken advantage of the situation.

Now, he was going to kill a security guard, and then Francesca was going to kill him.

"Look, sir," Francesca said, her cheeks still flaming. "We just slipped away from the party and got carried away.

Aiden stepped in front of her. He couldn't tell exactly where the guard's gaze was falling, but he imagined it had to be somewhere around Frankie's heaving chest.

"It's my fault. I got carried away," he said, offering the man a chagrined smile. "I'm sure it's not the worst you've seen tonight."

The guard stared blankly for another moment. Aiden felt Frankie grab the back of his jacket with both hands.

"I just caught two girls skinny-dipping in the lobby fountain ten minutes ago," the guard announced. "Go on back to the party, and keep your clothes on."

"Will do," Aiden promised. Frankie's eyes were as wide as big screen TVs as they hurried past the guard onto a path that led to the crowded terrace that served as a dancefloor. "Well that

was easy,” he said. He reached up and picked a leaf out of Frankie’s hair. He was starting to wonder if he was obsessed with her hair. The thick, dark curtain that fell in curling waves. He wanted to bury his face in it.

“Easy?” she hissed, slapping his hand away.

“Well, you didn’t have to flash anyone this time,” Aiden pointed out.

Her gasp was worth the anticipation.

“You saw me?”

“I saw quite a bit of you.” Aiden decided not to mention that he’d been a split second slow in covering Antonio’s eyes.

Frankie slapped him in the shoulder.

“What? You’re the one who decided to flash half the island.”

“Yeah, but that didn’t mean you had to look, too!”

“I wasn’t about to miss out on that view, Franchesca.” He reached for her, and she held up her hands.

“Keep your hands off of me, or I’ll break off that hard-on you’ve been sporting all night and slap you in the face with it.”

How could he not want more of her? How could she believe that he’d leave her alone?

“Are you trying to draw attention to us?” he asked, pulling her into him. Those blue-green eyes narrowed at him. “We’re on the dance floor. So dance.”

She glanced around them and seemed to notice for the first time that they were surrounded by the upper echelon of California royalty. Aiden recognized a few faces here and there. A half dozen politicians, a handful of celebrities, but mostly it was a collection of heirs and heiresses to various fortunes who had clearly had more than enough to drink.

“What’s wrong with these people?” Frankie asked, allowing Aiden to draw her further onto the dance floor. Even the band was trashed, judging by the limping tempo to their song. “Oh, my god. Is that Meltdown?”

“The band with that song that you hear on the radio every six seconds? It would appear so. And what’s wrong with everyone is they’re wasted.”

It was like witnessing last call at an all-you-can drink gun raffle. The over-fifty crowd was straight up drunk. One man was projectile vomiting over the stone balustrade. A woman in her mid-sixties was sloppily pouring a homemade champagne fountain, pausing now and again to swig out of the open bottle.

There was a couple on the dance floor drunkenly leaning in time to the offbeat music and taking their clothes off.

It appeared that the younger set had graduated from alcohol to something harder. There were four women in couture gowns sitting in the shallow end of the pool laughing like hyenas. Further into the deep end a “who can break their neck first” diving competition was in full swing.

The bride was standing on the bar mainlining cosmos and shouting “I’m married, bitches!”

The third cosmo spilled like a waterfall down her bejeweled dress.

“Classy as fuck,” Frankie whispered to Aiden as they danced and dodged their way toward the hotel. “That’s a twenty-six-thousand-dollar dress.”

“Wonder where the groom is? Running for the hills?”

Frankie pointed toward a large potted palm. “I think he’s the one with his tongue down that groomsman’s throat.”

“Ah.” Aiden said.

Frankie shook her head. “This is like the Great Gatsby with a drug and alcohol problem.”

“And you thought Pruitt’s bridesmonsters were horrible,” Aiden teased.

A finger poked him hard in the shoulder. “Hey! Who arrrrre yooooou?”

Aiden twirled Frankie around so they could face the poker together.

“I’m Aiden. Who are you?” he asked the woman. She looked to be in her forties and trying desperately to hang on to her twenties. Her lips had been done, badly. The tight skin around her eyes and forehead screamed BOTOX or facelift. One strap of her ivory colored dress was broken. She held a bottle of champagne in one hand. Her hair extensions were coming out of some intricate knot at the back of her head and hung over her eye.

“I’m Priscilla.” She swayed as she said her own name. “Are you fren of bride or the broom?”

“We’re friends of the broom,” Frankie said, stepping in smoothly. “I’m Druscilla, and this is my paid escort, Aiden. I met the groom on Season Eight of Trust Funds and Trophy Wives.”

“Zat a reality show?” Priscilla asked.

Frankie nodded. “Oh, yeah. And the exposure was great. It really launched my career as a foot model. I can give you the producer’s number if you’re interested. It was the best eighteen months of my life if you like living on a yacht near the UAE.”

“Druscilla, we really should be going,” Aiden said, pinching Frankie in the waist.

“Call me,” Frankie sang as Aiden propelled her past the frowning Priscilla.

“We’re trying *not* to get noticed,” he reminded her.

“Aide, the only thing these people are going to remember tomorrow is a big, fat nothing.”

He hustled her into the hotel’s open-air lobby. With the ocean and debauchery at their back, the lobby was rather quiet. He made a move toward the front desk but was thwarted by the foot-dragging Frankie.

“Franchesca, come on. We’ve got work to do.”

“Sorry. Geez. Does being wealthy require you to ignore awesomeness?” she asked, admiring the thatched ceiling two stories above them. Gold and white statues and heavy potted

palms filled in the expanse of stone floor. Her eyes widened as they approached the front desk. “Is that gold leaf?” She pointed to a grand staircase that winged off into two different directions one level up.

“We can ask after we find Chip.”

“Right. Okay. I’m focused,” she promised. “What’s the plan here?” Frankie asked, nodding at the woman behind the desk.

“Charm first.”

“Good evening, sir. How may I be of service?” Hilde, according to her name tag, was tall and reed slim. She looked as though nothing in the world could ruffle her.

“Hello, Hilde. I’m looking for my friend’s room, and I’m embarrassed to say I can’t remember the number.” Frankie, pretending to be bored, wandered away from the desk over to the koi pond and out of Hilde’s line of sight.

“I see. What is your friend’s name, please?”

Aiden did his best to look chagrined. “My friend’s name is Chip. But the room is registered to someone else. Chip is about this tall. Blonde hair. This is his first night here.”

Hilde gave him a wan smile. “I’m sorry, sir. But I’m not permitted to divulge guest information. What is your room number, please?”

Aiden patted his jacket as if he were looking for a room key. “Let me look... Babe, do you have our room key?”

At that moment, two women, sufficiently intoxicated, stumbled past Frankie. “An’ then I poked a hole in the condom, told him I was on birth control, and vi-ol-a! I’m a millionaire, and he paid to fix my tits.”

“You’re like the worst human being ever,” the other crowed.

“I know, right?”

Frankie’s move was so fast Aiden almost missed it. One moment Millionaire Tits was stumbling across the marble floor, and the next, she was falling face-first into the koi pond.

The woman's screeches combined with Frankie's calls for help had Hilde grabbing a walkie-talkie from behind the desk and scurrying off toward the hub-bub.

"Hurry up," Frankie hissed, appearing at his side. "Stand guard." She shimmied behind the desk and sat in the vacated chair. "Shit. Password protected."

The screaming had yet to quiet down, so Aiden poked his head over the desk. "Option one, we crack the password ourselves. Option two, we make Hilde give us the password." He was weighing the pros and cons when Frankie's fingers flew over the keys.

"Ha. Got it."

"You cracked the password?" Aiden asked. Did the woman have no limits?

She snorted. "Don't have to crack it when they tape it to the monitor for me. Okay, I'm in. Who are we looking for? No one's registered as Kidnapper or Wedding Ruiner."

Aiden skirted behind the desk, hopeful that the koi pond distraction would hold. "Scroll through the reservations," he ordered, scanning the monitor.

"You think you're going to magically recognize the name of the kidnapper?" Frankie asked.

"Shut up. There," he pointed at the screen. "Room 314. Three nights. Who's it registered to?"

"No name. Just a business. El-Kil Corporation," Frankie read out loud.

Fuck. Aiden felt the sucker punch to his gut. He should have known.

"Oh, look! It's gotta be them. Two hours ago they ordered a tuna salad sandwich with crushed up chips on it. Chip's favorite! At least we know they're feeding him. That's good, right?"

"Good. Yeah." Aiden murmured.

“Oh, shit.” Frankie exited out of the program and grabbed him. He heard the click of heels on the marble. They only made it as far as the marble column next to the desk. When Hilde and the fish pond woman appeared with a small entourage.

“Let me call housekeeping and get you some fresh towels and a robe,” Hilde offered a soaked and shrieking celebutante.

“A fish swam *down my dress*. Do you think a robe is going to make me feel better after I was attacked by sushi?” the woman howled.

Hilde’s eyes narrowed when she spotted Frankie and Aiden standing next to the desk. Aiden thought about kissing Frankie again since it had worked so well the first time, but Frankie was faster.

She slapped him across the face so hard his head snapped backwards on his neck.

“You know it bothers me when you slip your sister the tongue. I don’t care how many years you spent in boarding school in Europe. That still doesn’t make it right!” Frankie’s voice echoed off the marble drawing every eye in the lobby.

“A. She’s my half-sister,” Aiden said, jumping on the crazy train that Frankie was engineering “And B. I can’t help it if I come from an *affectionate* family!”

“Oh, puh-lease!” Frankie’s scoff nearly knocked her off her feet. “Affectionate? Your grandmother grabbed my ass at Thanksgiving.”

“She wanted to see how the butt lift I paid for turned out.” He nodded toward the exit.

“Excuse me. I earned this butt lift!”

They kept up the argument for posterity’s sake, storming away from the front desk. As they passed, Aiden heard one of the audience whispering.

“What can you expect from a reality TV star and a male prostitute?”

News traveled fast.

He hauled Frankie outside. She started laughing the second their feet hit the resort's grand circular drive. "You're insane," he told her.

"Oh, please. I saw that look on your face. You were thinking about kissing the hell out of me back there. And it wouldn't have worked the second time around."

"Why not?" he asked, rubbing a hand over the cheek she'd so efficiently slapped.

"I don't make the same mistake twice, Kilbourn. And you're a big, fat mistake. Now, come on. I think room 314 is that way." Aiden watched in fascination as Frankie pulled a map of the resort out of her cleavage.

"Where did you get that?" Aiden snatched the map from her.

"At the desk."

"We're not going after Chip."

"Excuse me? We know where he is, and all of the sudden, you want to call it a night?"

"What do you want to do? Knock on the door and demand that they give him back?"

"It's a start! I'm not leaving my friend here."

Aiden gripped her upper arm and started pulling her toward the cab desk. "We have the upper hand here. What we need is a plan. I have to go figure out who has him, and if I can do that, I'll know why they took him." The lie was easy. He already knew the who and the why, but he wasn't about to add Frankie into the mix. He wasn't sure who she'd murder first.

"I'm not leaving Chip here with some kidnapping asshole! Let's call security or the cops!"

"We're not calling anyone," he said, tightening his grip on her arm.

"Why in the hell not? We know where he is!"

"We don't know who took him or why. We know that he's here and they're feeding him. And that means he's safe. For now."

“For now?” She tried to wrestle her arm free. “Did you just track down his abductor because you were curious where they took him? And now, curiosity appeased, you want to go back to the resort for some margaritas and see how this plays out?”

Aiden rounded on her. “Look. Believe me when I say your loyalty is admirable. But we need to regroup. I need a plan. If we go in there half-cocked, it could be disastrous.”

When her gaze slid to his crotch, Aiden rolled his eyes. “Stop looking at my cock. We’re leaving.”

Chapter Fifteen

He walked her to her room as if she were a prisoner. They'd spent the entire ride in silence as Frankie stewed and Aiden plotted. She understood that there was a time and a place for planning and manipulation, but when a friend was in danger? That seemed like the ideal time to kick in a door and start making noise.

With barely controlled rage, Frankie swiped her keycard. She intended to storm into the room and slam the door in Aiden's face, but he was faster. He caught her by the arm and forced her to look at him. "I appreciate all your help tonight. But I've got this handled now."

"Excuse me, Lone Ranger?"

"Franchesca, I need you to trust me to fix this. I promise you, I'll get Chip back before the wedding."

She opened her mouth ready to verbally punch him in the face, but as usual, he was quicker. He brought his mouth down on hers for a fast, hard kiss. Just when she was deciding between dragging him into her room or kicking him in the balls, Aiden pulled back. "You were amazing tonight."

He ran a finger down the tip of her nose and walked off.

"What in the fuck was that?" Frankie asked the empty room as she shut the door and added the chain in case Mr. Kilbourn decided to try his luck again.

She looked down at her dress and groaned. There was a tear in the waist and one in the skirt. Those damn berries had smeared their bloody red massacre over the right breast and hip. She looked like a murdered starlet in Monique Lhuillier.

Pru was going to kill her.

Frantically, she dialed the front desk and begged for a super emergency cleaning. The figure they named made her wince. It meant at least another month of catering gigs. But at this point, she had no choice. It was either pay the exorbitant fee

and hope for the best, or walk down the aisle and get stabbed by the bride.

If there was a wedding. If Aiden didn't come through, there would be no groom for Pru to marry, she thought bitterly as she changed into sleep shorts and a tank.

Frankie handed over the dress to the bell hop that knocked and then texted Pru.

Frankie: You up?

Pru's response was practically instantaneous.

Pru: OMG, get over here!

Frankie padded down the hall to Pru and Chip's room. Before she could raise her knuckles to knock, Pru opened the door and dragged her inside. Frankie blinked. Her best friend was wearing a silk pajama set... and her veil.

Clearly the rum and beer hadn't worn off yet.

"I know. I know. I look like a crazy person," Pru announced leading the way back into a marble on marble on marble bathroom the size of a football stadium. "But I started thinking. We're in paradise. It's hot. Do I really want to wear my hair down tomorrow? Have a seat," she said, pointing toward the ledge of the soaker tub.

"And do you?" Frankie asked, feeling like the worst human being in the world. Her best friend's fiancé had been kidnapped in front of her face and not only did she know where to find him, she had walked away without trying to rescue him. She was scum. The chewing gum on the bottom of someone's shoe. The kind of person who faked diseases to set up phony crowd-funding campaigns. She, Franchesca Marie Baranski, was a bad, bad person.

She sat on the lip of the tub.

Pru was discussing the merits of a sexy chignon when she abruptly cut herself off. Her blue eyes going wide in the mirror. "Here I am yammering on and on about my hair and you've just come back from a tryst with Aiden! What kind of a friend am I?"

“The best. You’re the best kind of a friend, Pru,” Frankie lamented. “You’re a wonderful person, and you deserve all the happiness in the world.” She had to tell her. If she were in Pru’s shoes, she’d want to know.

“What’s wrong?” Pru demanded, whirling away from the mirror. “You look like you’re gonna cry.”

Frankie let herself slide backwards into the tub. “Before we talk about Aiden, we should talk about Chip.” *How in the hell was she going to explain to her best friend that she didn’t call the cops, didn’t kick the door in and drag Chip home? That she was the worst friend in the world.*

Pru got a soft, faraway look in her eyes. “I can’t believe I finally get to marry him, Frankie. I just... I love him so much. He’s funny and sweet and kind and smart, and he looks like a Ken doll. But when I look at him, I can see us fifty years from now. Chasing grandkids, hosting parties, summering in the Hamptons with our huge family.”

Pru clasped her hands together and sighed. “He’s everything I’ve been dreaming about since I was five. I have my dream dress, my best friend, and I get to marry the man of my dreams in paradise.” Her eyes glistened with tears.

“Don’t cry, Pru,” Frankie pleaded. At least not before she’d told her the shitty part about having an MIA fiancé.

“I can’t help it.” Pru dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. “I’m so happy. And that’s what I want for you, Frankie. I want you to find someone who makes you feel like you’re flying. Someone who makes you look forward to the next fifty years.”

“I can’t focus on the next fifty minutes let alone years,” Frankie teased.

Pru crossed the bathroom. It took about ten minutes given the expanse of marble between them. She perched on the edge of the tub and toyed with her veil. “I think Aiden will be that for you,” Pru confessed.

Frankie smacked her head off the back of the tub. “Ow! What?”

“I know you two got off to a rough start—”

“The man called me a stripper!”

“After the engagement party, he asked Chip a thousand questions about you.”

“Maybe he wanted to find out where I dance and if I give BJs for an extra fifty,” Frankie shot back.

“He picked you up from the airport. I saw the way he was looking at you during dinner. Like he wanted to eat you instead of what was on his plate. And then he whisks you away? Don’t think for one second that just because I’m getting married tomorrow that I don’t want every single detail of what you two have been doing for the last five hours.”

Frankie rubbed the bump on the back of her head. “Let’s get back to this getting married thing tomorrow for a second. How upset would you be if something happened and you couldn’t?”

“Couldn’t what? Get married tomorrow?”

“Yeah. What if something... came up?”

“Franchesca Baranski, a mother-fucking hurricane could blow over this island leveling every building on it tomorrow, and I would still be marrying Chip.”

Ah, hell.

“Yeah, but—”

“Listen. You’ll understand this once you and Aiden really start getting to know each other,” Pru said, patting her arm. “Chip and I lost each other after college, and I was devastated because I knew he was the one. I never stopped believing that. Not once in all those years. And we found our way back to each other. We’ve paid our dues. That separation was heart-breaking for me, for him too. So we are going to have a magical day tomorrow because we deserve it. I deserve it,” her voice cracked.

Frankie grabbed her friend’s hand. “Of course, you deserve it. I know that Chip is all you’ve ever wanted, and you’ll have him. You’ll have your perfect guy on your perfect day. I promise.”

Pru nodded, her veil rippling. “I should text him! Text him and tell him how much I love him and can’t wait for tomorrow! Oooh! Or I could call him!”

“Uhhh—”

But Pru was already scampering back to the vanity for her phone.

Chapter Sixteen

Frankie: Pru thinks we made out for five hours tonight. Also, she's texting and calling Chip to tell him how excited she is about tomorrow. In about thirty seconds, she's going to start to panic.

Aiden: I've got it covered.

Frankie wanted to reach through her phone and strangle him. Or at the very least punch him in his smug "I've got it covered" face. She was debating whether or not to bite the bullet and tell Pru everything when Pru's phone signaled a text.

"Is it Chip?" Frankie asked, aghast. Was Aiden really that good?

"No. It's Aiden," Pru said, beaming at her phone. "He said that Chip is sound asleep in his suite, and he didn't want me to worry that Chip wasn't returning my texts."

Pru hugged her phone to her chest, her eyes glistening with unshed tears of happiness. "I'm getting married tomorrow."

Hell yes, she was. Frankie vowed that she would do whatever it took to get Pru down the aisle to the man of her dreams.

"Enough about me. Tell me about Aiden! Is he really an orgasm master?"

* * *

Pru's wedding day dawned bright, beautiful, and hot. With no groom in sight.

The evening ceremony called for hours spent at the spa with the rest of the bridesmonsters. Frankie had tossed and turned

the rest of the night away in Pru's room seeing Chip's abduction over and over again in her head.

Aiden hadn't bothered checking in, and with this seaweed wrap sucking the fat out of her, she couldn't just get up and go find him. All she knew was he had better be mounting a rescue with tanks, ninjas, and mercenaries. Whatever it took to get Chip Randolph back to the resort and in a tux before six.

Cressida sauntered by in a short, silk robe and mud mask. "Here. Have zis," she said, wielding a bottle of Cristal. "You look tense."

Frankie looked at her arms pinned to her side with green slime. "Got a straw?"

Cressida shrugged. "Open your mouth. I will pour."

Frankie laid back and did as she was told. Cressida poured with precision, and Frankie swallowed the bubbles like a first-string sorority pledge.

"Did you take care of what you needed to take care of last night?" Cressida asked without moving her lips, careful not to crack her mask.

"It's being managed," Frankie said evasively. She wasn't about to trust any of the bridesmaids with a brown bag lunch with her name on it let alone sensitive information that would ruin Pru's wedding day.

"Ze bride is getting anxious. She has not heard from ze groom since last night," Cressida announced, nodding her blonde head in Pru's direction.

She had her feet in a spa tub and was staring at her phone in her lap as if willing it to ring.

Frankie prayed that Aiden was handling it. "What's Chip doing today?" Frankie asked Pru, already dreading the answer.

"Apparently he's fishing with Aiden this morning." Pru bit her lip.

"That sounds like fun," Frankie prodded.

"Yeah, I'm just getting a little... nervous."

“Butterflies,” Margeaux announced knowledgeably. “I was that way the first time. The second time around you won’t feel a thing.”

“Nice, Marge,” Frankie snorted.

Margeaux scoffed. “Please. Like anyone believes this marriage will last. Hey, watch the cuticles,” she screeched at the woman doing her manicure.

“Don’t listen to her,” Frankie pleaded with Pru, inch-worming her way into a seated position. The seaweed ripped down her back, and she could breathe again.

“I haven’t heard from him since the fish fry last night. What if…” Pru didn’t finish the sentence, and Frankie was the only one in the room who knew the truth was even worse than all the scenarios that Pru was running through.

“If they’re fishing offshore they probably left early, and there’s no cell reception,” Frankie said, shrugging back into her robe.

Pru chewed on her lip. “True. But if I haven’t heard from him by lunch, I’m going to send my dad to check on him.”

Wouldn’t that go over well? R.L. Stockton storming around the resort looking for the future son-in-law that he hated. One whiff of trouble with Chip and R.L. would have Pru on a private plane flying back home while his team of attorneys worked out the best way to sue the shit out of Chip and his parents.

“Trust Aiden,” Frankie insisted. “He won’t let you down.” And if he did, Frankie would be first in line to kick him in the balls.

“There’s my baby girl!” Addison Stockton stormed into the treatment room in her matching robe and slippers. “She’s going to be the most beautiful bride,” she announced to the room, fluttering her hands like hummingbird wings.

“Someone enjoyed their laser hair removal appointment,” Taffany said, cracking her gum.

At noon, the spa served up a vegan spread for the party. Chip’s mother, Myrtle, took one look at the hummus topped

cucumber rolls and ordered a burger, rare, with extra fries. *Can't take the Texas appetites out of a cattle ranch baron's daughter.*

Frankie would have done the same if she could stomach the thought of food. Every time Pru picked up her phone, Frankie cringed inwardly.

She volunteered to go first for hair and submitted to the violent hair stylist who seemed intent on embedding pins into her skull.

"I don't see why we all have to change our styles because Pruitt did," Margeaux whined, slapping away the stylist as the man tried to sweep her thick curtain of honey blonde hair off her neck. "And wax my eyebrows while you're at it."

"Christ, Marge! Can you shut your mouth for one day and do something for someone else? It's not your fucking day. You'll probably have eight or nine wedding days by the time a husband holds a pillow over your face and puts the rest of us out of our misery. So put your damn hair up and shut your damn mouth!"

It was exactly the wrong approach to take with a sociopathic asshole.

"Do you even know who I am, you piece of shit from Brooklyn?"

Margeaux spat out the word Brooklyn as if it were sulfur flavored.

"Do you even know what a black hole of a human you are?" Frankie shot back.

Her stylist, unfazed by the exchange, spun her around to show her the results of eight thousand hairpins and six cans of hair spray. She'd tamed the dark curls into submission, wrangling them into a rock-hard bun at the nape of her neck.

"Looks amazing," Frankie said, jumping out of the chair and throwing cash at her before she could reach for more hair pins.

"You're just jealous because you're nothing. You're literally the help. Pathetic with your hand out for tips so you can pay

your dry-cleaning bill.”

“You better watch how you talk around people, Marge. A lot of us are help, and without us, you’d have a dirty toilet, bikini burn, and no food at your stupid parties.”

“Someone like Aiden Kilbourn would never give you a second glance. Unless it was out of pity or to wonder how you managed to shove your Kardashian-sized ass into your dress. You’re going to look like a whale in the pictures next to the rest of us.” She laughed an unhinged, diabolical Dr. Evil kind of laugh.

The stylist working on Margeaux reached for the hot wax and slathered it over the entire brow. He gave Frankie a commiserating look and slapped the waxing strip on top of the wax.

“I might not be the only one people are staring at tonight,” Frankie predicted. She turned and marched out of the room to the music of Margeaux screaming.

“What did you do to my eyebrow you fucking idiot?”

In the hallway, she pulled her phone out of her robe pocket and fired off a text to Aiden.

Frankie: Status update. Where are you with Operation Free the Groom? The bride is getting nervous.

His response was terse.

Aiden: I have it handled.

She’d like to handle him... out of a ten-story window and into a dumpster full of broken glass.

She dialed him as she walked. If he didn’t tell her he was breaching the door to Room 314 right now she was going to get Chip herself.

“What?” he answered brusquely.

“Where are you?” she hissed. She marched down the sun dappled hallway that connected the spa to the main building.

He sighed. “Franchesca, I’m in the middle of something, and every time I have to check in with you, I have to stop

working.”

“Will Chip be back here before the wedding?” she asked.

“I’m working on it,” Aiden answered tersely.

“Have you even heard from the kidnapper today?”

“Yes. We have a meeting scheduled.”

“A meeting?” Frankie stormed past the doors to the resort’s library bar and stopped in her tracks. She backed up two steps and glared through the glass doors. It was a spacious room with tall bookcases and ladders straight out of *Beauty and the Beast* except for the large L-shaped bar with the spectacular ocean view. The bar that played host to one Aiden “Dead Man Walking” Kilbourn.

Disgusted, Frankie ended the call and flicked off the unseeing Aiden through the glass. Under a full head of steam, she approached the front desk. “Excuse me,” she said to the concierge. “My dress is in for an emergency cleaning.”

“Yes, Ms. Baranski. We’re working on the damage right now.”

“I’ll need it ready in time for the ceremony. Because nothing is going to ruin this wedding. Not a missing groom, or an asshole best man, or a stained dress.” She was pointing her finger in the air like a movie heroine making a proclamation.

“Of course, Ms. Baranski.” The concierge gave Frankie the “you’re a crazy person and I have to be nice to you” smile.

“Um. Thank you,” Frankie said. “I’m going to go away now.”

The concierge smiled pleasantly again, and Frankie backed away from the desk. She jogged to the bank of elevators. Once in her room, she shucked the robe and dragged on a sundress. Antonio’s business card fell out of her clutch when she dug out her money.

Maybe she didn’t have to do this entirely on her own.

Chapter Seventeen

“Where’s your uncle’s van?” Frankie asked, eyeing the doorless dune buggy-like vehicle.

“He’s driving it,” Antonio announced sliding out from behind the wheel. “Your chariot awaits, madam.” He was wearing a prep school uniform of navy blue shorts and a white short-sleeve button down. His tie was a clip-on.

“Did you steal this? And I feel like I have to repeat my question from last night. Are you even old enough to drive?”

“You wanna stand here and ask questions, or do you want to go to Rockley?” Antonio asked.

“Oh, my God. Just drive.” Frankie climbed in next to him and fastened the safety harness.

“Yee haw!” Antonio gunned the engine, jumped the curb, and tore down the winding drive to the road.

“Do *not* kill us!” Frankie shouted over the rumble of the engine.

Antonio approached the highway like a villain in a car chase. Frankie covered her eyes with her hands and said her prayers. She heard horns and braced for death. But the impact and death never came. She peeked through her fingers to see they were tooling down the highway weaving in and out of traffic.

“Okay. We’re not dead. This is a good start.”

“So, what’s the plan, lady? You find your friend last night?”

“The plan is you’re driving me to Rockley, I’m rescuing my friend, and you are driving us back to the resort in time for the wedding.”

“Good plan,” Antonio nodded. “Where’s Money Bags?”

“Aiden?” Frankie glared out the windshield. “He had business to take care of.”

“So, you’re going to rescue your friend by yourself?”

“If you want something done right...”

Antonio nodded sagely.

“Speaking of Money Bags,” Frankie began. “My pockets aren’t as deep as his.”

“That’s okay. You can pay me by flashing your boobs again.”

Frankie cuffed him on the back of the head. “Hey!”

He grinned.

Frankie’s phone rang. “Oh, hell.” It was Pruitt.

“Hey, bride!” Frankie answered. She sounded like a complete phony.

“Where are you? We’re ready for bridesmaid pictures.”

Frankie slapped herself on the forehead. Shit.

“I’m not there actually. I’m, uh, heading to the... dock?”

“The dock?”

Frankie could hear the note of panic in Pru’s voice.

“Yeah, I wanted to get down here and check in on Chip for you. Just so, you know... you’d know,” she finished lamely.

“You’re the best friend a girl could have,” Pru sniffed. “I didn’t want to say anything, but I’m tied up in knots. I need to hear his voice and know that everything is still good.”

“Everything is going to be better than good,” Frankie promised. “I’m going to have him call you as soon as I see him. He probably just dropped his phone overboard or something. You know how he is with those things.”

“Yeah,” Pru sniffled. “I do. I just... come back soon, okay? I can’t wait for you to see Margeaux’s eyebrow. They had to draw it back on.”

Frankie rubbed her temples. “I’ll be back before you know it,” she promised.

She hung up and buried her face in her hands. “Oh, my god. If I can’t pull this off I’ve ruined not only her wedding day but our friendship.”

“It’ll work out,” Antonio said cheerfully.

“Is that a school uniform?” Frankie asked, eyeing the loafers working the gas pedal.

“Yep. You got me out of a geography test.”

“You’re skipping school to drive me around?”

“Sure! I do it sometimes. It beats sitting behind a desk and listening to teachers blah blah blah all day.”

Frankie tried not to think about all the laws they were probably breaking at this exact moment. Her phone rang again, and she picked it up without thinking.

“Franchesca! You’re alive! I’ve been so worried.”

“Mom?”

“Oh, thank god you remember me,” May said, laying on the sarcasm. “I thought you went paragliding and hit your head and got amnesia.”

“Ma. Now’s not a good time.”

“What could possibly be more important than reassuring your mother that you’re alive and well?” May insisted.

“Ma, it’s Pru’s wedding day, and I’m running an errand for her. I really have to focus, okay?”

“Pruitt’s parents must be over-the-moon excited.” Reality didn’t exist in May Baranski’s world. She’d met R.L. and Addison Stockton on dozens of occasions. The Stocktons weren’t an overly excitable bunch. “You know, I’d love if *my* daughter had a wedding day someday,” May sighed.

“Yeah, yeah. Poor you. No grandbabies except for the one on the way from Marco and Rachel. I’ll get knocked up next time I go out with a guy on Tinder. I promise.”

“Franchesca Marie, you wouldn’t dare—”

“I gotta go, Ma. I’ll call you.”

“When? You’ve been gone for so long already!”

“Soon.” Probably. “I gotta go. Bye!”

She hung up before her mother could deliver yet another guilt trip with the precision of a surgeon.

Antonio snickered. “Your mom sounds like fun.”

“Shut up, underage felon, and drive.”

She had Antonio get as close to the gate as possible. She couldn't waste time crawling through jungle this time. After three embarrassing attempts, she finally made it over the wall scraping the shins of both legs on the sharp stone of the wall.

She grunted and groaned her way out of the flowering bush with the sound effects of an elderly person. *At least her hair helmet hadn't moved.*

Now, to stealthily—shit!

Three maids were catching a smoke break at the back of the building closest to her. They were all watching her warily.

Frankie brushed the dirt and leaves off her dress and strolled toward them casual as can be.

“Good afternoon,” she greeted them smiling like a normal person. “So, here's the thing...”

Chapter Eighteen

Frankie tied the apron around her waist. “Thank you again for this, Flor,” she said to the woman she’d swapped clothes with. The bust was a little tight and the shoes were a little big, but other than that, Frankie was confident she could pass for a resort maid. At least temporarily.

“Is no problem,” Flor said, straightening Frankie’s collar. “That man is an ass. I’m happy to help.”

“Do you know if there’s anyone else staying in the room with him?” Frankie asked as her new friends hustled her down a back hallway.

“He’s got an assistant who hovers around. Big man,” Bianca told her. “But he stays in a different room.”

Okay, so hopefully only one potential hired gun to get around. Frankie pressed a hand to her stomach as Wilma punched the call button for the elevator. She was either going to die today or pull off the greatest wedding day miracle of all time. And she was really hoping she wasn’t about to die. Not without slapping the shit out of Aiden Kilbourn first.

They got off the elevator in the basement. Flor played lookout while the other two stocked a room service cart with liquor.

“Just tell Mr. Hasselhoff you’re there to restock the bar,” Bianca instructed.

Hasselhoff. At least the kidnapper had a sense of humor.

“And don’t make eye contact with him. He hates that,” Wilma suggested.

They returned to the elevator with a white sheeted cart and half a dozen bottles of liquor.

“Keep your head down to avoid the cameras,” Flor said, ushering them back into the elevator car. “And if you need help hiding the body, call 101 from the room phone and say you’d like to order room service.”

“Cameras. Body. Room service. Got it,” Frankie said. Her heart was thudding in her ears like the bass in her high school boyfriend’s Chevy Cavalier.

Was she doing the right thing? Should she have trusted Aiden to handle it? Would she at least see Chip before she was gunned down in the prime of her life?

It was the longest elevator ride of her life, and that was counting the one with the guy who was breaking up with his girlfriend on speakerphone. The longest elevator ride was followed by the longest, creepiest walk down a hotel hallway. 302, 304, 306. As the room numbers counted up, Frankie’s heart started pulsing in her head. She should have written up a will before this trip.

What if her brothers fought over her NHL memorabilia collection? She could see Gio and Marco coming to blows over her signed Kreider jockstrap. She hoped whoever took her apartment would be a good neighbor to the Chus across the hall. Mr. Chu was constantly losing his glasses, and Mrs. Chu thanked Frankie for finding them with gift cards to their Korean restaurant around the block. She’d never again get to taste their bulgogi.

Tears swam in her eyes as 314 loomed in front of her. She took a deep breath. She was doing this for Pru. Her best friend deserved her happily ever after. And she’d totally get over the death of her best friend.

She was lousy at pep talks. Frankie raised her knuckles to knock and hesitated for a second. “You can do this,” she whispered to herself. “You can go in there and show him that nobody kidnaps your friends and gets away with it.”

Her pep talk was interrupted by the questioning glances of a hungover couple dressed to the elevens. The nines were so last year.

“She looks a little like that reality star that threw Kennedy in the koi pond last night,” the woman said in a stage whisper.

Frankie put her head down and, eyes clenched shut, knocked.

The door wrenched open. “Can you read the ‘Do Not Disturb’? Or are you all illiterate and stupid?”

All rich assholes tended to look the same. And this guy was no exception. He was medium build, medium height, spray tanned complexion with medium brown, carefully coiffed hair.

“I am here to restock dee barrr.” God, her fake accent sounded more pirate than Bajan. Only an idiot would fall for it.

“It’s about damn time. I called hours ago,” the idiot said.

He ushered her inside, making annoying flapping motions like a chicken trying to take flight. “Come on. I don’t have all day.”

The suite was dark, heavy curtains closing out the tropical sunshine outside. It looked as though he was trying to make the room resemble a bad guy’s lair. But there was too much mess—room service trays, empty liquor bottles—marring the luxury. It looked like a crew of trust fund babies had gotten together on daddy’s dime to trash a hotel suite, not execute an abduction.

Kidnapping Asshole didn’t look much better than the room itself. His hair was messed up like he’d been shoving nervous hands through it. His tie was loosened. *Who the hell wore a tie to lounge around a hotel room in Barbados, anyway?*

She headed into the main living space of the suite and did her best to guess where the bar was hidden. She guessed wrong, finding the TV sequestered in a cabinet. Wealthy people didn’t like to stare at blank screens.

Kidnapping Asshole snapped his fingers. “The bar is over there. What, are you new here?”

She was saved from having to bite back a response by the man’s phone ringing.

“Christ. What’s taking so long? Get back here. He’s going to be here any minute, and I’m not doing this without backup.” He stormed out of the living room and into one of the bedrooms, slamming the door behind him.

“Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god,” Frankie chanted. She surveyed the room and ran for the next closed door. It was a bathroom. The next one was a freaking walk-in closet. Finally, she spotted another closed door on the far side of the room. When she jiggled the handle she found it locked.

She yanked out the keyring Flor had loaned her and fumbled with the lock. She got it on the fifth try and ducked into the room. It was dark in here too, and it smelled like old eggs.

Frankie quietly closed the door behind her. “Chip?” she whispered. “Are you here?”

She tripped over him before she saw him. He was laying on his back on the floor beside the bed.

“Oh, my god, Chip,” she hissed. *Was he dead? Had that sonofabitch killed Chip?*

She reached a tentative hand toward him knowing that if she touched cold skin, she was going to throw up and then go commit a murder so heinous she’d go down in Barbados history. “Please don’t be dead,” she whispered.

Chapter Nineteen

Frankie prodded Chip hard with two fingers. It wasn't the cold flesh of a corpse that greeted her but a still-warm armpit and a snore.

"Chip!" She shook him again.

"Huh? What?" he struggled to wake up.

She breathed a sigh of relief so big it almost brought her breakfast back up. Her phone vibrated in her pocket. A text from Pru.

Pru: Where are you? Where's Chip?

Shit.

"Chip, it's me, Frankie. Are you okay?"

"Frankie?" he asked, groggily. "Does Elliot still have me? Does he know you're here?"

Frankie looked back toward the door. "No time to talk. We have to get you out of here. Can you walk?"

"Of course, I can walk. I fell asleep doing sit-ups. They gave me something to knock me out. Plus, super hungover. How's Pru? Is she mad? Is her dad—"

"Pru's fine. She's anxiously awaiting you in a poufy white dress."

"She didn't cancel?" Chip lit up like the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree.

"She doesn't know you're missing yet."

Frankie's phone vibrated again and then again. A rapid succession of texts she imagined.

"Why were you doing sit-ups?" Frankie asked, grasping his hand and pulling him into a seated position.

"Didn't want my six-pack to suffer just because I got abducted. I'm good. I swear." To prove it, he bounded to his

feet and promptly fell on the bed. “Sorry. My foot’s asleep.”

Frankie pulled him back up. She could hear a voice in the other room and footsteps.

“Hide,” Chip whispered.

Frankie ran around in a circle panicking and was eyeing the bedspread as a potential hiding spot when Chip opened the closet door and shoved her inside. He had just shut her in the dark when she heard the room door open.

Was Asshole Kidnapper coming to kill her? Reflexively, she hunkered further into the closet and hit her head on something large and metal.

“Mother f—”

Frankie clapped a hand over her own mouth when she heard the bedroom door open.

“Stay in here until I tell you to come out,” Asshole Kidnapper insisted.

“Look, Elliot. Let’s work this out. I’ll get you whatever it is you want if you let me leave.”

“Nice try, Randolph. But there’s only one person who can give me what I want.”

“Aiden is not going to let you get away with this.”

Frankie froze. This guy had to be someone Aiden knew. Was that the reason he hadn’t let her kick in the door last night? She rubbed the knot on her head.

She was reaching for the door, ready to burst through it and demand answers when she heard a faint knock.

“Stay here and this will all be over soon,” Asshole snapped, slamming the bedroom door.

The closet door flew open, and Frankie jumped back, hitting her head again in the same spot.

“Are you okay?” Chip asked when she doubled over.

“Ouch!” Frankie’s hair snagged on a clothes hanger. She felt a half dozen bobby pins explode out of her head. “Oh, my God!”

“What?”

“My hair! My head! We have to get out of here!”

They both stopped, listened. There was more than one voice in the living room now, and it was only a matter of time before someone came back in.

Frankie rushed to the wall and pulled back the heavy curtains. “Oh, thank God,” she whispered when she spotted the balcony. As quietly as possible, she muscled the sliding glass door open. The noise of ocean and resort life immediately filled the room, and she winced. If they stopped talking outside the bedroom, they’d hear.

Ugh. Three floors up, she confirmed, looking over the balcony edge. There was no way down, but perhaps there was a way out. The railing banister was wider than the railing itself. Some enterprising architect had probably realized people would want to put their crystal martini glasses down to take sunset selfies. And it connected every balcony on the floor.

“Chip, get out here,” Frankie hissed.

He hobbled into the daylight like a hungover vampire.

“Why’s the sun gotta shine all the time here?” he groaned.

“Oh, my God. Climb up here.”

“You’re bleeding!” he said, gaping at her.

She touched her fingers to her hair. “I hit my head on the safe. It’s fine.

“It looks like...” Chip doubled over and breathed deeply.

“Pull it together, Chip.” He’d been pre-med at NYU until he realized that blood made him vomit and faint. “Don’t make me slap you.”

“Okay. Maybe if I just don’t look at you.”

“For the love of god, Chip. I need you to climb up on this railing and shimmy your ass to another room with an open balcony door. We need to go. Now!”

Chip peered down to the terrace below. “Jesus, Frankie, that’s like instant death!”

Frankie grabbed his face in her hand and squeezed his cheeks until he made fish lips. He closed his eyes so he didn’t have to stare at her head wound. “Chip, do you want to marry Pru today or not?”

“Yesh.”

“Then get your ass up there and shimmy over to the next balcony.”

“Okah.”

She released his face and pushed him toward the railing.

“You’re coming too, right?”

“I’ll be right behind you. Out of curiosity, what did Aiden have to do with all this?”

Chip paused on all fours balancing. “It’s not his fault.”

They heard raised voices coming from inside the suite. “Go. We’ll talk later.” Frankie shooed him further down the ledge and ran back into the room.

She’d barricade the door to buy them a little time. At least that was her plan when she tried to pick up the nightstand. The bedroom door burst open.

Asshole Kidnapper stared at her for two full seconds before losing his shit.

“Who are you, and where’s—”

“Your kidnapping victim? My friend Chip? You want to know where he is?” Frankie’s voice was rising. Her fingers closed around the alarm clock and iPhone charger on the nightstand.

“Yes!” he shrieked, tearing at his hair. “And why is there blood everywhere? Did you kill him?”

“What’s going on—” The man in the doorway didn’t get a chance to finish his sentence because Frankie hit Asshole in the face as hard as she could with the alarm clock.

He doubled over, screaming. More blood rained down on the white carpet. Frankie gave him another whack for good measure that knocked him to his knees.

“I tried to keep this civilized,” Asshole shrieked.

Frankie turned on the second man and hefted the alarm clock.

“You want a turn, Kilbourn?”

Aiden held up both hands. “Hang on there, slugger. Why are you bleeding?”

“Why am I bleeding? Why am I bleeding?” she laughed. “I’m bleeding for the same reason your best friend is missing his wedding. Because of *you*.”

“Franchesca, I can explain.”

“I don’t want an explanation! You’re too late. Chip’s already long gone—”

“Uh, Frankie?”

“Chip! What the fuck?”

Chip peeked through the patio door looking sheepish.

“So, I found a room that was open, but it was occupied, and I think they’re calling security.”

“Back up, Kilbourn. Just back the fuck up,” Frankie ordered, wielding the alarm clock.

“Hey, Aiden.”

“Good to see you, Chip.”

“Don’t talk to him. And don’t you come near us!” Frankie inched past Aiden, dragging Chip with one arm while holding the alarm clock pointed in Aiden’s direction.

Asshole Kidnapper moaned on the floor. “She broke my nose.”

“Good,” the three of them answered.

“Now, Chip and I are going to walk out of here, and you both are going to let us, or I’m going to start screaming bloody murder, and all of resort security will be breaking down that door in thirty seconds.”

Frankie backed them toward the door to the suite.

When Aiden made a move to follow, she shook her head. “Uh-uh, buddy. You’re persona non-grata. You stay here with your pal. We’ve got a wedding to get to.”

“You should probably do what she says,” Chip suggested to Aiden. “She’s terrifying when she’s mad.”

“I can see that,” Aiden said, looking more amused than terrified.

“Don’t you dare laugh,” Frankie growled. “I’ll make sure you regret this. Let’s go, Chip.”

“Hey, do you want a ride, Aiden?” Chip offered.

Frankie slapped him on the arm. “No, he doesn’t want a ride. Kidnappers don’t get rides from their victims.”

“Awh, Frankie, he didn’t really kidnap me.”

“Then he conspired to kidnap you.”

“No, I didn’t!”

“No, he didn’t!”

“We’ll talk about this later,” Frankie said, finally understanding just exactly how mad a parent had to be to use those words.

She pushed Chip out into the hallway. “Stay,” she said, pointing at Aiden who was helping his brother to his feet. “If either of you try to follow us, I’ll kill you.”

“I think the crazy maid means it,” Elliot stage whispered, still clutching his nose and looking terrified. “Lo siento, lady. Lo siento.”

“Seriously? We’re in Barbados, you idiot!”

She pulled the door shut and then pushed Chip toward the stairs. “Go! Go! Go!”

They sprinted to the basement and burst through the double doors. Footsteps sounded a floor or two above them. Flor in Frankie’s sundress was stocking a cart with mini shampoos.

“Can you lock that door?” Frankie asked, as she worked her zipper down her back.

Bianca raced to the stairwell door and locked it. “Someone’s running,” she reported, stepping away from the window.

“Thank you so much for everything,” Frankie said, shoving her way out of the dress. “Sorry about the blood. Those closet safes are sharp.”

Something, a good-sized body from the sounds of it, hit the doors at a run.

Frankie winced. She’d have nightmares forever of being chased down the stairs.

Flor stripped down quickly and handed the dress back to Frankie. “I hope you showed that asshole in 314 who’s boss.”

“I’ll apologize for the blood up there too,” Frankie said grimly.

Flor gave her a curt nod and clapped her on the shoulder. “Good luck, my friend.”

“May the force be with you,” Frankie offered. She was no good at pep talks or thank yous. “Let’s go Chip.”

They tiptoed out a side door and then half ran, half crawled, into the vegetation. The open scratches on her shins sang as she packed more dirt into the wounds. Her head throbbed and her hair was being picked apart by branches. But she had the groom.

“Ouch!”

Frankie looked back. Chip was holding a hand over his eye. “Are you okay?” she hissed.

“I got a branch in my eye.”

“Just look with your good eye. We’re almost to the wall.”

Finally, the great stucco monument rose before them. “Okay, we’re going to climb over, get in the car, and go get you married, right?”

“Right,” Chip said, still clutching his eye.

“Let me see your eye.”

He dropped his hand. There was a red welt that continued on either side of his eye. The eye itself was as red as a bloodhound's.

"Oh, God." She clutched a hand to her mouth. Frankie's stomach could handle a lot of things. Wounded eyes were not one of those things.

"Why are you *still* bleeding?" Chip gagged. "It's smeared all over your face." He bent at the waist and dry-heaved.

"Let's just stop looking at each other and climb the wall."

Frankie shoved Chip up and over, and when he leaned down to offer her a hand, he wisely squeezed his eyes shut tight.

They landed unceremoniously alongside the highway two hundred feet from Antonio and his stupid little car. The engine roared to life as they approached. Frankie stuffed Chip in the backseat.

"Buckle up," she warned, before jumping in next to Antonio.

The kid sped away from the resort with the vigor of a NASCAR driver in a brand-new sports car. Frankie pulled out her phone.

"Oh, my god." She had nineteen missed calls. All but two from Pru. The others were from Aiden. She played her friend's most recent voicemail and winced. Pruitt was sobbing uncontrollably.

Frankie hit redial with one hand and clung to the dash with the other. "Pru? Can you hear me?"

"Where are you?" Pru wailed. "Chip is gone. Aiden's missing. And you *abandoned* me! My dad is looking for a weapon, and Chip's mom already broke into the cocktail hour appetizers. I'm supposed to be getting married in twenty minutes, and I don't have a groom or a best friend."

"You have both, Pru. I have Chip with me, and we are on our way back."

"You have Chip?" At least, that's what Frankie thought she said. It was too high-pitched and blubbery to be sure.

“He’s right here. And there’s no rules about talking before the ceremony, right?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Pru sobbed.

“Here,” Frankie said, shoving her phone into Chip’s hand. “Talk to your bride?”

“Pru, baby?” Chip crooned into the phone.

“Is there always this much drama at weddings?” Antonio asked, veering around a pothole big enough to swallow their buggy.

“Really this is par for the course for most American weddings,” Frankie said.

“Really?”

“No! Jesus, Antonio. This is a complete shit show. Kidnappings and rescues—”

“And car chases,” Antonio added looking in the rearview mirror.

Frankie twisted in her seat to look. A big, black SUV was glued to their tail. She didn’t recognize the driver, but she sure as hell knew the passenger.

Chapter Twenty

Frankie released her safety harness and leaned out her open doorway to give Aiden a better view of her middle finger.

“It’s just Aiden,” Chip said, trying to juggle the phone and eye injury while shooing her back into the vehicle.

“*Just* Aiden? His brother kidnapped you!”

“That’s kinda the way they do things.”

“Your friends are horrible people,” Frankie yelled.

“Pru, baby?” Chip said into the phone. “Yeah, kidnapped. I know, right? Look, I gotta go. Aiden’s calling, and Frankie’s hanging out of the car, and we’ll be there so soon. I’ll explain everything after you’re my wife. I can’t wait to see you in your dress. I love you,” Chip shouted over the wind.

“Don’t you dare answer that call—” Frankie’s warning did no good.

“Oh, hey, Aiden. Oh, good. You’re right behind us... No, I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to tell her that right now. She’s pretty mad at you... I don’t know. We haven’t really had time to talk.”

Frankie reached behind her and snatched the phone back. “What the hell are you going to do, Kilbourn? Run us off the road? Shoot us in the back of the head?”

“Sit your ass down, buckle your seatbelt, and try to stay alive,” he growled into the phone.

“Excuse me? I don’t take orders from kidnappers.”

“He didn’t kidnap me!” Chip said.

“I didn’t kidnap him!”

“Whatever. Don’t even think about trying to keep us from the wedding. It won’t go well for you.”

“I’m not trying to keep you from the wedding, you irresponsible, exasperating idiot. I’m on your side.”

“Bullshit. You knew your brother had Chip.”

“I did,” he admitted. That temporarily shut her up. “I realized it when you read the business name on the room register last night. It’s a subsidiary of the family company.”

“Well, good news for you.”

“I promise you, I’ll deal with Elliot later. For now, let’s try to get the groom to his wedding in one piece.”

“You are the worst human being in the world, and I know a lot of people,” Frankie shouted into the phone.

“Sweetheart, you have no idea.” He disconnected before she could have the satisfaction of hanging up on him.

“Agh!”

“So Money Bags kidnapped you?” Antonio asked as he skirted through an alley.

“Yes,” Frankie said.

“No,” Chip said. “Hey, are you old enough to drive?”

They made it to the resort in one adrenalized piece. The big black SUV maintained its course and pulled up to the hotel behind them. Frankie tossed every bill she had in her wallet at Antonio, blew him a kiss, and dragged Chip out of the car.

Aiden burst out of the passenger door of the SUV, and the three took off at a dead run through the lobby.

The concierge and front desk manager gaped after them.

“We have to get you dressed,” Frankie said, pushing Chip toward the elevator. The doors miraculously opened, but Aiden slid in behind them. The close quarters were what pushed her over the edge. She launched herself at Aiden. Her hands were so angry they didn’t know whether to slap or punch and instead flopped uselessly against his chest.

“She’s going Solange on you,” Chip observed.

“Thank you. I can see that,” Aiden said dryly, wrestling Frankie into the corner of the elevator. “Stop. Hitting.”

He held her there with the weight of his body. Frankie’s rage kicked up another notch when her body reacted as if it was happy to have six-plus feet of lying asshole pressed against it. Stupid, traitorous body.

“Hold still, Franchesca. I’m just trying to look at the cut on your head.” He gripped her chin from behind as she flailed against him. “Stop.” He gave the order softly.

She winced when his fingers prodded the cut.

“It’s not too deep. But you should have it looked at.”

“Oh, sure. I’ll make an appointment with a doctor in the next, oh, two minutes before the ceremony starts.”

“What happened to your eye?” Aiden asked Chip.

“Tree branch during the escape. This is going to be some story for the grandkids someday.”

“Yeah, just remember who rode to your rescue and who was the bad guy,” Frankie muttered.

The elevator doors opened, and they spilled out into the hallway. Chip jogged toward his room, one hand clamped firmly over his eye. Aiden stood rooted to the spot. “We need to talk,” he said to Frankie.

“Yeah, well, that’s not happening either. I have nothing to say to you.”

“Let’s go Kilbourn. Gotta get me married,” Chip called from the end of the hall.

“Don’t get abducted again,” Frankie called after him. She whirled on Aiden and stabbed him in the chest with her finger. “He trusts you. But I don’t. And if you do anything to fuck this up for him and Pru, I’ll be taking your balls home with me in my carry-on,” Frankie warned him.

“I’m rather attached to them.”

“Don’t be cute with me.”

“You’re beautiful when you’re covered in blood and pissed off.”

“Then I must look like a fucking super model right now.”

She flipped him off one more time for good measure and stormed down the hall to her room. She’d forgotten until she got inside about the dress. The mangled, stained dress. The garment bag was hanging in the closet. She was too nervous to look to see if the hotel laundry had been able to work a miracle. She shucked off her now ruined sundress and shoved herself into the strapless bra and friggin’ forty-seven dollar satin briefs that *had* to go with the dress.

With shaking fingers, she unzipped the bag. Oh god. There were still visible berry stains. The tears at least looked... better-ish. It still looked like the dress had been run through a garbage disposal.

Her phone rang again and she stabbed the speakerphone button as she shimmied into the dress.

“Yeah?”

“Frankie, you’ve got to get down here. My dad and Chip’s dad are fighting in the aisle.”

“Fistfight or wrestling?”

“Ha. Basically, screaming at each other about how the other’s kid is a selfish asshole.”

Frankie could hear shouting in the background. “What are the groomsmen doing?”

“Putting action on it. Most of them think my dad can take Mr. Randolph because of the years of pent up rage.”

“Ugh. I’ll be down in two minutes. In the meantime, have your wedding coordinator do literally anything.”

“Hurry!”

Frankie hung up and stared in horror in the mirror. The left side of her face was covered in blood. Only some of it was dried. Her carefully coiffed hair was exploding out of the last

of the torture pins that were still hanging on. She had an entire vine stuck in there somehow. And the dress?

The dress was cleaner now but still destroyed. Did bridesmaid dresses come in distressed fabric? Pru was definitely going to kill her.

There was a knock at the door, and Frankie tripped over the hem in her haste to get to it.

“What the hell do you want?”

Aiden was standing there in an annoyingly pristine, perfectly tailored tux. No blood or bruises on his face. Just a ghost of a smile and a garment bag slung over his shoulder.

“I thought you might need this,” he said, handing over the bag.

“Like there’s anything you could give me that I’d accept right now,” Frankie snapped. Her head hurt and so did her heart.

Seeing that she wasn’t going to, Aiden reached over and unzipped the bag himself.

It was her bridesmaid dress. Or at least an exact replica. “How in the hell—”

“Do you really want to know how, or do you want to put it on?” he asked.

“On.” Anger and shyness be damned. She had a best friend to please. Frankie slid out of her dress, shoving it into a pile on the floor.

Aiden lost that smug smile and simply stared.

“Like you haven’t seen a thousand tits before,” she muttered, stepping into the new dress.

He steadied her when she wobbled and zipped her up in the back.

“Perfect,” he said.

“How did you know my size?”

“Did you forget I’ve had my hands on you?”

“That was eighteen hours ago. How did you get a gown in my size here that fast?”

“Why don’t we take care of the blood and the hair instead of focusing on the hows?” he suggested.

“How did you get dressed so fast? Is Chip ready? Oh, God. You didn’t leave him alone did you?”

Aiden pushed her into the bathroom and wet a washcloth.

“Why are hotel towels always white?” Frankie winced, as he began to clean her face. “Those stains aren’t coming out.”

“Do you always babble when you’re nervous?”

“Nervous? I’m not nervous. I’m a freaking rock over here. I didn’t almost die or give myself a concussion or ruin my best friend’s perfect day.”

“Shhh.” Aiden worked the cloth gently around her temple.

“Look. You don’t have to be all gentle about it. We gotta get down stairs and keep Win and R.L. from killing each other. They were four seconds away from wrestling when Pru called.”

“Got it covered.”

“You have everything covered, don’t you?”

“I would if you’d let me.”

“You could have told me. That you knew who had him. That you were working on a plan.”

“I didn’t want to involve you in Kilbourn business. It’s messy and ugly, and I’m trying to impress you. So, how appealing would I have been if I told you my half-brother orchestrated this entire thing to ensure my vote for a new chief financial officer?”

“I find honesty a lot more attractive than someone who never gets dirty, Aiden.”

She turned to look in the mirror. He’d done the best he could with the cleanup, and she no longer resembled a car accident victim. “Oh, my hair.”

“Leave it down.” He pulled a pin out before she could object. “Don’t try to tame it.”

Their eyes met and held in the mirror. She was still mad. But marginally less mad. It must be his pheromones that he was giving off. Sexy, wealthy pheromones.

“We better get down there,” she said, grabbing a stick of deodorant and her lip gloss and shoving them in her clutch. “I can finish in the elevator.”

She made a dash for the door only to turn around. “Shoes!”

Aiden held up his hand, her sandals dangling from his fingers.

Chapter Twenty-One

The wedding was, despite the events leading up to it, picture perfect.

Well, after Pruitt's father, R.L. tried to take a swing at Chip when he handed off his daughter to her groom. But besides that, it had been rather nice, Aiden decided.

Pruitt glowed in her gown and didn't even seem to mind that Chip was wearing an eye patch. A scratched cornea, according to Dr. Erbman, an optometrist who was attending the wedding. The couple said their vows and sealed them with the requisite kiss. It appeared as though all transgressions had been forgiven and everyone was ready to enjoy the party. Everyone except Franchesca.

There was no forgiveness in those blue-green eyes. He'd watched her throughout the ceremony. He tried to put his finger on exactly what it was about Franchesca Baranski that held his attention like a hand closing around his throat. She wasn't his usual cookie-cutter beauty. She wasn't refined. And she certainly wasn't used to high society.

He made sure the women he dated were all of those things. It made it easy, uncomplicated.

There was nothing uncomplicated about Frankie. And she was dismissive about his wealth, something else Aiden wasn't used to.

But he longed to touch her again. It had been a test of both his and her reactions at Oistins. He'd pushed his luck on the beach at Rockley. But now that he had his answer, there was no way he was giving up the chase. He wanted her under him, naked and begging. Wanted to fist a hand in that curtain of curls and bring her to her knees. There was something dangerous about those desires. He wanted to own her, consume her.

He wanted her to complicate the hell out of things.

He watched her throughout the ceremony. While the other bridesmaids looked bored or practiced the perfect pose for the photographer, Frankie cried tears of sincere joy for her friends and the commitment they were making. She was a romantic, and he knew he'd spoil that in her if he touched her. If he got her to say yes. He wasn't capable of love or romance. He excelled at winning.

And even with the blood, the bruises, the lack of makeup, Franchesca was a prize worth winning. She outshone the rest of them, all posing like clothes hangers. The same hair, the same makeup, the same drive.

He'd have her, Aiden decided, for purely selfish reasons. She didn't make sense. She didn't fit in his life. But he wanted her all the same. He'd have her even if it meant ruining her.

He'd caught her eye during the vows, and the soft happiness in her eyes had shifted to steel. No, she hadn't forgiven him. Nor should she. However, if that grudge was going to keep her out of his bed, Aiden was willing to grovel to destroy the obstacle.

They spent the rest of the ceremony locked in a staring contest. His focus zeroed in until there was nothing but Frankie, her hair blowing in the breeze, her dress hugging her curves like she were a pin-up.

"Knock. It. Off," she mouthed to him. He grinned wickedly. Yes, this conquest would be more than satisfying.

When the bride and groom linked arms in celebration and marched down the aisle to the cheers of their audience. Aiden felt the anticipation ratchet up.

And then he was touching her. Frankie stiffly slid her arm through his.

He reached into his jacket pocket and produced a handkerchief. He handed it to her. She frowned down at it. "You soak this in chloroform?" she hissed.

His laugh surprised them both and drew the eyes of the ceremony guests.

"You are one-of-a-kind, Franchesca."

“Ugh. Let’s get this over with, you steaming pile of shit,” she muttered.

“Smile pretty for the cameras, sweetheart,” he said as they started down the aisle.

“How about I break your nose like I did for your brother?” she offered sweetly, beaming up at him as if he were the most fascinating man in the world.

“Half-brother. And if it gets you to forgive me, my nose is yours.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

They smiled and nodded their way down the white carpet, and Aiden captured her hand with his free one. A photographer darted in front of them, and Aiden squeezed her hand until Frankie pasted on a “fuck you” smile. They grinned at each other. His hand crushing hers, her nails digging into his wrist.

He’d never wanted a woman this badly before in his entire forty years. Not even the voluptuous and unattainable Natalia when he’d been a fifteen-year-old virgin in private school. Two years older than Aiden, Natalia hadn’t remained unattainable, and Aiden hadn’t remained a virgin.

However, Frankie was just stubborn enough to deny them both what they most wanted on principle. He couldn’t have that. He was a Kilbourn, and Kilbourns did whatever it took to get what they wanted by any means necessary as embarrassingly evidenced by his half-brother’s dim-witted move.

Reluctantly, Aiden released her when Pruitt threw her arms around Frankie.

The women hugged rocking side to side, and the tears returned.

Aiden slapped Chip on the shoulder. “You did it.”

“Thanks to you and Frankie,” Chip said, prodding his eyepatch. “So, you going to kill Elliot?”

“I’ve got some plans for him,” Aiden said darkly. He was used to his family’s manipulations to some extent. But Elliot had crossed a line, and there was no going back.

“What did he want out of you?” Chip asked.

“A vote.”

“Family, right?” Chip shrugged good-naturedly.

“I’m sorry he dragged you into this. Rest assured he’ll pay.”

“I had no doubt, Kilbourn. Now, let’s party.”

Chip swept Pruitt out of Frankie’s arms and spun her in a circle. “Mrs. Randolph!”

“Mr. Randolph,” she cooed back at him. “Now, tell me everything that happened.”

Davenport appeared with Margeaux attached to him. She slinked over to Aiden and smiled slyly. “How do you feel about bagging a bridesmaid before cocktail hour?”

He frowned and leaned in a little closer. “What happened to your eyebrow?”

Margeaux growled. “That low-class, fat bitch Franklin bonded with the help, and they waxed it off.”

“Oh, hey, Marge,” Frankie strolled by, plate of hors de oeuvres in hand. “You’ve got a little something right here.” She pointed to where the fake eyebrow that wasn’t fooling anyone had been sketched onto her forehead.

“Why don’t you fuck off and go scrub someone’s toilet?” Margeaux snapped.

“Actually, I’m in catering, so you should ask me to get a plate of food. But I can see how you’d get those confused, being a spoiled, selfish dumbass and all.”

“Ladies,” Davenport said jovially. He threw an arm around both bridesmaids. “Can’t we all just get along?”

“Sure, as soon as someone sends her back over the wall to Mexico where she belongs,” Margeaux sneered.

“I’m Lebanese and Italian, you fuckwit.”

“Whatever. Your people fold my laundry and cook for me.”

“Margeaux, why don’t you do us all a favor and go off and fuck some poor schmuck who doesn’t yet know what a

soulless harpy you are?” Aiden said succinctly.

Frankie and Margeaux stared at him, open mouthed.

“Don’t insult Franchesca again, or you won’t be happy with the consequences.”

“Come on, doll. Let’s get you a drink and some appetizers that you can throw up later,” Davenport said, steering Margeaux away from Frankie.

“I don’t need you defending me,” Frankie reminded him.

“And I don’t need you being treated like shit.”

“I can handle myself.”

“I can see that. Nice job on her eyebrow by the way. She’s going to look perennially surprised in every photo.”

Frankie’s full lips curved ever so slightly. “It wasn’t my idea. I wish it had been.”

Cressida and Taffany joined them. Cressida snapped her fingers at a waiter bearing a tray of drinks. “You may leave these here,” she said, taking the tray from him.

Taffany was a shocking shade of fuchsia. She reached for a glass and winced as her dress rubbed her raw skin.

“What happened to you?” Frankie asked.

“I fell asleep in the sun this afternoon after the spa,” Taffany said trying to lift the drink to her lips without stretching any skin.

“Passed out actually,” Ford said, leaning over Taffany’s shoulder and grabbing a drink. He’d already loosened his tie and slapped on a pair of Ray-Bans. “Let’s get this party started!”

“I agree,” Cressida said fiercely.

“Woooo,” the burnt Taffany said without moving.

Digby strolled by on his phone muttering about “not missing this IPO” and “restricted shares.”

“Let’s talk,” Aiden told Frankie. He was pleasantly surprised when she let him guide her away from the festivity, his hand at

the small of her back.

Night was falling. The sunset cast a spectacular show of pinks and reds over the sky and ocean to the west. Behind them, the band warmed up with an old favorite.

“You wanted to talk, so talk,” Frankie said, crossing her arms in front of her. The move made her breasts swell dangerously against the fabric of her dress.

“I’d like to explain what happened.”

“To me or to my boobs,” Frankie asked.

Rather reluctantly, Aiden raised his gaze to her face. She was smirking at him, her hair spilling over a shoulder, the curls lifting in the wind.

“To all of you, if you’ll let me.”

She made a sarcastic and sweeping gesture with her hand. “The beach is yours. Talk.”

“My family isn’t normal,” he began. She rolled her eyes but didn’t interject. “We don’t ask for things. We take them. We manipulate and maneuver until whatever it is that we want is ours or until we lose our interest.”

“I thought you were trying to get into my pants?” Frankie quipped.

“I’m trying to be honest. And I have a feeling honesty will get me farther than painting pretty pictures.”

“So, you’re all selfish, manipulative assholes. I got it. Why did your selfish, manipulative asshole brother take Chip?”

“Elliot is my half-brother. He’s spent years trying to prove to our father that he’s the better son.” Despite their ten-year age difference, Elliot had been born trying to keep up with Aiden. “I’m favored for whatever reasons my father has. But Elliot is constantly trying to outdo me, undermine me, prove his worth.”

“Uh-huh. And abducting your best friend would help him how?”

“We’re all on the board of Kilbourn Holdings. We’re looking for a new CFO. A powerful and lucrative position. Elliot wants me to vote for the candidate he’s backing. His candidate is... lacking. And I told him so, repeatedly.” It was the polite way of saying Boris Donaldson was a sexual harassing, egotistical, asshole who left his last position under the shadow of an insider trading scheme. Aiden wasn’t letting the man near his family business.

“So, he took Chip to strong-arm you into it?”

Aiden nodded. “It sounds stupid, but the business of it is complicated.”

“It is stupid, but it’s not that complicated. Obviously, Elliot has a reason he wants this guy in place whether it’s personal or professional. CFO for Kilbourn Holdings. That’s a lot of money, not to mention prestige, and a voice as to what happens within the company. He either really likes this guy, or it’s a ‘I’ll do this for you, if you do this for me’ deal.”

Aiden nodded, pleased that she grasped the situation. “I knew Elliot was behind it when you named the company listed on the room. He thinks it’s a secret shell corporation, but I know everything that happens under the company umbrella. I’ve kept an eye on him and his business.”

“This is the part that really starts to piss me off. You knew where Chip was and who had him, and you could probably guess the reason. Yet you decide we have to leave him there and ‘regroup.’”

“I told you I didn’t want to involve you.”

“I could have held your coat while you kicked in the door, punched your brother in the face, and dragged Chip out.”

His lips curved. That was probably the way Frankie would prefer to conduct business.

“That’s not how Kilbourns react to threats.”

“Let me guess,” Frankie said, tapping a finger to her chin. “You came back to the hotel, did a little digging, and found out why this Boris guy is so important to your brother so you could use it against him.”

He nodded again. “Essentially. You’re not running away screaming yet,” Aiden pointed out.

She shrugged. “It’s no kicking in a door and punching him in the face, but at least you were willing to do something vindictive. However, you were *also* willing to leave my friend at the hands of an idiot kidnapper for more hours than necessary. What if Elliot had hurt him?”

Aiden shook his head. “That’s not Elliot’s MO. He doesn’t get his hands dirty. You saw the setup. Chip was locked in a room and fed.”

“But you couldn’t know that for sure,” Frankie reminded him. “People go crazy all the time.”

“Chip dabbled in mixed martial arts after college. I think he could take a sniveling idiot like Elliot without breaking a sweat.”

She stepped closer. Her chin came up defiantly. “Your brother could and did hire other people to do his dirty work. You shouldn’t have assumed that they would have qualms about harming a rich, drunk American. You were so cocky in your assessment, you left my friend in a potentially dangerous situation and me in the dark. That’s not how you treat people, Aiden.”

He frowned, her words striking a direct hit. “There’s no point in reviewing ‘what-ifs.’ I was confident that Elliot wouldn’t harm Chip, and he didn’t.”

“You were willing to risk it.”

“I got where I am today by listening to my instincts.”

“Please. You got to where you are today because your daddy gave you a position and a big, fat trust fund. Maybe you’ve worked hard since then. Maybe you’re good at what you do. But you fucked up here. Chip could have been hurt while you and your brother were playing human chess. This wedding might not have happened, and a whole lot of other people would have gotten hurt.”

“But it didn’t happen that way,” Aiden pointed out, his frustration rising. He wasn’t used to being lectured by anyone

other than his father.

“You were careless with other people, Kilbourn. That’s a pretty damning character flaw. I don’t go to bed with people who treat me or anyone else like shit.”

“Franchesca,” he began. Defending himself was getting him nowhere. Time to change tactics. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I was careless and cocky, and my decision could have hurt people.”

“Hmm.”

“What does that mean?”

“Aide, you tell me you’re a champion manipulator, and then you go and give me the perfect apology? Please. I didn’t just fall off a turnip truck. I know how far a man will go to get in my bed.”

He didn’t particularly care for being called out for his tactics or having to think about any other man lucky enough to land in Frankie’s bed.

“You wanted answers, you wanted an apology. And none of that’s good enough. What more do you want from me, Franchesca?” he demanded, crossing his arms.

“I want you to be real. Don’t play games. Don’t paint me a picture. Be honest. Don’t try to strategize your way between my legs.” She turned and started back toward the party and then paused. “Oh, and you owe Chip and Pru a pretty massive apology. Make it a good one.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Frankie marched back to the reception ready for a good, stiff drink. She was exhausted. Chip was safe, Pru was married, and she'd knocked the great and powerful Aiden Kilbourn down a peg or two. Her work here was done.

She was flying back in the morning. Back to normal life. Work, school, her insane mother. And as far as she was concerned, she'd be just fine if she never saw Aiden again.

"There you are!" One of the photographer's lackeys grabbed Frankie's wrist just as she was reaching for a glass of something cold and alcoholic. "Time for portraits," the woman said cheerily, dragging her away.

"But, but tequila!"

"I'll have a hot cocktail waiter spoon feed you tequila if it means you'll run, not walk," the woman said through gritted teeth.

"You don't have to be afraid of the bride. There's no zilla there," Frankie said, warming up to a jog.

"It's not her. It's Wannabe Annie Leibovitz," the lackey said, nodding in the photographer's direction. The woman was wearing diamonds and silk as if she were one of the higher end guests. "She's terrifying."

"Send me that waiter," Frankie hissed as the woman shoved her toward the photographer.

"You!" The photographer pointed an accusing finger in her direction. "Makeup!"

As if by magic, a hotel employee with a palette of gels and goops and glosses appeared in front of Frankie and started applying things to her face.

"And you!" The photographer pointed at Aiden who had trailed in, a glass of something manly in his hand. "Your hair is a little long on top for my vision. We need to cut it."

“Or you’ll take me as I am,” he suggested calmly, his gaze finding Frankie.

“Bah!” the photographer spat out a laugh. “Fine. Stand there and look broody. Perfect,” she said when he didn’t move a muscle. She pointed at Frankie again. “You. Go there.”

“Where’s my tequila?” Frankie whispered to the assistant.

“I’ll share,” Aiden offered, holding up his glass.

She wasn’t getting through this without alcohol. She sipped, her eyes widening at the slow, smooth burn at the back of her throat.

“Scotch?” she asked, taking another sip. A team of assistants appeared and shoved her at Aiden, arranging them for the photographer.

Aiden nodded. His hand skimmed the small of her back, fingers curling around the curve of her hip.

One of the assistants snatched the glass from her hand and Frankie glared, mutinously at the man. “I must have only had the bad kind before.”

“I’ll give you a case,” Aiden promised.

Frankie looked up at him sharply. “Don’t start with me, Aide.” One of the stagers grabbed her hand and laid it flat on his chest. “Hey!” Frankie didn’t care to be arranged like a Barbie doll. Especially not when her Ken was Aiden.

“Perfect! Don’t move!” The photographer flew around them snapping away. Flashes blinding them both. “Stop looking at me. Look at each other.”

Frankie didn’t obey the command swiftly enough and Aiden nudged her chin up to meet his gaze.

“Oh, hell yes. Inferno over here,” the photographer shouted. “Give me more.”

“I want you,” Aiden announced quietly.

Frankie tried to withdraw, but he wouldn’t let her. He held her in place with those two big, capable hands.

“You wanted honesty. You don’t want games. I’m giving you that. I want you in my bed, Franchesca. I want to see you when we go home.”

“God! The smolder on you two,” the photographer crowed.

“I want you, and we both know that’s not one sided,” he pressed.

She shivered, thinking about those probing fingers under the table at dinner the night before.

“Giving in to every craving your body has is a stupid idea,” she shot back.

“Craving. What a perfect word for it.” He brought his hand up and smoothed her hair away from her face.

“Oh, yeah. I’m having orgasms over here,” the photographer shouted. “Way better than Sunburned Fake Tits and Mr. Roboto.”

“I just told you I don’t sleep with guys who treat people like shit.”

“Then I’ve changed my ways.”

She gave him her best “shut the fuck up” look.

“I’ll be whatever it is you want me to be.”

“Aiden! How is that not playing games?”

“I’m trying to be honest with you.”

“Then try this on for size,” she suggested. “Frankie, I like you. A lot. And I want to fuck you, and I promise to make it worth your while.”

“I want to do more than fuck you,” he admitted.

Frankie shook her head. “I know what you do. You play with women like toys until something newer and shinier comes along.”

“I don’t do long-term relationships,” Aiden agreed. “But I won’t play with you. I’ll be good to you.”

“While it lasts,” she shot back. “I’m not interested in being someone’s toy. And what makes you think I’d want a

relationship with you anyway?”

“Then spend tonight with me.”

“Just tonight?”

“Let me have you tonight. All night. Then decide.”

“Jesus, Kilbourn. You want me to fuck you and then decide if I want to be your plaything?”

He looked pained. “I’ll give you anything you want.”

“Newsflash. You don’t buy me, asshole. You earn me.”

The camera shutter clicked incessantly. “Why don’t you grab her leg and hook it over your hip,” the photographer suggested to Aiden.

“I think we’re done here,” Frankie said, pushing out of Aiden’s arms. She needed tequila to cool the slow burn in her blood. Every damn time he put his hands on her, she couldn’t think of anything else but how good it felt.

She couldn’t trust him. Wouldn’t trust him. She had standards. She wasn’t some walking horn dog like Margeaux. And she wasn’t an idiot like Taffany. She knew exactly what she’d be getting into, and it wasn’t just Aiden’s bed.

* * *

The party moved to the expansive stone terrace for dinner and more drinks. Frankie noted that Pru looked a little shell-shocked over Chip’s description of recent events. But she was a Stockton-Randolph now. Appearances had to be kept.

Still, Frankie watched her closely for signs of migraines or minor freak-outs. And while she watched Pru, Aiden watched her.

She avoided him. But it wasn’t easy. There was the group photography. The bridal party dance. And she couldn’t

completely ignore him now that he was giving a toast.

He rose from the chair on Chip's right, the microphone in his hand. The long bridal party table was swagged in ivory cloth and tens of thousands of dollars of cream-colored flowers. Strands of silver and gold crystals dripped from the table top down to the floor. Frankie half expected Gatsby himself to stroll out with a goblet of champagne.

And Aiden Kilbourn in a bespoke tux looked as if he belonged here.

He didn't need to quiet the crowd. When Aiden spoke, everyone listened.

Frankie tried not to look at him, but it was like telling an elementary school student not to look directly into the sun during an eclipse. It made her want to look more.

"Chip and I met on the polo field several years ago when my rather aggressive pony tried to take a bite out of his shoulder," Aiden began warmly. "He was quite nice about it as Chip is about everything. I, on the other hand, am more like my pony."

The crowd chuckled, and Frankie rolled her eyes.

"Despite that, we became friends. I thought my influence would harden him. Make him more aggressive to better suit me. However, it didn't work out quite that way. Despite my best efforts, Chip remained kind-hearted, friendly. And I found myself softening a bit. Chip reminded me that there is more to life than conquering the world. There's living and loving to be done. And he and Pruitt are a shining example of exactly that."

Chip grinned up at Aiden.

Stupid eloquent bastard. He wasn't even reading from notes.

"Now, I'm not saying you and Pruitt have changed my mind about marriage. But you do make love look appealing. I've never had someone in my corner the way Pruitt is in yours. Well, except for you, Chip, and you're already taken."

The crowd laughed eagerly.

"I'm honored to be in both your corners today. And for the first time in my life, I worry that I might be missing out."

Every woman on the terrace swooned. It was an audible sigh, like a flock of birds taking flight at once.

“To Chip and Pruitt. I wish you all the happiness that comes with living and loving,” Aiden said, raising his glass of champagne.

“To Chip and Pruitt,” the guests echoed.

That sexy rat bastard. No one would have guessed that just a few hours ago the man had allowed his so-called best friend to be used as bait. Aiden came to her, the microphone in hand. He leaned down and in, his lips brushing her ear.

“Quit glaring at me, sweetheart. You’ll spoil the pictures.”

He handed over the mic, winked, and returned to his seat.

Frankie cursed him. Her pulse rate was running at jack hammer speeds. One brush of his lips against her ear lobe, and she was ready to take his pants off under the table and grip his cock with both hands.

How was she supposed to give a speech when her nether-region was throbbing like a volcano about to erupt? The man was leaking pheromones, nature’s roofies.

Grateful for the cover of the table and the long gown, Frankie rose and stood with her legs crossed tight. She cleared her throat and focused on Pru’s pretty face.

“I have two loud, obnoxious brothers at home. My whole childhood was spent wishing for a sister. Someone to even the odds. Someone who didn’t leave the toilet seat up.”

The crowd chuckled. *See? She could be funny, too.*

“I didn’t get my wish until I moved into my dorm freshman year. I walk into my new room, carting all of the freshman necessities like cheese curls and a straightening iron with my brothers bickering about who was carrying more stuff. And there she was,” Frankie smiled down at Pru who was already crying.

“My sister. She told my brothers to quit whining and to go order us a pizza. A good one, not one crapped up with onions and anchovies, if I recall. We were there for each other

through mid-terms and finals, and boys and late nights, and hangovers, and more boys. Pru taught me to ski. I taught her to flip the bird to cabs in the crosswalk.”

Pru laughed and wiped her eyes.

“But for me, the absolute best thing about our relationship,” she paused to shoot a look at Aiden, “is being here today and seeing you two so happy. When you love someone, when you really care about them, nothing is more important to you than seeing them happy. And seeing you and Chip here today, I couldn’t be happier or more proud. You found your way back to each other, earned it. And together you’ll face the future as a team. I love you two. Salute.”

“Salute,” the crowd echoed and the air rang with the clinking of the finest crystal Barbados had to offer.

Chapter Twenty-Three

He caught her on the dance floor. Frankie was sharing a dance and laughing with Chip when Aiden appeared with Pru in his arms.

“Care to trade partners?” Aiden offered.

“Get your hands off my wife, Kilbourn,” Chip teased, reaching for Pru and reeling her in.

“There ye be, my pirate husband!”

Frankie started to step away, but Aiden held out his hand to her, daring her to take it. *Fine. She could deal with a dance. One dance. It didn't mean she'd end up naked with him doing magical things to her body.*

“Sorry about ruining our pictures,” Chip told Pru.

She shook her head at him. “Everything was absolutely perfect. Think of the story we'll have to tell our grandkids someday,” Pru told him. “I'm just glad you're safe.”

“I have Frankie and Aiden to thank for that.”

“Ahem!” Frankie cleared her throat, staring pointedly at Aiden.

“Almost entirely Franchesca,” he admitted. “In fact, I'm afraid I'm due the blame, not the thanks. It's my fault Elliot took Chip.”

Pru stopped mid-dance and prodded Aiden in his impeccable lapel. “Make him pay.”

“You can count on it,” Aiden promised.

Pru nodded and melted back into Chip's arms.

“Wait, wait, wait. That's it?” Frankie demanded, squirming against Aiden's hold. “He gets your groom kidnapped, lets him almost miss the wedding, and you're totally fine with it?”

Pru stared up into Chip's one good eye. "Aiden will take care of whatever needs taking care of."

"Where is the girl who made me grovel for three days after I ate the last cannoli junior year?"

"Those cannoli were freaking amazing! Heaven in my mouth," Pru argued.

"I know! *My* father made them!"

"Yeah, well, you said I could have as many as I wanted, and I was on my period. And I wanted that last one."

"Three days. Over cannoli. You get her husband kidnapped and 'oh, it's fine.' Life is not fair," Frankie announced to Aiden.

"Shut up and dance with the handsome man while I make out with my pirate husband," Pru said, shooing them away.

"You should listen to your best friend," Aiden said, his voice was a rumble low in his chest.

She tilted her head back to look at him and regretted her decision. Why? WHY did he have to be so beautiful? His cheekbones were sculpted like a team of angels had weighed in on the exact right proportions. His beard was neatly trimmed moving him from clean cut to rakish. And all that dark curling hair? She wanted to shove her hands into it and grip while she shoved his face between...

Fuuuuuck.

She was no better than stupid Margeaux. Why did she want him? God, was she so desperate she'd fuck a guy just because he was hot?

As if reading her mind, Aiden drew her to the side of the dance floor and pulled her a little tighter against him.

"I'm not a bad guy, Franchesca. I've made mistakes, but I'm not some heartless villain."

"Would you have felt the least bit bad if your brother had ruined their wedding?"

“Of course I would have. And he *will* pay for what he did with more than just a broken nose.”

“Is it really broken?” Frankie asked hopefully. She’d thrown more than her fair share of punches, growing up with two brothers that lived to torment her. And when she sprouted boobs, those same brothers wanted to make sure she could fight off any guy not good enough for her.

“Definitely,” he said. His hand cruised over her back until it met bare skin.

She ignited. She never wanted something that she wasn’t sure she’d survive before. She didn’t like it.

“I need some air,” she breathed, pushing out of his grip. What she needed was more tequila. A bottle of it. And a flight home. She couldn’t afford to play with the rich and famous anymore. She wouldn’t get out unscathed.

He let her go, but she felt the weight of that hot stare on her until she jogged down the steps and disappeared onto the sand. The moon glimmered over the water, another perfect slice of paradise.

“What the fuck is wrong with me?” she murmured, stalking toward the ocean. *Was there a friggin’ cupid mosquito down here that she wasn’t aware of?* She’d had sex before. Plenty of it. She liked it. But one look from Aiden and her underwear melted off of her body. “Stay mad,” she coached herself, pacing down the beach. It was safer. Maybe Pru was feeling forgiving, but that didn’t mean she had to.

Someone had to keep their wits about them.

She felt him before she saw him emerging from the shadows. Frankie’s breath caught in her throat as Aiden walked toward her.

“I’ve never chased anyone, Franchesca.” The moonlight played over his perfect face, shadowing the hollows beneath his cheekbones. He had his hands in his pockets, deceptively relaxed. But there was no doubt that he was a hunter and she was the prey. Another challenge.

“Why do you want me, Aiden? And don’t give me some bullshit about me being beautiful and special. I already know I am, just like I know that I’m not your type. So ask yourself why it’s me you’re chasing and not some high society princess who’d beg to be ass up in your bed.”

“That is exactly why it’s you and not Margeaux or Cressida or whatever the fuck the other one’s name is. I want that smart, wicked mouth of yours wrapped around my cock as you take me to the back of your throat. I want to hear my name from that mouth when I make you come with mine. I want the challenge, the chase. I live for it. You’ll make me work for it, earn it. And I’ll worship you for it.”

Frankie blew out a breath and bent at the waist. “Well, that was at least honest.”

“I’m not offering forever. It’s not on the table. But what I can give you is time that we’ll both remember.”

“Fondly or ‘I spit on your grave’ memories?” Frankie quipped.

Somehow, he was in front of her, moving like a ghost. He threaded his fingers through her hair, and she shivered at the contact. “I’m not going to stop until you give me what I want. You need to understand that. I’ll push your buttons, manipulate you. Whatever it takes. I won’t fall for you. But I’ll be good to you.”

“Oh, I’ve seen how the Kilbourns do business,” Frankie snapped back.

He was a breath away. She could smell him, feel the heat pumping off of him. His presence drowned out the steady roll of the surf behind her.

Aiden didn’t know, couldn’t know, that he was waving a red flag in front of an enraged bull. He wasn’t the only one who loved a challenge. She bet that if they tangled, she could get in a few shots of her own. Maybe even make him fall just a little.

“So, I agree to be your shiny new plaything, and you give me ___”

“Anything and everything you want.”

“And what do you get out of it?”

“You.”

She wanted to laugh, to make a joke. This didn't happen to Franchesca Baranski. She met nice guys in coffee shops and offices, and they went to plays and bars and had fun, energetic sex. *This* happened only in the dog-eared novels on her bookshelf. Billionaire sweeps regular girl off her feet.

God, she at least hoped the orgasm count of fiction would come true.

“I'm going to kiss you,” he said, his voice low and rough.

Frankie slapped a hand to his chest. “Uh-uh. You're going to kiss me when I say you can kiss me. I'm not a 'submit to the alpha' kind of girl. I'm a 'kick him in the balls and take what I want' woman.”

“What do you want?”

“To break you.”

She caught him by surprise. That much was clear when her mouth met and took his. He stilled beneath her lips, her hands, for the span of a heartbeat. And then the beast was out of its cage. His hands on her felt so right. He pulled her into him, and she felt the heat, the hard of his body.

There was nothing soft or gentle about him. And she didn't want him to be.

She wanted to jump off that jagged edge of pleasure they'd been dancing on. She wanted to throw herself to the wolves. *The wolf*. Aiden's teeth raked her lower lip, and she whimpered. He used it to gain access to her mouth, his tongue sweeping inside, claiming new territory.

She shoved at his jacket, needing far fewer layers between them. Then it was her hands splayed over the thin material of his shirt. She felt the steady thrum of his heart under her hand. It gave her a little thrill to know that he was nearly as revved as she.

With one hand, he dove into her hair, closing his fist around her curls and pulling. The pain at her scalp should have been a

warning to slow down, to back off. But it only heightened her craving. He growled into her mouth, and the sound went straight to her belly.

Frankie's nipples were begging to be released, to be stroked and tasted and sucked. And her panties were so wet there was no way they could catch fire now.

"Don't play with me, Franchesca," Aiden said, leaving a millimeter between their mouths. "Don't torture me."

"Shut up and kiss me, Aiden."

"Tell me I can have you. Tell me you're mine."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Aiden kicked open the door to his room so hard it bounced off the wall. But he pushed them through the doorway before it flew back to hit them. He shoved it closed behind them and felt blindly for the lock without breaking from Frankie's mouth. Her mouth, God, that mouth.

Everything she did with those lush lips and wicked tongue drove him insane. They should have talked. The expectations should have been made clear before this.

Frankie slipped her hands between the buttons of his shirt, her fingers flexing on the fabric.

"You're rich, right? You can afford a new shirt?"

"Oh, yeah," he breathed.

It was all the incentive she needed. She yanked, sending buttons flying in all directions. One stroke of his chest, and she sent her busy fingers to his belt.

"Franchesca if you don't get out of that dress now, I'm going to destroy it."

"You bought it for me," she reminded him.

"Right. I'll get you another dress and me another shirt."

He didn't destroy the entire thing. Just ripped one of the straps and ruined the zipper trying to get his hands on her faster.

She worked just as quickly, just as impatiently. She had his belt off and his pants unhooked before he got the dress to her waist.

He'd thought of little else since he'd seen her in that strapless bra and gossamer thin panties before the ceremony. And now she was his for the touching, the taking.

One more shove and her dress pooled at her ankles. She was curvy like a goddess. So different from the waiflike size zeros he usually took to bed.

Her body made him salivate. She was made for sin, and he was happy to oblige.

He wanted to stop, to enjoy the view. Aiden wanted to stroke and kiss his way over every inch of her beautiful body. But his pants were sliding down his thighs, and she was wrestling his throbbing dick out of his briefs.

“Let’s see what we’re working with here,” she said, dropping to her knees.

The picture of Franchesca on her knees in front of him, staring at his cock, nearly leveled him. It was so much more than any fantasy. And if he thought about it for one second longer, he was going to come before her red lips even parted over his cock.

“Fuck.” He needed to reel it in, to take control. He didn’t let anyone dominate him. Ever.

It was a rule.

She was looking up at him, a submissive vixen with fingers curled loosely around his erection. “Nice equipment, Aide,” she said, her eyes twinkling.

He nodded, incapable of words. Every ounce of his focus was on not coming on her face, in her hair.

Jesus.

“You okay up there?” she asked. “You having a stroke or something?”

“You and your fucking mouth,” he groaned. And then she was using that fucking mouth on him.

She knew, had to know, how close to the edge he already was. When she took him to the back of her throat, it was slow and teasing, giving him precious seconds to get used to the drag of her tongue, the glorious wet of her mouth.

Those eyes. More green than blue now, stared up at him triumphantly as she licked and sucked him. She was a witch, and he was her victim. He fisted his hand in her hair and regulated her strokes. Keeping them slow and controlled. But there was nothing he could do about that tongue. Those

incredible noises at the back of her throat. He wanted to do this and nothing but this for the next year, watch her like this, feel her like this.

She *could* break him, he realized. With nothing more than that smart mouth, she could break him and make him grovel.

It was that thought and that thought only that had him hauling her to her feet by her hair. She licked her lips and made his cock twitch against her stomach.

“I was just getting started.”

“So am I,” he promised. He stepped out of his pants, kicked off his shoes. “Bed. Now.”

She didn't move fast enough for his liking. So he picked her up, draping her long legs over his hips. Her breasts taunted his mouth. “Take off your bra,” he said, crossing the living room.

By the time he hit the bedroom, he had one of those caramel nipples in his mouth, and she was begging him loudly to fuck her.

“Aiden!” She swore at him when he dropped her on the mattress. But he followed her, not wanting to be away from the body that tempted him like he was under a spell. He slapped at the lamp on the bedside table and reached into the drawer. Thank fucking God he never traveled without condoms. He wouldn't have survived the hunt for one. And it would have taken zero convincing for him to drive himself into her bare. Something he'd never done in his entire life.

Kilbourns didn't father bastards.

But Frankie could have batted those long-lashed eyes at him, and he would have happily shot his load inside her, thanking his lucky stars.

She was fucking beautiful, sprawled across his mattress, her hair spreading out beneath her, her nipples swollen and straining. She still had her sandals and underwear on, and Aiden planned to remedy that.

“You gonna look all day, or are you gonna make me come, Aide?”

“Just taking in the view, sweetheart. If I don’t get myself under control, you won’t be able to walk tomorrow.”

“Challenge accepted.” She rose up and grabbed him by the back of the neck, yanking him down to her. She kissed him like he was the only man in the world, and it was a heady thing. His cock was weeping with the need to bury itself in her. Precum leaked from the tip.

“Fuck,” he rescued himself from the kiss and slid down her body pausing to worship both breasts with their perky, needy nipples. She hissed in pleasure as he closed his mouth over each one, sucking until she writhed under him.

This wasn’t a woman faking her way to a picture-perfect sexual experience. This was a goddess chasing an orgasm that would eclipse the sun. And he would give her what she wanted.

“Finally,” he said, settling between her legs. He let his lips graze her inner thigh and watched her tremble. Aiden dragged those air-thin panties down to her thighs. He left them there. The final barrier prevented him from ramming himself into her wet pussy. He wanted to torture her the way she had him.

“Aiden if you don’t do something right this second, I’m going to take matters into my own hands,” Frankie threatened. He grinned. He didn’t know what love was, but he sure liked Franchesca Baranski more than any woman he’d ever taken to bed.

He took two fingers and traced them through the soft wet folds.

“Oh God. Oh fuck. Aiden!”

He held out for his name and then thrust his fingers inside her.

She cried out, and he nearly came on the sheets that touched his cock. He fucked her with his fingers, and when she started to grind her hips up, he leaned in and slid his tongue through her slit.

Rather than the scream he’d hoped for, she went deathly silent. He peeked and saw her, eyes squeezed shut, mouth open in a

silent O. “You okay up there? Are you having a stroke?” he quipped.

“Aiden, talking is *not* what I want you doing with your mouth right now!”

He licked his way to her center. His tongue and fingers working her clenching pussy and her sweet, little clit. She rode his hand, his mouth, determined to steer him toward her orgasm. But he could get there without the road map.

He added a third finger and traced his tongue down to her tight asshole and back to her clit again and again. She was sobbing his name. Everything else was incomprehensible.

He felt her walls tremble against his fingers and then the first pulse squeezed against him. He licked and fucked her through every contraction of that beautiful release. She clenched his fingers with those slick muscles, pulling him in as deep as he could go, and he wanted more. He wanted her coming on his cock, wanted those hungry squeezes to milk his own orgasm out of him.

“Aiden!”

He ground his hips into the mattress, desperate for the friction.

Her orgasm went on forever, and by the time she went limp beneath him, he was afraid he might black out if his brain lost any more blood. There was a pulse hammering in his head.

He raised up onto his knees and fisted his hard-on to roll on the condom.

“Franchesca,” he snapped. “Look at me. Open your eyes.”

She did, hazily at first. But when she saw him, fisting his dick between her legs, her gaze sharpened.

“What are you waiting for?” Her voice was hoarse.

“Tell me you want me. Tell me I can have you.”

“Take me, Aiden.”

“Are you mine?” He didn’t know why he was asking. He wasn’t possessive about women. But he wanted her to say it, say the words. And then he’d know he won.

“You get me for tonight. Don’t fuck it up.”

It was enough for him. For now. He spread her thighs and gripped her hips and had the satisfaction of hearing her voice break on his name when he pushed into her. She was so fucking tight, even after the warm up he’d given her. He buried himself to the hilt, pinning her to the bed with his hips.

Something snapped. Something he didn’t understand triggered, as if he were one man a second ago and now a brand-new one.

Her eyes, so bright and glassy, stared into him, into his soul. And she could see into his. Into the emptiness there that he was never free of.

But he wasn’t so empty now. They were connected. They were one. He could feel the aftershocks of her orgasm trembling around his cock. He could read her thoughts if he tried hard enough.

He wouldn’t last long. Not with her eyes glazing over like that and those round tits tempting him. “Franchesca,” he whispered her name as he finally began to move in her.

She brought her hands up and stroked over his shoulders, down his arms. A gentle, soothing touch. It felt like something had broken inside of him and now there was light getting in through the cracks.

She had bewitched him. Or he had contracted some kind of tropical fever.

She cried out, and he saw tears in her eyes. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, nails carving into his skin. He’d treasure the marks, hoped they’d stay.

He was done thinking. Done doing anything but feeling because she was getting tighter around him and he was swelling impossibly thicker in anticipation of a release that could wreck him.

Franchesca’s breath was coming in short bursts, and he felt sweat dot his skin. It was heaven, moving in her, being surrounded in her heat. He leaned down and closed his mouth over one pert nipple.

She arched against him, and all sweetness, all tenderness, was gone. They were animals in heat, clawing at each other, blindly scrabbling for a pleasure too intense for words. He released her breast and grabbed her hair, burying his face in her neck. She hiked her thighs up around his waist drawing him in deeper, and when he bottomed out in her, when she screamed his name brokenly, he felt it.

The detonation.

His own orgasm was on a hair-trigger, and when she closed around him, he exploded inside her. Pump after pump, he couldn't stop coming, and neither could she. Every thrust, every hot rush of come, she met him, squeezed him, pleaded for just one more.

He emptied himself into her welcoming center, but he felt anything but empty now. There wasn't cold, calculation at his center. No. There was something warm and bright and dangerously real.

He felt wetness against his shoulder, heard Franchesca snifle.

His gut tightened. "Franchesca? Frankie? Are you okay?" *He was still inside her, and she was fucking crying. It gutted him.*

"Oh, my God. I'm so embarrassed."

He wiped a fat tear from her cheek with his thumb. "What is it? Did I hurt you?" *What had he done?*

"No. I think it's because the wedding, and I was stressed, and those were the two most powerful orgasms of my entire life. And now I'm blabbering and embarrassed and holy fuck, Aiden. What was that?"

He dropped his forehead to hers, relief coursing through him.

"Are you sure you're okay? I didn't cross a line or something?"

"You didn't shove your dick up my ass without asking first, so I think we're fine. Can we pretend this part never happened?"

"What part?"

She laughed and another tear escaped. “Oh my God. Maybe you don’t suck so bad after all, Kilbourn.”

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“I could eat an entire buffet in under ten minutes.”

He wanted to kiss her on that tear-stained cheek. Kiss her and stay buried inside her where he felt something *good*. But he didn’t do that sort of thing. And she wouldn’t trust it if he did.

“Let’s see how many dishes we can order from room service,” he said, reluctantly sliding out of her and reaching for the phone.

Chapter Twenty-Five

There was nothing like a walk of shame to make Frankie feel like she was twenty years old again. Except this time, she was thirty-four, and she was sneaking out of a man's room wearing his Yale t-shirt because he'd ripped her dress in his desperate haste to fuck her to five mind-altering orgasms.

She clutched her shoes to her chest and balled up the remains of her gown and slipped out the door.

They'd dined on champagne and tender steaks in bed and ended up naked and panting again. She had every intention of leaving, of going back to her room to pack and regain whatever shred of sanity she had left, but had instead fallen asleep next to Aiden, a tangle of limbs and sheets.

She woke with a start, sunlight beaming obnoxiously in her face between the slice of curtain they hadn't bothered closing. She'd been horrified to find her face snuggled into Aiden's neck. Her hand resting on the smattering of chest hair above the slow and steady beat of his heart.

Her leg was thrown over his crotch, and his erection was digging into her thigh. The magnitude of last night, of not just giving in to his chase, but demanding he take her, hit her like a heavyweight champ. And the things she'd let him do to her? The things she'd done to him? *Hell.*

Apparently, she was as forgiving as Pru. Or as hormone driven as ol' one-eyebrowed Margeaux.

She must have forgotten to pack her dignity.

"Well, well, well."

Frankie jumped a mile in the hallway as she pulled Aiden's door closed.

"Jesus, Pru. You scared the ever-living hell out of me."

Her best friend was still in her wedding gown, her hair a disaster, her makeup smeared. She smelled like a distillery and

was grinning like a kindergartner turned loose in the Hershey Chocolate Factory.

“You and Aiden?” Pru squealed at dog whistle frequency.

“Shhh! Jeez. Keep your voice down.”

Pru listed hard to the side as if she were walking the deck of a boat. “I’m super drunk but not drunk enough to not be really, really excited.”

“Have you even been to bed yet?” Frankie asked.

Pru shook her head violently from side and side and walked into a wall. “Nope. ’s my party. Hey! Wanna hold my hair while I throw up? You can tell me why you’re sneaking out of You Know Who’s room with sex hair and teeth marks on your neck.”

* * *

Pru could be a professional vomiter, Frankie observed. She tucked her knees under her neatly in front of the toilet and gracefully sighed up the contents of her stomach.

“You know, when I barf, I sound like I’m trying to bring up a foot of intestine,” Frankie pointed out.

“Blaaaaaah,” Pru crooned to the toilet. She sat back on her heels looking proud of herself and flushed. “Barf drinking is so much easier than barf sicking. I prolly won’t even remember this tomorrow... or today.”

“Yeah, but you were like this with the stomach bug of 2005 too.”

“The trick is not to fight it,” Pru said sagely. “When you fight it, it makes it so much harder.”

Vomit lessons from a cheerful zombie bride. At least this was keeping her mind off of the satisfied ache in every well-used muscle. Off of the naked man down the hallway who had

shown her things in the dark that she couldn't comprehend in the daylight.

"Where's your husband?" Frankie asked, handing Pru a glass of water.

"My husband is sleeping under the head table on the terrace," Pru said proudly. "Now, tell me exactly how you got beard burn on your neck.

Her neck wasn't the only place she'd gotten it. But she wasn't about to mention her inner thighs right now.

"Aiden and I had sex," Frankie admitted.

Pru started cackling.

"Geez, what? You laugh any harder, and you're gonna spew again."

"I was jus' thinking that I can't wait to tell this story at your wedding!"

"Why would you tell this story at my wedding?" Frankie asked, horrified.

"'Cause you're gonna marry Aiden, and I'm gonna be your matron of honor!"

"I'm not marrying Aiden! We had a one-time momentary lapse in judgment."

"Uhhhh, judging by the orgasmic look on your pretty, pretty face, you had a life-altering one-time momentary lapse."

Frankie slumped against Pru's vanity. "Okay, it was good. Really good." So fucking good every sexual experience from now on was going to pale in comparison. That was a cheery thought.

"And?" Pru prodded, fluffing the skirt of her dress around her.

"And the key phrase is 'one-time.' We are not each other's types no matter how good in bed we are together."

"Okay, okay. On a scale of Jimmy Talbot and Tanner Freehorn, where does Aiden fall?"

This was the problem with having a best friend who knew everything about you. She created sex scales based on your worst and best experiences. Jimmy had been her first and sweetly awkward. Tanner was a random hookup at a New Year's Eve party ten months ago who had given Frankie her first multiple orgasm.

"Ugh. Don't make me do this!" Frankie begged.

"You have to," Pru ordered. "It's in the friendship rules. Jimmy to Tanner. Go!"

"Tanner plus three," Frankie mumbled under her breath. She traced the grout line with her finger, refusing to meet Pru's eyes.

"Tanner plus wha?" Pru asked. Her post-puke voice echoed off the marble.

"Three."

She watched drunk Pru do the math very slowly on her fingers. "Oh hell. Five. I had five orgasms, okay?"

"Is that even physically possible?" Pru shrieked. "Wait, hang on." She leaned over the toilet bowl and blated again. She bobbed back up, perky as a morning TV show host who hadn't just thrown up a carafe of champagne. "Five orgasms in one night?"

"Yeah. I think it's like a super power or something."

Or something all ridiculously rich dudes could do. Could money buy sexual prowess? No wonder women were always chasing them.

"I. Am. So. Happy. For. You." Pru stabbed the air with her finger to emphasize every word.

"Again, one-time thing," Frankie pointed out. "But let's talk about how happy I am for you, Mrs. Stockton-Randolph."

"Did you see my ring?" Pru asked.

Frankie had seen it approximately nineteen times since the ceremony.

"I would love to see your ring."

“What kind of ring do you think Aiden will get you?” Pru asked, closing one eye. She slid down to lay on the marble floor, her dress puffing up around her.

“No ring. No more sex either.”

“But he’s good enough for you, Frankie.”

“Okay, you’re clearly all heart-eyes and alcohol-ed because you’re telling me to marry the guy whose brother kidnapped your fiancé on the eve of your wedding.”

“I forgot about that. But still, Aiden is amazing.”

“He’s also a perennial bachelor who likes to swap out his women every month. And again, brother kidnapped Chip.”

Pru waved a dismissive hand. “Details, details.”

* * *

Frankie found herself in the middle seat of the plane wedged between a tiny Asian lady with very nice headphones and a guy whose chest hair was woven around the thick gold chain visible because he had the first four buttons of his shirt open.

The lady smelled like vanilla. The man like half a bottle of Drakkar Noir. It was going to be a very long flight. But at least she’d escaped Barbados without facing Aiden. She wondered if he’d been pissed or relieved when he woke up to find her gone.

She plugged her earbuds into the seatback entertainment and randomly selected a music station. So maybe she was running away. And maybe she was a coward, but had she spent one extra second next to Aiden’s perfect, naked body, she would have literally died. Could one die from perfection? She’d come close. Or maybe it had been too many orgasms.

Frankie knew that had Aiden woken up and brought up the subject of a temporary relationship, she would have sat up and

begged like her parent's cocker spaniel. Out of sight, out of her sore yet satisfied pussy. *Mind. She meant mind.*

A hasty exit was for the best. Aiden would forget about her and their few hours of mind-boggling, flesh-searing, soul-shattering pleasure.

Chest Hair gave her the side-eye, and Frankie realized she'd moaned out loud. If this is what five orgasms skillfully doled out by Aiden Kilbourn did to her, she couldn't imagine what a temporary dalliance would do.

Her phone was off, and she had to work tomorrow. It was back to normal... with a few erotic memories that she could relive for the rest of her life.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Aiden took the stairs two at a time, his heart pounding. He'd been revved since waking up that morning. And all those hours in between, he'd been ready to snap.

She'd left him. He'd woken up to an empty bed with no trace of her in his room. And by the time he'd pulled on a pair of shorts and stormed down the hall to bang on her door and drag her back to bed, the maids were already cleaning it. *Checked out. Sorry sir.*

Franchesca had a thing or two to learn about just how he did business.

This place smelled like mothballs and dust. The stairs creaked ominously under his feet. There was no security on the door, and half the streetlights on the block were dark. And it had taken no more than a "please" to get Mrs. Gurgevich in 2A to buzz him in.

Everything pissed him off.

And that translated loud and clear when his closed fist met the door that stood between him and the source of his annoyance.

"Jesus, break down the door, why don't you, Gio?"

Frankie's eyes widened in surprise and, very possibly, fear. She probably would have slammed the door in his face had Aiden not shoved his way inside.

The apartment was small, on the shabby side, but clean. There was a kitchen, a living/dining room, and what Aiden assumed was a bedroom. Her TV, a pathetic thirty-inch, was on, and there was an open beer on the coffee table. The couch was deep and cushioned.

He turned to face her, and he felt it, that magnetic connection. It hadn't been the tropical setting or the adrenaline. It was the way she reacted to him. He was used to attraction. He used it as a snare when necessary. But what echoed between them? It was elemental. It was the primitive lust of one body

desperately needing the other. She didn't want his money or his family name. She wanted *him* and how he made her feel. And that was more potent to him than any aphrodisiac.

"What the fuck are you doing in my apartment?" She stood, hands on hips, wearing leggings and a thick sweater that draped over one shoulder. She had her hair pulled up in a thick tail.

He fisted his hands at his sides so he didn't reach for her and strip the tie out of her hair. "Why did you run?"

"I didn't run. I had a flight." She was cocky, self-righteous, and lying.

"Why didn't you wake me or say goodbye?"

He saw the shadow of guilt in those big eyes. "It was a one-time thing, Aiden. That's all."

"Bullshit." His voice rang out sharply. He was tired, angry. And despite that, he wanted to touch her. Punish her. Please her.

"Oh, come on, Kilbourn. We had a good time. Now it's back to the real world."

"We are *not* done, Franchesca."

"I think once was more than enough," she snapped back, eyes flashing.

"Twice," he corrected. "And do you really?"

"Go the hell home, Aiden."

He closed the distance between them and forced himself to take a gentle hold on her shoulders. She was melting into him even as she swore. Aiden felt relief, swift and sharp, knowing that she still felt that need. Even if it was only pure biology, body-recognizing body. It was enough, and somehow more.

"Last night?" he began. "That doesn't just happen. And running away from it is cowardly."

"Are you suggesting that I'm afraid of you?" Frankie's voice was low.

“I’m suggesting that what we shared was a first for me. That... connection. I don’t want to walk away. And I don’t think you do either.” If she wanted honest and real, then that is what he’d give her. Aiden only hoped the price wouldn’t be too high.

“I don’t want to be some guy’s plaything. I deserve more than that,” Frankie shot back.

“You do,” he agreed. “You’re the one who labeled it as such. Just because I’m not interested in marriage doesn’t mean I’d be disrespectful or callous toward you.”

She chewed on her lower lip, staring intently at the top button of his shirt. “So how exactly would this kind of arrangement work?”

He scented victory, knew it was within his grasp. “We spend time together. I give you anything you want.”

“Temporarily,” she added.

“It’s not like there’s an expiration date, Franchesca.”

“But you always lose interest.”

“I might point out that you happen to be single, too. Is that because you’ve always lost interest?” He let his fingers roam up to the back of her neck, toying with the curls there.

She sighed and finally, finally raised her gaze to his.

“Look, I’m not looking for forever either. I don’t know where I want to be in five years. I’d rather figure that out before I have to take someone else’s wants and needs into consideration. And God help the woman who wants it with you.”

He ran his hands around her tight shoulders. He turned her slowly in his arms, kneading her tense muscles. She sagged back against him.

“Then why aren’t you saying yes?” he whispered darkly in her ear. “Are you making me work for it?” He didn’t know why that made him hard. A Kilbourn never willingly relinquished control.

“Whoa! Am I interrupting?”

The man lounging in Frankie's doorway looked more interested than angry to find her wrapped up in another man's arms. He was broad shouldered and muscled. He wore a tight Henley that showed off that fact and ignored the thirty-degree weather outside. He was holding a bag of food that smelled better than any five-star meal in Manhattan.

"Gio," Frankie greeted the man as she tried to shrug out of Aiden's grasp. He didn't care for that. "Are you early?" she asked, shooting a panicked look in Aiden's direction. He *really* didn't like that.

"Huh?" Gio asked, fishing a phone out of the pocket of his track pants.

He held up the phone and snapped a picture.

"Don't you fucking dare!" Frankie wasn't nervous anymore. She was a snarling lioness.

"Oops. Too late," he shrugged. "You wanna introduce me to your friend?"

Aiden went from trying to keep Frankie in his grasp to holding her back as she took a swipe at the smugly grinning man.

"You are such an asshole!"

Gio's phone dinged, and he grinned, glancing at the screen. "Ma's looking forward to meeting your friend Sunday."

Aiden had to grab Frankie around the waist when she lunged for him. He picked her up and spun her around while Gio laughed.

"I'm Gio," the man said, extending a hand well out of Frankie's reach. "This hellion's brother."

Aiden shook with his free hand.

"Aiden," he said.

"So, you two dating?" Gio asked.

"Yes," Aiden said.

"No," Frankie countered.

“Well, either way, you just got me out of awkward fix up attempt number sixteen. Mary Lou Dumbrowski.”

“Mary Lou’s single again?” Frankie said, ceasing her attempts to kill her brother.

Gio crossed to the tiny table and dumped the bag of food on it. “Yeah. Husband number three keeled over last month at the dry cleaners. Bam. Dead before he hit the floor.”

“Ma must be getting desperate if she’s moving on to fresh widows for you,” Frankie pointed out.

Aiden squeezed her hand and then released her. She didn’t seem murderous anymore.

“Ma don’t like having a 36-year-old bachelor son,” Gio explained. “She also doesn’t like being the only one of her sisters without grandbabies.”

“Marco knocked up Rachel,” Frankie reminded him. “Marco’s our other brother and Rachel’s his wife,” she explained for Aiden’s benefit.

“Well, don’t worry because you just gave her even more grandmotherly hope,” Gio teased, unpacking the bags.

Frankie shook her head. “I hate you. What did you bring?”

Gio unpacked four deli sandwiches, pickles wrapped in wax paper, and a large bag of barbeque chips. “The usual. You hangin’ out, Aide?”

No one in his entire life had called him Aide before Franchesca. It appeared that the Baranski family enjoyed assigning nicknames.

“We taped the UFC fight from last night,” Gio said, wiggling a sandwich at him.

“Mixed martial arts?” Aiden asked, eyeing the glorious stacked sandwiches.

“Ugh,” Frankie rolled her eyes. “Fine. You can stay. But I call dibs on the roast beef.”

“You got beer?” Gio asked.

“Yeah, yeah. Keep your pants on.” Frankie headed into the kitchen, and Aiden followed her.

“We still need to talk,” he told her, reaching out to grip her slim wrist.

“Yeah, we do,” she sighed. “But not around the big mouth singing bass out there.”

“Have dinner with me tomorrow.”

She eyed him for a moment, and he thought she might be trying to come up with an excuse. “Fine,” she said. “But I’m picking the place.”

“Done.” He leaned in and brushed his lips against her cheek. “See how easy this is? You tell me what you want, and I give it to you.”

He had the pleasure of seeing goose bumps raise on her neck and arms. Aiden grabbed the beers she pulled from the fridge and wandered back to the living room.

They settled on her couch with Gio in the ratty armchair and ate sandwiches built by a master while watching men and women pummel each other into bloody submission. Frankie and Gio had action on nearly every match and enjoyed ribbing each other throughout. Aiden tried to imagine doing the same with his half-brother. It was unfathomable. They’d never had an easy relationship like this.

“So, how’d you two meet?” Gio asked, biting into a pastrami on rye.

Franchesca took a quick swallow of beer. “Well, Aide here called me a stripper five seconds after we were introduced. I told him he was an asshole. And then his brother kidnapped Chip the night before his wedding, and we had to track him down.”

Gio’s sandwich fell out of his hands into the wrapper in his lap.

“You serious?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Aiden admitted. “But I didn’t really mean the stripper thing.”

“Good,” Gio said good-naturedly. “I’d hate to have to beat you down on a full stomach.”

“I’d hate to be beaten down,” Aiden agreed.

Frankie picked up her beer and watched until Gio took another bite of his sandwich.

“Oh, and we had awesome sex last night. Crazy awesome.”

Gio choked on his sandwich, coughing until Frankie got up to slap him on the back.

“Goddammit. I hate when you do that shit.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The restaurant Frankie chose was a hole-in-the-wall Portuguese place sandwiched between an empty storefront and a hot yoga studio on a quiet street in Brooklyn. The tables had no cloths, and the menus looked as though they'd been printed from a back-office printer. But the smells coming from the kitchen were nothing short of heavenly.

Aiden silenced his phone and slipped it inside his jacket pocket. He didn't want anything trying to steal his attention from the woman across the table. Frankie had worn her hair down and, in keeping with the casual atmosphere of the restaurant, she was wearing tight jeans, a sweater with a neckline that kept drawing his eye to her delectable cleavage, and soft suede boots.

She seemed... comfortable, perusing her menu, resting her chin in her hand. He tried to remember the last woman he saw who didn't maintain perfect posture and actually asked for and remembered the names of the waitstaff.

"What?" Frankie asked, frowning at him over her menu.

"I was just..."

"If you say admiring the view, I'm going to throw up on the table."

Aiden shook his head. *The words that came out of her mouth...*

"Well, we can't have that now."

"Then why were you staring at me?"

"Because I like looking at you. You're interesting to watch."

"I'm going to assume that's a compliment so we don't have to start our first date with a fight," Frankie decided.

"It was very much meant as a compliment. You're different than—"

"What you're used to." She closed the menu. "Which brings me to my first point in what I hope will be a civil discussion."

“You’re not going to threaten to rip my face off and feed it to me like you did your brother last night, are you?” Aiden asked.

“Har har, smart guy. Let’s put this on the table. We have literally nothing but pretty spectacular orgasms in common.”

The word “orgasms” had his cock stirring. “I find it hard to believe there’s nothing else. How do you feel about puppies and apple pie?”

Her lips quirked. “Okay, let’s try this. What’s your goal this week? What do you plan to accomplish by Friday?”

The waiter returned with their glasses. It was a BYOB place so Aiden had raided his collection and settled on a decent bottle of cabernet. They placed their orders and handed over the menus.

“By Friday?” Aiden asked, filling her glass and then moving on to his own. “The board vote is this week. I plan to make sure it goes my way. Elliot needs to be reminded of his place in the family and the business. And I have a new acquisition that is experiencing some, shall we say, growing pains that need my attention.”

“Uh-huh,” Frankie said smugly. “You know what I’m doing this week?”

“I’d love to know.”

“I’m trying to ace my Corporate Social Responsibility exam on Thursday.”

“Exam?”

“I’m getting my MBA. Should have it by May if I can focus hard enough. The catering thing was a side gig so I wouldn’t go broke on Pru’s wedding. I work part-time for a small business development center.”

“You’re interested in business?” he ventured. Common ground that didn’t involve orgasms.

“Very. It’s what happens when your parents run a business. I’m sure you get that.”

He nodded. "Of course. At times, it can seem as if it's in the blood."

"Yeah, well maybe the business part for me but not the lunchmeat."

At his questioning glance, Frankie laughed. "My parents own a deli in Brooklyn just down the street from their house. My brother Marco runs it now. I grew up in that shop. I can slice a pound of corned beef better than Marco or Gio."

"But you didn't want to take over a deli?"

Frankie shook her head. "I like the numbers side of it. The accounting, the planning, the tracking."

"What will you do with your MBA?"

She shrugged. "I really like what I do at the small business development center. Some people think that big business, huge corporations, are where America works. But it's not. It's the second-generation plumbing company or the ice cream shop that's been open for forty years or the machine shop start-up or the florist. I help those businesses do business."

Fascinated, Aiden leaned forward and rested his elbow on the table.

"And you think we have nothing in common," he pointed out.

"How much does this bottle cost?" she asked, lifting her glass to study the wine.

He shrugged. "I have no idea."

"Well, I do because I Googled it when you were in the restroom. My rent is cheaper than this bottle."

"Why do I get the feeling that money is going to be an area of contention with you? I don't care what you have or how much you make or owe. Why should you care about my financials?"

"Aiden," she laughed. "Your financials put you in an entirely different world than mine. I don't think those worlds are going to mix well."

"We won't know until we try."

The waiter returned delivering the chicken skewer appetizer with a flourish.

“What do you want me to do, go to galas as your arm candy? Because I’ll be honest. What you saw last night? Sweat pants and UFC and greasy sandwiches? I’d much rather be doing that on a weekend than strutting around like one of Pru’s friends, dressed to the nines and ‘being seen.’”

“In this arrangement, Franchesca, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. I’m not interested in you as another Society Barbie. I like you the way you are.”

“Hmm.”

“What?” he asked.

“I’m thinking.”

“You’re trying to come up with another excuse. Try it, Franchesca. Date me. Fuck me.”

“You know how to sweep a girl off her feet,” she joked, taking another sip of wine.

“I’m just being honest.”

She picked up a piece of bread from the plate and studied it. “Fine. I don’t want to be paraded around like one of your other ‘dates.’ And my life is here. I don’t want to be trekking all over Manhattan at your beck and call.”

“Deal. I don’t do messy. I don’t do drama. If you can adhere to those two things, we’ll get along just fine.”

“Monogamy?” Frankie asked, arching an eyebrow.

“A requirement for us both.”

She nodded. “Good. I guess we have a deal.”

He reached across the table and picked up her hand. But instead of shaking it, he brushed a kiss over the knuckles. “I have a feeling it’s going to be a pleasure doing business with you,” he predicted.

They ate and talked over spoonfuls of fish stew and bites of salt cod fritters and lingered over their coffee. It was strong,

not bitter but not quite sweet, on his tongue, and Aiden couldn't help but think of the flavor of Franchesca. He'd only begun to sample it, and he wanted more.

She picked up the check before he could stop her. "Uh-uh," she said, snatching the paper away. "Money isn't an area of contention, is it?"

"I pay, Franchesca."

"You can get next time. This one's on me. And stop frowning like that. If it means that much to you, you can get dessert."

Dessert. The word brought dozens of images of Frankie's naked body to mind.

"Gelato, Kilbourn. I see what you're thinking."

The server returned with Frankie's change. "I'm leaving the tip," Aiden announced, laying down a bill roughly the value of the entire tab for dinner.

"Show off."

They rose, and he helped her into her coat. It was a wool trench that had seen better days. "You're missing a button," he said sweeping into his own cashmere coat and eyeing the gap in her coat's closure.

"Ugh, I know. I lost it last winter when my brothers dared me to sneak out of my old bedroom window at my parents' house and shimmy down the tree like I used to. In my defense, we were three bottles of wine into Thanksgiving dinner. Still can't find the button."

"So, where's this gelato place?" Aiden asked. He was pleased when she took his hand as they exited the restaurant. He wanted to ask her what she had in mind after dessert. He had an overnight bag in the car and a respectable stash of condoms. He was just being prepared... and maybe a little hopeful.

Frankie led the way around the block. "Did you work today?" she asked.

He nodded. He hadn't been planning to. Hell, he wasn't supposed to have flown home from Barbados until this

morning, but Francesca had changed that plan when she left his bed. “I did. Had to make sure nothing catastrophic had happened while I was gone.”

“Did you decide what you’re going to do about Elliot?” Frankie asked.

He tensed, wondering if this was a trap. Another excuse for her to go back to hating him. “I hit him where it hurts the most.”

“His broken nose?” Frankie asked.

Aiden laughed. “No, but he has two black eyes and can’t breathe, so that was entertaining to see as he groveled to our father.”

“You went to your dad?” Frankie asked.

“Elliot was always a problem child. He makes rash decisions, often with large amounts of money. He was given a position in the company because it was only fair in my father’s eyes. But Elliot’s money is tied up in a revocable trust. My father didn’t want him gambling it away or loaning it to a prostitute to start her own brothel.”

“Or a girl who dances like a stripper,” Frankie said, batting her lashes at him.

Aiden nudged her shoulder. “I’m sorry for that. I’d had a long day, and the last thing I wanted to do was spend my evening at a party with friends trying to hook me up.”

“And you had a migraine.”

“That too.”

“Do you get them often?”

“Only on special occasions. Usually when dealing with Elliot.”

“So, what did your father consider a punishment for committing a felony?” Frankie asked.

“He froze Elliot’s accounts for a month.”

Frankie stumbled. “Your brother kidnaps someone in some whack job power move, and your daddy takes *his allowance* away?”

Aiden wasn't about to tell her he'd had a similar reaction when his father had meted out the punishment. It was private family business.

“My father felt that was what the situation called for.”

“And what do you feel like ‘the situation’ called for? Keep in mind your answer will determine if you get past the gelato portion of our evening.”

“In that case, I'd like to bring back tarring and feathering.”

“You're learning, Aide. You're learning,” she said, eyes twinkling. It was a victory sweeter than any in recent history. And without thinking, without maneuvering her into it, Aiden pulled Frankie against him.

“Do I get to kiss you anytime I want now that we're dating?”

She looked up at him, hooking her fingers into his lapels. “Within reason, I suppose.”

He saw the heat in the narrowing of her eyes, the parting of her lips. And when he brought his mouth to hers, he tasted that victory again. Franchesca Baranski had submitted, temporarily. She was his to kiss, to fuck, to tease. And he wasn't going to waste a second of their time together.

She was backing up, and he followed her until her shoulders met the cold brick of the building. Holding her there, Aiden cupped her chin in his hands and seduced her mouth. Her lips were full and oh so soft. He remembered them sliding over his dick, remembered them going round in the shock of her release. And now they were feeding hungrily on him.

Her hands moved from his chest inside his coat to his hips. She pulled him against her and groaned when she felt his erection.

“How married are you to gelato?” she asked, breaking free of his mouth.

“I hate gelato.”

“My apartment is three blocks from here.”

“I have condoms in the car.”

“I have some at my place.”

His father’s warning to his teenage son echoed in his head. Rich kid rule number seventeen. Never use a woman’s condoms. She may be trying to trap you by getting pregnant.

“Let’s go.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Three blocks felt like miles when her clit was swollen with need and there was a sexy man holding her hand who could do something very efficiently about it. They barely spoke, the tension between them skyrocketing by the second.

Every brush of his body against hers put Frankie further on painful, needy edge.

Would it be as good as it had been in Barbados? Would it be better? Would she survive?

There was only one way to find out.

She fumbled with her keys at the door, nerves visible in the way her fingers shook. Aiden took her keys from her and unlocked the door. It was the last civilized thing he did for the rest of the night.

Frankie dragged him inside and shut the door behind them before Mrs. Chu could stick her head out into the hallway and offer them snacks or sex advice. Aiden was already shedding his coat and suit jacket by the time she slid the chain on the door.

She joined him, shucking layers and shoes until they had the barest of essentials between them.

“Come here,” he said, his voice a gravelly order.

She could have sauntered to him, making him wait, keeping the upper hand for a bit longer until he stole it from her with those sinful lips and magic cock that was straining to escape the confines of his sexy, tight red underwear. But she didn't. Frankie launched herself at him. Aiden, to his credit, didn't buckle under her weight.

He picked her up, lifting her by her ass cheeks, and settled her against his hard-on.

She was beyond grateful that she'd dressed with the potential for sex on the mind. For once, her underwear matched her bra.

Black and lacy were about as sexy as she got effort-wise. And they seemed to be doing the job.

Aiden fed on her mouth as he carried her into the bedroom. This time, he lowered her slowly to the mattress, covering her body with his. Her bed was small, nothing like the acreage of mattress they'd indulged themselves on in Barbados. But Aiden didn't seem to mind.

"Condoms?" he asked, his voice rough.

She pointed to a box on her nightstand.

"I hope you put those there thinking of me," he said dryly. She was amazed that he could tease her with as hard as his cock was against her.

"No, I always keep a jumbo box of extra-large for-her-pleasure rubbers on my nightstand."

He pinched her ass, and she squealed. His mouth muffled any further comment.

"I want you in every way possible," he confessed.

"Gotta start somewhere," she breathed, half laughing, half ready to plead. "How do you want me, Aiden?"

As she'd expected, the question had carnal need lighting his beautiful blue eyes. He clenched his jaw.

"Show me," she insisted. She was giving him permission. The last time it had been a war for the upper hand. This time, she wanted to see exactly what dark fantasies went on behind that angel's face.

He growled low in his throat and flipped her over onto her stomach. He held her head down by grabbing a handful of hair and slid an arm around her waist, lifting her hips so that she rose onto her knees.

"Is this okay?" he whispered.

"I'm greenlighting you. Whatever you want is okay tonight." Sure, she was testing him. But if he didn't slam his cock into her in the next ten seconds, she was probably going to die.

"Whatever I want?" he repeated.

“Well, I’m not into threesomes or dudes pissing on me.”

“What about...” he trailed a finger down her spine to the cleft between her ass cheeks. When he stroked the tip of the finger over her asshole, Frankie tensed.

“Let’s see how the evening goes,” she said.

“I think we should get married,” Aiden joked.

Frankie laughed into the pillow. “Aide, seriously if you don’t stick a body part inside me right now, I’m throwing you out and going for gelato by myself.”

“We can’t have that, now can we?” He took those magic fingers and brought them between her legs.

“God, yes.” Frankie’s groan was muffled when he dragged her underwear down her thighs. And then she was soundless with shock and pleasure when he finally drove two fingers into her tight, wet core. Finally, she wasn’t empty anymore.

She pushed her hips back against him, begging for more. Aiden’s hand left her hair and slid down her shoulder and around to cup her breast where it hung.

Kneading her with one hand and fucking her with the other, he slowly escalated the torment. And Frankie chanted her words into the pillow.

“You are such a beautiful girl, Franchesca,” Aiden whispered, raining kisses down her back.

God, she loved the feel of him curling over her. Of him pumping his fingers into her and tugging on her nipples. She needed *more*.

And he was willing to give it to her.

Frankie felt his thumb probing between her ass cheeks and tensed at the touch.

“Trust me?”

The question was strained.

She didn’t trust Aiden to not bend the rules until he got what he wanted or even possibly abduct someone like his brother

had. But she did trust him to give her body pleasure like she'd never known before.

“Yep. Okay. Yeah,” she said, her voice husky.

He didn't need reassurance. In moments, she was back to begging as he fingered her in ways she'd never experienced. That thumb. Those magic fingers. The feel of his thick shaft probing her through the material of the briefs he'd yet to remove. His heavy breath that she could not only hear but also feel against her bare skin.

There was only so much build up a girl could take before she exploded.

Frankie cried out into the pillow on a particularly masterful crook of his fingers. She was going to explode and take the entire apartment building down.

Aiden groaned, low and guttural. “I feel you getting ready to come.” He leaned down and bit her on the shoulder.

That quick slice of pain was all it took to snap her like a guitar string. She let go and hurtled into the orgasm. This? This was otherworldly, and Aiden was her new universe.

Chanting praise, he continued to pump his fingers and thumb into her and she shuddered and trembled through her release.

Aiden played her body like a maestro.

She felt his weight shift behind her, sobbed out a plea when he pulled out of her. And then she heard the foil wrapper.

He stroked himself against her, priming his cock, and Frankie spread her knees just a little wider, inviting him in. It took nothing more.

Aiden notched the crown of his dick against her, gripped her hips, and drove into her.

Decadently full, Frankie welcomed the invasion. The noise he made at the back of his throat drove her wild. Frankie reared up, arching her back.

He closed his fist around her hair and used it to hold her still while he began torturously slow, measured strokes. She was so

glad she hadn't insisted on gelato.

His other hand was never still, stroking and squeezing her flesh as if he wanted to explore every inch of her body. Aiden's grip on her hair disappeared, and when he gripped her by the hips, she tossed her hair over her shoulder and looked back at him.

He looked like a god lost in the throes of passion. His jaw was clenched. The cords of his neck stood out against the strain. His eyes were hooded.

"I love when you look at me like that," he gritted out the words.

"Like what?"

"Like I'm the center of your universe."

That connection, gaze to gaze, held them prisoner. His pace quickened imperceptibly at first before speeding up, faster and faster. His thrusts were so powerful they were forcing her forward until finally she was flat on her stomach accepting his full weight on her back.

"Aiden!" she called out his name. The climax building again inside her was terrifying.

He grunted softly into her ear, lost to the wild rhythm. *Take*, his body told hers. And Frankie was only too happy to obey. He was crushing her to the mattress, giving her no room to move. All she could do was take the pleasure he was delivering.

Aiden slid his hand between her legs, cupping her exactly where she needed his touch. "I'm coming, and I need you with me," he told her.

He slammed into her—once then twice—and, on the third thrust, held as he shouted victoriously. She met him there, her walls closing around him as her body fell into spectacular freefall. "Fuck, Franchesca. Baby," he groaned against her ear.

It only made her come harder. His cock pulsing inside her, his labored breathing against her neck, the weight of him on top of

her. Her fingers were white knuckled on the sheets even as the waves began to mellow.

He fucked her until she was done and vibrating beneath him, and then he collapsed on top of her.

“I know I’m crushing you,” he said, “but moving is not an option right now.”

“It’s fine. I’ve accomplished all I’ve set out to do sexually. Dying like this is totally acceptable,” Frankie said into the pillow. “My mom will be so proud.”

“Speaking of your mother—”

“Aiden, you’re still inside me. I don’t like where this is going.”

He laughed softly against her neck. “Am I still invited to Sunday lunch?”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Frankie hadn't exactly meant to let him spend the night. But lounging in her bed with naked Aiden Adonis wrapped around her was too decadent to put a stop to. Plus, the heat that his ridiculously perfect body pumped off was more than enough to keep her warm in her Arctic breeze apartment. The windows were drafty, and the building's furnace had been on its last legs for years. But the rent was affordable, and it was close to her parents.

So she dressed in layers and piled blankets on her bed. The bed that Aiden had dominated last night with his large frame. The bed that he'd been too polite to complain about with its lumpy mattress and sagging box springs. It was on her list of things to replace when she was finally done paying for grad school. Sure. She'd have some student loans, but for the most part, she'd shouldered the burden up front, paying as much of her tuition as she could out of pocket.

Frankie poked her head out of the bathroom and eyed the damage a vigorous night of lovemaking caused while she brushed her teeth. Her blankets were in a pile on the floor, and at one point, someone's foot or arm had swept the nightstand clean. It looked as though she was going to need a new lamp.

Worth it.

Aiden had pressed a kiss to her forehead on his way out at the ungodly hour of five.

He had early meetings and needed to get home to shower and change.

She, on the other hand, had lounged about in her bed on sheets that smelled like him until her alarm sounded two hours later.

She'd showered, leisurely, and then decided to treat herself to a coffee—the expensive kind—at the hipster café on her way to work.

“Good morning,” Frankie said as she breezed through the glass door of the office. Brenda, the receptionist and part-owner of the Brooklyn Heights Small Business Development Center, shivered at the draft of winter air that followed Frankie inside and huddled closer to the space heater under her desk.

It was a cheery if not chic space. Just last year Frankie had come in on a Sunday to help Brenda and her husband Raul paint the industrial gray walls a nice, clean white. They’d decorated with art by local Brooklynites. Paintings of storefronts, sketches of the skyline and streets. Brenda had added a veritable garden of plants for pops of green and “air filtering.”

“Girl, you are going to freeze to death walking to work,” Brenda tut-tutted.

Frankie laughed and unwound the wool scarf from her neck, looping it over the coat rack. After last night, she felt she had heat to spare for the six-block walk having taken so much of Aiden’s.

“I *like* walking to work. Because the walk allows me to do this.” She handed over the small green tea she’d picked up for Brenda.

The woman wiggled her fingers and reached for the cup. “Gimmie! Forget what I said. Walk all you want. Who cares about frostbite when you bring me green tea?”

“How did Daisy Scouts go last night?” Frankie asked, shrugging out of her coat and carrying her bag over to her desk.

Brenda had been called to babysit her granddaughter’s Daisy troop when the scout leader—Brenda’s daughter—came down with a case of front row seats to see Bon Jovi.

“I drank half a bottle of wine after they left. Thirteen seven-year-olds.” Brenda shook her head and then patted her hair to make sure it was still in place. She wore her dark hair in dozens of tiny braids coiled in a bun at the base of her neck. “My dining table looks like a glitter bomb went off.”

“I warned you not to do sparkly or sticky crafts!”

“Lesson learned,” Brenda sighed. “What about you? How was your mysterious dinner date?”

Frankie had been cagey about her evening plans, which had raised Brenda’s red flag immediately.

“It was uh... good.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Brenda said.

Frankie felt the color on her cheeks rising. She’d donned a turtleneck today to cover the bruise between her neck and shoulder where Aiden had gotten a little overzealous with his mouth. *She’d have to lay down the law before next time: No visible hickeys.*

The thought that there would be a next time? Now her cheeks were flaming.

“Girl, the shades of pink you’re turning are making me *very* curious.”

“I had dinner with... the guy I’m... my boyfriend?” That’s technically what he was. Wasn’t it? It was too much of a mouthful to say the guy I’m seeing temporarily and enjoying naked.

“Boyfriend?” Brenda perked up. She popped the lid off her green tea and blew on the steam. “Details, please.”

“Don’t we have to get ready for the social media workshop?” Frankie asked hopefully. She pulled her laptop out of her bag and booted it up.

“The one you have given every month for the past year? I think we’ve got it down to a science. Spill.”

What could she possibly say that wouldn’t sound like she’d lost her damn mind? *My boyfriend and I are having sex until he gets bored and moves on. But it’s cool because he’s promised me a ton of orgasms and anything I want.* Nope. That wouldn’t do.

“His name is Aiden, and we met at the wedding.”

“He must be one of the hoity-toity crowd if he was at Pruitt’s wedding,” Brenda guessed.

“I don’t really know what he does,” Frankie said evasively. It wasn’t exactly a lie. Just because Aiden had more money in his couch cushions than she did in her savings account didn’t mean that she exactly grasped what he did to earn those piles of cash.

“That’s not like you. Usually you have a dossier of every dateable candidate before you even say yes to the first date,” Brenda pointed out.

“I’ll have to get on that dossier,” Frankie promised.

“What’s his last name?” Brenda asked.

“Kilbourn. Aiden Kilbourn.” Shit was about to go down.

Brenda shoved a finger in her ear above the neat rows of tiny gold hoops that she wore in her lobe. “I’m sorry. It sounded to these old ears like you said Aiden Kilbourn.”

“You’ve heard of him?” Frankie asked innocently. Of course, she’d heard of him. Everyone in the five boroughs knew of the Kilbourns and their Manhattan domination.

Brenda bustled back to her desk, her nails clicking on the keyboard. She was shaking her head and muttering. Frankie slunk into the tiny kitchenette and stored her lunch in the fridge. “Morning, Raul,” she called through his open door.

Raul was a man of small stature and big heart. He also dressed to the nines in vibrant colored pullover sweaters and nerdy glasses. His hair was going silver. He always made time for anyone who graced his doorway and considered himself an aficionado on bottles of wine below twenty dollars.

“Morning, Frankie. You ready for the workshop today?”

“All set. We’ve got ten signed up, which probably means eight will show.” One of Frankie’s specialties was teaching social media marketing to local business owners or employees that were hired to take care of Facebook pages and Instagram accounts. She ran the Facebook account for her parents’ deli after her father had blatantly refused to learn how to turn on a computer. Her mother was quick on an iPad but had no desire to “blab about every damn thing” she did in her day.

But it gave Frankie a special insight into the mind of a small business owner. It was just one of the areas she focused on at her job. But it was usually more fun than grant writing and accounting software tutorials. The people the business development center served couldn't afford a pricey accountant, and if they could, they wouldn't trust one. Small business was as different from the corporate level as, well, Frankie was to Aiden.

She slipped back to her desk and found a stack of freshly printed papers.

Brenda had started the dossier for her.

She intended to ignore them, but a headline caught her eye. And then a picture of Aiden and another man at a charity auction. She skimmed the caption and promptly fell down the rabbit hole. Aiden was COO for Kilbourn Holdings, a mega corporation that specialized in mergers and acquisitions as well as corporate finance. Aiden on his own also dabbled in real estate. The man owned buildings. In Manhattan.

And he still played polo but only for charity. *Of course.*

She flipped to another picture, a group shot on the carpet of some gala. He looked like his mother, one of the women under Aiden's father's arm. The same thick, dark hair, the same patrician nose. Spectacular cheekbones. His father had the Irish auburn hair that was going silver. Cozy family, she thought. Aiden's parents had divorced years ago. Yet they still socialized in the same circles.

Aiden's stepmother and Elliot the Fink were also in the picture. The women were dressed in stunning gowns, the men in tuxes they'd been born to wear.

Frankie was suddenly beyond relieved that she'd laid down the law on dabbling in his life. No arm candy appearances. She'd done enough catering gigs to see how the whole trophy date thing worked. Stand there and look beautiful but keep your trap shut. Drink but not too much. Don't eat anything that crunches or crumbles or ruins your lipstick. Smile but not too much.

Barf.

She was not about to sign up for a life that treated Tuesday nights like it was prom.

She checked her watch. She still had an hour before she needed to head upstairs to set up. They had a conference room on the second floor where they hosted educational seminars. Frankie was working on building a set of online classes for business owners who were too busy to take time out of their day to attend. But it was slow going with the grad work and the catering. Just a few more jobs that she'd already committed to and her credit card balance would be gone. Then a few more months and she'd have that shiny MBA in hand.

And then?

Then she wasn't sure. She'd love to stay here, working for Brenda and Raul. They were the heart of the business community in Brooklyn Heights. But their budget was already stretched near to breaking. If they lost even one grant, cuts would have to be made, and unfortunately for Frankie, she'd be first in line. It was another reason she wanted to make sure they had the online classes to offer.

She'd find something that excited her, that challenged her. And she'd finally be able to claw her way up from the paycheck-to-paycheck existence she'd known her entire life.

She was startled out of her reverie by the door. A courier popped in hefting a large black box. "Looking for a Ms. Baranski," he said, popping an ear bud out of his ear.

Brenda pointed an index finger in Frankie's direction. "You found her."

"Cool," he strode over and dropped the box on her desk. "Just need your signature here." He whipped out a tablet and Frankie signed the screen with her finger.

"Who's it from?" she asked.

"Big guy at Kilbourn Holdings downtown. Later," he said, flashing a quick salute before heading back out the door.

Frankie stared at the box, half scared to open it. What could he possibly have had the time to send her in the scant hours since they'd been wrapped up naked in each other's arms? Even Prime wasn't that fast. *Oh, god. What if it was a box of sex toys?*

Brenda leaned over Frankie's desk. "Hurry up. I'm dying over here!"

She'd be dying if it was a value pack of dildos. But there'd be no getting rid of Brenda until the package was open. Carefully, Frankie lifted the lid and peered underneath.

"Well?"

Frankie dumped the lid to the side and parted the delicate layers of tissue paper. Seriously, who had a gift wrapper on hand first thing in the morning?

"Oooh," Brenda crooned as Frankie pulled the coat out of the box. It was black like her current one, but the similarities ended at the color.

Wool—and was that cashmere?—with a plaid silky lining.

"It's so soft," she murmured.

"Put it on," Brenda ordered.

"Holy crap. It's Burberry."

Brenda shoved her into the coat. It *felt* luxurious. She stroked her hands over the fabric. The coat nipped in at the waist and fell to mid-thigh.

Brenda nodded approvingly. "You look fabulous."

"Don't you dare look up how much it costs," Frankie warned her. This was no hundred-dollar coat from a department store.

Brenda shoved her hands in the pockets.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm looking to see if he stuffed the pockets with loose diamonds."

Frankie laughed. She felt lightheaded. Was she just supposed to accept this as a gift? How could she possibly reciprocate in

kind?

“Aha!” Brenda pulled her hands out of the pockets in triumph. “No diamonds, but I did find these.” She held up a sleek pair of gloves.

Of *course* they were cashmere lined leather.

“Oh, look! There’s a note in the box!”

Nestled in the tissue paper, Frankie snatched up the envelope before Brenda could get to it.

To keep you warm when I’m not around.

A

Holy. Shit.

“What’s it say? What’s it say?” Brenda was practically dancing from foot to foot.

Frankie cleared her throat. “It just says, ‘To keep you warm,’” she fibbed.

Brenda squealed. “This is so exciting! Our Frankie lands a jillionaire!”

Raul poked his head out of his office door. “How’s the workshop setup going?” he asked, eyeing them with suspicion.

“Great,” Brenda said sweetly. “And thank you for asking!”

“I’d better go set up,” Frankie said, reluctantly sliding out of the coat.

“You go ahead. I’m going to pet your coat for a few minutes.”

Frankie put the coffee on in the kitchenette and then headed up the narrow staircase to the second floor. In the conference room, she turned up the thermostat and set out the notebooks and pens. And then flopped down in one of the chairs. She pulled out her phone.

Frankie: Where did you find a Burberry coat before 9 a.m. on a Tuesday?

He answered immediately and she guessed he must have been waiting for her to text.

Aiden: You're welcome. I told you. Anything you want.

But she hadn't asked for it. Gifts like this? A coat that cost at least a grand and probably more? There was no way in hell she could keep up with him on this side of their relationship.

Aiden: Do you like it?

She hadn't thanked him, and that made her rude in addition to being poor. They had to talk about this side of things. That she wasn't comfortable being the beneficiary of his deep pockets. But for now a little gratitude was due.

Frankie: It's stunning. I want to say I can't accept it. But I think my boss threw my old one in the trash can with the coffee grounds. Thank you for thinking of me.

Aiden: I have a feeling I'll be doing a lot of that.

Chapter Thirty

“You’re bringing your young man to lunch on Sunday, aren’t you?”

Frankie’s mother had caught her between work and class on exam night, guaranteeing the highest amount of stress.

“Ma! He’s forty. We’re having sex, not going to junior prom!”

“Even better. He’ll be wanting to settle down and give his mother-in-law a half-dozen grand babies.”

“Do you torture Marco and Rachel like this? They’re actually pregnant,” she pointed out.

“If I have to listen to my smug sister tell me one more time how smart Baby Nicky is or how she couldn’t wait to spend the day taking little Sebastian to the park, I’m going to set her on fire.”

May Baranski was never just a tiny bit dramatic.

“I don’t know if he can come, Ma,” Frankie sighed, running up the front steps of the building. It was the only class she had to physically be on campus for. The rest were online, thank God. So once a week she schlepped her ass downtown for Corporate Social Responsibility.

She started for the stairs.

“Well, you won’t know until you ask him,” May sniffed.

“Fine. I’ll ask him.”

“Good. We’ll see you both on Sunday.” Her mother hung up, and Frankie cursed family and its complications.

She was five minutes early. And rather than reviewing her notes one more time like she should have, she opened her texts.

Aiden: Good luck tonight.

How had he remembered that she had an exam? With as packed as she presumed his calendar to be, the fact that he was storing little personal details about her both delighted and unsettled her.

Frankie: Thanks. You're going to need some luck now. You've been summoned to Baranski Sunday Lunch. You can say no. It's loud, cramped quarters. People yell a lot. I can tell her you're busy buying a country or something.

When he didn't respond immediately, Frankie silenced her phone and stowed it in her bag. It was for the best if he didn't go. It would be a mistake to take him to her parents'. Her mother would start building castles in the sky and "finally" planning her "only daughter's wedding." And when it ended, when she and Aiden went their separate ways, May would be more devastated than either of them. Plus, she didn't want to complicate things. And that's exactly what family usually did.

They were doing a good job of keeping it uncomplicated. They'd had dinner and (phenomenal) sex on Tuesday and had been texting off and on since then. See? Minus the expensive coat and gloves she loved so much that she wore them watching TV in her icebox of an apartment, they were basically a Tinder hookup.

That, she could handle.

Professor Neblanski shuffled into class clutching a latte and dumped his briefcase on his desk. "All right, let's get this over with."

* * *

Frankie hated to admit it, but she was disappointed that she didn't get to see Aiden Friday or Saturday. Friday night, she already had plans to go out with friends, hitting a new wine bar in Clinton Hill. Saturday Aiden spent half the day in the office and the other half juggling rich guy responsibilities.

Something about a fundraiser appearance and a dinner with clients. Now, she was curled up on her couch with Netflix reruns on in the background and her thesis draft in her lap, ignoring both in favor of thinking about Aiden.

What they lacked in physical attention, they made up for in texting. Frankie was delighted to find that Aiden was funny over text.

Aiden: Dinner companion mentioned having his hands full of wood. Exactly how am I supposed to respond? (Full disclosure: client owns several lumber mills).

Aiden: I was going to stop by your place tonight and surprise you, but Brooklyn.

Aiden: I've been disappointed by every single sandwich since the one your brother made.

And then there was tonight's message.

Aiden: Preparing for lunch tomorrow. What's the best way to take your mother's attention off of Gio and the fresh widow? Should we tell her we're adopting a child or that our sex tape was leaked?

Frankie laughed out loud at that one. She fired off a response.

Frankie: When is the last time you met a girl's parents?

Aiden: I meet most of them.

Frankie didn't care for that particular tidbit. It certainly didn't make a girl feel special.

Aiden: However, I'm feeling a lot more pressure having heard about your mother. What's the best way to win her over? Asking for a friend.

Frankie laughed again. She started to text back and then threw caution to the wind and dialed his number.

"Franchesca." He answered the phone sounding both smoldery and delighted.

She felt like a damn teenager talking to her crush on the phone.

“Hello,” she said, wondering why she called him. Now they had to make conversation. “Are you really worried about meeting my mother? Because you should be. She’s terrifying.”

“You underestimate my charm,” Aiden insisted.

Frankie laughed. “You underestimate my mother’s lack of sanity. She’s going to ask you about weddings and babies.”

“And what should I tell her?”

Frankie flopped back on the couch cushion. “Well, she already knows that we’re having sex, which she thinks makes me a diabolical genius for hooking you on sex and then tempting you to put a ring on it.”

Aiden laughed softly.

“You don’t have to go, Aide,” she reminded him. She was more nervous about him meeting her parents than any legitimate boyfriend she’d had since high school.

“I’d like to go.”

“I can’t imagine why. They’re messy and loud and nosy, and you’re guaranteed to leave with a headache and probably a buzz and indigestion. My mom will keep refilling your plate while my dad keeps the booze flowing.”

“Are you trying to talk me out of it? Because never-ending food and alcohol are doing the exact opposite.”

“It’s not going to be what you’re used to.”

“Franchesca, just because I haven’t experienced something yet doesn’t mean I’m not going to like it. But if you don’t want me to go, say the word. Anything you want.”

She paused, chewed on her lip. “Come. Meet my crazy family.”

“I’ll be there. Besides, someone has to save Gio from the widow.”

“You’re awfully loyal to my brother.”

“The man made me a sandwich that I’m still fantasizing about.”

“Just wait ‘til I make you a sandwich. You’ll forget all about Gio and his wilted lettuce and soggy bread.”

“A sandwich artist, too? Is there nothing you don’t do?” Aiden teased.

Was he taking a dig at her blue-collar roots? Sandwich maker and catering help?

“Well, if you wouldn’t be so busy making all that money, you could learn to make yourself an acceptable sandwich,” she said lightly.

“How was your week?” he asked, changing the subject suddenly.

“It was... good.”

“What did you do?” he asked.

“Why?” Frankie laughed.

“I’m interested in you,” he said dryly. “Tell me about your week. How did your exam go?”

So she told him, and he listened. She couldn’t get a read on him. It was as if he were treating this as a real relationship. Something she couldn’t afford to do. Get used to late night calls with the gravel-voiced Aiden Kilbourn? Then what exactly would she do when those calls stopped?

It played on an endless loop in the back of her mind. Even as she enjoyed the conversation, the banter, the interest.

Chapter Thirty-One

Frankie glanced out the front window of her parents' house for the ninth time in two minutes.

"Someone's waiting for her *boy*-friend," her brother Marco sang in an annoying falsetto.

"Shut up, Marco," his wife and Frankie's new best friend, Rachel, snapped.

"Babe, don't yell. The doc says it's not good for the baby," Marco said, rubbing his hand over her rounded stomach.

"Oh, hang on there, buddy. Why don't you stop doing things that require getting yelled at for?" Rachel was her brother's match in everything... including volume.

"Both of you stop yelling so I can hear Drew." Frankie's father was a short and stocky man whose favorite place to be was ass-first in his recliner with the volume cranked on the TV. He DVR-ed *The Price is Right* all week long and binge watched it every Sunday. "For shit's sake, two dollars? Whatsa matter, lady, you never do your own shopping?" he grumbled in disgust.

"Ma! When are we eating?" Gio called from the back of the house where he was probably sneaking scraps in the kitchen.

"When Frankie's boyfriend gets here! Get your hands off of that roast!" May Baranski had the gift of sight when it came to the goings on in her children's bedrooms and her kitchen. The first time Frankie had snuck a boy into her room, May had suddenly needed to "borrow" a sweater from her teenage daughter and had scared the shit out of the guy in her closet.

"Is that him?" May threw herself at the couch in front of the window and peered outside.

Frankie's family didn't go to church, but her mother still believed in Sunday best and was wearing her very best elastic waist slacks and turtleneck purchased from JC Penney in 1989.

The car that pulled to a stop was worth more than the house they were in. It had to be him. Her phone dinged, and Frankie dove for it.

Aiden: I'm here. Is it safe to come in?

“Is it him?” May was clamoring over the couch to get a better view. The woman did aquacise classes three times a week at the YMCA and was in better physical shape than most of the rest of them combined.

Frankie: I'll be right out to escort you in. Did you bring any security with you? My ma is humping the couch trying to get a better look at you. I'm not sure if I can hold her back.

Frankie dropped her phone on the coffee table and dashed out the front door and down the two steps from the cement stoop. Aiden got out of the car looking good enough to eat in charcoal gray slacks and a burgundy sweater. Her mother would think he dressed up to meet them and give him bonus points. Frankie didn't want to admit it, but she'd changed twice, matched her bra to her underwear again, and applied work day makeup.

She met him on the skinny concrete walk that led up to the house and stopped short. Every single family member, minus her father, would be plastered to the front window. She wanted to kiss him, but she didn't want to give them a show.

Sensing her hesitation, Aiden gave her a smile. “If you shake my hand it's just going to make them talk more.”

“I'm going to go ahead and apologize now. Because this was a huge mistake, and I'm so sorry I got you into it.”

“Relax, Franchesca. We're going to lunch, not war.”

She snorted. “Shows what you know. In this neighborhood, they're usually the same thing.”

“I'm going to kiss you,” he warned her. “And then we're going to go inside and have lunch. And then I'm going to take you home and fuck you.”

The thrill rushed over her as he reached for her.

“Fine, but no tongue. You know my pants fall off when you do that.”

He was grinning at her with something like joy. He laid a very chaste kiss on her mouth before pulling back.

“How was that?”

“My pants still want to fall off. Let’s get in your car and drive away and jump straight to the sex,” she suggested.

“After,” he promised. “We’ve got business to attend to first.” He held up the flowers and wine.

“Jesus, Aide. You didn’t bring a thousand-dollar bottle of wine, did you?” Frankie was appalled. The flowers were no grocery store impulse buy either. White lilies and glossy green holly leaves. *Ugh. Her mother would love them.*

“Relax. I went to a store and paid a respectable price.”

“It better be under a hundred dollars.”

“If I tell you it was, will you please let me in the house?”

She sighed and straightened her shoulders. “Just remember, I gave you the opportunity to run away.”

She led the way inside through the rusting storm door that hit Aiden in the ass when she stopped suddenly because every member of her family was crowding around the twelve slate tiles that acted as the home’s foyer. Geez, why hadn’t she noticed the dust bunnies on the floor trim? And when had the coat closet door started peeling?

“Oh, great. You’re all lurking like turkey vultures. Everybody, this is Aiden. Aiden, this is everybody.”

“Aiden, it’s so nice to meet you,” Frankie’s mom crooned as if she were meeting Frankie Fucking Valli.

Her father grunted and looked over his shoulder at Drew Carey’s face, his version of a “pleasure to meet you.”

“Hey, nice to meet you, man,” Marco said, offering a hand. “This is my girl, Rach.”

“Wife actually and future mother to his child,” Rachel said pointing at her belly.

Aiden shook all the appropriate hands and greeted them more warmly than Frankie thought they deserved.

“Hey, good to see you again, Aide,” Gio said, pulling Aiden in for one of those one-armed buddy hugs.

“Again?” True to form, May latched onto that statement with a talon. “You’ve already met.”

“Yeah,” Gio shrugged. “He was at Frankie’s apartment last week.”

“And you didn’t think to mention it?” May’s voice was accelerating into dog whistle range. She cuffed Gio upside the head.

“Ouch! Ma! I sent you the picture of them!”

“I forgot! I’m sorry!” She smacked him again.

Aiden looked on in what Frankie hoped was amusement. Her mother was a few cards shy of a full deck.

“Can we please, for the love of God, act like regular people for one afternoon?” Frankie screeched. She turned to Aiden. “I wish I could say they don’t usually act like this. But this is the family that got permanently banned from an Applebee’s on Atlantic Avenue.”

Aiden squeezed her shoulder and stepped in. “Mrs. Baranski, thank you for inviting me to join you today.” He wielded the flowers and wine like they were a shield that would keep the little Italian woman at bay.

“Oh, my! What a gentleman,” May sighed in approval. “So very nice. Why don’t you boys ever bring your mother flowers?” she asked, admiring the lilies and managing to lay a guilt trip at the same time.

Gio and Marco spouted excuses that earned them both a cuff to the back of the head.

“Mr. Baranski,” Aiden began, “Gio brought some sandwiches to Franchesca’s this week. He said they came from your deli.

Best sandwich I've ever had.”

Hugo puffed out his chest in pride. “It’s all in the meat. You’ve got good taste in sandwiches. You’re okay by me.” He immediately returned his attention to the TV.

Frankie rolled her eyes. “Welcome to the sixth circle of hell,” she whispered.

Aiden winked. “Wait until you meet my family.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

“It’s so good that you met Frankie when you did,” May was saying as she helped herself to another glass of wine. “Her eggs are only a few years from drying up.”

“Ma!” Frankie looked more annoyed than aghast. “Would you shut up about my eggs? We literally just started dating. Aiden could be an axe-murdering clown.”

“He’s not an axe-murdering clown!”

“How do you know?”

“He brought flowers and wine. Clowns don’t have manners like that.” It appeared that no one could argue with May Baranski’s logic, Aiden decided.

“I appreciate your faith in my character, Mrs. Baranski.”

“Call me, Ma.”

“Ma!” Franchesca covered her face in her hands, and Aiden hid his laugh behind his beer. “Why don’t you write him into your will already?”

“As soon as there’s a ring on your finger, I will,” May challenged with a stubbornness that had clearly been passed down to her daughter.

“So, Aiden. What do you do?” Hugo’s attention span had expanded since *The Price is Right* had ended.

Frankie gripped his thigh under the table. She was sending him a silent message, but unfortunately for her, it was intercepted by his cock.

He cleared his throat and took a sip of beer. “I’m in business, too.”

When she snorted next to him, Aiden brought his hand to the base of Frankie’s neck and squeezed.

To him, a business was a business no matter how many employees or office buildings it laid claim to. Frankie’s father

wanted to be his own boss and provide a service for the community. Aiden could appreciate and respect that.

“Dad, Aiden is COO of Kilbourn Holdings” Frankie explained. She didn’t sound like she was bragging. She sounded like she was apologizing.

Marco whistled. “Damn. You own entire city blocks downtown.”

May’s eyes widened and she reached for her wine glass. “Franchesca, may I see you in the kitchen?”

Aiden and Frankie shared a glance.

“All the food’s already on the table, Ma,” Frankie pointed out.

“Now.” May’s tone left no room for arguing.

Aiden felt the dull throb of the headache that Frankie had promised him begin in the base of his skull. Here it comes, he thought. There wasn’t a mother in the world whose eyes wouldn’t light up at the thought of her daughter landing a Kilbourn.

Frankie squeezed his thigh and followed her mother into the kitchen.

“What in the hell have you gotten yourself into?” May Baranski yelled from the confines of the kitchen.

“Uh, Ma likes to think the kitchen is soundproof,” Gio said.

“You’re probably going to want another beer,” Marco predicted.

“You might as well get us a round,” Hugo sighed. “Sorry, Aiden.”

“Should I go in there?” Rachel wondered.

Marco’s arm landed on her shoulders. “It would be a danger to the baby, believe me.”

“Gotten myself into? What the hell, Ma?” Frankie yelled back.

“He’s a *millionaire*,” May said. “You can’t handle a husband like that.”

“I hate to break it to you, Ma, but you probably have to change that ‘m’ to a ‘b,’ and I’m not looking for a husband. He’s a nice guy. We’re having a good time.”

No one in his entire life had described him as a “nice guy.”

“You’re thirty-four years old, Franchesca. Just how long are you going to wait to settle down?”

“Until I find the right guy, Ma! Not all of us get lucky and find our soulmate in junior high.” Apparently, Frankie thought the kitchen was soundproofed too.

“He’s from another world! You can’t expect to be an equal partner in that relationship!” May shouted.

“Ma! Do you think there’s any man on the planet I’d let treat me like less than?” Frankie demanded.

“I don’t like this, Franchesca. Not one bit. It’s one thing to be friends with Pru, but dating a man who owns half of Manhattan?”

“Now you’re exaggerating.”

“Exaggerating? Me? I never exaggerate!”

“She always exaggerates,” Rachel said, smiling sympathetically at him.

“Hey, Aide,” Gio said suddenly. “How you feel about the Knicks?”

“The Knicks? I think they have a shot at the semis if not the finals this year.” Aiden was grateful for the rope.

“Me and Marco have an extra ticket for the game Tuesday. You wanna go?”

Aiden tried to remember the last time someone invited him somewhere that wasn’t related to business. He couldn’t come up with anything.

The shouting from the kitchen reached a crescendo. “He’s a nice guy that I’m not marrying, Ma. Chill the hell out.”

“Don’t you swear at me, Franchesca Marie!”

“You’re the one acting like a crazy person in front of a really nice guy that I like a lot.”

“I’m not acting crazy! I’m making sure my daughter isn’t getting in over her head with a crowd that runs too fast! What if he wants you to go to Monaco or St. Barths? What if he gets you hooked on drugs? All the celebrities need rehab, you know.”

“Jesus, I’m not thirteen, Ma! And Aiden isn’t hooking me on drugs.”

“I don’t want you losing your focus on your degree for a handsome face with deep pockets.”

“*Mother!* All you’ve talked about since I was twenty-two was me getting married.”

“I meant to a nice guy from Brooklyn who could offer you a family and a nice home within a three-block radius of our house. Not some kajillionaire who would treat you like some trophy.”

“Oh, I’m not a trophy?” Frankie challenged at full volume.

“I thought you said you weren’t marrying him?” May demanded.

“You know how I operate! You say no, and that’s what I want to do!”

“Tuesday would be great,” Aiden said.

“Awesome,” Marco shrugged.

“Meet at the Garden?” Gio suggested.

“Works for me,” Marco nodded.

“Me, too.”

“Who’s gonna sneak in there and get another round of beers?” Hugo wondered.

“Oh, my God. I’ll do it,” Rachel said, pushing back from the table.

“Be careful in there, babe,” Marco warned her, no longer as concerned with the welfare of their unborn baby since beer

was on the line.

Rachel headed down the hallway supporting her belly.

“Everyone can hear every word you both are saying,” she announced.

“No, they can’t,” both Baranski women said.

“Yes, we can,” the Baranski men called back from the dining room.

“See what you did, Ma?”

“Me? You’re the one who brings a trillionaire to lunch!”

“We can still hear you,” Gio yelled.

“No, you can’t,” May insisted.

But the yelling ceased, and after a few stage whispers from down the hall, Frankie, Rachel, and May reappeared. Frankie and May had topped off their wineglasses.

Rachel was juggling four beers that she doled out at the table.

Aiden guzzled the last of his beer and reached for the fresh one. “This roast is delicious,” he announced.

Marco snorted and choked.

“We’re so happy to have you here to enjoy it,” May said, smiling sweetly.

Frankie flipped her brother the bird.

Marco flipped it back but not before his mother caught him. May got out of her chair and walked casually behind her son, and just when his shoulders seemed to relax, she cuffed him on the back of the head.

“Manners!”

“Frankie started it,” Marco argued.

Frankie flipped him another bird.

“See, Ma? Look!”

Frankie picked up her fork and ate innocently. “Marco, you’re hallucinating.”

May slapped Gio on the back of the head on her way back to her chair.

“What was that for?” he whined.

“I saw your finger twitch,” she pointed out. “It was a preemptive strike.”

May sat down primly. Frankie and her brothers watched carefully, and the second the woman’s attention was on her plate, three middle fingers shot up around the table.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake. When did you all turn into assholes?” Hugo sighed over his plate.

“What? What did they do?” May demanded.

“Nothing,” the three Baranski siblings announced.

“You sure you want to deal with this?” Rachel asked Aiden from across the table. “There’s still time to get out.”

Aiden turned his laugh into a discreet cough.

“Don’t try to scare off the trillionaire. He’s Frankie’s last shot at non-test tube babies,” Marco joked.

Aiden shot Marco the finger, and the table erupted in laughter. Except for May. She very calmly got out of her seat and smacked him upside the head.

“Ma!” Franchesca was horrified.

“I don’t care if Aiden is a trillionaire. No one flips the bird at my dinner table!”

As soon as she glanced down at her plate, six middle fingers shot up.

Chapter Thirty-Three

When all was said and done, Frankie had to drive Aiden to her place in his car because he'd had one or three too many with her dad and idiot brothers. He was a sweet drunk, complimenting her on her braking and turn signals the whole eight blocks back to her place.

Frankie slid the key in the lock and gave him a push into her apartment. She dropped her keys on the kitchen counter and kicked off her shoes. "Well, *that* was eventful," she announced.

"I couldn't tell. Did I pass?" he asked, sliding out of his coat and hanging it neatly on the dubious coat rack that leaned like the tower of Pisa.

"Pass what?" Frankie asked, fishing two glasses out of the cabinet in her kitchen.

"Your parents' inspection."

She laughed. "My mother hit you upside the head. That's a gold star seal of approval if there ever was one."

"That's not what it sounded like from the kitchen."

Frankie handed him a glass of water and some ibuprofen. "You heard that, huh?" She curled up on the couch, tucking her feet beneath her.

Aiden flopped down next to her and stared at the pills in his hand.

"Go on. They always give me a headache," Frankie joked.

"You're very thoughtful," Aiden said, smiling sweetly at her.

She indulged herself and ran the fingers of one hand through his thick hair.

He leaned back against the couch cushion and closed his eyes. "Feels good," he murmured.

There was something irresistible about tipsy, vulnerable Aiden.

“Do you really care if they like you?” she asked, wondering if he could be playing her.

“Of course I do,” he said, lolling his head to one side to study her. “If they’re important to you, they’re important to me.”

“Did you and my dad sneak into the bourbon?” Frankie asked.

“Only one or two times,” Aiden said, listing toward her. “Hey, you know what I heard some people do on Sunday afternoons?”

“Buy small countries?” Frankie offered. His head hit her in the chest and she continued the slow stroke of her fingers through his hair.

“Ha. You’re funny. I heard some people nap.”

She closed her fist in his hair and gave a tug until he was looking at her. “Have you never had a Sunday afternoon nap?”

“Sure. When I was like three,” he smirked.

“Sunday afternoon naps are the best. And if rich people can’t take them, I don’t ever want to be rich.”

Aiden nestled into her, his face pressed against her breast.

“Will you take a nap with me?”

“Take your shoes off, Aide,” she told him.

“K.” He shoved his Ferragamo loafers off, and they hit the floor one at a time.

“Are you always this adorable when you drink?” she teased, tugging the blanket off the back of the couch to cover him.

“I drink too much,” he murmured. His eyes were closed.

“You do?”

“Self-medication.”

“I’ve never seen you drunk before,” Frankie pointed out as she adjusted the pillow behind her.

“I don’t like to get sloppy,” he yawned.

“You’re not a sloppy person,” she agreed.

“Hey, will you come to a dinner with me this week?”

“Where?” she hedged.

“At some museum. It’s a reception for a nonprofit. My mom is on the board.”

“Your family will be there?”

“Mmm-hmm. Everybody. Even that asshole Elliot.”

Frankie laughed softly. “I’m gonna have to pass.”

“Why?” he sounded disgruntled.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Aiden. It’s better if we keep our relationship... private.”

He lifted his head and looked at her frowning. “But I just met your family,” he pointed out.

“I know. But that’s different. I don’t think I should dabble in your world. Okay?”

It was all temporary, and she didn’t want either one of them to forget that. Meeting her family was one thing. It drove her mother batty. Mission accomplished. If she met Aiden’s family, it would be making a statement. And she wasn’t really a statement kind of woman.

“I wish you would. I liked meeting your family, and mine doesn’t hit as much.”

Frankie laughed again. “That just means Ma really liked you.”

“Even though I’m a trillionaire?”

“She wouldn’t have smacked you if she didn’t like you.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.” Despite her better judgment, Frankie dropped a kiss to the top of his head. His hair was soft, silky to the touch.

“What do you use on your hair?” she asked.

“Mmm, stuff. Can we sleep now?”

“Yeah, we can sleep now.”

His arms came around her waist, and he was out like a light in seconds.

Frankie tried not to think about how good this felt. A Sunday nap on the couch with her sexy boyfriend. It wasn't real, but that didn't mean that it didn't feel damn good.

She woke slowly in stages to a gentle stroking. She knew without waking that it was Aiden's hands in her hair.

"Mmm," she sighed.

"I can't remember the last time I took a nap," Aiden murmured.

Somehow, they'd shifted during the nap and Aiden was now spooning her and stroking his hand through her thick, wild hair.

"You are missing out," she said, giving herself over to the luxury of a whole body stretch.

"I had no idea just how much," he said, his lips moving against her ear. She wiggled back against him and felt the reward of his exceptional hard-on.

"Do you always wake up with wood?" she asked.

His hand slid down to capture her breast through her sweater.

"When I wake up next to you I do."

He sounded sleepy but sober. And there was something irresistible about his lips moving over her hair, her neck.

"Are you sure you won't reconsider coming to dinner this week?" he asked, his hand squeezing the tender flesh of her breast.

"Mmm. Meeting the family? Facing photographers? Sitting around while you wow the room? No thanks."

He sighed behind her. Was that disappointment? Relief?

"But maybe there's something I can do to make it up to you," she said rolling to face him and reaching her hand between them to cup his erection.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Aiden shoved his gloved hands in his pockets and watched the crowd fighting their way into Madison Square Garden. There was no sign of the Baranski brothers yet, and he had a brief, unsettling flash of concern, wondering if they weren't actually serious about the invitation.

That sort of thing didn't happen to him. Not with the last name Kilbourn. Growing up, there hadn't been a birthday party, a bar mitzvah, or a wedding he hadn't been invited to. However, those invitations usually came with strings. It was the reason he'd been looking forward to the game. Gio and Marco didn't seem like string-holding guys. And what would it be like to spend an evening being just one of the guys?

Frankie had been entertainingly shocked when he told her he couldn't meet her for her booty call tonight because he was hanging out with her brothers. It was good to keep a woman on her toes. And lately, he'd been feeling like Franchesca was holding all the power in their relationship. Turning her down tonight made him feel like he'd taken a step to restore the balance of power.

"Hey, Kilbourn!"

He turned with relief at his name and spotted Gio and Marco making their way through the crowd to him.

"Good to see you, man," Gio said, slapping him on the shoulder.

They all exchanged greetings. The brothers were decked out in Knicks apparel. Aiden, not sure of girlfriend's brother's hangout etiquette, had kept it simple with jeans and a sweater.

"We ready to get out of this ball-freezing cold?" Marco asked, digging into his coat pocket for the tickets.

"Where we sitting?" Gio demanded, blowing into his hands and rubbing his palms together. Aiden wondered if anyone in the Baranski family ever remembered gloves.

“Well, we’re not nosebleed, but we ain’t front row,” Marco said, waving the tickets.

Aiden debated for a second before digging into his own pocket. “Actually, we are,” he said, producing the tickets. He didn’t want it to seem like an over-the-top gesture. But when they’d invited him, he’d actually been excited and not in a conquer-the-business-world way. Besides Chip, Aiden’s friends were few and far between, and there was something entertainingly normal about Frankie’s brothers.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Gio snatched the tickets out of Aiden’s hand.

He couldn’t tell if the man was going to hit him or hug him.

“Front fucking row?” Marco whooped.

“I hope you don’t mind—”

“Mind?” Aiden found himself enveloped in a male embrace and actually lifted off his feet.

“This is like a real fucking dream come true,” Gio said, still staring at the tickets. Aiden wasn’t sure, but it looked as though his eyes had gone a little misty.

Marco released him back to the ground and slapped his brother on the shoulder. “Can Frankie pick ‘em, or can she pick ‘em?”

“I wish you’d tell her that,” Aiden said before he thought better of it.

“She giving you a hard time?” Gio asked sympathetically.

Aiden hesitated. Family loyalty dictated that Frankie’s brothers would be one-hundred percent on her side.

“She’s great,” Aiden said evasively.

“She’s a slippery one to nail down,” Marco said. “If you want to be in it for the long haul, she’ll make you work.”

“Overtime,” Gio added.

“Tough nut to crack,” Marco said.

“I can’t tell if she wants to be in this relationship, or if she’s just waiting for it to end.”

The brothers shared a look and a laugh. “How about we get inside and talk over a beer and some steak sandwiches?”

“Real quick, hang on,” Gio said, snatching the old tickets out of Marco’s hand. “Hey, kid.” He stopped a gangly teenager in a jersey. “You got tickets?”

The kid shook his head. “No, man.”

“Now you do.” Gio handed them over with a flourish.

“Are you serious?” The kid gaped down at his hand as if Santa himself had just bestowed a magical gift.

“Pay it forward,” Marco announced cheerfully. “Let’s go.” He led the way inside.

“I feel like Oprah,” Gio mused, bringing up the rear.

* * *

The game was action-packed for a basketball game. The courtside seats were worth the astronomical price when Gio and Marco couldn’t stop hitting each other in excitement.

“This is the greatest night of my life,” Gio announced when one of the Knicks City Dancers blew him a kiss.

“Top ten, definitely,” Marco said through a bite of steak.

Together, they razzed the players and shouted along with the rest of the crowd. And Aiden felt like he was part of the unit. He couldn’t imagine spending an evening like this with his half-brother. He and Elliott had never had much, if anything, in common. They were loyal because it was required. But they weren’t tight-knit like the Baranski siblings.

“Are you excited about being a father?” Aiden asked Marco.

“Shit yeah,” Marco shrugged. “Never thought I would be. But Rachel? She makes my life a thousand times better than before. And I had a damn good life before.”

“You know what you’re having?” Aiden asked.

“Little girl,” Marco puffed up and then shoved a finger in Aiden’s face. “But Rachel wants to be surprised, so she didn’t open the envelope. And *neither did I*. Got it?”

Aiden smirked. “Your secret is safe. Does Frankie know?”

“Not yet.” The way Marco said it made Aiden think there weren’t many secrets the Baranski siblings kept from one another.

It was an appealing dynamic, he thought. He’d spent his life with family that ruled decisions, friends that he could rarely trust, and hundreds of acquaintances who would sell him out at the drop of the hat. It was nothing like the bond Gio and Marco shared.

Between plays, the brothers helpfully schooled him on all things Frankie.

“You gotta understand, Frankie’s looking for what our parents have,” Marco said, washing down the rest of his sandwich with overpriced beer.

“A partnership,” Gio added. “She’s not settling for less.”

Less is exactly what they’d agreed upon.

“So, how would someone prove they’d be a good partner?” Aiden asked.

“First of all, don’t be a pushover. Don’t give her everything she demands. Like when she calls you tonight and suggests you come over, tell her you can’t, and don’t give her an excuse.”

“That will drive her friggin’ nuts,” Marco grinned in approval.

“You’re not giving me bad advice to sink me, are you?” Aiden asked wryly.

Marco leaned in, the epitome of seriousness. “With the seats you could get us for the Jets? Nah, man. We wouldn’t lead you astray. Hell, we’re hoping you get married and have eight babies.”

“Frankie grew up with us. She’s basically a guy without the equipment,” Gio pointed out, leading them back to the topic at hand. “Talk to her like you would a VP in your company. Don’t be all like ‘Not now, baby, men are talking.’ She’ll have your balls in a peanut butter jar for that.”

Marco nodded. “Yeah, she’s a smart girl. Talk to her like she’s one.”

The crowd exploded as a breakaway was foiled.

Gio put his hand on Aiden’s shoulder. “Listen, man. Don’t be fucking around if forever isn’t what you’re after. You want to keep it light? Fine, do that. But don’t be getting into her head if you’re looking to jump ship next week, got it?”

“Fair enough,” Aiden agreed. He didn’t know if forever was what he wanted, but he sure as hell wanted more than just next week.

“Good. Because I’d hate to have to beat the shit out of you after courtside seats,” Marco chimed in. “I mean, I’d still do it. But I’d probably be pulling my punches a bit.”

“Hey, so what’s it like being able to buy whatever you want?” Gio asked.

* * *

“Hello, beautiful,” Aiden answered Frankie’s call, plugging his other ear with a finger so he could hear her over the din.

“I saw you and the two stooges on TV,” she told him.

“I hope you recorded it.”

“I did. I even took some still shots of them climbing you like a tree on that last second three-pointer. You do remember which member of the family you’re dating, don’t you?”

He grinned.

“Is that, Frankie?” Gio hissed.

Aiden nodded. Marco grabbed a pen off of a waitress and scrawled a note on a beer napkin.

Don't say yes to the booty call.

“So, where are you guys?” Frankie asked.

“Celebrating with apparently half of Madison Square Garden in a bar,” Aiden told her.

“You drinking?” she asked.

He had a vague recollection of his confession before falling asleep on her Sunday afternoon. He didn't know whether to be annoyed or pleased that she was looking out for him.

“One beer at the game. One beer here,” he reported.

“Good boy.”

He wanted to hate the way the praise she gave him made him hard. Made him want to see her, touch her, taste her.

Marco shoved another napkin in his face.

Stay strong!

“I live to serve,” he said lightly.

Dismayed, Marco and Gio shook their heads.

“Are you coming back to Brooklyn with them?” she asked innocently. “I might have a cute, lacey nighty on.”

He knew her better than that. She was in a tank top and leggings curled up under a mound of blankets.

“I don't think so, but you're more than welcome to come into the city,” he offered. Thinking of her in his bedroom, her dark hair spread out on white sheets, the city lights shining through the windows. Aiden wanted her to say yes. Wanted it more than anything.

“I've got an early morning,” she said. “Don't stay out too late.”

“I'll talk to you tomorrow,” Aiden said, wishing she'd change her mind.

“Goodnight, Aide.”

“Goodnight, Franchesca.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Aiden opened the front door of his apartment and, ignoring the fresh flowers on the foyer table, headed down the hallway to his bedroom. He deposited his wallet and cufflinks in their special compartments in his closet. He slid out of his suit jacket and shoes, returning both to their appropriate places before changing into jeans and his favorite Yale sweatshirt.

Comfort clothes.

It had been another tough day at work. The board had finally settled on a CFO candidate that they could all stomach. All except for Elliot. He'd stormed out of the meeting like a child having a tantrum. Their father ignored the show of temper and moved on to the next agenda item.

They'd all been far too lenient with Elliot, ignoring his absolute uselessness. Uselessness Aiden could deal with. He didn't like it but could accept it. However, the willful harm his half-brother was committing against the family and their business? That was a different story. Kilbourns were a lot of things. Manipulative bastards, cold-hearted sons of bitches, competitive enemies. But they never turned their back on family.

Aiden had broached the subject with his father after the meeting. Ferris had shut him down with a "Not now, son," and ushered him out the door.

As much money as he made Kilbourn Holdings, as much value as he added, his father still thought of him as a child to be guided.

But the unease that had settled into his gut had less to do with work and more to do with Franchesca. She was holding back with him everywhere but bed. It irritated him to extend invitations only to be consistently shut down. She acted as if she couldn't care less about his life. Yet when they were together he *knew* she felt it. That magnetic pull that had them orbiting around each other. There was a connection and while

she seemed only interested in exploring that connection when he was shoving his cock into her, it wasn't enough for Aiden.

And that unsettled him.

He padded into the living room, his gaze settling on the decanter on the side table. It had become his habit to have a glass as soon as he walked in the door. And another one while he worked for another hour or two in his home office cleaning up what he hadn't gotten to during the day. And a third while reading or catching the game.

He didn't drink to get drunk. He drank to numb himself. It wasn't pain that he felt. It was something more nebulous. Dissatisfaction? Emptiness? Loneliness?

Looking around the rest of the room, was it any wonder? He'd hired a designer. People of his stature didn't choose their own furnishings. The company had done a reasonable job filling the place with things that he mostly liked or at least didn't have to think about. The leather couch was a little too modern, a little too hard. But it looked right in the space.

His father always commented that the wealthy didn't have time to sit around on their furniture. They were too busy making money.

Aiden's mother had always rolled her eyes at the sentiment and insisted that Ferris sit and talk. They'd usually get five, maybe ten, minutes out of him before he heaved himself out of the silk upholstered wingback chair and headed back to work. Everything to his father was work. Success was defined by the number of hours a man put in and the number of zeroes in his portfolio. It was a cold way to look at the world. And Aiden had fallen into the same trap.

He traced a finger over the marble surround of the fireplace he never sat in front of. The leather club chairs flanking the fire had never held guests. The fully stocked bar built into the bookcase served only one.

He'd considered this place to be his sanctuary, but today it felt like a two-dimensional replica of a home, a life.

Aiden's gaze flicked back to the scotch. There was no siren's song coming from the crystal. Only a habit. He hated weakness, and the fact that he'd managed to develop a crutch without noticing it was embarrassing. He'd confessed to Frankie that he thought he drank too much. *Why had he told her that? Why had he given her that weapon?*

He scraped a hand over his face and wandered over to the piano he didn't know how to play. He didn't feel safe sharing things with her. Not when she'd clearly marked it as a one-way street. But he couldn't stop from offering up pieces of himself to her. Sacrifices to a cruel goddess, he mused.

Only she wasn't cruel. She wasn't disinterested. She was... careful. And maybe she had the right idea to remain distrustful.

The buzzer to his door sounded, and Aiden frowned. Very few people were cleared to this floor. His mother would have called first.

He crossed to the door and found his father on the other side of it.

Ferris Kilbourn strolled inside, hands in his pockets in a deceptively casual stance. Ferris and his wife, Elliot's mother, lived two blocks over in a stunning two-story penthouse. But despite the proximity, they rarely made social calls.

"This is a surprise," Aiden said, closing the door behind him.

"I thought it would be good to talk away from the office," Ferris told him, perusing the space as if he were a bored guest in a museum.

"Would you like a drink?" Aiden offered.

"Macallan?"

"Of course."

Aiden led the way into the living room and poured a glass. He hesitated and then poured a second. He handed one to his father and deliberately took a seat in one of the club chairs.

Ferris unbuttoned his jacket and sat down on the couch, stretching his arm across the back of it. Aiden had gotten his

looks from his mother, all dark hair and blue eyes. His father had the gingery hair of his Irish heritage, most of it gone now. What remained was trimmed short. He was clean shaven and always, always in a suit. His father was the type of man who wore a tie on Christmas morning. And not a silly Santa tie, either. He preferred Hermès.

Aiden waited while his father gathered his thoughts. Neither appreciated the banality of small talk, and there was power in silence.

“I’m thinking of retiring,” Ferris announced without preamble.

“Thinking about?” For his father to verbalize such a bombshell, he’d gone past the considering stage and into planning and implementing. But retirement shouldn’t be in Ferris’s vocabulary.

Ferris eyed his glass. “I’ve given my life to this company. We’ve achieved something your great-grandfather and grandfather couldn’t have envisioned.”

“And you’re comfortable just walking away from it?” Aiden asked. He sat his untouched drink on the walnut side table and rested his elbows on his knees. His hands dangled between his knees.

“Jacqueline and I are getting a divorce,” Ferris said, dropping the next boom as though he were casually commenting on the weather.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’ve met someone else. My relationship with your stepmother has run its course. We’ve already spoken to our attorneys and are letting them hash out a settlement.”

“Dad, what the hell is going on?”

Ferris sipped his scotch and sighed. “It might be a mid-life crisis, but son, this is the most fun I’ve had in my life. I think it’s time I had some.”

“I’m happy for you,” Aiden said. He probably was. He wasn’t entirely sure. He’d never developed more than a superficial relationship with his stepmother. And she’d rightfully favored

her own son over Aiden. He couldn't say that he'd be sorry that he would no longer suffer through her incessant to-do lists that she nattered on about.

"I have to go to the salon and then the dermatologist. Then it's lunch with so and so's club. Soul Cycle afterwards. Then there's the board meeting for such and such. I don't see how I'm going to find the time to have dinner. People ask me how I do it. They just don't realize that I'm hanging by a thread!"
Always a martyr.

"Her name is Alice, and she's a clothing designer. Not high fashion but outdoorsy, athletic lines. Smart, vivacious. We're going to take the boat down the coast and cruise the Bahamas this spring and summer."

Aiden made a mental note to contact the family law firm immediately and have an iron clad prenup drafted before Alice became a Kilbourn.

Aiden stared at the man who looked like his father but sounded like a complete stranger. However, as Ferris had taught him, it didn't pay to show surprise or confusion in any situation. Even if his father was losing his damn mind.

"Congratulations," Aiden said.

Ferris raised his glass in a toast. "I've built an empire. I think it's time I started enjoying the perks."

Mid-life crisis? Or perhaps an undetected brain tumor?
Maybe a visit with the concierge doctor his father favored was in order.

"You certainly deserve to use your time as you see fit," Aiden responded.

"I wouldn't be doing any of this if I wasn't one-hundred percent confident in your ability to step into my shoes as CEO. You've been groomed your entire life for this, Aiden. I know you won't let me down."

"What about Elliot?" Aiden asked.

"I know you're not pleased with how I handled him over the Barbados situation—"

“He abducted someone, Dad.”

Ferris at least had the good grace to look embarrassed. “It was a family matter that got out of hand.”

“It was a felony no matter where it happened.”

“He’s always wanted to be you, son. And, unfortunately for him, he’ll never be. You can’t blame him for being rash with his decisions living in your shadow. He acts out because he’s not you, and I can’t see punishing him for that fact.”

“Elliot does not put this family first. He doesn’t put the business first. He puts himself first.”

“And that’s why I’m counting on you to lead him. Groom him into a Kilbourn man. I’ll be the first to admit that he’s an embarrassment.”

An embarrassment? Aiden suddenly wanted that drink, but he forced himself to ignore it.

“He’s not just an embarrassment. He’s a danger. He wanted to put Boris Donaldson in our company for a reason.” A reason Aiden had yet to discover.

“Elliot is harmless and misguided. I need you to take him under your wing. I need you to do this for me, Aiden. I know it’s not easy. But when my father stepped down, I had to make tough choices, too. It’s part of passing the torch. Someday you’ll ask something of your son.”

Aiden bit back a reply. He was forty fucking years old. His girlfriend wouldn’t even consent to meet his parents, not that he could blame her now. Building a new generation to carry the weight of a family legacy was not on his to-do list.

“I’m about as far away from having a family as I can be,” he told his father.

“Aren’t you seeing someone?”

Aiden lifted an eyebrow. His father always had his fingers on the pulse whether it was business or family. “Where did you hear that?” he asked.

“I know you’ve been spending time in Brooklyn.”

“And?”

“Defensive about her,” Ferris mused. “Just make sure you’re making the responsible choice for the family.”

Aiden bristled. “Dad, you walked in here and told me you’re leaving your socialite wife for a woman who makes cargo pants.”

“I’ve served my time. I’ve made every decision for the last fifty years with family and responsibility in mind,” Ferris said coldly. “It’s your turn now. And we both know this Baranski woman isn’t the kind of wife a Kilbourn needs by his side.”

Aiden shook his head in disbelief. No, Frankie wasn’t a woman to stand quietly in the wings. She belonged on center stage.

“I’m asking you to give me this, Aiden.” Ferris wasn’t a man who wasted time on please or thank you. “I’m asking you to choose family first.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Aiden stared at the glass on the side table. His father had gone home to get ready for some event or another with Jacqueline. They'd decided to continue their appearances together through the end of the month before quietly parting ways. Jacqueline would go to the no-longer family home in Provence for a few weeks. Ferris would announce his retirement and then whisk Alice away to the home in St. Barths. Everything would blow over while they were gone.

And Aiden would be left to pick up the pieces.

He picked up the glass and took it into the kitchen. It was all dark wood and white marble. A room he rarely if ever used. Every once in a while, if he couldn't sleep, he'd whip up a grilled ham and Brie. He had a feeling tonight would be one of those nights.

His father had lost his sense of familial duty. The man had confessed that running the company had killed his soul and then turned the keys over to Aiden without a thought as to the effects on his son's. There was no "there's more to life than business, son." No "you've done so much for us, you deserve to take a step back and focus on something you care about." But that was his father: selfish with zero self-examination. Why would Ferris think about others when he paid them to think about him?

He had assistants getting him his afternoon almond toffee snack. He had a personal chef that made his favorite meals in a specifically choreographed rotation. He had a wife who organized his social calendar to include only the most advantageous events. And he had a son who would run the family business while he abandoned all responsibility for a new girlfriend who made fucking windbreakers and cargo pants.

He glared at the glass, channeling all of his anger into the crystal and McCallan. He didn't feel much better after he

shattered the glass in the sink. But at least he hadn't felt some overwhelming desire to drown his sorrows.

He thought of Frankie. Of the departure from this life that she offered. She was a respite from Kilbourn business. From the constant battle for success. Maybe there was something more productive he could do with his time.

He left the mess for later, grabbed a water from the refrigerator, and headed down the hallway into his private office.

The file was where he'd left it, front and center on his desk. He opened it and propped his bare feet up on the corner of the desk. One of their holdings was a small security firm that did an excellent job quietly digging into people's lives.

Frankie had twenty-one thousand dollars in student loan debt. Not bad considering the fact that she'd returned to NYU for her MBA. He could make that disappear within hours. He planned to. If he could get the slightest inkling of interest out of her. It was a point of pride that he could take care of those closest to him. But when one of those select few did everything she could to shut him out, he would tread lightly.

Perhaps there was another gift that would be more beneficial to them both? He picked up his desk phone and dialed.

"It's Aiden Kilbourn. How soon can you make a delivery for me?"

* * *

Aiden pushed aside the contract his team of very well-paid lawyers had spent weeks dissecting and moved on to the newest candidates for chief information officer at another holding. For a software firm, their management was woefully antiquated. He fired off an email to the current CEO saying he found it hard to believe the only candidates for the position

were white men over the age of fifty. He suggested they restart the search with a more “interesting and energetic” crop of candidates.

The Knicks game was on in the background, drawing his attention more often than usual as he’d found himself added to the text message conversation between Frankie’s brothers about the game.

It was after ten, not nearly late enough to consider turning in. He slept on average five, possibly six, hours a night. But the day, the evening, had taken its toll.

His phone vibrated from under a stack of papers. Reflexively, he checked the TV to see what was happening with the game, but it was a time out.

Frankie: Why are there three men with a mattress at my front door at 10:30 at night?

Aiden: Your bed is a disgrace to beds everywhere.

Frankie: It’s my bed!

Aiden: Well, you’re not the only one sleeping in it now.

Frankie: Don’t you think you should have run this by me?

Aiden: And this is how that conversation would have gone.

You: No. Me: Yes. You: Fuck you, Aiden. Me: Fine, but it’s going to be on this nice new king-size. You: *has several orgasms on new bed* Okay, we can keep the bed.

Frankie: You’re insane.

Aiden: You’re welcome.

A few seconds later she sent another text. It was a selfie on the new mattress.

Frankie: I’m willing to give this bed and the aforementioned orgasms a shot.

He laughed despite himself. He knew what she needed. He was eager to give it to her. But everything with Frankie was a battle.

He started to type a reply and changed his mind. He'd take a shower and read until he got out of his own head, he decided.

He made it as far as the bedroom before his phone rang.

Frankie.

"Hi," he answered.

"Hello, secret bed buyer. Where do you even get a king-sized bed and mattress at 10 o'clock at night?" Frankie asked.

"I have a guy," Aiden joked.

"Are you okay? You sound... off."

Aiden sat down on the edge of the bed and stretched out. "Nothing I can't deal with," he said, flippantly.

There was a pause on her end. "Wanna talk about it?" she offered.

Did he?

"I wouldn't even know where to start," he admitted.

"You're not just patting me on the head and shooing me away so the menfolk can talk business, are you?"

It was exactly the kind of behavior Ferris treated his wives to.

"Gorgeous, you know more about business than I do."

She laughed huskily, and it went straight to his chest. "Let's hope my Corporate Social Responsibility professor thinks like you do. So, what happened?"

"My dad came over tonight."

"Hmm, not enough information for me to make snap judgements and offer unwarranted advice. Keep going."

Aiden covered his eyes with his free hand and soaked in the sound of her voice.

"He announced that he's retiring at the end of the month."

"Holy shit. Stepping down as chairman of the board?"

"Walking away from everything. Oh, and he and my stepmother are getting a divorce."

“Mid-life crisis?”

“If you can have one at sixty-five. There’s a girlfriend.”

“Of course there is. Let me guess, a dancer? No, wait, not classy enough. Oh! A museum docent?”

“An athletic apparel designer.”

“Nice! You finally have an in for all the sports bras you’ve been wanting.”

Aiden’s lips curved. “I wish you were here.” The words were out in the world before he could stop them.

She sighed into the phone. “Maybe sometime. But for now, I wish you were here in this big bed with me.”

Just imagining her stretched out, her wild hair fanning out in all directions, stirred him.

“So, what does this mean for you? You’re COO—I Googled you—what happens next?”

“I make the move to CEO, take on more responsibility, including the care and maintenance of one Elliot Kilbourn.”

“You’re shitting me. That man-child is an epic asshole. Why would your father let him within five-hundred yards of the company?”

“He’s blinded by Alice the sports bra designer.”

“Funny. So your dad is dumping all his responsibilities on you so he can what? Retire on a topless beach in Boca?”

“Sail down the Intercoastal Waterway and spend the summer in the Bahamas.”

“Is he going to change his mind?” Frankie asked hopefully.

“I don’t think so. He wants me to carry on in the business and family.”

“Oh,” she said flatly. “You mean find a nice billionaire debutante and create perfect male heirs.”

It was amazing exactly how much Frankie understood about the inner workings, the expectations of his life.

“Something like that.”

“Did you buy me a bed to break up with me?”

Aiden laughed, and the sound echoed around the quiet room.
“I bought you a bed to fuck you on without dumping us on the floor.”

“I’m not mistress material, Aide.”

“No, you’re not. My father also wants me to groom Elliot for a VP position. Something respectable.”

“Eeesh. Sounds like your dad’s asking for a unicorn for Christmas. Never gonna happen.”

It was simple for her. When presented with a decision, if it wasn’t satisfactory, turn it down, move on. But his life was so much more complicated than that. Where was the gratitude for everything the previous generations had built that he now enjoyed? Shouldn’t he be happy to sacrifice for that legacy as his father had?

“So, you’re not out shopping for a wife right now?” Frankie asked.

“They don’t exactly have stores for that,” he said dryly.

“Oh, I don’t know. Everything can be bought for a price.”

“What’s your price, Franchesca?”

“Hmm. I guess it depends on the currency.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

January gave way to the icy fingers of February. New Yorkers spent the month shivering their way from building to building on gray, slushy sidewalks. But Frankie stayed warm enough with Aiden in her apartment at least three nights a week.

They were getting along better than she would have imagined. He was smart and funny and horrifyingly generous. The new bed had been broken in, and now when Frankie went to bed alone, it was in the middle, hugging the pillow he'd used last.

She tried not to think of the countdown clock. His relationships usually lasted between two and three months. They'd been going strong for six weeks. It was longer than she thought they'd survive. In fact, neither one of them was showing any signs of slowing down.

Frankie finished up the email she was working on and fired it off. It was her half-day today, and with her evening class canceled for the evening, she had a luxury she wasn't used to. Several unfilled hours. She thought about texting Aiden to see if he would come out tonight, but as he'd been there last night, it wasn't likely.

She turned to eye the flowers he'd sent this morning. Raul liked to joke that if Brenda had turned the office into a greenhouse with her pretty plants everywhere, Frankie's boyfriend had turned it into a tropical rainforest.

These were exotic and colorful with green spikes.

Wild and beautiful. Just like you.

—A.

Frankie's phone rang from the desk drawer, and she retrieved it.

"Well, if it isn't my old married friend Mrs. Stockton-Randolph," she answered.

“Frankie! Tell me you don’t have plans for lunch,” Pru squealed into the phone. “I haven’t seen you in a thousand years, and I need you to tell me if I look like an old married lady.”

“Send me a selfie so I can see first. I don’t want to be seen in the city with some old lady,” Frankie teased.

Ever the obedient friend, Pru sent her a selfie with crossed eyes and a scrunched nose.

“Yeah, I’m definitely not being seen with that.”

“Har har. It’s your half-day, isn’t it?”

“It is. I get off in twenty.”

“Well get off and get your ass downtown. I want all the dish on you and a certain most eligible bachelor who’s been seen smiling from time to time since he got back from my wedding.”

“Smiling you say?” Frankie asked. So maybe she wasn’t the only one walking around with a stupid grin on her face.

“Meet me at The Courtyard in an hour,” Pru ordered.

“Yes, ma’am.”

* * *

The host hustled Frankie through the restaurant with its bamboo walls and artsy chandeliers to the bar area where Pru waited. Her friend was dressed in trousers that molded to her like a second skin and a body hugging cashmere turtleneck. Slouchy gray boots poked out from under the wide legged cuffs of her navy blue pants.

They hugged as if it had been years rather than a few weeks.

“Well, marriage certainly agrees with you,” Frankie quipped, sliding into the leather backed booth.

“I’d say that dating Aiden agrees with you,” Pru said, eyeing her coat.

“Yeah, keep it down, okay?” Frankie glanced around the restaurant. It was one of the places where important private conversations were often overheard for the gossip columns.

“Tell me everything,” Pru demanded.

“There’s not much to tell,” Frankie fibbed. She wasn’t exactly prepared to put into words the feelings she had surrounding Aiden. They weren’t identifiable at this point, and she was in no hurry to hash them out.

“You’ve been dating the most eligible bachelor on the eastern seaboard for six weeks, and there’s yet to be a picture of the two of you together. You never bring him up. You only don’t talk about men when you’re really serious.”

“We’re not serious,” Frankie said. “We’re just having fun, enjoying the ride.”

Pru snorted into her still water at “the ride.” “Oh, I bet you are.”

“He’s great. Okay? He’s smart and funny, so much more than the gorgeous son of a bitch I thought he was. Happy?” Frankie asked.

The waitress appeared and rattled off the daily specials. Pru ordered the kale salad with steamed chicken. Frankie ordered a beer and a turkey panini with fries.

“Why do you do this to me? All my snotty rich friends order green juice and plates of air,” Pru lamented.

Frankie took a bite out of one of the breadsticks the waitress delivered. “I’m your snotty poor friend, and I love carbs. I thought your stupid diet was over the minute the dress came off?”

“I’m on a new diet called fat blast the honeymoon weight.”

Frankie shoved the breadstick in Pru’s face and waved it from side to side. “Eat me. Eat meeeee...”

“God, I miss you,” Pru sighed, snatching the breadstick out of her hand and taking a tiny nibble out of it.

“You rebel, you,” Frankie teased. “I miss you, too.”

“So, tell me about Valentine’s Day. What did Aiden the perpetual bachelor do for you?”

“Well, he tried to surprise me with a long weekend in San Francisco. He had to go for business, but I couldn’t get away. So he ended up bringing over take out when he got back, and he got me a bracelet.”

A very *nice* bracelet. One that was too nice to actually wear. But she did open the swanky case and stare at the diamonds every night.

“Jewelry already? Margeaux would be impressed and dying of jealousy. What did you do for him?”

“I got him a Knicks hat.”

Pru sat waiting expectantly. “And?”

Frankie shrugged. “And that’s it. Well, I did flash him from the fire escape when he got to my place.”

Pru looked like she smelled something funny. It was her concentrating face that Frankie recognized from a few years of finals weeks.

“What?”

Pru shook her head, her honey blonde hair never moving from its sleek knot at the base of her neck. “Nothing. Hey, let’s do dinner tonight! The four of us! We can go to The Oak Leaf.”

Frankie wrinkled her nose. “Eh. Doesn’t Page Six camp out there?”

Pru rolled her eyes. “Who cares? Their crab puffs are to die for, and I miss you, and I want to see you and Aiden together so I can give you my official seal of approval. I’m texting Chip right now.”

“I don’t know what Aiden’s doing tonight,” Frankie began to argue.

“So text him. Find out,” Pru said without looking up. “It’s Friday night. You’re already here. You can stay at Aiden’s.”

“I’ve actually never been there,” Frankie said, taking a bigger bite of breadstick. It lodged in her throat.

Pru dropped her phone on the table with a clatter. “I’m sorry, what? You’ve been dating him for almost six weeks, and you haven’t seen his place yet? Is he taking you to hotels like some skank?”

A few of the closer diners shot glances their way.

“I’m not a skank,” Frankie promised them. “She’s just running lines for a play.” Everyone went back to their meals. “Can you try to keep it down, please?”

“I can’t believe he hasn’t invited you to his place. I really thought this was different. Chip said he’s never seen Aiden so —”

“Relax, Cujo. He’s invited me plenty of times.”

“And?” Pru looked at her like she was talking to an idiot.

“And I live in Brooklyn. By the time I get over here and we do our thing, I’d have to spend the night or go straight to work. Take the train...” She trailed off, feeling a sliver of something uncomfortable.

“I see. So, when do you see each other?” Pru asked.

Frankie shifted uncomfortably. “When he comes to Brooklyn.”

“And how often is that?”

“Three or four nights a week,” she said. Five times last week.

“I see,” Pru said primly. “And what kind of events have you gone to with him? Any fundraisers? Galas? The theater?”

Frankie shook her head to each one.

“Have you met his family?” Pru asked.

“Uh, no. He wanted me too, but the timing wasn’t right. He did meet mine.”

Pru brightened considerably. “Really? How did it go?”

“Well, I mainly did it to piss my mom off. Like ‘Hey, Ma, here’s this gorgeous guy I’m seeing. But guess what, we’re just fooling around. No future here. Burn.’” Frankie laughed nervously but quit when Pru didn’t join her.

Pru pinched the bridge of her nose. “Frankie, I’m going to say this with love because I do love you, and I want you to be happy. But you have got to quit the Frosty the Bitch Queen routine before you ruin something amazing.”

“Excuse me?”

The waitress reappeared with their meals. “I’ll leave you two to it then,” she said when the silence at the table grew awkward.

“Frosty the Bitch Queen?” Frankie repeated.

“Don’t even pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about. You are freezing Aiden out. Why in God’s name, I have no freaking clue. But you’re trying to sabotage this thing. Do you want to be right that badly?”

Frankie’s jaw was on the table.

“And while I’m talking and you’re listening, Aiden inviting you to his home, to meet his parents, to go to San Fran? He’s trying to share his life with you, jackass. And you’re basically kicking sand in his face.”

“That’s not what I’m—”

“Bullshit.” Pru stabbed her salad with such violence Frankie thought she saw the kale shrivel. “I get that you’re protecting yourself, but you don’t need to hurt him to stay safe.”

Frankie swallowed hard.

“It’s just a fling.” She said it to remind Pru and herself.

“That’s no excuse to treat him like Margeaux treats her housekeeper.”

Frankie brought her hands to her face. She was trying to protect herself. But that was no excuse for purposely rejecting him. Had she hurt Aiden? It wasn’t her intention. Though if the tables were turned... “I’m such an asshole.”

“Frosty bitch queen,” Pru corrected with less vehemence.

“He’s done everything for me, and all I’ve done is reject him.”

“Good,” Pru said, pointing her fork at Frankie. “That’s the guilt I want to see. This is not like you to treat someone as less than.”

“How do I fix it?” Frankie asked.

“We start with dinner tonight.”

“You still want to go with me even though I’m Asshole the Frosty Bitch Queen.”

Pru looked down her nose piously, “My dear, some of us can afford to forgive.”

“Oh. Nice. Now who’s the asshole?” Frankie asked.

“I didn’t want you to feel all alone up there on your high horse.”

“I’ll ask him about dinner tonight. But I’ll do it in person,” Frankie decided.

“Good girl. You can meet me at the salon afterward, and we’ll go shopping so you have something amazing to wear to start your apology tour.”

Frankie eyed her sandwich. “You, uh, wouldn’t happen to know where he works, would you?”

“You are the worst.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Aiden left the conference room feeling vaguely annoyed. He didn't care for the old adage, 'If you want something done right, you'd better do it yourself.' However, with the fresh crop of new hires in human resources and marketing, he felt like it would be faster to do their jobs for them.

He made it a point to meet with new hires periodically throughout their first year with the company. He found that flattening the layers of the corporation led to more natural communication and a better absorption into the corporate culture.

But the early meetings were always a pain in the ass. No, Kilbourn Holdings didn't need its own podcast. And no, they were not replacing all of the desk chairs with bean bags and exercise balls and opening a juice bar downstairs.

He nodded at his admin, Oscar, a thin, fashionable dictator with a French accent who ruled Aiden's calendar with an iron, manicured hand.

"Well, that ran long," Oscar announced, glaring at his Rolex watch, a gift from Aiden for the man's tenth anniversary of dealing with Kilbourn drama.

"I don't suppose you have lunch waiting for me like a good admin," Aiden shot back. Their relationship was closer to that of Frankie's brothers than boss and employee.

"Ah, I have something better than that waiting for you," he said, pointing at Aiden's closed office door. "I approve, by the way."

Aiden frowned and let himself into his office. The sight of Frankie sitting behind his desk swiveling in his chair jarred him hard enough that he froze to the spot for a moment. Oscar closed the door behind him with a stage whisper. "Have fun."

"Hi," Frankie said, ceasing her swiveling.

“Hi,” he responded, still shocked to find her in his office. She was dressed for work in a neat little suit that made him want to unbutton the jacket and slide his hands inside. She looked nervous. Something he wasn’t used to seeing on her face. Not his confident, energetic Franchesca.

“I hope you don’t mind me dropping by,” she began, rising from the chair.

“No! Not at all! I mean...” He couldn’t seem to regain his composure. He was so damn happy to see her. “I’m really happy to see you,” he admitted.

“Yeah?” she asked beaming at him. “I was in town for lunch with Pru, and I well, we... Do you have dinner plans?”

He did. Business ones. But having Frankie here in his office asking him for anything trumped that.

“I’m yours,” he said. He meant it.

She flushed and crossed tentatively to him, a paper bag in her hand. “I was hoping you’d be free for dinner with Pru and Chip tonight.”

“What’s in the bag?”

“I know you don’t get a lot of time for lunch, so just in case you didn’t get it yet today I brought you a sandwich.”

“Is it a Baranski sandwich?” he asked snatching the bag from her.

She laughed. “Gio really made an impression on you, didn’t he? Remind me to make you a club sometime. You’ll worship me.”

He already did.

His gaze must have told her as much because she looked down at her shoes and then the bag in his hand. “It’s not one of ours, but it’s a deli a few blocks away that’s almost as good as us. Don’t tell Dad.”

“Your secret is safe,” he promised.

“Why did Oscar let me in?”

“I told security and reception that you had free rein to come and go as you pleased.”

“When did you tell them that?” Frankie asked.

“The day after I got home from Barbados.”

She bit her lip and dipped her head.

“Is something wrong?” Aiden asked, nudging her chin up to look at him.

“There was, but now there isn’t,” she said firmly.

“Can I ask what?”

She shook her head. “Uh-uh. It’s better that you just go with it.”

“Then that’s what I’ll do.” He grabbed her wrist and towed her back to his desk where he spread the sandwich out on the bag. Hot roast beef, and was that a whiff of horseradish?

“I had them leave the onions off in case you had meetings today,” Frankie said. She was back to chewing on her lower lip.

“Do I have to share this with you, or am I good to inhale the entire thing?” he asked, keeping the tone light.

“Inhale away. I had a turkey panini and watched Pru choke down six pounds of kale.”

“How are the newlyweds?” he asked.

“Glowing like all the lights in Paris,” Frankie sighed and perched on the edge of his desk. “She looks great and says Chip’s eye is all healed. Is The Oak Leaf at eight good for you?”

He would rearrange whatever it took to clear his schedule. Oscar would whine about the last-minute changes, but Aiden finally had a social occasion that trumped any business.

“That’s fine,” he promised.

“There’s one more thing,” she said. Frankie was watching him closely. “Is it okay if I stay the night at your place? Since I’m already here and all—”

“I’d love that,” he said, taking her hand and kissing her knuckles. His blood was already roaring through his veins with the thought of Franchesca naked on his bed. Franchesca eating breakfast at his table. Franchesca lounging on his couch or arguing with him over something in his office.

He didn’t know what had caused this abrupt about-face, but he was grateful.

She glanced at her watch. “I should probably head out soon. I’m meeting Pru and we’re going shopping.”

Aiden reached for his wallet and stopped when Frankie pressed her stilettoed foot to his chest. It gave him a direct line of sight up her skirt. “I can buy my own dinner dress, Kilbourn.”

He didn’t know whether to be incredibly turned on with the heel pressing into his pec or annoyed that, once again, she was rejecting him. He decided it was okay to be both.

“Fuck it. Franchesca, this is the one thing I have to offer you, and when you refuse it, it cuts at me.”

“Aiden!” she gasped his name in shock and some anger if he wasn’t mistaken.

Damn it. Why did he have to open his mouth? It never paid to show someone your vulnerability.

Frankie moved her shoe and surprised him by sliding onto his lap. “You think your wallet and your cock are the only reasons I’d be with you?”

He felt his cock thicken at her words. He knew she had to feel him lengthening under her, her skirt pushed up around her hips.

“Do you think that?” she asked again. Those eyes were more blue than green here under the office lights. And they tore at pieces of his soul.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe.” Yes.

“Then I haven’t done a very good job at being your girlfriend,” she sighed. She gripped him by the tie, and he went fully hard under her.

“New deal, Aide. I’m not doing all the taking anymore. Starting now.”

She slid off his lap, and he was still reaching for her when she shoved his chair away from the desk.

When her fingers met his belt buckle, the breath left his body, and he seized up like rigor mortis. “What... we can’t... what if...”

All thoughts and corresponding words left his brain with the last ounce of blood that plummeted to his aching cock. How could one woman make him feel this free, this terrified?

In seconds, she had his cock freed from his pants. “Are you sure your man out there will keep people out?” Frankie asked. But she wasn’t looking at him. She was looking at his erection that she held firmly in her hand.

Aiden couldn’t even find the words to answer her, and Frankie didn’t seem to need them because she was opening her mouth and slicking her tongue over his dick from root to sensitive crown.

He crashed back against his chair and watched in fascination as she did glorious things to his dick with her mouth.

“I want to touch you,” he gritted out when she took him to the back of her throat.

“Mmm, tonight. For now, this is just for you.” Frankie focused her mouth on things much more important than words.

She was slick and hot, and the feel of bottoming out against the back of her throat nearly did him in.

In ecstasy, Aiden’s head fell back against the leather cushion of his chair. She was pumping him with her fist and using her mouth, a heady combination. He’d walked into this room frustrated and tired, and in seconds, she’d turned his entire day around.

Her tongue did something particularly insane to the tip of his dick, and he felt his balls tightening.

“Franchesca,” he hissed.

“I’ve got you, baby,” she promised, kissing his cock before resuming her attention with her mouth. She was no longer languid with her strokes. No. Frankie was hollowing her cheeks and sucking hard enough that he saw stars.

He couldn’t close his eyes though. He wanted this vision of her on her knees in front of him sucking him off. Wanted it forever.

Aiden dug his heels into the rug for traction, fearing that he’d become weightless and float away. He felt it build at the base of his spine and marveled at the witchcraft that brought him to orgasm so quickly.

Giving up all pretense, he gripped her head with both hands and let loose a guttural groan when she let him take over. Fucking her mouth with short, shallow thrusts, he lost himself in the moment. He meant to pull out. But then he was coming, jerking convulsively and pouring his release down her throat.

He went silent as the orgasm ripped through him, hollowing him out even as it filled her mouth.

Nothing. *Nothing* in this world could have prepared him for the sight of Franchesca at the receiving end of his cock, taking everything he gave without asking for anything in return. He shuddered and collapsed back into the chair, blood rushing in his ears.

She rose from her knees, a goddess no matter her position. She crossed the room and peered inside, finding his private bathroom. Aiden would have directed her to it, but he was a shell of a man right now. Leveled by beauty and desire.

She returned with a warm, damp washcloth and cleaned him thoroughly.

“I haven’t been a very good girlfriend. I’m hoping to improve my score,” she confessed, gently tucking him back into his underwear. “You’re a good man, Aiden. You’re smart, you’re funny, you’re unbelievably patient. If I asked you for Cleveland, Ohio, you’d find a way to deliver it to me. You’re insanely generous and surprisingly sweet, and I’m sorry I haven’t been appreciative of it.”

“Gah.” It was the best he could provide verbally after having been completely decimated.

“So I’m going to do a better job, and I’m going to expect you to hold me to a higher standard.” She perched back up on his desk, and he swore he could smell her arousal. He would have fucked her. He would have given her anything she wanted just for visiting him. But she wanted to change the way things were.

Aiden managed a shaky breath and then another one, slowly feeling the life return to his body. “I have an addendum to our deal as well,” he told her.

She watched him warily.

“I’m not suggesting forever,” he began. “But I would like to table the ‘temporary’ aspect of our relationship.”

She stopped breathing, freezing in place like a rabbit in front of a predator.

Aiden reached out, shifting his chair so he was in front of her. “You’re special to me, Franchesca. And I don’t foresee a point when you won’t be.”

“Jesus,” she blew out her breath. “That must have been some BJ,” she said.

“See? That’s what I’m talking about.”

“The blow job?” she asked cheekily.

He pinched her.

“Ouch! I’m kidding,” she said.

“Forget the fact that you’re beautiful beyond belief. You’re sharp and mean when you need to be. You have no filter. I’ve never known anyone who didn’t carefully weigh every word. You’re a breath of fucking fresh air in my life.”

“Aide, you’ve got me shaking in my boots here,” she admitted.

“All in, Franchesca. You and me.”

She blew out a slow breath and stared at the ceiling. “What if we fuck it up?”

He squeezed her hips. “I won’t let you.”

She laughed. “Ass,” she said.

He saw the shimmer of tears behind her long lashes. “I’m asking you to take me or leave me,” he told her.

“You ever have this conversation with anyone else you dated?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Not even close. You and me, Frankie.”

“I feel like I’m gonna throw up,” she admitted, clutching her hand to her belly.

He saw it then, the fear, the nerves. And he made the conscious choice to push the button. “I never would have thought I’d see the day when Franchesca Marie Baranski was too scared to go after what she wanted.”

It was a manipulation, but damn it, he needed this. He needed her.

She nodded, her lips pressed tight. “Okay. All in.”

He rose, lifting her off the desk in a tight embrace.

“You won’t regret it, Franchesca.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

“Judging from the fingerprints on your neck, things went well with Aiden,” Pru said, eyeing Frankie as she flopped down in the salon chair next to her.

Frankie was too emotionally drained to argue. “You were right, and I was a horrible person,” she admitted, pouting in the mirror.

“When you know better, you do better,” Pru chirped from under her foils.

“We’re officially in a ‘real’ relationship, and I threw up my panini on my way out of the building.”

“You have a cast iron stomach,” Pru pointed out.

“Yeah, okay, so that part didn’t actually happen. But thanks to you, Aiden and I are,” she swallowed compulsively, “a couple.”

“I have the perfect way for you to thank me.”

“I just made it up to Aiden under his desk. What the hell do you want from me?”

Pru pointed at Frankie. “Oh, Christian! My friend here needs something done with her mop.”

A man dressed in head to toe black with a shaved head—irony of ironies—magically appeared behind her.

“Babe,” he said plucking a curl and holding it between his fingers. “We can do so much better.”

Places like this charged four-hundred dollars just for planting your ass in the chair, Frankie thought. She tried to stand, but Christian had some muscles under that tight black t-shirt.

“It’s my treat,” Pru sang out.

“You know I don’t like when you do this,” Frankie reminded her.

Christian whirled a cape around her and tightened it at her neck. “Now, what are we thinking?” he asked, holding her hair at varying lengths and glaring in the mirror as if looking for creative inspiration.

“We’re thinking a nice little trim,” Frankie said, snatching her hair out of his hand.

He grabbed another fistful. “A trim?” he scoffed examining the ends. “You have what? Eight months of damage.”

“Don’t you think she’d be gorgeous with some highlights?” Pru suggested.

“That tin foil is messing with your brain waves,” Frankie shot back.

“Don’t mind her, Christian. She’s not usually this surly. Also, she’s from Brooklyn,” Pru said.

Christian spun her chair around and caught it by the arms. They were inches apart. “I need you to trust me. I do not do bad hair days. I do not deliver subpar cuts. If I give you highlights, you will wish you would have been born with them. I will make your hair into a miracle, but I need you to trust me.”

“Do it!” Pru hissed in a stage whisper.

Frankie pointed an index finger at him. “If you fuck up my hair, months from now when you’ve forgotten all about me, when you’re complacent, I’ll wait for you in the alley, throw you into a dumpster full of human hair and perm chemicals.”

“And if I make you look like the kind of woman who doles out whiplash from second glances, you’ll come back and let me touch up your highlights,” he bargained.

She offered her hand. “Deal.”

“Her boyfriend likes it long and wavy,” Pru added helpfully.

“Oh, so I have a boyfriend now, and I need to wear my hair to please him?” Frankie shot back.

Pru and Christian rolled their eyes heavenward in the mirror.

“I’ve got this,” Pru sighed. “Look Frankie. When you’re in a relationship, you don’t live your life to please your partner. But you sure as hell don’t figure out what they like and then run in the opposite direction to maintain some semblance of independence.”

Christian shoved his fingers into her hair like he was hand washing laundry in a river, turning her head this way and that. “One of the greatest gifts to give in a relationship is something very small that costs you nothing.”

Well, it was costing Pru four-hundred dollars.

Awesome. She was getting her hair cut by a Manhattan fashionista version of the poet Pablo Neruda.

She closed her eyes and let him do his worst. Flinching at the snips of the scissors and the tugs of the comb. She couldn’t stop thinking about Aiden’s face when he found her behind his desk. He’d lit up like Times Square. As if her mere presence was a gift.

She’d been holding on to the thought, the hope that Pru had been wrong. That she and Aiden were just having fun as they’d agreed. That he wasn’t looking for more. That she wasn’t secretly hoping he’d disappear so she could be right. Would right have soothed her bruised heart if she’d succeeded in pushing him away?

She wasn’t a cruel, callous person. She wasn’t someone who crushed a person because she could. Yet, she’d been so determined to keep Aiden at a distance she’d rejected him every step of the way. And he’d stuck.

Seeing him *see* her? Unguarded joy. And if he was willing to be that vulnerable, the least she could do was meet him there.

After what felt like hours of fussing, she felt her chair spin around.

“Okay, open your eyes and take in my genius.”

She opened one skeptical eye, prepared to see a purple Mohawk or something equally garish. But it was her own hair. A few inches shorter, curls more defined and certainly shinier, but it was her.

“Are those caramel highlights?” she asked, turning her head.

Christian scoffed. “Caramel highlights are for amateurs. “Those are macchiato lowlights.”

She looked sleek, put together yet still herself. No longer did the static electricity of winter rule her head.

“Damn it, Christian. I really wanted to throw you in a dumpster.”

* * *

“Aiden is going to drag you somewhere dark and semi-private within five minutes of seeing you in that,” Pru guessed, poking her head into Frankie’s dressing room. For an upscale boutique, there was a surprising lack of security in the dressing room area.

Frankie turned to the side to look at her ass in the scarlet red dress. It hugged her curves, dipping low at the breasts and skimming over her waist and hips.

“It’s February. I can’t wear sleeveless,” she argued. Besides, this freaking swatch of fabric cost just under a grand. Aiden had slipped a credit card into her hand on the way out and ordered her to use it. But it felt... weird. A blow job and a credit card? They’d happened too close together. She needed to make it clear to herself that she wasn’t Vivian from *Pretty Woman*.

“You’ll have a coat, and I requested a table by the fireplace. You’ll probably be sweating by the end of dinner,” Pru predicted, sashaying around in a sleek black sheath.

“Why aren’t your boobs on display for the world to see?” Frankie asked, glancing down at her own overflowing cleavage.

“I’m a married woman and a B cup, babe. There isn’t much to display. And you’re insane if you don’t buy that dress.”

Frankie studied herself in the mirror, barely recognizing herself. The hair, the dress, the diamond and—God, was that platinum?—bracelet that she’d just happened to have in her bag.

“You know what we need now?” Pru asked.

“I’m hoping you’re going to say froyo, but I have a feeling it’s shoes,” Frankie sighed.

“Shoes!”

When Pru ducked back into her own fitting room, Frankie checked the price tag on the dress again. It made her feel ill.

She pulled out her phone.

Frankie: When you gave me this credit card, what kind of budget were you thinking?

Aiden: I doubt very much that there’s anything you’d buy that would cause me to so much as blink.

Frankie looked down at the dress again. *Wanna bet?*

Frankie: I’d feel better if you could give me a number to stay under. I found a dress, but there are more digits than I’m used to. And Pru is chanting “shoes, shoes, shoes,” one dressing room over.

She could picture him chuckling to himself at his backwoods girlfriend panicking over pennies.

Aiden: I love seeing you treat yourself. And I love it more that I can be part of it. How about keeping it under fifty grand for today?

He *had* to be fucking with her. Frankie couldn’t begin to imagine a world in which fifty grand was blow money. Of course, knowing Aiden, he’d named a sum lower than usual to appease her.

Frankie: Oh, so I can’t get this seventy-five thousand dollar dress? Too bad.

She added a disappointed meme.

Aiden: Maybe if you'd send me a picture of the dress, I could make a judgment call.

His playfulness eased her tension the tiniest bit. And maybe she could give him some tension of his own.

She snapped a selfie of mainly her boobs and sent it.

Aiden: I've never gotten an erection in an analyst meeting before. This is interesting.

Frankie laughed. She didn't know if he was kidding, or if he really was texting her during a meeting. Either way, she felt lighter. And if he thought fifty-grand was an acceptable level of spending, then her pretty dress and a pair of shoes wouldn't kill either of them.

“Okay, Pru. Where are we going for shoes?”

Chapter Forty

Frankie spent more time prepping for this double date than she had her senior prom and the two weddings she'd been in combined. She had been plucked, glossed, lotioned, and smoothed and was starving to death by the time their car pulled up in front of the restaurant.

Chip and Pru extracted themselves from the permanent embrace marriage seemed to have sewn them into.

"Aiden's here," Pru said, pointing at the limo in front of them. All limos looked the same to her, so she took their word for it.

Frankie felt her blood sing. She wanted to see him here on his own turf. See what she'd been missing out on. She wanted to watch his pupils dilate when he got his first good look at her in this damn dress. She wanted him to be proud to have her on his arm.

And she wanted to eat some goddamn dinner.

"Just two photographers," Chip said, glancing out the window. "They must not have seen Aiden yet."

Frankie gulped. "Why? Does he get a lot of attention?"

Pru and Chip exchanged a look. "You'll be fine. Be you," Chip said, patting her on the knee. He exited the car first and held a hand out for Pru.

Frankie saw the flash of a camera and rolled her eyes. Who in the hell in their right mind would camp out in front of a restaurant in February to snap a few pictures of people?

She stepped out next and immediately forgot about the photographers. There on the sidewalk in front of her was Aiden Freaking Kilbourn, and he was closing in on her like a lion on a slow, fat gazelle. The look in his eyes told her he was hungry, too. Just not for dinner.

Frankie felt a cold rush of air and realized she'd forgotten to button her coat. Aiden noticed too as the wind opened the

cashmere, parting it.

She swore he licked his lips, and then his hands were on her and then his mouth. His touch ignited every nerve ending in her body as if they'd been waiting for this exact moment. It was chemistry, biology. Something hardwired into them both, and Frankie couldn't get enough of it.

He kissed her hard, licking into her mouth to stroke his tongue against hers, leaving no doubt to any witnesses exactly who she belonged to. Laying claim to her.

She didn't like being on display. Didn't like the attention. And she would have told him so if she hadn't been so busy clinging to him like a vine.

"So, we'll go get some drinks then," Chip said, pointing toward the restaurant and dragging the grinning Pru after him.

"Meet you crazy kids inside," Pru called after them.

"We'll be back," Aiden answered without looking away from her. There were flashes of light, and Frankie was dimly aware of questions being hurled at them both. And then Aiden was tucking her under his arm and guiding her back to his limo. He opened the door and ushered her inside.

"Drive until I say so," he ordered tersely and then raised the privacy glass.

"What about dinner?" Frankie asked, sliding across the bench seat to accommodate him.

"We're having dessert first," he breathed, freeing her of her coat. His hands cruised her dress, stopping reverently just beneath her abundant cleavage.

"Do you know what happened after you sent that picture today?"

"What?" she breathed, needing him to touch her. Afraid that when he did, she'd cease to exist. She ran her palms over his thighs.

"I had to excuse myself from the meeting to jerk off in my bathroom.

Her breath was a shiver. “Did you think of me?”

“Gorgeous, I’m always thinking of you.” He reached down and palmed his hard-on through his pants.

Frankie was instantly wet. “In a limo?” she hissed. She hated to admit it, but limo sex was on her bucket list.

“It has to be now, or I won’t make it through dinner. Not with you in that dress.”

His blunt honesty was as attractive to her as the predatory look in his eyes.

Game, Frankie slid a leg over his lap, leaving enough room that he could free himself from the confines of his pants. His thick length fell heavily into her hand. He was already leaking, and Frankie felt a thrill of power. Steadying her on his lap, Aiden reached around her into a compartment and produced a condom.

He’d probably had sex in this car a hundred times, Frankie thought. But she’d be damned if this wasn’t the only time burned into his brain forever.

While he rolled the condom on and stroked himself gratuitously, she inched the skirt of her dress up until it bunched around her hips. She shoved at the wide V-neck until it slid off her shoulders down her arms. The material hanging precariously from her breasts.

The low rumble in his chest was her reward.

He leaned over and pressed his face to her breasts, his beard rough against her skin. Frankie moved closer so the powerful strokes of his hand brought his cock in contact with where she needed him most desperately.

“It’s going to be hard and fast, Franchesca,” he warned her. “Once I’m inside you, I’m not going to stop until you’re coming on me.”

“Fuck me, Aiden,” she breathed. It was an order, a plea.

He gripped her hips, positioning her with his tip probing her center, just outside her weeping entrance. With one hand, he yanked her thin-as-air underwear to the side.

His chest was heaving, his jaw clenched, and he hadn't even started fucking her yet. Aiden Kilbourn over the edge was a heady sight.

It was her last coherent thought as he thrust his hips up, driving into her with brutal force. He didn't give her a moment to get used to him, to relax around him. He jackhammered into her and used one hand to free her breasts from the dress. It had a built-in bra, so there was nothing left separating him from her heavy, needy tits.

"Aiden," she hissed when he closed his mouth over one nipple and sucked it hard. His thrusts never ceased. He growled into her breast, his hands gripping her hip so hard it made her cry out again.

It only made him fuck her harder.

He was out of control, suckling and thrusting, driving her completely mad. Frankie dug her hands into his shoulders and held on for dear life.

She couldn't breathe, couldn't think. She could only take what he was giving her. Life. Fire. Desire.

"So fucking perfect," he murmured against her flesh.

This dress had been the best extravagant purchase of her life.

She felt him thicken inside her, heard his breathing go ragged, and knew he was close. Aching to orgasm. Hanging by a thread.

He held her against him, shortening his thrusts to grind against her. It was beautiful, primal.

He released her nipple with a pop and moved to her other breast, his eyes bright and hard on hers. She watched him take the tip in his mouth, felt his tongue stroke over her. She had molten gold flowing through her veins. Her world went white hot and brilliant as her orgasm exploded without warning.

"Aiden!" She sobbed out his name as he thrust in to the hilt. His moan was low and guttural as he emptied himself into her. Even through the condom, she could feel him pulsing inside her, releasing his seed in a never-ending climax.

She came again, or still, as he rode out his orgasm. And when he finally went still beneath her, Frankie collapsed against him.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and held her close, pressing her breasts against his crisp shirt. He stroked her bare back with soothing sweeps of his hand. The praise he whispered in her ear made her blush. Her boyfriend was one dirty talker. And that was coming from a woman whose second word as a child was “fuck.”

She felt like he'd taken her apart and put her back together again. There was nothing like feeling Aiden inside her. Even now, after an orgasm that had hollowed him to the core, he was still semi-erect.

“Thank you for the dress,” she whispered, her throat too raw for any volume.

He laughed softly against her hair. “Thank you for you.”

Chapter Forty-One

Aiden clearly had clout at The Oak Leaf. The host didn't even blink when the limo pulled up in the alley. He merely led them through the kitchen, past the bar, to their table where Chip and Pru were arguing over tapas.

Frankie tried to ignore the curious glances in their direction. He was the most recognizable Kilbourn in the family and a permanent bachelor. There was bound to be interest.

Frankie slid into the booth first, and Aiden followed her, his hand clamping on her thigh under the table. She picked up the menu and pretended to peruse it, ignoring the expectant weight of Pru's stare.

"How are the clams here?" she asked innocently.

"Uh, *hi*. How was your limo sex?"

Frankie looked up at Pru who was resting her chin in her hands and grinning smugly.

"It was nice. Right, Aiden?" Frankie said haughtily, looking at him. His hair was mussed, but it could pass for purposeful styling. His tie was crooked. And the rest of him was, of course, flawless. She, on the other hand, looked as though someone had run a vacuum cleaner over her and then bit her in a few key places.

"Very nice. Highly recommended," he said, reaching for his water goblet and downing half of it.

He squeezed her thigh and moved his hand a millimeter higher on her thigh.

Teasing him, she hooked her shoe over his shin, opening her knees.

No one else would know just by looking at him, but he was already displaying his turn on tells. There was the flush at the neck, the flaring of his nostrils. She wished she could get a look at his crotch, betting money he was sporting wood again.

The man was a freaking marvel. His orgasms probably had orgasms.

“So...” Pru began pointedly. “How’s life?”

They dined on fabulous food, drank astronomically expensive wine and, in general, had a lovely time. Frankie eventually forgot about the curious stares and enjoyed watching Aiden relax. His reserved façade slipped around Chip. And he laughed more, smiled more, those sexy-as-hell crinkles showing at the corners of his eyes. Even while deep in conversation with his friend, Aiden still maintained a physical connection with her. Toying with her hair, stroking her shoulder with his thumb, or coaxing his fingers higher on her thigh.

Pru filled them in on their honeymoon. When residents of the Upper West Side marry in Barbados, they can’t very well vacation there, too. Pru and Chip had spent another ten days in the Maldives. Frankie wasn’t exactly sure geography-wise where the Maldives existed, but the pictures on Pru’s phone were stunning.

It felt... normal. Blissfully so.

Well, as normal as a \$73 pasta entrée could feel. A Friday night with friends. For the first time, Frankie felt like they were a real couple. She wasn’t the poor girl from Brooklyn. He wasn’t the CEO and newly appointed family head.

He was very simply hers. Aiden, the man who drew every woman’s gaze and snagged the check from Chip claiming the meal was a welcome home gift, belonged to her.

Frankie felt a rush of teenage girl giddiness sweep through her. Like she’d just spotted Pre-Jessica Simpson John Mayer across the restaurant.

“Girl bathroom break,” Pru announced pushing Chip out of the booth so she could escape. “Let’s go, Frankie. Give the boys a chance to miss us.”

Pru all but hauled Frankie into the bathroom and then mauled her in a fierce hug.

“Okay. What the hell is this?” Frankie asked, awkwardly patting her friend on the back.

“You love him!” Pru squealed. “I’ve been waiting for the day when you look at a man the way you sat there and looked at Aiden.”

“I don’t love him,” Frankie argued.

“You have this glow,” Pru said, twirling around and checking her makeup in the mirror.

“It’s a post-orgasm glow. He dragged me into his limo for sex, Pru. We’re not decorating summer homes and naming babies.”

“And the way he looks at you? I swear to God it singed my eyebrows off. He wants to eat you alive.”

“Stop. You’re all clouded with newlywed bliss, and you want everyone else to be in love right along with you.”

“We should have babies together,” Pru decided, reapplying her lipstick. “We could share a nanny.”

“I love you, Pruitt, but you’re fucking insane.”

Pru grinned at her in the mirror. “I like seeing you happy. That’s all. I promise. I’m mostly just teasing.”

“You’re such an ass,” Frankie laughed.

“I may be an ass, but you sure photograph well,” Pru said, handing over her phone.

“Are you kidding me?” Frankie scrolled through the post. It was a gossip blog with a series of pictures of Frankie and Aiden pawing each other on the sidewalk. “Oh my God, my mother is going to see these!”

“Your mother and anyone who’s anyone in the city,” Pru said, unsympathetically gleeful.

“This *just* happened! How is this even a story with...” she scrolled up again, “*three* updates since it was posted?”

Pru rolled her eyes. “Uh, don’t you teach social media workshops?”

“To business people about businesses!” Frankie waved her arms at her friend. “Not some vapid readership that has an opinion on... my food order? What the hell is wrong with these people?”

“You’re an exotic unknown on the arm of everyone’s favorite bachelor. What did you expect?” Pru asked.

Pru’s phone vibrated in Frankie’s hand, and a text message popped up.

“How is that ethno-mutt dating Aiden Kilbourn?” Frankie read out loud.

“What?” Pru shrieked. “Is that in the comments?”

Frankie held up the phone. “Uh, no. That’s your best pal Margeaux texting you.”

“She’s the worst human being in the history of human beings. The world is lucky she has no ambition besides getting another husband because, if she had any kind of drive, she’d be the new Hitler.”

“How are you two friends?”

“We’re definitely, definitely not. My father and her father are business partners. I was in her first wedding to a cocaine-snorting, prostitute-buying gambling addict. They made a lovely couple.”

Frankie slumped against the wall. “Someone is telling the paparazzi what I’m eating for dinner. And hundreds of people are freaking out about it, including Hitler Junior. I’m not ready for this.”

Pru marched up to her and stabbed a finger in her shoulder. “You listen to me Franchesca Marie, you can and will handle this. You are the one person in this world who has the ability to be completely immune to this kind of attention. And if you can survive it, your prize is Aiden. So suck it up. You’re dating a guy who gives you an excuse to hang out with me and Chip in Manhattan on a Friday night. I’m not letting you make a mess of it.”

“Don’t tell me you were tired of schlepping to Brooklyn for cheap pizza and movies?” Frankie joked, but she felt the familiar unease return. It was another reminder that she didn’t belong in this world. At the end of the day, she was just a girl playing dress-up for the night.

Could she really survive keeping a foot in both worlds?

Chapter Forty-Two

“It’s still early,” Pru said, checking Chip’s watch.

There was nothing early about a dinner that wrapped at 11 p.m., Frankie thought, stifling a yawn. “Do you guys want coffee, or do you want to hit a club?” Chip offered.

Frankie slid her gaze to Aiden’s. “No thanks,” they said together.

“They’re going for Round Two,” Pru explained with a wink at Chip.

“That’s not a bad idea,” he said, winking down at his wife.

“You know, I kind of miss the eyepatch,” Frankie mused to Chip.

Aiden texted his driver from the table to bring the car around and helped Frankie into her coat. The restaurant was much less crowded, but the crowd outside seemed bigger than before. The maître-d whispered something in Aiden’s ear, and he frowned, nodded. Two gentlemen in suits appeared.

“What’s going on?” Frankie asked.

“There’s more paparazzi outside,” Aiden said, glaring through the glass. “Security is going to clear the way for us.”

“Clear the way? How the fuck many people are out there?” Frankie asked.

“Not that many,” he said dryly. “I’m not in a boy band.”

There were enough people milling about to Frankie’s way of thinking. Sure, Bieber would have caused a fan frenzy, but there were still two dozen curious passers-by and seven guys with cameras when they left the safety of the restaurant. Security barreled their way through the crowd forcing the cameras back as Aiden tucked her under his arm and guided her to the waiting limo.

She was blinded by the flashes but otherwise unscathed. And the second Aiden slid in behind her, the door closed, sealing them off from prying eyes.

“Why do you eat here if you get that kind of response?” she asked, flopping back against the head rest.

The back of the limo still smelled faintly of sweat and sex.

“They’re more interested in you and who you are to me,” Aiden told her.

“Well, they better prepare for disappointment,” Frankie shot back.

Aiden tugged her into his lap and reached inside her coat to hold her around the waist.

“It goes with the territory. Just like your mom slapping everyone. It’s one of those things we all have to tolerate.”

Frankie laughed and rested her head against his chest. She’d half expected him to jump her again the second they got in the car. But this was nice too. Very nice.

“You’re breathtaking, Franchesca.”

“Aide,” she said softly.

He shook his head. “I’m not trying to give you a compliment. I’m warning you. They’re going to find out who you are. They’re going to want to know everything about you and put it up for public consumption.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because you’re mine.”

It was arrogant the way he stated it as fact. But damn it if she didn’t like hearing that claim a little bit.

She opened her mouth.

“Don’t argue with me,” he warned her.

“It’s what I do best,” she teased, toying with the buttons of his shirt.

“Don’t argue about not belonging to me. I belong to you. I’m yours. All in, remember? It goes both ways.”

“All in,” Frankie murmured.

* * *

Aiden’s building was in the middle of everything important. Only three blocks from his office, he could walk should he choose to brave the masses. Though after witnessing the attention he attracted, Frankie didn’t blame him for hiring a car. Not much fun feeling like a goldfish in a bowl on the commute to work. Where everyone else in the city was an anonymous stranger, Aiden’s face and name was known far and wide.

And now Frankie was stepping into that orbit. Willingly.

The lobby was guarded by a uniformed doorman and a smartly suited woman in black behind a sleek U-shaped workstation. “Good evening, Mr. Kilbourn,” she greeted him with a professional smile.

“Good evening, Alberta. This is Ms. Baranski,” he said, nodding at Frankie as he pulled her along, never slowing his pace.

“A pleasure, Ms. Baranski,” Alberta said.

“Nice to meet you,” Frankie answered over her shoulder as she jogged to keep up with him.

Aiden was towing her toward the bank of elevators like a pack of hyenas were on their heels.

They stepped inside, and Aiden pulled a key from his coat pocket.

“Don’t even,” Frankie said, shaking her head.

“Don’t even what?” he asked, sliding the key into the elevator control panel and pushing the P.

“Oh, come on! The penthouse? Really? Can’t you at least pretend to be a normal guy?”

He stared at her with amusement in those blue eyes. “You are the first person who has ever complained about the penthouse,” he observed.

“I’m not a fan of reminiscing about the horde of ladies you brought back here for naked times, Aide.”

“Exactly how many women do you think I’ve been with?” he asked with a laugh.

“Enough.”

One second he was standing in front of the button panel, and the next he had her pinned to the wall of the elevator.

“You know what I’ve never done?”

He planted his hands on either side of her head. He was a whisper away, as close to touching her from head to toe without actually making contact.

“What?” she whispered.

“I’ve never kissed anyone in this elevator.” He trailed his lips over her jaw line to her neck and back again.

“Aren’t they watching?” she asked, nodding toward the security camera.

“Does it matter?”

The soft of his lips, the rough of his beard—a contrast of sensations.

Frankie held on to the rail behind her. And when his lips closed over hers, she was glad to have the support. It wasn’t a wild, passionate kiss. It was something different, something that ran deeper and sang in her bones.

The kiss bloomed like a rose under the heat of the sun. Opening and reaching for more.

His tongue slid lazily against hers, stroking, exciting, and soothing all at once.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” He said it like a confession. A dark one.

“I’m glad to be here. I get to find a flaw in you tonight. Maybe you’re a hoarder. Maybe you have horrible taste in velvet paintings. Maybe you’ve got sixteen cats.” She brought her arms around his neck. “I’m going to find what makes you human, Kilbourn.”

The elevator doors slid open, and Aiden led her by the hand into a spacious foyer. White on white on white.

“Hmm, so far no cats,” she observed.

He unlocked the door and pushed it open. “Maybe they’re all hiding inside with my yard sale collection of eighties cassette tapes.”

She slapped him on the shoulder. “See? There’s my normal guy.”

“Your version of normal is woefully odd.”

She stuck her tongue out and sauntered past him inside. His foyer was the size of her entire apartment with about an acre of glossy white marble with gray veining. There was a pedestal table in the middle of the space with a vase of flowers. She touched a petal. Fresh flowers.

There was no mail piled up, no magazines scattered about, no jumble of keys and coupons. The living room stretched out in front of her. One open space with a wall of windows. Of *course* he had a killer view.

They were part of the city skyline from here.

The furniture was dark, leather, and arranged just so. He had a bar stocked with every top shelf liquor known to man. A marble fireplace. Bookcases housed books and framed photos. Everything was neat, tidy, and maybe a little cold. There were no pillows or blankets on the couch. The white rug under the sitting area was thick as a cloud. The walls were dark—a contrast, she imagined to the white of the floor and the sunshine that would pour through that wall of windows.

He followed her as she wandered into the kitchen. It was a long galley style. Sleek, modern, and most likely never used. The island that divided the kitchen from the dining area stretched on forever. She could have climbed up on the granite

and stretched her arms over her head and still not been able to touch both ends.

The dining table was just as long. Glass with metal legs. High-backed chairs ringed the table, ready and waiting for a party of twelve. There were more shelves in here. More photos. Some art, carefully colorful.

She glanced down the hallway but decided to stick to the main living space. In this dress, they wouldn't make it out of his bedroom until morning.

It was cool, beautiful, just like him. It also felt a little empty, a little lonely. And she wondered if that too reflected the owner.

Aiden was watching her, leaning against the island and working his tie free. He slid the silk out of his collar and coiled the tie on the counter.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“It's very beautiful.” And it was. A showplace. She did not want to know what it was worth. Real estate in this part of the city was beyond astronomical. It would have been cheaper to build a summer home on the moon. But there was a lifelessness here, and it made her sad. The idea of Aiden coming home alone to the cool museum-quality beauty... She wondered if he felt at home here, if he ever relaxed here.

“Thank you,” he said.

She picked up a gilt frame. It was a photo of Aiden's father behind his desk in an office, the city skyline outside the windows behind him.

“Tell me about your family,” she said.

“Why?”

“So, I know what I'm getting myself into with this gala thing this week.”

Chapter Forty-Three

Aiden wasn't one to count on luck. Luck, as far as he was concerned, was a fickle bitch. Timing, preparation, and aggression usually worked more in his favor. But for some reason, that fickle bitch was smiling on him today. Frankie was in his home, making plans to step into his world.

All in.

“This is your first time in my place, and you want to talk about my family?” Aiden teased, stripping out of his jacket. He saw the hungry look in her eyes and reveled in it. Wanting, being wanted, with that intensity was new. And humbling.

“Would you like a drink?” he offered.

“Do you want one?” she countered.

“How about water for us both?”

She followed him into the kitchen and snoopied through his refrigerator and pantry.

“Well, there's some actual food in here,” she said, sounding surprised.

“What did you expect? Bags of blood?”

“Ha, vampire diet. No, I mean, I wasn't sure if you actually *lived* here.”

He eyed her as he filled two tumblers with ice.

“Of course, I live here.”

“Oh, I don't doubt you sleep here. But do you put your feet up on the coffee table? Do you make eggs at midnight on this fifty-burner stove? Do you pay bills and swear at the TV when the Giants are playing?”

Her definition of living fascinated him.

“I sleep here. I work here. Occasionally I eat here. I can't recall ever putting my feet on the coffee table, but that might

be because the designer referred to it as ‘priceless and one-of-a-kind,’ so that kind of billing most likely kept my feet on the floor.”

“Do you lounge around in suits all the time, sitting up straight and counting gold coins?”

He laughed and handed her a glass of water. “Your mind is a fascination.”

She wandered back into the living room and flopped down on the sofa. She wriggled onto the cushion and then pulled her feet under her.

“This isn’t the most comfortable piece,” she complained.

“Your couch tries to swallow its victims whole,” he pointed out.

She studied him over the rim of her glass and sighed. “You’re just so perfect I want to mess you up and see what happens.”

“What’s wrong with me as I am?” Aiden asked, amused.

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

He sat next to her and tugged her feet into his lap.

“I’m trying to wrap my brain around how we can fit together. Because if you think I’m going to prance around in sexy dresses and four-inch heels with my hair and nails done when we’re home alone, you’re going to be seriously disappointed.”

He shook his head. When he envisioned her here, it wasn’t in designer apparel and flawless makeup. He pictured her in sweats and bare feet, eating takeout off the coffee table. Or laying her head in his lap while they read or watched TV. Or naked and sighing in his bed.

“Are you trying to ask what my expectations of you are?”

She nodded, looking apprehensive.

“Franchesca,” he reached out to tuck her hair behind her ear. “I want you to be you. I enjoy spending time with you. Not some carbon copy of every other celebutante in the borough.”

“I can’t believe you know that word,” she joked. But she was rubbing her cheek against his palm, and he saw the nerves in her beautiful face.

“Tonight was fun. And not just the limo. I enjoyed taking you out, showing you off, and spending time with people who are important to us both.”

She nodded, looking wary.

“But I also love being with you in Brooklyn. Exploring those hole-in-the-wall restaurants, sleeping in your drafty fire trap. Hanging out with your brothers. I like all that, too.”

“You’ll still do those things even though I’ve crossed the river?”

“Sweetheart, did you think I’d stop giving just because you started?”

He didn’t know who was more surprised when her eyes clouded with tears. “Hey, what is it?” he asked, pulling her into his lap.

She shook her head, curls shivering from the movement.

“I feel awful. I want to say that I was only trying to protect myself, but I think part of me wanted to make you eat your words about all this being temporary. I wanted to prove to you that I’d be important to you.”

“Well, mission accomplished. Franchesca, you’re very important to me. Don’t doubt that.”

“I feel like I Aided you.”

He laughed softly. “I don’t know what that means.”

“It means I know that you get off on the chase, and I made you work hard. I think I manipulated you whether I consciously meant to or not.”

“And you think now that the chase is over I won’t be interested,” he guessed.

“I don’t know. I just, it’s not like me to hurt someone on purpose. And I’m sorry, Aiden. I truly am. The more I get to know you, the more clear it is that you’re... great.”

“Great?”

She nodded, blinking back the tears. “Really great.”

“This doesn’t have to be complicated, Franchesca.”

She stiffened in his arms.

“Hang on. Before you get all fired up. I mean, *all in* doesn’t have to be complicated. You don’t want to give up your life just to be with me, and I want you to know I wouldn’t ask you to.”

“I don’t know if I’m going to fit in on your side of the tracks.”

“If I tell you a secret, do you promise it goes no further than this apartment?”

“Don’t you dare call this sublime chunk of Manhattan real estate an apartment. And yes, I promise.”

“I don’t exactly fit in either.”

“I call bullshit. Your family basically built this side of the tracks.”

“Very true. My great-grandfather blackmailed and swindled his way into a bank presidency, and the Kilbourn story began there. His son, my grandfather, added to the family fortune by leaving his wife and two children for a very wealthy heiress whose father needed someone to step in and run his business. My father continued the great Kilbourn legacy by cheating his way to a business degree at Yale and then bribing admissions with a very hefty donation to accept his son with less than stellar grades and a few scrapes with his private school disciplinary committee.”

“You? A bad boy? We’re going to need to circle back to this.”

He smiled at her, shifting her in his lap. “I wouldn’t call the Kilbourns sociopaths. But I would say we prioritize business over all else. But in our case, family is inextricably tied to business. For my father, it was the amassing of trophies and successes. For me, it’s the hunt, the chase, the kill. Then there’s everyone else. I have friends, Chip included, who don’t actually work. Their money is managed for them, and they just

live. They marry beautiful women and have beautiful families and extend the family line.”

“But you all have money,” she reminded him.

“Yes, but my point is, I feel like I don’t fit in. I don’t want to make small talk with someone over their new race horse or the Van Gogh they got at auction. I don’t want to compare portfolios or fuck a stable full of women. I don’t want to party like I’m a 20-year-old with my father’s black American Express card. I want to win.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because I don’t know how to do anything else.”

*Kilbourn Holdings announces heir to the throne is dating
Brooklyn student*

*Five things you need to know about Aiden Kilbourn's Brooklyn
girlfriend*

*Meet the Parents: Aiden Kilbourn introduces family to new
girlfriend*

Chapter Forty-Four

“This is way too *Pretty Woman*,” Frankie complained inside Aiden’s closet.

“Are you calling yourself a prostitute?” he asked from the bedroom.

Frankie pulled the dress on and studied herself in the full-length mirror. She hadn’t had time to go shopping for a gala-worthy dress... or to even find out what gala-worthy dress code was. So, it had fallen on Aiden to find her the right dress.

It was midnight blue with elbow length lace sleeves and yards of skirt. And, of course, her size. “Am I going to freeze my ass off there tonight?” she asked.

Aiden poked his head in the doorway and stared appreciatively at her in the mirror. “Freeze your ass off?” he repeated.

“Yeah, like you know how some restaurants are drafty, so you dress warmer if you’re going there? Or certain offices have the heat blasting, so you make sure you can strip down and not sweat to death?”

He laughed. “Your practicality is refreshing. I once escorted a woman who chose a dress she couldn’t actually sit in. The ride to the event was quite memorable.” He leaned back against the shelving, keeping his body ramrod straight imitating the woman’s position.

“She did not!”

“I swear she did. Then she smiled for the cameras for twenty minutes and complained the entire rest of the evening and refused to eat.”

“Ugh. What’s the point of wearing something if you can’t sit down or, worse, eat in it?”

“I promise to always pick clothes for you that allow for both.”

“My hero. So, what do you think?” Frankie asked turning from side to side.

Aiden came up behind her and zipped her up in the back.

“Oh, that’s better.”

Her waist was slimmer, her breasts were supported and the full skirt floated around her. “Damn good job, Kilbourn.”

“Can I pick ‘em, or can I pick ‘em?”

“Mmm, the way you’re looking at me I’m wondering if you’re not just talking about the dress.”

He leaned in and dropped a kiss to her shoulder.

“Isn’t this the part where you shower me with a quarter-million dollars’-worth of jewelry?” she joked.

“As a matter of fact,” he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small jewelry case.

“Get the fuck out. Don’t come near me with whatever that is. I’ll lose it or get robbed or break out in a rash. This skin isn’t used to platinum.”

She backed into the corner of the closet warding him off with her hands.

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“You have expensive jewelry in that case, and it’s my right to refuse it. I’ll be a nervous wreck with something sparkly you rented for the evening.”

He opened the case.

“Oh,” she breathed, reaching out. “If you shut the case on my fingers, I’m going to punch you in your very sexy nose.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. Do you like them?”

It was a pair of chandelier earrings. They weren’t dripping in diamonds but rather a rainbow of glittering gemstones.”

“Aide, they’re beautiful.”

He handed them over one at a time, and she slipped them into her ear lobes.

“They’re not rented. I saw them and thought of you. Colorful. Interesting. Warm.”

“Oh, sweet baby Jesus, Aide! Exactly how much of your money am I wearing right now?” she asked, admiring the glitter in the mirror.

“Are we going to do this every time I buy you something?”

“Yes. Unless it’s a candy bar or a slice of pizza or any other item under ten dollars.”

“Then I guess we’d both better get used to this conversation. Also, those were some specific food references. Do I need to feed you before we leave?”

“Definitely.”

“I’ll have something sent up.” He paused in the doorway. “Or I can make you a grilled cheese.”

She perked up. “A grilled cheese?”

He nodded.

“That would be perfect.”

He turned to leave again, but she called him back.

“Hey, Aide? Thank you.”

He gave her that warm smile that crinkled his eyes, the one that she was starting to think he reserved just for her.

She turned back to her reflection and took a deep breath, barely recognizing herself. Money really did buy style.

“Who does this on a Thursday night?” she murmured to her reflection in the mirror.

* * *

Ever since Kilbourn Holdings had released a PR statement announcing that Aiden was dating business student and small business professional Franchesca Baranski, the attention had noticeably ramped up.

Brenda had to screen Frankie's calls at work, and her email and social media accounts had blown up with interview and friend requests. She'd actually spotted a photographer outside her building twice, but her neighborhood wasn't exactly friendly to lurkers. One of her neighbors had called the cops, and the problem disappeared.

But none of it had prepared Frankie for the frenzy outside The Lighthouse at Chelsea Piers.

There was a literal red carpet under her feet. And Aiden's arm was wrapped around her waist, anchoring her to the spectacle of camera flashes and shouted questions.

"Aiden, what's your connection to Big Apple Literacy?"

"My mother has been a long-time supporter of the cause. And our family is proud to support its educational initiatives," Aiden answered smoothly.

"Franchesca, who are you wearing?"

She looked down at her dress. "I don't know. Whoever Aiden picked out for me."

The crowd of photographers chuckled like she was a stand-up comedian in the middle of a routine.

"Carolina Herrera," Aiden filled in. "Now, if you'll excuse us." He towed Frankie away from the call line.

"There. That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Am I supposed to answer them when they ask questions?" Frankie frowned.

"You're supposed to do whatever you want to. I'm not going to treat you like a puppet and feed you sound-bites."

"But you'll tell me if there's something I shouldn't say?"

"It's always safe to avoid the word 'fuck' on the red carpet."

She rolled her eyes. "You're so helpful."

She accepted his arm with a death grip. If she didn't fall off of these sexy as hell icepicks and take a header into an ice sculpture or billionaire, it would be a damn miracle.

Miraculously, they made it inside unscathed. Aiden helped her straighten her skirt for her. “Ready?”

She looked beyond him to the crowd. At least she wasn’t underdressed.

“Yeah, let’s do this,” she said.

“You’re going to be great. You might even have the smallest bit of fun.”

She didn’t believe a second of his pep talk, but Frankie appreciated it all the same.

“Yeah, you too.”

“And when this is all over, I’ll take you through any drive-thru you want, and we’ll eat in pajamas at home.”

“Deal.”

She recognized Ferris Kilbourn from his photo at Aiden’s. He skimmed in just under six feet tall, and his Irish roots showed in the red hair going silver that ringed his head. He wore a tux and seemed as comfortable in it as if he were wearing sweats. He had his arm around a skeletal platinum blonde who had brushed a little too closely to having too much work done. She was dressed in gold and decorated in diamonds.

“My father and step-mother,” Aiden whispered in her ear as they approached.

“Aren’t they getting a divorce?”

“Appearances.”

“Of course.”

“Dad, Jacqueline,” Aiden greeted them. He offered a hug for his father and a stately kiss on the cheek to his stepmother. “This is Franchesca or Frankie if you prefer.”

“Frankie?” Jacqueline eyed her like a wad of chewing gum someone spit on the sidewalk. “Isn’t that... cute?” Her tone made it clear she found it anything but cute.

Frankie ignored the dig. It was hard to take offense to a woman who had been traded in on a younger, hipper model.

Frankie offered her hand to Ferris. "It's nice to meet you."

"I've heard my son has been smiling for weeks now," Ferris said amicably. "I assume we have you to thank for that." Instead of shaking her hand, he lifted her knuckles to his lips.

Oh. Okay, so this is the 1800s.

"I'm sure there are other factors at play," Frankie guessed.

Aiden slid his arm around her waist. "Not at all. Ah, and this lovely woman is my mother," he said, offering Frankie up to a lovely brunette in hunter green.

"Cecily, Franchesca. Franchesca, Cecily."

Cecily was a stunning woman in her early sixties. Her face had yet to show signs of an intervention by scalpel. She was tall, regal, and lovely.

"Franchesca. I've heard so much about you. May I call you Frankie?"

If Jacqueline was the frosty Arctic air, Cecily was a Bahama breeze.

Frankie accepted the woman's hand and shook it.

"And I believe you already know my half-brother," Aiden said.

Frankie could hear the tension in Aiden's voice and slid her hand up under his jacket. She wouldn't be breaking any noses this evening and embarrassing him. At least not without provocation.

Elliot sauntered into the group, hands in his pockets and an insolent expression on his face.

"Franchesca," he said, running a finger down the bridge of his ever so slightly crooked nose. "So nice to see you again."

"Hey, Elliot. How's the nose?"

She felt Aiden stiffen next to her, but then he covered his laugh with a cough.

"He broke it playing polo," Jacqueline announced firmly. Either she was an idiot or an idiot in denial.

Frankie wasn't sure who started it, but soon the Kilbourns were all laughing. Not the genuine belly laugh that was contagious around her parents' dinner table but the stifled, embarrassed "I know something you don't know" chuckle she imagined was probably common on this side of the East River.

The Kilbourns were a remarkably civilized lot for people who had done so much damage to each other. It seemed as though everyone knew their particular role and was secure in it.

"And you thought my family was weird," she whispered in Aiden's ear.

"Why don't we find our way to the silent auction?" Ferris said jovially, offering an arm to both his ex-wife and his soon-to-be ex-wife.

Chapter Forty-Five

Franchesca let Mr. Fast Feet drag her on another lap of the dance floor. The man was in his early thirties and very energetic. He also had an ulterior motive. If he said, “I think Aiden would really be interested in hearing about this investment opportunity,” one more time, she was going to stomp on his fast feet and go find some tequila.

“You know, I can’t help but think Aiden would—”

Frankie brought the dance to a halt. “Yeah, you’re not being even remotely subtle. You want to talk to Aiden about something to invest his gazillions in, go to him. Don’t go through me.”

Fast Feet looked chagrined. “It’s a really exciting opportunity ___”

“Dude, seriously.” Frankie scanned the crowd for Aiden, and when his gaze met hers, she waved him over. “Tell him what’s in it for him and why you think he’d like... whatever it is you’re doing,” she instructed. “If he says no, I’ll buy you a drink. Just, for the love of God, stop talking to me about it.”

Aiden arrived at her side.

“Aiden, Mr. Uh...”

“Finch. Robert Finch,” Fast Feet supplied.

“Right, Finch has something he wants to talk to you about.” She winked at Aiden as she sailed in the direction of the bar. She didn’t know if tequila was classy to order at a swanky event like this.

“What can I get for you, miss?” the bartender asked, all professional politeness.

“Listen, I’m new here. Is there a way that I can order a shot of tequila and not have half of this crowd gossiping about me?”

His smile warmed a few degrees. “How about I put it in a rocks glass, and you pretend it’s top shelf scotch?”

“Sold,” she said, slapping the bar. She slid a five-dollar bill into his tip glass.

He made a show of tossing the bottle over his shoulder and catching it behind his back. Bartender flirtations.

Frankie watched appreciatively and hid her smile when she saw he was catching the eye of a few other ladies in the crowd. There was always someone drunk enough to screw the staff in a closet or a restroom before the end of the night at events like these.

Frankie had been propositioned often enough at the events she worked to accept it as par for the course. Unless those propositions got a little too aggressive.

She accepted the glass that he handed her with a flourish. Clearly a double pour. And gave him a smile and a nod as she left him to his new admirers.

The event felt like someone’s wedding. White and crystal and sterling silver everywhere. A winter wonderland, she believed the theme was. It had to be \$500 a head, which made her wonder exactly how many people here would have been happier to cough up \$250 just for the privilege of staying home.

But she supposed being seen supporting a worthy cause was part and parcel of the responsibility of wealth. Aiden and Fast Feet were still chatting near the ice sculpture on the canapés buffet.

A suit sidled up next to her. “So, Franchesca, when are you going to apologize for breaking my nose?”

Elliot might have been trying to be charming, but he came across like a slug oozing slime. He was blond like his mother with finer features than Aiden. He was pretty, not handsome. His presence wasn’t commanding like Aiden’s either. It was more of an afterthought.

“Maybe when you apologize for committing a felony and nearly ruining my best friend’s wedding.”

He gave an elegant shrug of his slim shoulders. “No harm, no foul.”

She swung around to face him. “Lots of harm, lots of foul,” she countered.

“I came over to clear the air. Now that you’re part of the family, we can’t have any bad blood between us. Now, can we?”

“I’m completely fine with lots of bad blood.”

He laughed, but it sounded forced to her ears.

“I think you should dance with me,” Elliot announced.

“Did you get a concussion when I hit you?”

“It’s all about putting on a show.” He held his arm out toward the dance floor. “Don’t you want to prove that you can play the game?”

Frankie downed the rest of her tequila and pointed the empty glass at the bartender. He gave her a nod and started pouring.

“One dance, and you will not grab my ass or piss me off or abduct anyone, got it?”

“My word,” he said, crossing his heart.

He led her onto the floor and settled his hand at her waist. She didn’t particularly care for it. There was only one Kilbourn whose hands she wanted anywhere near her.

She followed his lead, grateful for the three weeks of remedial ballroom dance her high school gym class had forced on students every year.

“So, what do you want, Elliot?”

“Maybe I just want to spend time with my brother’s girlfriend.”

“Or maybe you want something. I like people who cut to the chase and don’t waste my time with flattery or threats.”

“I need something from my brother.”

“So ask him,” Frankie said.

“It’s not that simple,” Elliot argued.

“Yes. It is.”

“I need a favor that’s he’s not going to want to give to me.”

“So why are you dancing with me? You going to twirl me into a van and chloroform me until he agrees to whatever you want?”

“Where did my brother find you?”

“Dancing like a stripper at an engagement party.”

Elliot laughed. “You’re refreshing.”

“And you’re stifling me. Don’t use me to get to Aiden. Be a big boy and talk to your brother.”

The song ended, and Frankie abandoned Elliot in the middle of the floor and headed for the bar. She made it within six feet before she was intercepted.

“Franchesca, my dear. There you are,” Ferris Kilbourn said. “Allow me. A glass of wine for the lady,” he said chivalrously.

Frankie stared mournfully at her two fingers of tequila sitting behind the bar.

“Walk with me, will you?” Ferris suggested, handing her a glass of white wine.

“Certainly.”

She followed him to the edge of the room where a wall of windows and doors overlooked a stone courtyard. He held out a chair for her at an empty table.

Grateful to get off her feet, Frankie flopped down and kicked off her shoes under the table.

“I wanted to make sure you didn’t take offense to the concerns I voiced to Aiden,” Ferris began.

Frankie caught on to his game quickly.

“Concerns?” she said innocently.

“I’m sure you’re a lovely girl,” Ferris began.

“I’m an even better woman.” Frankie didn’t like it when older men tried to put her in the same category as her thirteen-year-old cousin who was obsessed with Harry Styles and Snapchat.

“Of course, of course. What I mean to say is I don’t want you to take it personally that I believe you don’t quite fit into our world. In fact, I’d be very surprised if you didn’t agree with me.” There was no malice behind his words. Manipulation, yes. But no real desire to harm.

She’d spent forty fucking minutes on her makeup for this. She could have troweled on blue eye shadow and bronzer in five minutes instead since they saw her for who she was. A *girl* from Brooklyn with student loans and no portfolio.

“Then I guess you’d be surprised. I’m not on my way out like some other family members,” Frankie said, staring pointedly across the room at Jacqueline.

Ferris looked flustered for a moment.

There, didn’t expect that, did you smarty pants?

He’d dropped the Aiden bomb knowing full well his son wouldn’t have discussed that particular conversation with her. But she’d gotten a piece back.

“I really don’t think I’m the right person to be having this conversation with. If you’re so concerned with your family, maybe you should plan to stick around.”

Ferris sighed and lifted his glass. “I’ve given enough. It’s my time to enjoy. My father never got the chance. Heart attack in his office at age 71. I don’t want that to be me.”

Frankie turned in her chair to face him. “Ferris, I don’t think anyone would begrudge you your chance to do what you want. But don’t try to dictate Aiden’s life. He’s your son, not just a business partner. Trust his judgment and not only when it comes to broods from Brooklyn.”

He sighed. “I don’t expect you to understand the complications of our family,” Ferris said. “Our business, our family, are inextricably intertwined. There is no one without the other. My son has a responsibility to make choices that will benefit both our company and our family.” Again, his words lacked spite. He was simply a man sharing his truth.

“And which one of those don’t I fit?” Frankie asked.

“Do you even want to fit?” Ferris asked, turning it back on her.

“I want to see Aiden happy.”

“Sometimes, happiness is a luxury that no one can afford.”

Frankie smirked. “I’m pretty certain the Kilbourns could find a way to pay for it.” If Aiden’s deep pockets were any indication of the family coffers, they could all quit working to live in a multi-million-dollar commune in Dubai without ever feeling the pinch.

“I’m only trying to save you some time and heartache,” he added. “I don’t see how a woman who could give a damn about appearances would willingly fit into this world. There are expectations that we must live up to.”

“Would your world really come crumbling down if the girlfriend of your CEO didn’t spend five hundred dollars on her hair and nails every two weeks? Would anyone really care if I show up to a family meal in \$25 Target jeans?”

“Frankly, yes,” he laughed. “There are certain expectations that we uphold. To the Kilbourns, work comes first. I missed out on most birthdays, baseball games, even some Christmases. It was the price I had to pay. But I built something that they can have long after I’m gone. Aiden will do the same. And he’ll need a woman by his side who understands that, accepts that, embraces that.”

“Did you ever think that maybe Aiden would rather have a piece of you instead of a legacy?” Frankie suggested. “Maybe he’d rather have dinner with you than you pulling his strings from a goddamn yacht because now he has to suffer for the next twenty years of his life while you finally live.”

“You think I’m very selfish, don’t you?” Ferris asked.

Frankie put her glass down. “I don’t know you well enough to judge you yet.”

“Touché.”

“Thank you. For the record, I don’t care who you’re divorcing or where you’re sailing. But if you care for your son more than

you do a bunch of zeroes and buildings and whatever the hell else, don't lock him in the same prison you just busted out of."

Ferris eyed her. "I may have underestimated you."

"Usually the case. But that makes it easier to win."

Ferris raised his glass to her. "Maybe you would fit in."

Frankie tapped her glass to his. "For future reference, I prefer tequila to wine."

"Franchesca." Just the sound of Aiden's voice was like a caress on her skin.

She rose, forgetting that she'd kicked off her shoes under the table. "Oops. Sorry. Too many dances," she said, fishing the heels out from under the table.

He tugged her into his side. "Are we having a private meeting?" his voice was guarded.

"Your dad and I were just discussing our beverage preferences."

Ferris rose. "Franchesca, it was... refreshing talking to you."

"Illuminating," Frankie agreed. They watched him walk away, joining a group of men clustered around a painting of what looked like a roman orgy.

"Was my father bothering you?"

"Not really. He's quite polite with the 'you're not good enough for my son' spiel."

Aiden's eyes narrowed. "I'll speak to him."

She shook her head. "You don't need to. I told him he better get used to me because I've been poking holes in our condoms for weeks, and it's only a matter of time before he has a grandchild to deal with."

His booming laugh drew the attention of guests nearby. "Are you ready to go?" Aiden asked, lifting his fingers to toy with one of her earrings.

"God, yes. My feet hurt, and if one more idiot tries to get to you through me, I'm going to break a bottle of Cristal over

their smug face.”

“Give me a head’s up so I can have my attorney on call.”

“Why can’t people just talk to you and ask you for shit?”
Frankie muttered.

“Because I’m very powerful and intimidating. And because they see that you have influence over me.”

“Can I influence you to pick up some Thai food on the way home?”

Chapter Forty-Six

“Was it a blood bath?” Oscar asked, handing Aiden a bottle of headache meds as he passed his desk.

“Worse,” Aiden said, fighting the pain that bloomed behind his eyes. Worthington Financial, an accounting consulting firm, hadn’t taken his CIO candidate search criteria seriously and had presented him with the same old, white guys. It had pissed him off enough that Aiden pulled a team off of the sale they were neck-deep in so they could dissect the corporate structure.

With a little digging and some precisely applied pressure, Aiden discovered a rotting culture of harassment and misogynistic behavior. He’d fired seven of the company’s top managers within half an hour. With the newly departed’s threats of lawsuits still echoing in his ears, Aiden had called a company-wide meeting and announced an immediate restructuring. Two administrative assistants had burst into tears while thanking him. And a junior vice president—exactly the kind of person he wanted for chief information officer—rescinded the resignation that she’d tendered two days ago.

He ordered an independent HR consultant into the wreckage to deal with the internal fallout and warned Kilbourn Holdings lawyers that there was a situation.

“Sacked them all?” Oscar asked. The man loved two things in life. His partner Lewis and juicy corporate gossip.

“Most of them.” Aiden noted the time on his watch. His two afternoon meetings had been juggled into a hasty conference in the car and a late dinner, during which his headache prevented him from eating anything. “It’s late. You should go before Lewis comes looking for you.”

“I’m meeting him for drinks to celebrate another week of his mother not moving in with us.” Oscar pulled his coat from the rack and slid into it. “Don’t work too late,” he reminded

Aiden. “I’m sure there’s a Brooklyn girl waiting for you somewhere.”

Just the thought of Frankie lifted Aiden’s spirits. She had a catering gig tonight. One of her last, so they wouldn’t see each other. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t call her.

“Go home, Oscar,” he said again. “And first thing in the morning, you can help start the search for all new senior management. Maybe we can cherry-pick from our own backyard first.”

“Of course. I’ll also be happy to make sure the ones you sacked are unemployable anywhere else.”

“You’re a mean Frenchman, aren’t you?” Aiden said, with a weak smile.

“The meanest.”

Aiden watched Oscar saunter toward the elevators. The rest of the offices were dark. It was nearly nine, and Aiden still had a few hours of work to catch up on. If he could get ahead of the headache... and stop thinking about the events of the day.

Two of the men had cried when he’d pulled the trigger. None were innocent, but there was something unsatisfying about punishing someone who felt like a victim.

“I have two kids in college,” one had pleaded.

“Then you shouldn’t have ordered HR to ignore the complaints against you and your colleagues,” Aiden had said briskly. He was efficient and cold. Merciless. It was more intimidating that way when he treated people like gnats who mattered too little to bother getting angry over.

On the inside, he was anything but cold. These men had created a work environment so hostile that it was a wonder they had any employees left.

It was the right decision. Perhaps a bit abrupt, but it would set the tone for the coming year. They were a new acquisition, and this was the fastest way to send the message that Kilbourn Holdings would not tolerate anything less than equality, anything other than fairness.

Having to defend his decision to his father on the phone hadn't helped.

Ferris agreed that "something" should have been done, just not now and certainly not by making such a statement. "We're already dealing with enough transition," he'd argued. "I don't see why you would have taken on a project of this magnitude that will only take your attention away from more important things."

In other words, Ferris felt like the women should have toughed it out a little longer, at least until he was on his boat smoking a cigar without a care in sight.

Aiden not-so-respectfully disagreed and said as much.

He wanted to go home. Scratch that. He wanted to go to Francesca's and lay next to her in bed until everything felt right again.

"Well, if it isn't my all-work-and-no-play brother," Elliot said snidely from Aiden's doorway.

And just like that, Aiden's night got worse.

"Look who stopped avoiding my calls." Since their father had made his decision to step down, Aiden had been trying to schedule a meeting with Elliot. And, until tonight, his half-brother had been avoiding him.

He was dressed for going out. A blazer with velvet lapels and a jaunty plaid bow tie. He looked like an overindulged idiot.

Elliot brushed a speck of lint from his shoulder. "Sorry, *boss*. I've been busy."

"Doing what, exactly?" Ferris had allowed Elliot to hold a title and kept an office available to him should his brother show any signs of interest in the business.

Elliot slunk into the chair in front of Aiden's desk and propped his shiny loafers on the surface. "A little of this. A little of that."

"Let's cut to the chase. From now on, you're required to be a contributing member of this family, of this business."

Elliot sneered at him. “You want more work out of me? I want a bigger office and an assistant. I want to have a say in operations.”

Aiden remained impassive. “You *earn* those things by proving yourself. Not by having the right last name.”

“Fine. Then buy me out.” Elliot crossed his arms smugly. He named a figure that was far too precise to have come from thin air. “That’s the price to get me out of your hair.”

“That is not an option.” As much as Aiden would love to write the bastard a check right here and now, he’d promised his father a year. An entire year to give Elliot the chance to prove himself and fail.

“Then I’ll sell them to someone else.”

Aiden stared his brother down. “You’d better think long and hard before you do anything irreversible. Kilbourns hold the majority. If you sell off your percentage, that would no longer be the case. It would put the company at risk.”

Elliot shrugged, but Aiden saw the beads of sweat on his forehead. Elliot was many things, most of them terrible and offensive, but his desire to be recognized as a valuable Kilbourn came first at all times. If something had him scared enough to sell off his only piece of the pie, it must be quite the threat indeed. It made Aiden almost curious enough to start digging.

“If you want to continue to see a paycheck, you’re going to have to do something to earn it. I don’t care if that means you’re making coffee in the breakroom or you’re emptying trashcans in the conference room. You will contribute, or you won’t have a place here.”

“You’ve been dying to get rid of me since I was born,” Elliot whined. “Now’s your chance.”

“One year. You know where this company is going. What the future looks like. You’d be an idiot to sell now.”

“Some of us don’t have a choice,” Elliot hissed, he dropped his feet to the floor and leaned forward in his chair. “Some of

us were never the favorite. Some of us had to settle for scraps. And some of us do what we have to in order to survive.”

“You’ve been handed everything you ever wanted,” Aiden pointed out.

“Not everything. And the rest was never enough. So you’re going to buy me out, or I’m going to that pretty little girlfriend of yours and tell her exactly why your friend Chip broke her best friend’s heart all those years ago.”

Aiden stilled in his seat. “What makes you think I had anything to do with that?”

Elliot sneered. “You’ve been ignoring my existence my entire life. I overheard a lot of things in that house.”

Aiden’s hand tightened on the pen, but he kept his face impassive, disinterested.

“Do you really think that information would have any effect on my relationship with Franchesca now? If you’ll recall, Chip and Pruitt are happily married now. No thanks to you.”

“Ah, but imagine how Franchesca would feel knowing that you were the reason her best friend in the whole world was nearly hospitalized? There were plenty of rumors back then about how hard she took the breakup. Chip didn’t know what you were doing, but I did. I recognize manipulation when I see it. How do you think he would feel knowing you orchestrated his breakup?”

“You have nothing. I’m offering you the chance to finally be a real part of this company.” Aiden kept his words clipped.

“You have a week to decide. Buy me out, or I’m spilling your dirty little secrets to Franchesca.” With that, Elliot stormed from Aiden’s office in a fit of temper.

And now Aiden’s headache was full blown. He glanced at the blinking voicemail indicator, at the dozens of new messages in his inbox, at the neat stack of contracts awaiting his signature and rose.

By the time he got there, Frankie would likely be getting home. He wanted her. Needed her. He called his car service.

“We’re going to Brooklyn.”

* * *

Aiden closed his eyes in the car and let the dark and the quiet relax him. By the time he got to Frankie’s front steps, it was ten, and he just wanted to lay down on that big bed, wrap his arms around her and sleep.

He pressed the buzzer for Frankie’s apartment and wasn’t surprised at the lack of response. He pressed the buzzer for Mrs. Gurgevich in 2A.

“Sorry to bother you so late, Mrs. Gurgevich,” Aiden said when she answered. The world was spinning in halos and nauseating visual disturbances around him.

“That girl hasn’t given you a key yet?” she grumbled.

“Not yet, ma’am.”

“Have you tried flowers?” she suggested through the crackle of the speaker.

“I’ll try that,” he agreed.

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you.” She buzzed him inside, and Aiden trudged up the three flights of stairs praying that his head didn’t fall from his shoulders. He’d sit in the hallway and wait for her. He should have texted her, but part of him wanted to test her. Would she be happy to see him? Annoyed? He needed to know before he went any farther. He could feel himself getting pulled into her. And he needed to know exactly how far she was comfortable going before he could give any more pieces of himself.

The door across the hallway cracked open. “Oh, it’s you. I thought it was Mr. McMitchem down the hall stealing my paper,” Mrs. Chu said, glancing down to make sure her decoy newspaper was still there.

Aiden caught a glimpse of pink house coat and plush puppy slipper through the crack in the door.

“Sorry for startling you, Mrs. Chu. I’m just waiting for Franchesca—ah, Frankie—to get home.”

“If you’re lurking out here, Mr. McMitchem will get scared off. Here.” She disappeared for a moment and then returned, shoving a key at him. “We have a spare.”

He needed to get Franchesca into a building with better security. Her neighbors would happily welcome an AK-47 wielding bank robbery suspect inside.

But it would be more comfortable than sitting in the hall. He unlocked the door, returned the key, and went inside.

He was always struck by the contrast between his home and Frankie’s. Hers screamed lived in, if somewhat messily. There were dishes in the sink, mail on the table, and a lump of clean laundry on the floor just outside the kitchen as if she’d dug through the basket in search of a particular piece in a hurry.

With a ridiculous amount of gratitude, he noted she’d washed a pair of his sweats and a t-shirt. He changed out of his suit, thought about raiding her cabinets, and decided his headache would be better off with rest over food. He lay down on the couch and tried to put his brain to work on the problem at hand. He knew how it would go if Frankie knew what he’d done. How he’d pushed Chip into breaking up with Pruitt. And from comments Frankie had made, the breakup had been devastating to Pruitt.

How was he going to fix it all? It was his last thought as the dark and the quiet enveloped him.

Chapter Forty-Seven

He was sprawled on her couch, a pillow over his face, his t-shirt showing a sexy peek of abs above the low waistband of his sweatpants.

Frankie would have screamed when she walked through her front door, but there was no mistaking that gorgeous, god-like body for some stranger who broke in to rob and rape her. Aiden Kilbourn was her mysterious guest, and judging by his bleary eyes, he wasn't here for sex.

"Hey," she said softly.

He winced at the light and closed his eyes again. "Hi," he said, his voice raspy. "What time is it?"

"Not quite 11."

"Sorry for breaking in."

"Seeing as how my door's still intact, I imagine Mrs. Chu let you in," Frankie said, brushing her fingers through his thick dark hair.

"You need better security." He nuzzled his cheek against her hand, and Frankie melted on the inside.

"Headache?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Hang in there, tough guy." She pressed a gentle kiss to his forehead and headed into the kitchen. She returned with a glass of water and two caplets. "I don't have any of Pru's good prescription stuff, but this is over-the-counter."

He worked his way into a seated position, and she could see that it pained him.

"How was your night?" he asked her, downing the pills and water.

His hair was disheveled from sleep, the ends curled softly at his neck. How was it that arrogant and demanding Aiden could

make her blood sing, but vulnerable, sweet Aiden turned her cold steely heart to mush?

“It was fine,” she lied. It hadn’t been fine. It had been a pain in the ass. And a bit of a culture shock to go from attending a huge charity function one week to working one the next. She felt as if she didn’t belong in either place now.

Perhaps she was two people too. Franchesca the entrepreneur’s girlfriend and Frankie the grad student from Brooklyn who sprinkled the f-bomb like fairy dust.

“How was your day?”

He pressed his fingers to his eyes, but she could still see the grimace.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.” She took his empty glass back to the kitchen and opened a can of Coke.

“I do. That’s why I came here.” Now he sounded just the slightest bit surly, and she found it endearing.

She handed the can over. “Here. Let’s double up on the caffeine.”

“Thanks,” he murmured.

“Come on,” she said, gently tugging on his hand. “Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?”

“To bed.”

“I don’t know how well I’ll perform—”

“To sleep, Aide. Just to sleep. I promise not to jump your bones until you feel better.”

“Oh.”

She led him into the bedroom and tucked him in on his side of the big king bed. His side. He had a side in her bed, a drawer in her bathroom, and it was probably time he had a key too instead of depending on the kindness/nosiness of her neighbors.

Frankie brushed a kiss to his forehead. When she tried to move away, he grabbed her hand. “Where are you going?” he asked.

“Honey, I’m going to change and then I’m coming to bed.”

“You’re probably not tired yet.”

She wasn’t. After running around like a fool for four hours feeding rude people and cleaning up their messes she was usually a little revved.

“I’m going to read in bed, right next to you.”

“Okay.” He pressed his face into his pillow.

God damn it. Vulnerable, needy Aiden was still sexy as fuck and all she wanted to do was bundle him up in a quilt and baby him until he felt better. It was making her feel weird in her chest area. Warm and... happy. She didn’t like it.

She took her time brushing her teeth and washing her face. When she came back into the bedroom in search of pajamas, he was asleep, a pillow pulled over his head.

Poor indestructible Aiden had found his limit. It must have been a very rough day indeed. She’d caught peeks at his work calendar before. He was scheduled down to the minute on most days. Aiden Kilbourn got more done before ten than most people did all day—hell, all week. But she recognized a pattern.

Work was his life, and he pushed until he burned out, and then he got back up and pushed some more.

She could admire that kind of dedication, Frankie thought as she pulled back the covers and slipped between the sheets. She settled back against the pillows with her eReader.

It was something they had in common. Sure, his work life involved him running a multi-billion-dollar conglomerate. Her work life was two part-time jobs and grad school. But still, they both had their eyes on the prize, and neither would stop at anything. Him: world domination or the corporate equivalent. Her: a master’s degree and a financially secure future.

It was funny how similar two people from opposite sides of the tracks could be.

He shifted on the mattress. Without opening his eyes, he rolled to her side, curling around her and pressing his face against

her arm.

The most eligible bachelor in the city was in her bed, holding on for dear life, and her heart was doing something funny and fluttery.

“Son of a bitch,” she murmured. She was falling for him. And this was not going to be a soft landing.

She picked up her eReader and opened the novel she’d started. At least on the page she was guaranteed a happily ever after.

Aiden Kilbourn's new girlfriend a cocktail waitress?

Just the tip: Waitress bags billionaire

Chapter Forty-Eight

Frankie swung through the crowd, a tray of pancetta crisps in her hand. It was her next to last catering gig. With the cash from tonight, she'd have almost enough to pay off her credit card that was still sobbing from Pru's wedding.

The rich were raising money for manatees or sea turtles or some kind of endangered marine life in an Upper West Side art gallery. They were scribbling checks with one hand while downing signature cocktails and stuffed mushroom caps with the other.

"These are *divine*," a woman in black sequins sighed, plucking another appetizer from Frankie's tray. "The only reason I come to these things is for the food," she confessed.

Frankie gave her a smile. "In that case, don't miss the brie toast points."

She made a lap around the far side of the room, smiling politely and pointing out the restrooms when asked. And was completely surprised when Cressida's considerable rack came into her line of vision.

Shit. She'd been hoping to remain as under-the-radar as possible. Her catering boss already had reservations about letting Aiden Kilbourn's girlfriend hand out apps to her new peers. The last thing she needed was a run-in with Pru's bridal party.

Frankie ducked behind a tall, stooped gentleman and peered around his elbow. Cressida wasn't alone. She was on the arm of groomsmen and day-trading boy genius Digby. Frankie was so surprised that she didn't notice when her cover wandered off toward the bar.

"Frankie?" Digby asked, cocking his head to one side.

Crappity crap crap.

Frankie plastered a bright smile on her face. "Hey, Digby. Cressida. It's nice to see you," she said for once wishing she

was in a nice dress holding a fundraiser program and not a tray of pancetta snacks.

Cressida eyed Frankie's uniform. "You are working?" she asked.

Frankie straightened her shoulders, daring them to say anything. "Yep. So, what brings you two here?" she asked.

Digby snatched a piece of toast off her tray. "Cressida owns the building," he said, chewing happily.

"And I like the manatees," she added pointing at one of the informative banners hanging from the ceiling.

The big-boobed blonde was a real estate mogul, and Frankie was pushing appetizers for a living. Sometimes life wasn't quite fair.

Digby reached into his pocket.

"You use your phone, and I will have you killed," Cressida purred.

Digby sheepishly ended his search and reached for another appetizer.

"I am training him to not be an asshole," Cressida announced. "Good luck with your training of Aiden."

"Uh, thanks?" Frankie said.

Digby grinned. "I heard Margeaux didn't take the news of you two dating well."

"Why Margeaux thinks it's any of her business is beyond me."

"That one does not like to lose," Cressida announced. "We must go make love now."

Digby's face lit up, and for once, it wasn't from the backlight of his phone. It looked as though he was trading in his day-trader ways.

"Great seeing you, Frankie. Tell Aiden we said hi," he said in a rush, grabbing Cressida's wrist and dragging her toward the door.

“Huh,” Frankie said, watching them leave. Maybe there had been something in the water in Barbados. She shivered, pitying whatever man ended up with Margeaux.

She moved on, circulating like a ghost through the crowd until her tray was empty. Back in the cramped kitchen, she restocked. Jana slid through the door with a tray of dirty glasses.

“Another hour, and we start packing up,” she sang. Her blonde hair was streaked with turquoise today.

Frankie couldn't wait for that hour to end, and with it this portion of her life so she could step into her newly favorite role. Aiden's bed warmer. Since she was already in town, it only made sense for her to stay at his place tonight. Especially since tomorrow was Saturday. The plan was to sleep in and have a lazy Saturday brunch. Then dinner with Aiden's father, his new lady friend, and Aiden's mother. As always, the Kilbourns kept it quite civilized. Though not civilized enough to invite the step-mother/soon-to-be-ex. News of the divorce had leaked early. And the gossip was rampant even here.

Rumor had it that Jacqueline had been on the guest list for tonight but was too humiliated to show her face. Frankie guessed the woman was probably reviewing her prenup with a magnifying glass rather than suffering any actual humiliation. It was funny serving food to some of the same people she'd danced alongside of last week. But as was typical, no one looked a server in the eyes unless they were after something more than food or drink.

The anonymity was more comforting than anything. Aiden hadn't mentioned anything about her catering gigs, but she imagined it must be odd for him to have a girlfriend who cleaned up after his peers.

“Franchesca?” Cecily Kilbourn cocked her head to one side. “It is you!” She was dressed in a simple yet stunning yellow dress that only a woman with her coloring and bearing could begin to pull off.

“Mrs. Kilbourn,” Frankie said, nearly bobbling her tray.

Her ghost status had just been revoked.

“Please, call me Cecily,” she said with a genuine smile. “Is Aiden here?”

“No. He was working late tonight.”

“Ah. My son is *always* working,” Cecily sighed. “He takes after his father in that area.”

“He’s very dedicated,” Frankie agreed.

“That’s a very polite way of saying he needs to be careful before he starts following in the rest of his father’s footsteps. I’m very glad he’s found you. He seems quite taken with you.”

“Same. I mean, I feel the same way.”

“I may be biased,” Cecily said, “but he is quite the prize.”

“We’re enjoying our time together,” Frankie said, not knowing how to make small talk with her boyfriend’s mother when she was supposed to be handing out miniature shrimp cocktails served in ceramic spoons.

“What did you find now, Cecily? You’re going to end up ten pounds heavier when you leave here if you don’t stay away from the food.” Jacqueline, neither humiliated nor glued to her prenup, sidled up to them and plucked a sample from Frankie’s tray. She sampled it and wrinkled her pretty nose. “Ugh. Disgusting. I hate shrimp.” She dropped the half-eaten shrimp back on the tray in a masticated lump.

Asshole.

“Where’s the girl with the brie?” she demanded.

“Jacqueline, you remember Aiden’s girlfriend Franchesca, don’t you?” Cecily said pointedly.

It took Jacqueline a moment to realize that Cecily was talking about the tray-wielding Frankie and not someone else. “You’re a *waitress*?” Jacqueline asked with a laugh. Her eyebrows were trying valiantly to raise, but the flawless forehead only allowed her eyes to widen ever so slightly.

“Among other things, Mrs. Kilbourn.”

Jacqueline looked like she was weighing whether or not she should be seen talking to the help.

“Well, enjoy your girl talk,” she said, going nearly cross-eyed from looking down her nose at them. “I’ve got another party to attend soon, so I must say my good-byes.” She swished away in satin and pearls.

“Let’s hope the next one is slightly more tolerable,” Cecily sighed.

“How did Ferris go from you to that?” Frankie asked. *Oh shit. When was she going to learn to keep her mouth shut?*

“It probably had something to do with her being pregnant with his child,” Cecily mused. “Oops. Family secret. Pretend I said something really Zen and sweet instead.”

“You’re right. Jacqueline really is a *treasure*,” Frankie said.

“Oh, Cecily!” A woman in a burgundy shawl waved from her up-close vantage point of a very naked statue.

“That’s a friend of mine. Would you like me to introduce you?” she asked.

Frankie shook her head. “I hope you don’t mind, but I’d rather stay incognito. I’ve only got one more catering gig to go, and it’s just easier if no one knows my... connection to Aiden.”

Cecily nodded. “I understand. Well, it was lovely to see you, and I’m looking forward to dinner tomorrow night.”

“Me, too,” Frankie said. And she realized she actually meant it.

Frankie headed in the direction of the kitchen to get rid of Jacqueline’s dead shrimp. Nothing killed the appetite like someone else’s chewed up food.

“Did you see who Cecily was talking to?”

Frankie heard Jacqueline’s voice coming from a cluster of ladies who were lingering near the bar.

“Who?” someone asked, breathy with excitement over any tidbit of gossip.

“A waitress.”

“Was she getting a recipe?”

“The waitress is her son’s *girlfriend*.”

“No!” someone gasped in horror.

Okay, that was a bit of an overreaction. It’s not like she just announced Aiden was eating homeless dogs for breakfast.

“Yes!” Jacqueline announced gleefully. “Like father, like son, I suppose. They both have a thing for the help.”

“Was Cecily a waitress too?” one of the other women demanded.

“Almost as bad,” Jacqueline continued. “She was a secretary or something at the interior design firm he hired to do the house in the Hamptons. Can you imagine? Poor dear always thought we were friends. But that’s what you do to help. You pat them on the head and tell them they’re doing a good job and then count the silver when they leave.”

They cackled like a flock of chickens.

“There goes the bloodline,” someone sighed.

“I suppose I should have told my daughter to get a job at a fast food restaurant or as a janitor when she wanted to catch Aiden’s eye all those years ago.”

Frankie was amazed that the tray didn’t snap in her hand from the pressure she was applying. She did a rapid calculation. Exactly how bad would the consequences be if she beamed the soon-to-be ex-Mrs. Kilbourn in the head with this tray?

Crap. Pretty bad. She seethed. *Okay, physical violence was out. But she wasn’t about to let this go.*

Frankie grabbed a cocktail toothpick off of the bar and walked into the midst of the hyenas. “There you are, Jackie. You’ve got a little spinach stuck in your dentures,” she said handing over the toothpick. “I’d hate for everyone to be laughing at you behind your back.”

The laughter screeched to a halt. Jacqueline stared at her coldly.

“Oh, and I’m so proud of you for making an appearance tonight. I can’t imagine showing my face in public after my husband dumped me for a woman fifteen years younger. Good for you, sweetie. Will you be at dinner tomorrow night to meet the new Mrs. Kilbourn with the rest of the family?”

Jacqueline’s mouth was hanging somewhere down around her augmented tits when Frankie breezed away.

Okay, it wasn’t as satisfying as popping her one in the face. But it felt good enough.

She stormed back into the kitchen, took a two-minute breather, and then plastered a professional smile on her face and returned to the thinning crowd. Jacqueline was gone, and it looked like she’d taken most of her cronies with her. Probably to prove she wasn’t wearing dentures.

Everyone was looking at her, though, and laying on the profuse thank-yous when she passed with the tray. Ugh. She preferred it when they were too important to look at her. Word traveled fast in high society. *Aiden Kilbourn’s girlfriend was slinging apps in an apron on a Friday night. What was the world coming to?*

“I’d love a piece of whatever it is you have.” The voice was smooth with a practiced flirtatiousness that immediately put Frankie’s back up.

“Stuffed mushroom caps?” she asked, shoving the tray between them.

He was leanly muscled and slight of frame, close to her own height. She guessed that she outweighed him by a good ten pounds.

There was something insolent about the way he perused her tray before popping the mushroom cap into his mouth and making a show out of licking his fingers.

“I’m Lionel, by the way.”

“Hi, Lionel,” she said, not interested in continuing the getting-to-know-you portion of their evening.

“I’m sure Aiden’s mentioned me before. I usually beat him on the polo field,” Lionel said, tossing his mop of blond hair off his forehead. “We like to compete against each other in everything.” He lowered his voice as if he were imparting a secret.

“Good for you,” she said side-stepping him. But he followed her, blocking her path.

“You’re very beautiful, you know. I saw you from across the room and just couldn’t take my eyes off you.”

“Cut to the chase, Lionel,” Frankie demanded with the minimum of politeness she could muster. She hated being restrained by the required professionalism of her current role.

He reached out and traced a knuckle over her cheek. “I think you’d like being in my bed better than Kilbourn’s. What do you say?”

Fuck off. Go fuck yourself. Go slather yourself with ground beef and walk into a grizzly bear den. “No thanks.” There was enough chill in her words that Lionel should have gotten frostbite.

“Maybe you need a little convincing. I like it when a girl plays hard to get.”

“Are you talking to me like this because I’m the help or because your wallet says you can?”

He threw his head back and laughed. “What a wildcat you are. Come on. Forget Kilbourn. Have a drink with me. I’ll pay you for the rest of your shift.”

Lionel made a fatal mistake by grabbing her wrist and giving her a tug.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Aiden frowned at the text from Frankie.

Frankie: Can't make it tonight. Raincheck?

The last time they'd talked, they were both looking forward to a night together. Aiden drummed his fingers on the desk, a dread growing in the pit of his stomach. Had Elliot actually carried out his threat? Had he underestimated his sniveling, lazy coward of a brother? The fact that Elliot needed money was obvious. But as for the why? It was still a nagging mystery.

Aiden's investigation had barely begun, and he had yet to dig up any connection between Elliot and Donaldson.

He'd assumed it was an empty threat. Elliot was many undesirable things, but his quest to be an important asset to their father was equal to no other goal. And Aiden was counting on that consistency to buy himself some time. He needed to figure out just how to break the news to Franchesca that he'd caused their best friends years of misery.

He could either do that by meeting Elliot's financial needs or maneuvering his way out of his commitment to his father.

In short, he was fucked.

His phone rang, and Aiden snatched it up. It was his mother. He briefly debated letting it go to voicemail but changed his mind.

"Sorry for calling so late," Cecily said, her voice bright. "But I knew you were working anyway. I wanted to tell you I ran into Franchesca at an event tonight. She was working."

"Was Elliot there too, by chance?" Aiden pinched the bridge of his nose and hoped for good news.

"Not that I saw. But his mother was."

Aiden's lips curved at the slightest hint of derision in his mother's tone. She should have been awarded sainthood for

her gracious acceptance of Jacqueline and Elliot after his father's philandering. Now that the marriage was over, Cecily had been sprung from the prison of politeness, of putting on a brave face.

"Anyway, Francesca's so different from anyone I've seen you with before, Aiden. And I wanted you to know that I like her very much. And that assessment was already in existence before she put Jacqueline in her place tonight when she was running her mouth about father and son enjoying 'the help.'"

Aiden swore quietly. He felt twin pangs. One of relief and one of dread. Even at work, Frankie couldn't escape his family. And though it hadn't been Elliot telling secrets, Jacqueline could do enough damage on her own.

"What exactly did Jacqueline say?" he asked, his tone steely.

Cecily laughed. "No need to ride into battle. Your girlfriend handled herself well enough that Jacqueline left with her tail between her legs. She's a good match, Aiden."

"Dad doesn't seem to think so," Aiden admitted.

"Your father needs his horizons expanded. I hope you keep her."

"We've only been dating two months. Are you designing wedding invitations already?"

"Two months is the outside for most of your relationships, dear son. And I don't see any of the usual tells that you're growing bored with her."

No, if anything, he was more fascinated, more enamored by the day. And someone in his orbit had upset Frankie tonight. It was his job to protect her from that.

"Where was this Save the Whatever fundraiser?"

He found her, finally, in a bar a block from the fundraiser. The crowds had thinned, and Frankie sat alone at the bar, still in her catering uniform, staring morosely into a glass of something. He barely registered the dark paneling, the soft lighting, and the subtle art under brass lamps. His focus narrowed to her, to the slump of her shoulders, the sweep of her hair, the pursing of her lips.

“You’re blowing me off so you can drink alone?” he demanded, taking the stool next to her.

She didn’t look up, her long hair hiding her face. Aiden could be a patient man when the situation called for it. He signaled the bartender and ordered a scotch.

That got a rise out of her. “So, you’re drinking again?” she asked.

“I’m having one drink with you. A beautiful woman shouldn’t have to drink alone.”

She shook her head and lifted her face. He saw the red eyes, the tear-stained cheeks, and felt his body shift into fight mode. Someone had hurt her, and they would pay.

“What happened?” he asked, his voice low.

“First, you need to know that I’m mad crying. Huge difference from sad crying. I’m not weak.”

“Franchesca,” he said, turning her stool to face him and caging her between his legs. “There isn’t a person on the face of the planet who would ever use your name and weak in the same sentence.” His phone vibrated in his pocket with an incoming call.

She looked down at her bunched fists. “I got fired.”

He reached for her hands and held them in his. “And you’re mad.”

She nodded.

“I heard about Jacqueline,” he pressed. “Did she do this?” His phone signaled again in his pocket.

Frankie shook her head. “I’d actually forgotten about that. I know she’s still technically your stepmother for a few more weeks, but I hope I’m not required to be nice to her. I probably should have checked with you first.”

“Franchesca, I don’t want you to ever feel like you have to be nice to someone who isn’t treating you the way you deserve to be.”

She looked at him, into him, and her eyes welled with tears.

“Shit, sweetheart. Tell me what happened.”

“Oh, I can do better than tell you.” She pulled a hand from his grasp and slid her phone in front of him.

Aiden glanced at the screen and then picked the phone up for a closer look.

The picture drew his attention first. Frankie was in mid-swing with a serving tray heading in the direction of a blond man’s square jaw.

Aiden Kilbourn’s girlfriend attacks business rival at fundraiser.

“Who is he, and what did he do?”

Frankie’s eyes widened. “He made it sound as if you two were Lex Luthor and Superman.”

“There are many people who feel that their relationship with me is more important than it is.” If his phone didn’t quit ringing, he was going to throw it in the bar sink.

“Ouch.”

“You, on the other hand, keep downplaying the importance of our relationship,” he pointed out.

“Nice save. Why aren’t you freaking out? It’s Lionel Goffman, by the way. Rivals on the polo field and business arena,” she said, quoting the article.

Aiden had a vague recollection of the man. “What did he do, Franchesca?”

“He hinted that I should try out his bed instead of yours. I’m required to be polite, professional, at work. I needed that job. Needed the money. But he grabbed me—”

“He touched you?” Aiden’s voice was dangerously calm, but it didn’t fool her for a second.

“Don’t you go all white knight and make this worse, Aide.”

“What exactly did he do?”

“He grabbed my arm and started pulling. He said he was going to buy me a drink and pay me for the rest of my shift.”

Aiden glanced back at the phone. “Did you break his nose?”

Frankie sighed and picked up her glass. “There’s video,” she murmured.

“I beg your pardon?” Aiden asked, leaning closer.

“There’s video. Scroll down.”

He did as he was told and watched as his Franchesca yelled a warning to the unsuspecting dead man. “You don’t get to touch me! In fact, you don’t get to touch any woman without her permission.”

But Lionel wasn’t in a listening kind of mood. He grabbed for her again. “Listen, let’s go for that drink—”

Frankie was shaking her head and then the tray came up. With one hand, she bashed him in the head like the tray was a cymbal. Dazed, Lionel took a step back and tripped, falling on his ass.

“For your information, Aiden Kilbourn is a better man than you could ever dream of being. And if you ever insinuate otherwise, I will hunt you down!” The temper had exploded, and there was no putting it back in the box. She grabbed a tray of champagne from a cocktail table behind her and dumped the entire thing on him.

“There’s your fucking drink, asshole!”

Shocked gasps and some laughter rose from the crowd of witnesses as Lionel tried to scramble to his sticky, humiliated feet.

“You’ll be hearing from my lawyers!”

Aiden put the phone down and felt his own vibrate in his jacket yet again. If the Rumor Mill blog already had this, it was everywhere by now. Damage control would be... interesting.

He picked up his glass and shocked them both by starting to laugh.

Frankie looked at him like he’d lost his damn mind. “How can you laugh at this? I’ve humiliated your entire family? Your PR bill is going to be astronomical this month alone.”

But he couldn’t stop laughing. He had Franchesca Baranski in his corner. No smarmy competitor, no wicked stepmother, no idiot brother had scared her off. She stuck. And her fierce loyalty now extended to him.

Just as his heart belonged to her.

“Aiden, stop laughing and start thinking about how much damage I did. I assaulted someone on video. And if that isn’t bad enough, now everyone knows that your girlfriend is a waitress.”

“Was,” he corrected her. “You got fired.”

She gasped so hard he thought she might fall off her stool. “It’s not funny!”

“There is no one like you in the world, Franchesca. I’m so glad you’re mine.”

“Aide! What do I do? Am I going to get sued? Do I have to apologize? Because fuck that. Do you know how long it’s going to take me to pay off my credit card on just the development center’s income?” She put her head down on the bar, her dark curls spilling over like a waterfall.

“Franchesca, you’re not getting sued.”

“Did you watch the end of the video when he starts howling about lawyers?”

Aiden sighed and pulled out his phone. Twelve missed calls. He skipped the ones from his mother, father, and Oscar and

dialed his PR firm.

“Michael,” he said by way of greeting. “Hold on while I conference in Hillary.” He called his favorite of the family’s attorneys. “Hillary? I’m on the line with Michael. Here’s where we stand. I want a countersuit prepared and ready to file if this Goffman asshole is stupid enough to proceed. I also want a statement prepared that says Ms. Baranski and I are weighing the idea of pressing charges for assault. She felt physically threatened by his overtures and handled the situation as best she could to safely diffuse the threat.”

Frankie gaped at him.

“I’d like to further add a statement about Kilbourn Holdings’ recent stand on sexual harassment and bullying. Some standard wording about how this behavior won’t be tolerated whether in a business or social setting, and we are proud of Franchesca and women like her who stand up to outdated patriarchal behaviors and call them out for what they are. Antiquated customs intended to value one sex over the other have no place in this day and age.”

“Got it,” Michael announced. “I’ll coordinate with Hillary, and we’ll get you a draft before it drops tomorrow morning.”

“Good. Make sure you mention that Ms. Baranski is repped by Hutchins, Steinman, and Krebs.”

“Looking forward to kicking some ass,” Hillary announced.

“Thank you for the overtime,” Aiden said and disconnected the call. His phone was already ringing again. It was his father. He ignored the call. Two texts popped up on the screen from Oscar. They were screenshots from other gossip blogs.

“Your dad is going to hate me even more,” Franchesca moaned.

“The only Kilbourn you need to be worried about is me. And I’m proud of you for standing up for yourself. And I also owe you an apology. Our relationship is the reason you’re dealing with this, and I can’t tell you how sorry I am for that. But I will make it right.”

“Oh, God. You’re not going to kidnap him, are you?”

“Do I look like Elliot?”

She gave him a ghost of a smile. “So, you’re really not mad?”

“I’m furious. But not at you. Never at you.”

“You hide it well. I feel it, I blow up, and then I spend a day or two regretting it.”

Her phone buzzed on the bar, and she picked it up, wincing. “Oh, God. Brenda, my boss. I can’t lose that job, too.”

“Let me pay off your credit card.” Aiden knew it was a mistake as the words were coming out of his mouth, but he could do this for her, give this to her.

She was already shaking her head. “Uh-uh. Nope. Not happening.”

“You know it’s nothing to me,” he argued.

“Just like you know it’s something to me. I’m not some trust fund kid who goes to Mom and Dad to get bailed out.”

“First of all, I look nothing like your parents.”

“Har har. I’m not taking your money, Aide.”

“Would you take Lionel’s?”

“What?”

“Would you take Lionel’s money if it came in the form of an apology for his behavior?”

“Oh, hell yes.”

“Then I’ll get you whatever it is he owes you. What’s your balance?”

Frankie named a figure so paltry that Aiden had to close his eyes and take a breath. “You’re really that close to not scraping by, and you won’t let me do anything about it?”

“You’re furious at someone else, not me. Remember?”

“You’re going to give me a headache.”

“Oh, sure. I bash one of your pals in the head with a tray and douse him in champagne, and you’re totally fine with it. But I

turn down your billions, and then you get a migraine,” she pouted.

“What if there was something that I needed desperately that was in your power to give so easily?”

“Money is different. Money is power and control, and I want my own, not someone else’s.”

He hated to admit it, but he could see her incredibly misguided and stubborn point.

“Fine. I’ll get you Goffman’s money.”

She shook her head and gave a soft laugh. “You’re something, Kilbourn.”

“Back at you, Baranski. Can we watch the video again?”

*Girlfriend of Aiden Kilbourn has secret life of catering jobs
and sexual harassment...*

*Aiden Kilbourn's girlfriend assaults Upper West Side
fundraiser attendee...*

*Aiden Kilbourn's new girlfriend brings Brooklyn bar fight to
art gallery fundraiser...*

*Aiden Kilbourn threatens lawsuit and charges against
girlfriend's attacker...*

Chapter Fifty

“I have a name,” Frankie muttered at her computer screen. Brenda and Raul had decided it would be better for everyone if she worked from home until the scandal and ensuing news interest died off.

“Damn right you have a name,” Marco agreed in her ear.

“Aiden Kilbourn’s girlfriend,” Frankie snorted. “Every single one of these headlines call me Aiden Kilbourn’s girlfriend.”

“If they didn’t know your name before, they will now.”

“Are you eating?”

“Mmm yeah. Corned beef.”

“I don’t suppose you deliver?”

“Not with everyone in the neighborhood stopping by for gossip on our own Frankie B,” Marco snorted.

“We usually only pull in these kinds of sales around the holidays. But you put us on the map. We got neighbors and reporters crawling out of the woodwork.”

“Oh, God! No one’s talking to the reporters, are they?” Frankie moaned.

“Only in glowing lies about your goodness. You’ve been dubbed Saint Franchesca.”

“You are so full of shit.”

“Relax. We take care of our own,” Marco said, biting into what Frankie could only assume was a giant dill pickle.

“Besides, Aiden and his PR guy stopped by earlier in the week and gave us all the standard line.”

“Aiden came to the deli?” Frankie asked.

He’d been so busy in the week since “the incident” they hadn’t seen much of each other. And he had definitely not mentioned the visit.

“Yeah, had a roast beef for lunch and took another one for the road. Didn’t you see the pictures of him carrying the Baranski Deli bag around? Can’t pay for that kind of advertising. Had a real estate developer call us up and ask if we’d consider opening a location downtown.”

“Are you kidding me?” She’d been wallowing in her own stew of embarrassment and anger that she hadn’t bothered to give two shits about anything else apparently.

“We’re not gonna do it. Baranskis are Brooklyn, you know? But it was nice to have the opportunity to say ‘No, thanks.’”

“What the hell else have I missed? The Pope pop by for a turkey club and a chat with Dad?”

Marco barked out a laugh. “Ha. I miss your twisted sense of humor. Stop by sometime, okay? Bring your guy.”

Frankie sighed. “I will. Thanks for having my back.”

“Family. Later, Frank.”

“Later, Marco.”

Frankie scrolled through the Google Alerts she received in the last week and pulled up a picture. There Aiden was in all his wealthy entrepreneur glory in a sexy navy suit, aviators, and a Baranski Deli bag. Looking at him in the picture, it was hard for her to reconcile the fact that she shared a bed with the man. He looked like he’d strolled off of someone’s Perfect Guy Pinterest board.

She knew why he was working so much this week. He was cleaning up her mess, and he’d taken the time to make sure her family was prepared. Just like family would.

Tomorrow, he was taking her to a fundraiser supporting a children’s cancer hospital hosted by his mother at her Long Island home. It would be their first “appearance” since the “incident,” and Frankie was already feeling the pressure. He hadn’t told her anything about his parents’ reaction to her brief lack of judgment. All she knew is the family dinner last Saturday had been canceled, presumably because Aiden was working on cleaning up her mess. Or because his parents were horrified by her behavior.

Well, she'd find out soon enough.

She scrolled through some more pictures, finding a few of them together. Aiden escorting her out of her building for brunch after a night of mattress pounding sex. Aiden guiding her into his office building with a hand at her lower back. The two of them wrapped up in each other in line at a coffee shop.

How was this her life? The magnifying glass had lowered without her ever really preparing for it. Now she appeared in magazines. Her decision to smack Lionel with a tray had been debated on a morning talk show. The attention was oppressive. And all she could do was sit and wait for the next celebrity or gossip column favorite to do something outrageous before the rest of the city forgot all about her.

* * *

“Come meet me for lunch,” Pru demanded.

“I’m not showing my face in that borough until someone famous gets arrested for prostitution.”

“You can’t let them push you into hiding. You’re Franchesca Fucking Baranski. You don’t hide from people!” Pru said, working her way into a halftime football coach pep talk.

“I’m not hiding,” Frankie argued. “I’m laying low so I don’t get sued by an asshole whose retainer for his lawyer costs more than my MBA.”

Jesus. She wasn’t safe anywhere. Her corporate social responsibility professor had pulled her aside and asked if Mr. Kilbourn would be interested in addressing the class on sexual harassment at the management level in the workplace.

She was one of those bugs on a white board with a pin in it. Collected and preserved by greedy fingers.

“Are you really going to let a little attention banish you from life? Or are you going to grow a pair, put on a gorgeous dress, and come eat lunch with me?”

“I’m not letting anyone banish me from anything.”

“Good. Get your ass on the train.”

“Pru—”

“Aiden’s worried about you. He thinks he’s ruined your life. I’m giving you the opportunity to prove to him that you’ve got a stronger spine than that.”

“Do they teach manipulation as a Gen-Ed course in private school?” Frankie asked.

“I will eat a roll if you come to lunch.”

“Ugh. Sold.”

So, Frankie reluctantly threw on that beautiful red dress, slapped on some makeup, and strutted down Fifth Avenue with Pru. There were a handful of photographers shouting questions, but Frankie iced them out behind her oversized sunglasses.

And damn if it didn’t feel good. Good enough that she ordered two pieces of apple pie to go.

“I eat one multigrain roll, and you’re going to pound a thousand calories worth of pie?” Pru asked, eyeing the tasty little to go boxes.

“They’re not for me,” Frankie laughed. “I’m dropping them off for Aiden and his admin at the office.”

Pru shot her a smug look.

“What?” Frankie asked.

“You liiiiiike him,” she sang.

“You’re so junior high,” Frankie sighed. “I thought we’d already established the fact that I like him.”

“Allow me my gloating time,” Pru insisted. “I knew you two would be great for each other, didn’t I?”

Frankie leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. “You *may* have mentioned something along those lines.”

“I can’t wait to be your matron of honor,” Pru said. “I’ve already got a proposal from a party planner for your bridal shower.”

“We’re dating and having sex, *not* getting married,” Frankie insisted. The idea of a bridal shower like Pru’s, with bitchy women whispering about how much they hated each other and useless, overpriced gifts like platinum ice cream spoons, gave her the heebie jeebies.

“We’ll see about that,” Pru mused, rising and sliding into her coat.

Frankie ignored her friend and buttoned her coat. They were halfway to the door when she stopped short. Pru ran into her back. “Hey,” her friend muttered.

Frankie pointed at what had caught her attention. Tucked into a quiet corner in front of the window were Elliot Kilbourn and Margeaux the Dragon Lady.

Elliot had Margeaux’s face cupped in his hand and was moving in for what promised to be an NC-17 kiss.

“Gross,” Pru hissed. “Go before they see us!”

They hurried out of the restaurant, eyes straight ahead. And didn’t stop until they were halfway down the block.

“Well there’s a match made in heaven,” Frankie said dryly.

“You said it, sister,” Pru agreed. “An evil wench and her henchman. We should give them a couple name. Elgeaux? Margel?”

Frankie shuddered and clutched the apple pie to her chest. Nothing good could come from a union like that.

Chapter Fifty-One

Aiden rested his hand on Frankie's bare thigh in the darkened back of the limo. She'd chosen a short dark purple number with a tempting halter neck that made his fingers itch to untie it. All that stood between him and Frankie's naked, begging body was two hours at his mother's fundraiser and a short speech. There was also the ride home from Long Island to Manhattan, but with a privacy screen and condoms stocked in the small compartment under the bar, that wasn't necessarily a hindrance.

"Do you like your dress?" Aiden asked, skimming his fingertips over her inner thigh.

He watched her open her knees a little wider to accommodate his touch.

Since her lunch with Pru earlier in the week, Frankie had declared herself cured of any worry about what a bunch of strangers with cameras and gossip blog subscriptions had to say about her. Which meant she hadn't heard anything about what the paparazzi had dubbed Dress Gate.

"It's very beautiful," she said, playing with the tulle of the skirt. It nipped in at the waist before flowing into a full skirt reminiscent of 1950s elegance. She looked stunning, fuckable, regal.

"Do you like my hair?" she asked, pushing a pin back in place. It was pinned up in a curling mass leaving her neck bare.

"Very much," he admitted.

"I watched a YouTube tutorial," she said proudly.

"You did it yourself?" he asked, his eyebrows winging up.

"I didn't have time for the salon today."

"What will society say when they find out you do your own hair?" Aiden teased.

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t care what they say. It’s stupid to drop a couple hundred bucks once a week just to have someone else stab pins into your head. Besides, you’d think they’d have more important things to worry about.”

“You’d think,” he agreed.

She was one of the few people in the world who could be completely immune to the crush of disapproval orchestrated by the media. She’d survived the attention over the Goffman incident, though he doubted the news would let it drop, especially after today.

But she could survive it. Franchesca Baranski didn’t care what a stranger behind a computer screen had to say about her style. And it was refreshing. He’d seen stray negative blog comments destroy entire weeks of the lives of women he’d dated before. “How could they say she wore it better?” “That’s photoshopped,” they’d howl at the screen while dialing their publicists.

It came with the territory of being considered important.

Frankie couldn’t be bothered to care enough to read the drivel in the first place. People could have been singing her praises or tearing her down, and it wouldn’t have interested her either way.

What remained to be seen was how she would feel about him going to bat for her. Aiden reached into his jacket pocket and produced the check.

“Here,” he said offering it to her.

“What’s this?” she asked peering at it in the dark. “Twenty-five hundred dollars? Aiden, I told you I’m not taking your money.”

He tapped the top of the check. “It’s not my money.”

He watched her as a slow smile spread across her face. “Lionel Goffman. And how did you manage that?”

Aiden cleared his throat. There was a lot they had to talk about. But the car was easing up his mother’s drive. “We’ll talk about it later,” he promised.

Frankie tucked the money into her clutch and leaned down to adjust the strap of her stiletto. Her breasts pressed against the fabric of the halter top, begging to be released.

He shifted uncomfortably as his dick hardened. Would he ever stop having that reaction to her?

Oblivious to his lecherous gaze, she sat up and reapplied her lipstick. Dark, sexy red. He wanted to see those lips wrapped around his dick, her big eyes staring up at him as she took him to the edge of reason with her magic mouth.

“Shit,” he muttered.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, snapping her compact shut and shoving it back in her bag. “You’re not getting a headache now are you?”

“More like a cockache.”

Not satisfied to take his word for it, she palmed his hard-on through his trousers.

“Damn it, Franchesca! You’re not helping.”

“Do you pop little blue pills for breakfast? You’re hard twenty hours a day. I didn’t even do anything to you... yet.”

The car pulled up to the front of his mother’s estate. He watched her internally freak out over the opulence. Thick ivory columns graced the front of the house. The circular driveway was made from crushed shells and orbited a large fountain with white statues in various poses of what looked like grief or some kind of extra weird orgy. The cars already here made the driveway look like a luxury sedan showroom.

“Don’t tell me what happens after ‘yet,’” Aiden begged, closing his eyes and willing his body to relax.

“I won’t tell you that I’m going to hold my boobs like this,” she said, pressing her tits together, “and let you fuck them.”

He hissed out a breath and reached for her. But she scooted out of his grip.

“Don’t you dare! Someone is going to open that door in five seconds, and we both better have our clothes on.” She

wrapped her coat around her.

“Don’t play with me, Franchesca.”

“Or what?” she asked innocently. “You’ll come in your pants?”

He growled and made another grab for her shapely ass. She was his tormentor, his angel, his enemy.

The car door opened, and Frankie winked at him as she slipped out in front of him.

She’d pay. He’d make sure of it. But for now, he’d be the one to suffer.

He caught up with her on the steps and tucked her arm through his. “Slow down, sweetheart, before you break an ankle.”

“If you fall right now, you might break your dick,” she mused.

“As soon as this is over, I’m going to fuck you so hard you won’t be able to sit down tomorrow.”

“Promises, promises,” Frankie said airily.

“If I shoved my hand up your skirts right now, are you telling me I wouldn’t find you wet?” he asked.

Her inhale was sharp, and Aiden knew he wasn’t the only one looking forward to the end of the event. They’d be lucky if they made it back to the limo.

“Nice house,” she said, her voice strained. Her coat gapped, and Aiden caught a glimpse of hardened nipple under the satin of her top.

“Tell me you’re wearing a bra.”

“I thought we weren’t supposed to lie to each other?”

“Jesus. Franchesca. How am I supposed to get through two hours knowing the only thing between my mouth and your perfect tits is a scrap of satin?”

She shrugged as if she hadn’t a care in the world. “I guess you’ll just have to think about baseball.”

He backed her up against the red brick of the entry way and flexed his hips into her so she could feel how hard she made

him. She gave a little gasp and cuddled into him.

Aiden reached into her coat and shoved his hand into the top of her dress. Her nipple throbbed against his palm. He squeezed her breast and ran his thumb over the point.

“Fuck, Aiden,” she hissed.

“That’s right, baby. You’re going to be begging me to fuck you,” he promised. “I’m going to ride you until you’re out of orgasms. Until you can’t move. I’m going to ruin you.”

She looked dazed. And Aiden felt like he’d gotten the upper hand again.

“Now let’s go smile pretty for the camera,” he said

She sagged against the wall when he stepped back. He adjusted himself to a slightly less painful position in his pants. His phone buzzed, and he glanced at the screen. He grimaced.

“What’s wrong?” Frankie asked, righting her dress.

“My mother is reminding me that there are security cameras out here.”

“Seriously?” she swore darkly. “She already probably hates me for causing a scene, and now I’m dry humping her son on the front porch!”

“There was nothing dry about that, Franchesca,” Aiden grinned wickedly.

“Evil.” She made a cross with her fingers. “Stay away from me with your magic penis and pheromones.”

He laughed and opened the front door.

Chapter Fifty-Two

His mother had limited the press to a few society reporters and bloggers. The media was confined to the entry hall, a two-story room in soft ivories and beiges with fussy accent chairs and tables.

It was a very civilized press gauntlet on home turf. Aiden kept Frankie glued to his side. His mother had made it very clear to the press that no one would be discussing Lionel Goffman. They suffered through the same questions over and over again. How did you meet? How long have you been seeing each other? And with each round, he could feel Frankie getting antsy.

“My subscribers wouldn’t forgive me if I didn’t bring up Dress Gate,” the blogger had thick glasses and pink streaks in her hair and directed the question at Frankie.

“What’s Dress Gate?” Frankie asked.

“The ongoing conversation about you repeating the red Armani dress you wore to dinner at The Oak Leaf and then again to lunch this week.”

“Are you pulling my leg?” Frankie asked, bewildered.

The blogger flashed her a friendly smile and waited.

Frankie looked up at Aiden. She was practically vibrating next to him.

He opened his mouth to speak, but she shook her head. “Oh, I’ve got this one. Don’t you all have more important things to do with your time? It’s a beautiful dress. I like it. I’m going to wear it more than once, not throw it away. Deal with it. Why don’t you ask me about the small business initiative the city is trying to pass or how survival rates with children fighting leukemia are five percent higher at this facility than any other in the country? Or, at the *very least*, ask Aiden here who he’s wearing.”

It occurred to Aiden that Frankie might be dangerously close to breaking another nose.

He slid his arm around her waist. “I have very fond memories of the first time she wore it. I hope I get to see it many more times in the future. And speaking of the future, I hope your questions for my girlfriend reflect both her intelligence, her sense of social responsibility, and her involvement in the business community.”

He dragged Frankie away before she could add anything further.

“What the fuck? Dress Gate? Are they serious?” she hissed.

“Aiden! Franchesca!” Cecily Kilbourn, dressed in head to toe silver, glittered her way toward them.

“Mom,” Aiden said, leaning down to kiss her cheek.

“I’m glad you two were able to make it inside,” Cecily teased.

Frankie turned scarlet, and Aiden pulled her into his side and dropped a kiss on top of her head. “Sorry about the R-rating,” he said, not feeling remotely sincere in his apology.

“I’m happy to see you happy,” Cecily said, winking at them both. “Now, let me introduce you two to some people.”

* * *

It was the last time he had his hands on Frankie. She was dragged away for introductions and wine while Aiden made his own rounds. His mother had opened up the library, dining room, and grand hall for the event. He tried to stay in the same room as Frankie, but when Pruitt and Chip arrived, he felt like he was constantly chasing her from room to room.

He found her easily in the crowd when he got up to make his speech. He spoke of family and community and the

responsibility they felt for providing for a better future. But he thought of Franchesca, naked and bucking under him.

She smiled up at him from her chair. Those red lips curving sinfully.

It was an obsession, her mouth. Listening to the words she would scream or pant or plead while he was inside her. Watching her wrap her lips around his cock as she took him to her throat. That dirty, smart, funny mouth.

He'd given up trying to anticipate exactly what she'd say. She was quicker with a jibe, wittier with a reply than anyone he knew. His Franchesca had the brains that made her even more appealing than her goddess-worthy curves did.

It wasn't just sex. It never had been with Franchesca. He loved watching her. He loved their late-night calls to catch up. He loved knowing he was going to see her and enjoying that painful edge of anticipation. He loved... *her*.

The thought echoed in his head, resonating like the chime of a bell. Resonating like the truth.

People were applauding, but only Frankie existed to him.

He stepped down from the riser his mother had positioned at the end of the grand hall and zeroed in on her. Ignoring the attempts to grab his attention, he reached her and tugged her from her chair.

"Come with me," he ordered, pulling her from the room into the empty hallway.

"Aide, slow down," she said breathlessly behind him. He slowed his steps so she could keep up.

"What's going on down there?" she asked, eyeing his crotch.

Aiden reached down and adjusted his erection that was threatening to tear its way out of his pants.

He turned on her. "This is what you do to me, Franchesca. You eviscerate a reporter, you cross those long, beautiful legs, you order a fucking pizza, and I'm hard."

“Too bad we’re surrounded by a hundred people who didn’t come to watch a porno,” she said. And then she made a mistake. She reached between them and cupped him through the material of his pants.

He grabbed her by the arm, hard. “Don’t tease me, Franchesca.”

He saw that spark in her eye and recognized it. The woman loved a challenge almost as much as he did. Maybe even more.

“Or what? You’ll punish me?” She dragged her knuckles over the ridge of his cock. “You’ll fuck me? Where would the keynote speaker drag me off to—”

He didn’t let her finish the sentence. He wouldn’t have survived it. Aiden kept his grip on her arm and dragged her down the hall.

She was jogging to keep up with him, her short steps on those heels made her tits bounce against their confinement. If he didn’t find an empty room in the next six seconds, his drycleaner was going to have a serious issue to deal with.

The kitchen and morning room were too open. There was too much traffic. The library was where the bar was and usually drew a small crowd over the course of an evening. But the music room with its glass doors and dark interior? That would work.

He pulled her inside and kicked the door shut behind him.

“Are you gonna lock it?” Franchesca asked, her voice husky.

“There’s no lock,” he said, drawing her across the darkened room to the white Chesterfield sofa. “So, if someone comes in here they’re going to see me fucking you on this couch. They’re going to see your tits bounce every time I drive my dick into you.”

That excited her, that potential for exhibitionism. He saw it in the gleam of her eyes.

She always managed to surprise him.

He balanced her on the rolled arm of the sofa. Aiden reached up behind her neck and in one swift tug untied the halter neck

of the dress. It was exactly why he'd bought it for her. That quick access. One hard pull, and her breasts were tumbling into his hands.

They were heavy and caramel tipped, the nipples already budding at just the thought of his mouth on them. He skimmed his thumbs over them and listened to her hiss of breath.

Yes, this was love and need and everything in between. He backed her against the couch and dipped his head to feed, first at one breast and then the other. She clawed at him, slipping her hands under his jacket, raking her nails over the fabric of his shirt.

"I don't have a condom, Franchesca," he said, unbuckling his belt.

"I don't fucking care, Aiden."

"Be sure," he warned her. "Because I'm not going to stop."

Her answer was to grip his cock through his pants with one hand while wrestling with his zipper with the other.

He was hard enough that his cock escaped the confines of his pants on its own and hung heavily toward her. He was going to *feel* her tonight. Every sensation would be magnified. Every squeeze of her pussy he'd experience with nothing between them.

He wouldn't give her foreplay or finesse. Not here. But he would finish her in the room in which he'd suffered through summer time music lessons. He'd pour himself into her and brand her from the inside.

Aiden pushed the skirts of her dress up until his fingers found wet satin. "So ready for me, baby. Aren't you?"

Frankie nodded wordlessly, her eyes glazed over as Aiden slid his fingers inside her delicate little thong. She was already spreading her legs for him. He tugged the satin down to her knees and let them fall the rest of the way. He took a moment to stroke his begging cock while Franchesca watched hungrily as his fist closed around his shaft. As he stroked, moisture pooled at the tip like tears of delayed gratification.

“You are so fucking perfect,” he praised her as he guided the head of his cock between her legs. “I’m going to fuck you standing like this so I can watch you when you come on me.”

She gave him a tiny nod, and he felt like he was back in control. He had won. And what a sweet victory it was with the tip of his dick pushing against her velvet wet.

“This is how I’m going to fuck you tonight in my mother’s house with a hundred people on the other side of those glass doors. Anyone could see you. Anyone could watch you come for me.”

“Aiden,” his name was a strangled cry from her lips.

With one hand holding her hip and skirts, he pulled and thrust at the same time.

The angle prevented him from going any deeper. But it was enough. Enough for the greedy little squeezes of her pussy to milk him like a fist. Enough for her to buck her hips against him and beg for more.

There was nothing between them and it was exquisite. Her slick flesh held his erection in a death grip. “You’re so close already, baby.”

“Who knew I’d like being bossed around?” Frankie murmured, a whisper of a laugh hanging on her words.

He needed more of her. Being fully clothed with just his dick hanging out of his pants wasn’t enough. But it would get them through the party. He squeezed her hip tighter and hefted her breast with his other hand. Heavy and full, her breasts were a personal fantasy. He wanted to suck, to lick, to make her scream. But with the height difference he had to settle for tugging that perfect dark nipple with his fingers.

She answered by pushing into his hand and bucking her hips harder. She was riding his rigid cock standing up. Sliding back and forth on it taking a few inches each time.

“Aide. I’m coming,” she moaned.

There was nothing more important to him than feeling Franchesca fall apart on his bare cock. He didn’t care that

there were footsteps approaching from the hallway. Didn't care that they could see Marjorie Holland, heiress to a coffee fortune, clear as day from the lit hallway as she wandered past the door.

"Jesus," Frankie hissed.

He needed her to come. Dropping her skirts, Aiden shoved his hand under them and used his thumb to press speedy little circles to her clit.

She went off like a rocket around him, bathing him in wet, gripping him like a fist. Squeezing him to within an inch of his life. And all the while he mimicked the waves with pulls of his fingers on her nipple.

"Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod," she chanted in a soft, desperate whisper.

He wanted to tell her there in that moment, with her lips forming the perfect o. Her hooded eyes glassy as they stared in shock and joy into his own. I love you. He could say it right now. But a Kilbourn never showed all their cards at once.

She was still trembling through the last aftershocks when he spun her around and bent her over the rolled arm of the couch.

He pushed his way inside her, hungry to be welcomed again. This time, he slid all the way home. Frankie let out a sharp gasp that he could feel at the tip of his dick. He wouldn't last long. Not with her draped over a sofa for his pleasure. Not with those beautiful breasts hanging down, nipples brushing tasseled pillows.

Aiden gripped her hips and eased halfway out of her. She whimpered, and it went to whatever primitive part of his brain was responsible for fucking. It broke him. There was no control as he thrust back in. There was no finesse in the way he used her body to build himself to orgasm. He felt the tightening in his balls as they drew up against his body, felt the tingling at the base of his spine.

The sound of his flesh slapping against hers was music to his caveman ears. He was brutal with the power of his thrusts. But when he reached down, hinging over her to take handfuls of

her breasts, Francesca threw her head back and gave a silent scream of ecstasy. Her orgasm, a surprise to them both, destroyed him. There was no holding back or making it last. He poured himself into her, holding deep at the hilt and relishing the feel of his hot seed exploding inside her walls.

This is what had been missing. This is what he would never again do without.

He curled grunting softly through every wrenching spurt, raining kisses on the bare skin of her back. “My beautiful Francesca. You’re mine now.”

“Pretty sure I was before you filled me up with a gallon of your super sperm in your mother’s cigar room.” He slapped her lightly on the ass. And, liking the sound and her squirmy reaction, did it once more.

“Music room,” he corrected.

“Whatever. From now on, I dub this room the secret party orgasm room.”

Aiden slowly pulled out of her and watched his come drip out of her, wet and hot on her thighs. He found a box of tissues on a completely impractical secretary desk and returned to her. Francesca seemed to feel no need to get up and put herself back together. And with her breasts bared, her ass in the air, Aiden was oh so tempted to put his half-hard cock back in her.

“Don’t even think about it, Kilbourn. Clean up in aisle three.”

He cleaned them both—and the floor—as best he could and pulled her underwear back into place. “I want you to spend the rest of the night with my come inside you.”

Aiden Kilbourn gushes over girlfriend at hospital fundraiser...

*Is Manhattan's most eligible bachelor officially off the
market?*

Love is in the air for Aiden Kilbourn...

Chapter Fifty-Three

Their bliss lasted until Monday morning.

Franchesca steamed past reception, leaving the staff staring after her.

When Oscar rose from his desk, she shook her head.

“He better be in there, and no one better interrupt us,” Frankie said, stabbing a finger at him.

Oscar bobbed his head. “Yes, ma’am!”

She heaved open the door and marched inside, ignoring the delighted expression on Aiden’s face. He wasn’t allowed to be delighted. He should be shaking in his boots.

She dropped her iPad on the desk in front of him with the offending article.

“You can’t just buy a company because some guy was mean to me!”

Aiden’s gaze flicked down to the headline and back up.

“Mean to you? Franchesca, he put his hands on you.”

“So, you bought his company and *fired* him?”

“He’s lucky I didn’t do more than that.”

“Don’t put me in the middle of your pissing contest. Some guy thought he could beat you, so you *ruin him*?”

“Some guy thought he could touch you, drag you away from your work, and insult you, and I’m supposed to do what? Nothing?”

Frankie flopped down in the leather visitor’s chair. Gio had called her on her way into work to tell her he always liked Aiden and approved of his methods. She’d only been at her desk long enough to corroborate the story before she took a personal day and rode the train downtown in a fit of rage.

She scrolled through more of the article.

“Oh, my God. He checked into *rehab*?”

Aiden looked so unconcerned with the fact that he'd ruined a man's life, Frankie was aghast.

“You're not going to convince me that I should have left him alone,” he said coolly. “And I'm not the only one. Your brothers—”

“If you agree with my brothers, then we have a problem. They're idiots.”

“They have your back, and so do I.”

“You took it too far, Aiden!” Frankie rose and paced his office.

“Would it make you feel better if I told you he's a systemic harasser? That he's paid off previous accusers? That his company was weeks away from bankruptcy, and all those people would have lost their jobs?”

She flopped back down in the chair again, suddenly exhausted.

“You and I, Franchesca? We're in this together. We belong to each other. And if someone comes after you, they will live to regret it. I expect the same courtesy from you.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “So I'm supposed to say thank you?”

The door to Aiden's office flew open. Ferris Kilbourn strode in with Oscar hot on his heels.

“I need a word with you,” Ferris announced, zeroing in on Aiden behind the desk.

“Sorry,” Oscar mouthed to Frankie.

“Why in the hell would you get tangled up in a mess like Goffman's company?” Ferris demanded, slapping down a newspaper where Frankie had only minutes earlier dumped her tablet. “You're not thinking with your brain, son.”

Aiden rose and buttoned his jacket.

Oscar inched out of the room and quietly closed the door.

“If you think I'm going to let you throw away everything this family has built over a girl—”

Frankie cleared her throat and rose from her chair.

“If you have a problem with the way Aiden is running the company, maybe you shouldn’t have dumped it on him,” she snapped.

“Don’t insert yourself in family business, Franchesca,” Ferris said coolly.

“You’ll watch how you speak to her,” Aiden snapped, his voice was cold enough that Frankie shivered.

“You don’t have the luxury of dabbling in pet projects, Aiden. You have a legacy to fulfill. People are counting on you. *I’m counting on you.*”

“If you have a problem with my performance as CEO, take it to the board,” Aiden suggested.

Frankie moved to stand next to him. “Or, you could trust your son to do right by you and the business,” Frankie spoke up. “You may not understand or particularly like some of his decisions, but *you* put him in this position. Now it’s time to trust him to do what’s best for your family.”

“I know what’s best for the family. And you are not it.”

Frankie crossed her arms. “Said the guy who dumped an empire on his son and said, ‘good luck running it.’ Oh and try to turn your sociopathic half-brother into a contributing adult. I’ll be in the Caribbean.”

“I’ve given this company everything,” Ferris shouted.

“What have you given your son besides an impossible responsibility?” Frankie shouted back. “You owe him more than a job. And you know what? Even if he wasn’t your son, what kind of sense does it make to hand over the reins and then expect him to do everything with one hand tied behind his back? You’re sabotaging him because you’re doubting yourself.”

Ferris glowered at them both and snatched the newspaper off the desk. “You’d better think long and hard about the choices you’re making.” He was speaking to Aiden but pointed the folded paper at Frankie.

The message was clear. Choose family or choose hot mess girlfriend.

She felt Aiden's hand settle at the small of her back.

* * *

“Well, that was pleasant,” she said dryly after Ferris stormed out. “Are you okay?”

Aiden put his hands on her shoulders and squeezed. “Come on,” he said, nudging her toward the door.

“Where are we going?”

“I want air. And coffee.”

“Air and coffee sound good.” She watched him slide into his long wool coat, admiring the view of tailored suit, strong jaw, and unreadable eyes. “What if we run into your dad in the elevator?”

“Then you can hit him with a tray,” Aiden promised.

Oscar was sitting behind his desk, pretending to be very busy.

“Oscar, we're going for coffee. Do you want us to bring anything back for you?” Frankie offered.

“Double espresso with soy,” Oscar rattled off without looking up from his blank word document where he was typing gibberish. “Please.”

Frankie wasn't sure if she or Ferris had scared Oscar more.

They took the elevator in silence, and Frankie let Aiden lead her through the lobby and out into the frigid first day of March.

He held her hand but remained silent on the half block walk to a café. Frankie's nerves all but crackled. Was he ushering her off site to politely explain that things wouldn't work between

them anymore? That they'd had a good run, but family came first?

She swallowed hard. She couldn't blame him exactly. She'd been a disaster from the start. In the time since Barbados, she had assaulted his brother, insulted his stepmother, embarrassed his entire family with a public brawl, and now was to blame for Aiden using the company coffers to get even with someone who dared act like an asshole in her presence.

Maybe she should just do it first. *Thanks for all the amazing sex and being a really great, smart, funny, protective boyfriend, Aiden, but it's time to move on...*

Her heart was pounding so loud in her ears, she didn't hear him ask her what she wanted the first time.

"Franchesca?"

"Oh, sorry. Tea. Ginger?" She needed something to calm her stomach that was currently turning somersaults.

He ordered for them and led her to a small table in the corner. Solicitously, he helped her out of her coat. If he was letting her take her coat off, was he settling in for a long-winded break up? She'd rather he just rip off the bandage and let it weep pus in the open air.

Gross.

"Franchesca," he began.

She squeezed her eyes closed, bracing for the brush off.

But no brush off came. No words at all. She opened one eye to peek. He was watching her with amusement.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm bracing myself."

"For what?"

"For the 'it's been nice knowing you' speech."

"That's what you think?" he laughed. "I'm surprised you didn't try to beat me to the punch and dump me in the lobby."

She blushed.

“You thought about it?” he asked, somewhere between astonished and amused.

“I didn’t know what this was. I thought you were mad. I—just shut up. Okay?”

The barista called Aiden’s name, and still chuckling, he picked up their order.

He handed her the tea and sank back down in his chair.

“Thank you.”

“For what? I’ve done nothing but create disasters since we met.”

“For doing what no one else in my entire life has had the balls to do. You stood up to my father.”

“What about your mother?” Frankie asked, blowing on the steam rising from her cup.

“Mom convinced, cajoled. She never yelled at him. Never called him on his bullshit.”

“See, this is why people become assholes. They’re insulated by trust funds or glass towers or titles, and everyone else is too scared to point out they’ve turned into a monster.”

“But you’ll call a monster a monster?”

“What’s he going to do? Go open a deli next to my parents’ and run them out of business? Kidnap one of my brothers? I’m one of the little people. Not even worth the energy of flicking me off.”

Aiden shook his head. “But you’re important to me. That makes you important to him.”

“You’re not suggesting your father would go all Elliot on me, are you?”

“Kilbourns are ruthless,” Aiden reminded her. “I’ve told you before.”

“Ruthless or not, hurting me would only hurt you. And as shitty as his attitude is right now, I don’t believe your father wants to hurt you.”

“What did you mean he was sabotaging me because he’s doubting himself?” Aiden asked, studying her over his coffee.

“A little psychology. No one walks away from their empire without worrying that they’re making the right decision. He doesn’t know who he’ll be if he’s not part of that empire anymore, and that reality is hitting him.”

“So you pushed the button?”

“I Aidened him.”

“When did you start playing so dirty?” Aiden asked, taking her hand in his and tracing his thumb over her palm.

“When I started hanging out with the ruthless, pillaging Kilbourns.”

Chapter Fifty-Four

Aiden checked his phone for messages from Frankie as he headed toward his waiting car. He'd just wrapped another round of meetings with management in Goffman's app development firm and could feel the excitement of momentum. With a few tweaks to the corporate structure, an overhaul of terrible existing policies, and a rebranding under the Kilbourn umbrella, he could see a very bright future for the company.

His father would have to eat his words on this deal eventually.

He was opening Frankie's text when he collided with someone.

"I'm sorry," he said, reaching out to steady the woman.

"Oh, Aiden!" Margeaux, the bitchy bridesmaid from Chip and Pru's wedding, stared up at him, her eyes welling with tears.

Of all the people to smack into on a busy sidewalk, it had to be the one who would probably sue him or try to blackmail him into bed.

"Are you hurt?" he asked curtly, looking her over. She wore a camel-colored wool coat. Her blonde hair was curled in thick ringlets that hung down past her shoulders. Her missing eyebrow had mostly grown back.

She gripped him by the lapels of his coat and threw herself against his chest. "I just need a friendly face," she said in a tremulous voice.

Aiden looked over at his car and sighed. So close.

"I don't know what to do! My boyfriend and I just got into a fight, and he left me here," she said, her voice pitching into a wail.

Aiden gritted his teeth. She was a horrible human being but a horrible human being in need. "Can I offer you a ride?" he asked.

She nodded, looking up at him as if he were her own personal hero. He didn't like it. There was something slippery about this woman. Like an eel. He didn't think she'd appreciate the analogy.

He opened the door for her and, with a glance over his shoulder, slid in next to her. She crowded him on the seat, leaning against him. "Where can we drop you?" Aiden asked briskly.

"Oh, Fifth and East 59th. Please." She added the word like it was an afterthought. It sounded foreign from her lips.

She was fiddling with her phone, still leaning too close. He pulled out his own phone, using his elbow to dislodge her from his side, and scrolled through his messages. Frankie was leading another social media workshop, and thanks to her known association with Aiden, enrollment had skyrocketed with small business owners hoping the Kilbourn fortune would spread through osmosis.

Frankie: I think they're half expecting you to come strolling through the door doling out money bags.

Aiden: I should stop by with my money bags. I seem to have an excess of it since my girlfriend won't let me spend it on her.

Frankie: Funny guy. Gotta go teach people how to geographically target their Facebook ads.

Aiden: See you tonight, beautiful.

She responded with a heart emoji. And Aiden eyed it feeling like a king. She didn't know it, but she was falling for him. He just had to wait for the right time to bring it to her attention. And possibly come clean that he'd come to the conclusion weeks ago.

He was in love and, for the first time in his life, thinking about next steps in the relationship department.

He sent a glance in Margeaux's direction. She was reclining on the opposite side of the car, a sly smile on her face as her fingers flew over her phone's keyboard.

“So, you had a fight with your boyfriend?” Aiden asked, not really caring. But they had fifteen blocks to go, and her change in attitude unnerved him.

“Hmm?” she said, looking up from her screen. “Oh, yes. A fight. And it’s the last one as far as I’m concerned. I deserve better, and I’ll see that I get it.”

“Mmm,” Aiden murmured noncommittally. From his limited experience with Margeaux, she deserved to have lemon juice poured into paper cuts every day for the rest of her miserable life. But who was he to judge?

He had Frankie, and that was all that mattered. There would be no more trading one girlfriend for another, one heiress for another. He had what he wanted. Finally.

Aiden briefly entertained the idea of sending Goffman a thank you card for being an asshole.

He was feeling confident in the future. Franchesca was finishing up her MBA in the next two months, and they’d been discussing what she’d do professionally afterwards. He’d hoped she’d consider a position with his company. She’d laughed in his face when he suggested it. But he was persuasive. He could wear her down. And he could use her. Even if she didn’t want to work with him directly, he had a number of new smaller acquisitions that could use her energy. She liked the small business arena. Maybe he could build something for her to manage?

He’d bring it up again in a week or so and test the waters.

“Here we are,” Morris announced from behind the wheel. Whatever business Margeaux had was in a pricey art deco hotel. Morris hustled around and opened the rear door. Aiden stepped out and offered Margeaux his hand.

“Best of luck to you, Margeaux,” he said.

“I don’t need luck,” she said with a smirk and then raised on her tip toes to press a kiss to the side of his mouth. “See you around.”

She strolled into the hotel. Aiden shook his head.

Morris gave a shiver. “That one there’s an evil one,” he announced.

“You’re not wrong,” Aiden agreed.

Once a bachelor always a bachelor

Aiden Kilbourn caught sneaking into hotel with socialite

Aiden Kilbourn's girlfriend devastated by affair

Chapter Fifty-Five

Frankie locked the front door of the development center behind her and shouldered her bag. It was cold and dark. A typically depressing March evening. But she had Aiden and takeout to look forward to in a few hours. She'd let that thought keep her warm on the walk home.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket, but before she could dig it out, a shadowy figure pushed away from the wall one storefront down.

“Well, if it isn't my old friend Franchesca,” Elliot Kilbourn said slyly, falling into step with her.

“How's the schnoz, Elliot?” she asked breezily. There was only one reason Elliot would be waiting for her. Trouble.

“I snore now, thanks to you.”

“Consider it a souvenir that reminds you not to abduct people.”

“Did you know that I'm not the only Kilbourn with dirty secrets?” he asked. His gleeful tone put her on edge.

Frankie stopped mid-stride. “Look. Let's get this over with, okay? I've had a long day. Just drop the subterfuge and spill it.”

“I came to offer my condolences,” he said, grinning devilishly as if he relished every word. “The news is breaking right now.”

He handed her his phone and Frankie gave the screen a careless glance.

Once a bachelor, always a bachelor. Aiden Kilbourn throws over girlfriend for hotel fling with socialite.

The pictures. God. The pictures. Aiden with Margeaux Fucking Assface in his arms on a city sidewalk. Their heads were tilted toward each other, faces serious. It looked... intimate. Aiden in his limo with Margeaux cuddled up against

his side. She was pouting for the selfie while he looked at his phone. Then Aiden and Margeaux getting out of the car in front of a hotel and Margeaux leaning into him, pressing a kiss to his mouth.

Frankie was going to murder someone. She just wasn't sure who to start with.

Wordlessly, she handed the phone back to Elliot.

"He's not the guy you thought he was," Elliot said. "He's selfish and cruel and only cares about himself."

Frankie started to walk away. Her gut was roiling with anger and pain and confusion.

"There's a SnapChat video too. But you probably don't need to see that," he said, picking up the pace to keep up with her. "And there's one more thing."

Frankie pinched her lips shut. She was going to throw up. Or scream. Or both.

"Aiden's the reason Chip dumped your friend all those years ago."

"What did you just say?" Frankie came to a screeching halt.

"He and Chip were talking at my parents' house. They didn't know I was around. They never did."

Frankie saw the bitterness in Elliot's eyes.

"Chip mentioned he was thinking about proposing soon. But Aiden didn't like that. He told Chip that he didn't think Pruitt was a good match. That she wouldn't be the kind of partner he'd need. Chip didn't see what he was doing, but I did."

"What was he doing?" Her phone vibrated again, and she knew without looking it was Aiden.

"He was pulling strings like a puppet master. Kilbourns learn it from birth. How to make people do what you want them to do. He 'guided' Chip to the same conclusion, telling him Pruitt was too immature, too needy. She wouldn't be the right partner for him."

“Why would he do that?” Frankie asked, her voice barely a whisper. Why would Aiden ruin Chip’s happiness? Why would he set into motion years of misery and pain for Pruitt?

“Who knows?” Elliot shrugged. “Maybe he wanted her for himself? Maybe he couldn’t stand seeing his friend happy? The point is, he’s not the man you thought he was.”

“Go home, Elliot,” Frankie said quietly. A ton of bricks had just leveled her. And worse, she hadn’t seen them coming. She should have known better.

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news,” he offered, still smiling over whatever triumph he’d achieved by carving her out and leaving her bleeding.

“No. You’re not.”

She walked away, and this time, he didn’t stop her. He left whistling a happy little tune.

Frankie’s phone vibrated again. She pulled it out. Aiden.

He’d called four times so far. Pru called too. But she wasn’t prepared to talk. She needed to go someplace. And home was no longer an option.

He’d find her there.

She turned around and let herself back into the darkened office. Locking the door securely behind her, Frankie took her laptop upstairs to the conference room and sat in the dark.

She brought up the first gossip blog she could think of and forced herself to read the article, to look at the pictures. “Oh, shit. There really is a video,” she murmured to herself. Frankie didn’t consider herself a coward under the worst circumstances, but it still took her nearly five minutes to push play.

It was Margeaux—that nasty asshole—laying across the leather of a limo bench seat. Her head was in a man’s lap. He was wearing a gray suit, just like Aiden’s in the pictures. She was toying with his tie, stroking his thigh. “Heading to the Manchester for some afternoon delight,” she purred. Frankie wanted to break her laptop, snap it in half, set it on fire.

Anything to get the image of Margeaux and Aiden out of her head. A hand in the video swooped down to stroke over Margeaux's jaw.

Frankie frowned and hit pause. She backed up the video and watched it again. The hand was wrong. So was the watch. Aiden wore a Patek Philippe watch that cost more than her parents' house when they bought it forty years ago. A sentimental and flashy gift from his father upon joining the company. The man in the video wore Cartier.

Son of a bitch.

She scrolled back to the pictures. The first one on the sidewalk. It was shot as if to highlight Margeaux's face as she looked up at Aiden. His face was angled away. It was definitely him, but there was something about the photo. It wasn't the blurry shot of a tourist or a rushed frame from a paparazzi. It looked crisp, clear, professional. Staged?

Frankie rubbed her temples. Her phone vibrated again on the table in front of her. It was Gio.

"What?" she answered.

"Dude, I don't know what's going on, but Aide's about five seconds from tearing Brooklyn apart brick by brick looking for you."

"You see the news?" she asked.

"Yeah, I saw it," Gio said, sounding more annoyed than furious.

"Front row at a Knicks game's enough to buy your loyalty?" Frankie asked.

"Jesus, Frankie. The dude in the video had a manicure. It ain't Aiden. The guy is losing his shit, sis. I know you're gonna hate me for this, but I think someone set him up."

She'd already come to the same conclusion, but that didn't explain the other pictures. The embrace, the kiss. And there was that whole other thing about destroying the happiness of her best friend in the world.

"I'm not ready to talk to him yet," Frankie said.

“Can I at least tell him you’re okay?”

“Fine. Whatever. Look, I gotta go.”

“Are you okay?” Gio asked.

For the first time, she felt tears prick at her eyes.

“Not really,” she said, her voice breaking.

Gio swore. “Listen. You know I have your back, right? No matter what.”

“Yeah. I know,” she said, finding a sliver of comfort in that. *Family first.*

She hung up and dialed the only person who would tell her the truth.

Chapter Fifty-Six

Aiden kicked open the door of his penthouse and strode inside. The desk had called to tell him that Ms. Baranski was waiting for him. He saw her, sitting on the leather sofa, a bag packed on the floor, two glasses of scotch in front of her. Relief, fast and fierce, coursed through him.

“Franchesca,” he whispered her name.

She turned to him but didn’t look him in the eye, and Aiden’s stomach sank. He reached for her, but the chill she gave off stopped him.

“Tell me you don’t believe it,” he said quietly. He needed her to know him, to trust him. The idea that she could ever think that he’d—

“Some of the pictures are real,” she said flatly.

He nodded. “Yes. I ran into her after my meeting this week. She bumped into me and acted as if she was crying. Said she had some kind of fight with her boyfriend.”

“You gave her a ride,” Frankie filled in.

“Yes. *Just* a ride.” He reached for her again, but she leaned forward and picked up a glass and handed it to him.

He closed his fingers around the cold of the crystal and wished it was her skin. If he could only touch her, everything would be all right. They couldn’t lie to each other when they were touching.

“I believe you,” she said simply, and the ball in Aiden’s gut dissolved. He dropped to his knees in front of her dumping the scotch on the rug to run his hands up the outside of her thighs.

“I’m so sorry. I don’t know why Margeaux would have done something like that. Attention or—”

“Revenge,” Frankie filled in. “Did you know she was involved with Elliot?”

Aiden's spine stiffened. The alcohol soaked into the knees of his trousers. Elliot. It wasn't Margeaux and the fake scandal. It was Elliot and what he'd told her.

"I didn't know," he began, waiting for her to determine his fate.

"I'm not going to do this anymore, Aiden." Her voice was so calm, so flat.

"Franchesca, you can't leave." She couldn't. It was physically impossible for her to leave. She had possession of his heart. If she walked out, she'd leave with it.

She shook her head, and when she met his gaze, he saw the temper in her eyes. "Don't 'you can't' me. I'm sick of being in a fucking circus."

She rose, and he grabbed onto her hips, his forehead landing on her stomach. "Franchesca."

She pulled him to his feet. "Look at me, Aiden," she ordered.

He did as he was told and cupped her face in his hands. She closed her eyes for a moment. And when she opened them, he knew he'd lost her.

"I want you to understand I know you didn't have an affair with Margeaux. I know that you wouldn't have done that to me."

"Then why..." he trailed off. He knew why. He wanted her to say the words that he deserved to hear.

"I want to hear you say it." Her words echoed his own thoughts. "I want you to tell me."

Aiden clenched his jaw. He felt powerless. Was this karma for all his years of manipulation, living for the pursuit of success at all costs? He could have had it all, and now he'd be left with everything he had before. Ironically, it added up to the equivalent of nothing without Franchesca.

"I was afraid she wasn't right for him. She seemed so young, so immature. He was my first real friend, and I was looking out for him. At the time, I didn't think she was the right partner for him."

Frankie flinched at his words, and he felt her pain like it was his own wound.

“Go on,” she said flatly.

“He had just graduated and was talking about getting engaged. I thought... I thought it was a mistake. I didn’t realize how strong her feelings were for him. I’d only met Pruitt a handful of times. I thought I was doing him a favor.”

“Do you know how devastated she was?” Frankie asked, her voice low and strained.

“I had no idea until you mentioned it at the wedding. When they found their way back together again, they seemed so much better suited. She was steadier, more mature. She was good for him. I thought the time apart had been warranted.”

“She didn’t eat, Aiden. She couldn’t get out of bed. She should have been hospitalized, but instead her parents pumped her full of anti-anxiety meds and put a full-time nurse on her. She thought she’d met *the one*. Thought her future was just starting, and then you took it away from her because she wasn’t good enough.”

Her voice rose sharply.

“Franchesca, sweetheart. I’m so sorry. I never meant to cause any harm. I was looking out for a friend and had I known how deeply Pruitt felt for him I never would have said anything.”

“If she wasn’t good enough, then what am I, Aiden? If Pruitt ‘Blueblood’ Stockton isn’t good enough, why did you waste so much time slumming it with me?”

He gripped her arms. “You are everything to me, Franchesca. Everything I didn’t know I was missing. Everything that I can’t live without now. I love you.”

He saw them, bright in her eyes. Shock and horror. “What did you just say?” There was nothing flat and dull about her tone now.

“I said I fucking love you.”

“You do *not* get to manipulate me with that word! You don’t get to pull it out and throw it down when you’re in fucking

trouble for hurting people that I love. You don't get to use love as a tool to get you what you want."

The panic was clawing its way up his throat. "It's the truth, Franchesca. Damn it. I'm no good at this. I've never told anyone who wasn't my mother that I—"

"Stop talking, Aiden! Christ. I'm a regular person. Regular people don't have photographers following them around or rich assholes trying to destroy their relationships. Regular people don't use love as a weapon."

"What do you want me to do? Tell me, and I'll do it," Aiden commanded.

"I want you to let me go," Franchesca shouted.

"No!" He would do anything for her. Just not that.

"You don't get to decide to keep us together. You hurt my friends. You hurt me. And you didn't tell me yourself. I had to hear it from your creepy brother who was waiting to pounce outside my office. Everywhere I go, there's a Kilbourn telling me I'm not good enough."

"Elliot is my problem. I'll handle him."

"He cooked this up. He and Margeaux. I'd bet your big fat checking account on it. Pru and I saw them when we were out to lunch. I thought they were dating, but they were plotting."

"Elliot wants me to buy him out of the company. He said he'd tell you about Pru and Chip if I didn't close the deal."

"So why didn't you?" Frankie demanded.

"I thought he was bluffing."

"Wrong fucking answer, Kilbourn!"

"It's the truth!" Aiden roared.

"I *know* it's the truth! That's the problem! I can't deal with this, Aiden. I don't want to spend my life being outmaneuvered or lied to or constantly threatened or used because of your last name. I want a *partnership*. That's not what we have."

She made a move toward her duffle bag, and he stopped her, grabbing her arm.

“We can have it. I swear to you, Franchesca.”

“You said you’d give me everything I wanted,” she said, looking at him accusingly.

“Anything and everything.”

“But you couldn’t even be honest with me. Tell me, when Elliot came to you with what he knew, did it even occur to you to come clean? To tell me? To take your lumps and hope for the best?”

Had he considered it? Or had he just decided to handle it?

“Everything is a power play to you,” she said quietly. “And I’m done being played.”

She tried to free herself from his grip, but he held on tighter.

“You’re hurting me.”

“*You’re hurting me*, Franchesca. Let’s talk about this. Let me fix this!” If she walked out that door, he knew she’d never be back. It was like holding back the tide, but he’d be damned if he didn’t at least try.

“I’m not lying when I say I love you. I really felt it and knew what it was at my mother’s house. I looked at you in the audience, and you’re all I saw. You’re all I want to see every day for the rest of my life. Please don’t let this break us, Franchesca.”

“You’ve known you loved me for how many weeks now, and you didn’t think to tell me? Like an ace up your sleeve? Your get out of jail free card? Do you see how fucked up that is? Do you think that’s what I deserve?”

“No, of course not. I’ve never been in love before, Franchesca. So excuse me if I don’t know how to process it. It took a battle just to get you to date me. I didn’t know what it would be like to say those words to you and hear nothing but silence in return. I wasn’t ready.”

“Who said there would have been silence, you idiot?” Temper and tears glistened in her eyes. “Who said you were the only one who felt those feelings?”

He gripped her arms. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I loved you, too. You ass!”

Loved? How could it be past tense just like that?

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you’re Aiden Kilbourn, permanent bachelor and womanizer. You’re married to your work. And I didn’t know how to say it. I wasn’t saving it up to tip the scales at the right moment. I didn’t know how to tell you without breaking my own heart.”

“Franchesca, we can make this work. We love each other.”

“It’s not enough.”

“It has to be.”

She shook her head and pulled free from his grip and held up her hands when he stepped forward. “Look at me. Understand me. I don’t want to be here and I don’t want you to come with me.”

“Why can’t we talk this out? Why can’t you let me fix this?”

“Because a team fixes things together, Aiden. And we’re not a team, and we’re not together.”

He took a step back as if she’d landed a physical blow. This couldn’t be the end of it. But she was picking up her bag and moving to the door. She paused, her hand on the knob.

“Don’t talk to me. Don’t come see me. Don’t call me.”

God she meant it. He’d never seen her so serious, so hurt. And he’d done that.

“And one more thing. Elliot’s trying to ruin you, Aiden. Be careful there.”

She left, closing the door behind her with a quiet click. And all the light went out of his world.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Back in her apartment, in the bed they had shared, she finally let the tears come. Hot and salty, they scorched paths down her cheeks and soaked the pillow beneath her. His pillow. She'd known, hadn't she, that this was how it would end? She'd taken precautions, but in the end, nothing could have guarded her heart from Aiden.

He'd looked so brokenly at her as she left. She felt his pain echo inside her. They were both to blame. She for falling for him and him for disappointing her. He would always be looking for a way to win. It was in his blood.

Frankie rolled over, clutching the pillow to her chest and cried until she slept.

The dull gray winter morning did little to coax her out of bed. She'd seen Pru in the depths of despair over Chip and had promised herself she'd never let a man wreck her like that. And here she was aching on the inside, eyes puffy from so many tears shed.

She couldn't today. She couldn't go out into the world, not with news of Aiden and Margeaux smugly splattered on every blog and news site in the city. Not with the truth of her loneliness.

She texted Brenda and sent her apologies saying she wasn't feeling well and couldn't come in today.

Great. Not even the threat of loss of income could tempt her out of bed. She was officially a broken woman. She didn't even want food. She just wanted to be left alone.

As if the universe heard that thought, there was a loud pounding on her door. Frankie's heart raced at the thought that it might be Aiden who magically found the right words to stop her hurt. She pulled a pillow over her head and pretended the world didn't exist.

Unfortunately, the world had a key to her apartment. Two big bodies hit her mattress, jostling her under the covers.

“Go away.”

Her pillow, the one that smelled like Aiden’s shampoo—oh God, his thousand-million-dollar shampoo was still in her shower—was ripped from her face.

Her brother Marco smiled down at her. “There she is,” he said cheerfully.

“Get. Out.”

“It’s either us or Ma, and she’s curled up in the fetal position crying about all those beautiful Kilbourn babies she’ll never get to hold,” Gio announced from the foot of her bed.

Frankie did the last thing her brothers expected her to do. She burst into tears. In all her adult years, she had never once cried in their presence. Not even that time when one of their buffoon cousins broke her arm playing flag football on Thanksgiving.

“Oh, shit,” Marco whispered.

“What do we do?” Gio demanded.

“I can still hear you, idiots,” Frankie sobbed, ripping the pillow out of Marco’s hand and holding it over her head.

“She trying to suffocate herself?”

“I’m callin’ Rach. She’ll know what to do.”

“You’re not calling anyone! I’m fine!” Frankie wailed. If she was going to humiliate herself, she was going to commit to it. At least it would teach her brothers to never enter her apartment without an express invitation again.

Not that they’d be interrupting anything. New life plan: She was going to age badly and rescue a bunch of cats that would one day eat her in her sleep.

Frankie heard Marco on the phone in her living room through the paper-thin walls. “I never saw her like this before,” he was saying.

“What can we do, Frankie?” Gio was asking. “You want us to go beat the shit out of him?”

She sat upright. “No, I don’t want you to beat the shit out of him!”

He frowned. “You want us to beat the shit out of her?”

“Maybe.” She shook her head. “No, I don’t want anyone beating the shit out of anyone. It wasn’t true. He was set up, but we’re still broken up. Okay?”

“I’m confused.”

She flopped back down on the bed and held the pillow over her face.

Marco came back in the room. “Rach gave me a really specific list. I’m gonna go get the stuff. You stay here. And don’t let her look out the window.”

“Why?” Frankie asked, sitting up again.

“Shit. I thought you couldn’t hear me through the pillow.”

“What’s outside my window?” Frankie scrambled over the mattress, and Gio made a dive for her, but she dodged him. She pressed her face to the dingy glass. “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“Fuckin’ paparazzi,” Gio sighed.

“Why are there cameramen outside my building?”

“I guess you didn’t see the news today.”

“What the hell could have possibly happened?”

“Aiden filed a lawsuit against that Mar-goat chick and every blog and news site that printed the story. Most of them already printed retractions.”

“How is this my life?” she murmured to herself.

“I’m going out the alley. Be back in a few,” Marco said, shrugging back into his coat.

Frankie drew her blinds, throwing the apartment into the gloomy kind of darkness she felt in her heart. She let Gio talk her into at least getting out of bed and brushing her hair, but

when she spotted Aiden's comb and a stray pair of boxer briefs in the hamper, she lost all desire to behave like a human.

They slumped on the couch staring at a rerun until Marco returned.

"Okay, we got some glossy magazines that don't say anything about keeping your man on the cover," he said unloading the bag on her coffee table. "Some tissues in case that thing that happened in there happens again. Six different kinds of chocolate bars. Two pints of ice cream because any more than that and you'll hate yourself in the morning. And a quart of chicken noodle."

"What's in the other bag?" Frankie asked, with a sniffle.

"I bought a bunch of blow 'em up Blurays that we can watch. And the taco truck was two blocks over, so I got some of those, too."

"Thanks, Marco," she said. "Thanks, Gio."

Gio ruffled her freshly brushed hair and flipped her off. "Family."

* * *

Aiden hadn't called. When she finally got the nerve to turn her phone back on, she had fifteen missed calls from him, but that was before the showdown at his penthouse. He hadn't called her since. But he had texted.

Aiden: I know you said no calling. But you didn't explicitly say no texting. And until you tell me otherwise, I'll keep texting. I miss you. I'm sorry.

Aiden: I have exactly everything I had before you, but now it feels like nothing.

Aiden: I wish we were on your couch. You cuddled up to me. Me playing with your hair. Leftovers going cold on the table.

I miss you.

Aiden: I'm suing a bunch of people today. I thought you should know. No one gets away with hurting you, Francesca. Not even me. I'm in misery without you.

The next morning the gifts started. No direct contact. Just little gifts with handwritten cards delivered by messenger. On Tuesday, he sent a stack of romance novels and a hefty gift card to Christian's salon to her apartment. On Wednesday, when she finally returned to work, he had gourmet hot chocolate delivered for her, Brenda, and Raul. Frankie didn't want to know how he knew she was at work. If he was still keeping tabs on her, he still had hope. Something she didn't.

On Thursday, Frankie found a bundle of fuzzy knee-high socks outside her apartment door. The kind she loved to wear under her boots.

Friday brought a silky soft set of pajamas. Not sexy lingerie but the kind you'd pull on after a long week and live in for the weekend. She'd put them on immediately and curled up on the couch with Aiden's Yale sweatshirt that she'd pulled from the laundry basket so it wouldn't lose his scent.

The week was a blur of "no comment" when she (rarely) ventured out in public and unenthusiastic "I'm fines" at work and around her mother's dining table. She felt cold inside as if she'd taken the winter within her and would never again warm up.

And every night, she fell asleep on the couch without ever turning on the TV, avoiding the big, beautiful bed and its memories.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Aiden gazed out his office window, ignoring the pile of things that required his attention on the desk. He had nothing to give. Just showing up drained him. He was tuned out, shut down, and it was affecting his work. Oscar was walking on eggshells around him. Meetings were magically rescheduled for future dates. His mother spent their entire dinner together last night smiling sympathetically at him.

And Aiden couldn't rouse himself to care.

His desk phone beeped.

"Yes?"

"There are two burly gentlemen from Brooklyn here to see you," Oscar announced.

"We're comin' in, Aide." Aiden heard Gio's voice through the door.

Great. Just what he needed. The Baranski brothers ready to beat the hell out of him.

"Send them in," he sighed.

A second later, his door opened, and Gio and Marco sauntered in. They were probably playing it cool so Oscar didn't call security right away.

Marco slumped into one of the visitor's chairs while Gio prowled the office. Aiden couldn't tell if he was admiring the view or looking for security cameras.

He waited for one of them to speak first, hurling threats or accusations, demanding sacrificial kneecaps or whatever body part it was the Baranski brothers would break for their little sister.

"Bro, what the hell?" Marco asked, breaking the silence. "You gotta watch yourself around girls like that."

"Girls like what?" Aiden asked calmly.

“That Margeaux chick,” Gio filled in, coming over to lean against the corner of his desk.

“She exudes evil, man. I’m surprised you fell for it and let her set you up like that,” Marco sighed.

“Set me up? You believe me that nothing happened?”

Gio snorted. “Frankie’s prime rib, and we’re supposed to believe you’d go through the drive-thru for some Skeletor, pinched-face, ball buster?”

“So, you’re *not* here to beat the shit out of me?” Aiden clarified.

The brothers threw back their heads and laughed but didn’t give him a definitive yes or no.

Aiden’s phone buzzed, and he glanced down at the screen.

Oscar: Do I need to call security?

Aiden: Not unless you hear me sobbing for my mommy.

He returned his attention to the brothers. “Then why are you here?”

“Frankie is wrecked,” Gio announced.

“We figured you probably weren’t doing so hot either,” Marco chimed in.

“You could say that,” Aiden said, looking down at the disorganized mess on his desk. “I need to get her back.”

Marco sighed, and shoved a hand through his thick hair. “I don’t know, man.”

Aiden rubbed a hand over his brow. “No advice, no magic key to make her forgive me?”

“She ever tell you about our second cousin Mattie?” Gio asked.

Aiden shook his head.

“Yeah, that’s because she won’t speak his name. He got gum in her hair when she was nine, and Ma had to cut it out. She didn’t speak to Mattie again until his wedding last year.”

“She’s not big on forgiveness,” Marco said. “Like ever.”

“It can’t be over,” Aiden said, pushing his phone around on the desk. She’d not once responded to one of his texts or gifts. Desperation made his chest ache.

“Ah, shit,” Gio sighed, scratching the back of his head. “Look. You can’t keep texting her and sending her stuff, okay? Anything you do is gonna look like psychological warfare.”

“You want me to give up?” Aiden asked.

“Nah, man,” Marco said. “Just make it *look* like you’re giving up.”

“Look, guys. I haven’t been sleeping well. I’m not getting what you’re trying to say,” Aiden said.

“She’s a smart girl, our Frankie. Stubborn but smart,” Gio began.

Marco shifted in his chair. “You fucked up, pretty big. But so did she.”

“She didn’t do anything,” Aiden argued.

“She’s had one foot out the door your entire relationship because she figured it would end bad. She was scared, and if you ever repeat that to her, I’ll fuck you up and lie about it,” Gio said, pointing a finger at him.

“She was looking for an excuse,” Aiden said half to himself.

“Yeah, but given her current level of misery, if you give her some space, she’s gonna figure it out that she isn’t the innocent party here either.”

“How much space?” Aiden asked. He needed them to spell it out for him. The idea of abandoning his efforts—giving up control—was terrifying, but a tiny spark of hope lit in his chest.

“All the space,” Marco said.

“No texting, no presents, no nothing,” Gio added.

Aiden covered his eyes for a minute trying to wrap his head around the idea of giving up and hoping for the best. It went

against everything in his DNA to leave things up to chance.

“I was thinking about paying off her student loans,” he admitted. His small gestures hadn’t gotten her attention. Maybe a bigger one would. She would have at least been compelled to come to his office and scream at him.

“Oh, Christ, no!” Marco said, looking horrified.

“She’d hate that, man,” Gio agreed. “Do not, I repeat, do not go throwing piles of money at Frankie. She’ll just set them on fire.”

“So, I give up? Leave her alone?”

“You make it *look* like you’re giving up,” Marco said as if there was a difference.

“If I do this, do you think there’s a chance she could forgive me?”

“Yeah,” Gio said supportively. “I do.”

“A real small one,” Marco piped up. He shrugged when his brother shot him an incredulous look. “What? I don’t want him to get his hopes up if she decides to Frosty the Snow Bitch him permanently.”

“Listen, you gotta think of something else, Aide. Are you prepared to forgive her? She walked out on you instead of having your back—again, if you ever say this to her I will ruin your very nice face also probably your fancy suit—and if you’re going to let that fester, you don’t have a chance.”

The philosophers of Brooklyn were sitting in his office giving him advice and the tiniest sliver of hope.

“I won’t let it fester,” he promised.

“Good.” The brothers nodded.

“You got a nice place here,” Marco said, glancing around.

“What? We’re making small talk now?” Gio demanded.

“I’m being polite.” Marco kicked Gio’s knee where it rested on the desk.

“Ouch! Fucker!”

Oscar: Was that a body blow I just heard?

“Anyway,” Gio said, looking at the clock on his phone.

Aiden felt himself tense. He didn’t want them to leave. They felt like his only tangible connection to Frankie.

“You wanna go for a drink? Maybe some steak?” Marco asked Aiden.

Aiden nodded as relief coursed through him. They weren’t abandoning him. “Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

Chapter Fifty-Nine

“I’m not sure how to tell you this, Frankie,” Raul began for the third time, clearing his throat. Brenda sat next to him at the conference table stemming her tears with a third tissue.

Frankie saw her employee file on the table and had connected the dots within five seconds of walking into the room.

“We lost our grant,” Raul announced. “Two of them, actually. They’re not even being funded anymore, so it wasn’t anything that you did in the grant writing. It wasn’t anything that we did as an organization, it was just... bad luck.”

Her life felt like it had been nothing but bad luck these past few weeks.

“So, what I’m trying to say,” Raul took a deep breath, “is that we’re shutting the office down. We can’t continue to serve the business community without those funds, and we’ve been talking about retiring for a while now.”

Brenda blew her nose noisily.

“And that means that your employment is also terminated.” Raul choked out the words and reached for his coffee, managing to spill most of it.

“Okay, then,” Frankie said, too numb to process anything. It was the trajectory of her life, plummeting straight down. By this time next week, she’d be warming her hands on the open flames in hell if her descent continued. “I’ll just pack up my stuff and go.”

Brenda’s quiet sniffles turned into full blown wails. “We’re so sorry, sweetie! And after everything that you’ve been through...”

Frankie rose and gave each of them a mechanical hug. They had been mentors, second parents, and friends to her. And now they, too, were out of her life.

“Can we take you to lunch or... something?” Raul asked.

She shook her head. “No, thanks.”

“We’ll send you your vacation pay with your last paycheck,” he said, looking glumly at the table.

“Thank you,” Frankie said, pausing inside the door and taking a last look at the room.

Downstairs, she shoved what she could from her desk into an empty paper ream box and stepped out into the mocking sunshine. The end of March was showing signs of the spring to come. But nothing could thaw the ice inside her.

She sat down on the curb in a scrap of sunshine that filtered between the branches of the trees. Was this rock bottom? No job, six weeks shy of finishing her master’s, and she was going to have to decide between rent and tuition. Oh, and speaking of school, this job and her social media workshops had been part of her thesis project. So, graduation this spring was no longer an option.

And worse was the fact that Aiden had stopped contacting her a week ago. As if he’d vanished from the face of the planet. But he was still here. Still working. Still existing. Still living his life.

She knew because she couldn’t stop herself from opening those blasted Google alert emails every damn morning.

He went to work every day, had dinner in the city, made appearances. Meanwhile, she’d stopped talking to everyone. Her parents, her brothers, Pru. She was avoiding human contact because she no longer felt human.

The anger, the hurt, had shifted inside her making room for a new feeling. One she didn’t understand. Guilt.

“Frankie!”

She winced at the cheery greeting. She couldn’t do Pru right now. She was incapable of even pretending to be happy to see her best friend.

“Hi,” Frankie said flatly.

“Why are you sitting on the sidewalk with a box of... Oh.”

“I got fired. They’re shutting down the center,” Frankie said.

“Then you’ve got time for me to buy you lunch,” silver-lining-finder Pru announced. “Let’s go.” She dragged Frankie to her feet and picked up the box. “I’m feeling like pizza.”

Frankie stumbled over her own feet. “You’re voluntarily eating pizza? Do I really look that bad?”

“You look like a zombie. Sort of alive on the outside but totally dead and gross on the inside.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Pru led the way to one of Frankie’s favorite pizza shops, chattering about the weather and gossip. Frankie didn’t bother responding. It took too much effort.

Pru slid into the booth across from her and interlaced her fingers, smiling expectantly. “I’ve got some things I need to tell you.”

“Is everything okay?” Frankie asked, rousing herself into a minimal level of caring.

Her friend nodded.

“What can I get you ladies?” Vinnie the proprietor demanded, leaning on their table with a combination of charm and impatience.

“The biggest, greasiest pepperoni pizza you can make,” Pru decided. “And how about some of those garlic twists?”

Frankie’s eyebrows winged up. Her friend was serious about all the carbs today.

Vinnie took their drink orders and headed back behind the counter.

“So. I’m pregnant,” Pru announced.

Frankie’s mouth opened. Her brain wasn’t prepared for new information of that magnitude.

“Wha...?”

“Pregnant. Like with my husband’s baby?” Pru said, beaming at her. “Thanks, Vin,” she said when Vinnie returned with their

waters.

Frankie chugged half of hers, trying to get her brain back to functioning. “You’re going to have a baby?”

Pru nodded again. “Honeymoon baby, which was a surprise. But we’re so excited.”

Frankie could see it. The sheer delight on her friend’s face. And even though her own life was in the gutter, she still felt a stirring of happiness for Pru.

“Wow. Congratulations. Chip must be thrilled.”

“He wavers between thrilled and hyperventilating. He ordered sixteen parenting, pregnancy, and baby books and wants to start interviewing nannies now.”

“Wow,” Frankie said again. A rush of memories washing over her. Pru dressed as Carmen Miranda strolling into their dorm room on Halloween. Pru dancing on the bar at Salvio’s after one too many margaritas. Pru trying on her wedding dress for the first time. “I know I don’t look it, but I am so happy for you.”

Pru reached across the table and grabbed Frankie’s hand. “I know your life sucks right now. But you’re going to be an aunt, and that’s worth something. And I want you to hang on to that aunt thing while I say this next thing.”

“Uh-uh.” Frankie braced herself.

“Why haven’t you talked to Aiden?” Pru asked.

Frankie felt herself shutting down again. “Look, Pru. There are things you don’t know. No, he didn’t cheat on me with ol’ one-eyebrow. But there was something else. Something much bigger.”

“I know,” Pru said, squeezing her hand. “He told me. He talked to me and Chip last week.”

“He told you?” Frankie asked, astonished.

“He planted the seeds for Chip to break up with me.”

“And you’re okay with that? He robbed you both of years of happiness, Pru. Because he thought you weren’t good enough

for his friend.”

“He thought I was immature and flighty, and to be honest, he may have been right. Not that I’d tell him that. I was fresh out of college and had diamond rings in my eyes. I had no idea what marriage was actually about. I just wanted a sparkly ring and a big party. If we hadn’t broken up and both matured a bit, I don’t know that we’d still be together. And I do know that this little low-carb baby wouldn’t be growing in me. I’m stronger than I was then. Happier. Maybe the slightest bit more mature. And in the end, Aiden was just looking out for his friend. A friend who made the decision through no coercion, I might add.”

“He *hurt* you,” Frankie pointed out.

“And I forgave him. You should try it sometime.”

Frankie snorted and stabbed her straw into her glass of ice. “Fool me once shame on you. Fool me twice...”

“Do you think relationships mean never screwing up at all?” Pru asked. “The insult was against me, the damage was done to me, and I’ve forgiven him. Why can’t you?”

“Because you always had a soft heart. If I were you, I never would have forgiven Chip.”

“And where would I be then? Not married to a man who makes me laugh every day. Not picking paint swatches for the nursery. Not sitting across from my best friend in the world desperately trying to show her what doors forgiveness opens. I could have played it safe. I could have married some boring guy who let me call every shot. But what kind of life is that when there’s never any risk of getting hurt?”

Frankie stared down at the table, wishing Pru’s words weren’t landing direct hit after direct hit. “Being in a relationship with Aiden was so hard,” she said lamely.

“It’s not like you were doing yourself any favors there. You fought him every step of the way. You were just waiting for him to disappoint you, to give you the excuse you were looking for to leave.”

“I was not,” Frankie argued.

“Now you’re lying to yourself.”

“All in,” Frankie whispered. Had she ever really been all in? She’d made the commitment, but had she really acted on it?

“You’re the most loyal person I know, Frankie. Why can’t you be loyal to him? Why can’t you fight for him? Who does Aiden have in his corner that he can count on? Who has his back? You should have been out there attacking Margeaux. Instead, you holed up and hid yourself away.”

Vinnie returned with a steaming pie. He dumped plates in front of them. “Enjoy, ladies.”

Frankie stared at the swirl of sauce over bubbling cheese.

“I love him so much it scares me,” she admitted, her voice low and shaky. She brought her gaze up. “I love him so much I can’t breathe because I feel like a piece of me is missing.”

“You are so damn stubborn,” Pru said with a sliver of sympathy. “You’d ruin this just to be right.”

The guilt in Frankie’s gut stood up and saluted in recognition.

“My feelings for him terrify me. I’m living a nightmare. And it’s all too late. He stopped texting, stopped sending me things. It’s like I don’t even exist to him anymore.”

Pru slid a slice onto her plate and reached for the oregano. “Then maybe it’s time you reminded him that you exist.”

Chapter Sixty

It took her an entire twenty-four hours to formulate a plan. And when she had it organized in her head, she started with Pru. Collecting names and numbers, making connections. She lunched with celebutantes, met with servers and maids and personal assistants in alleys by recycling bins, and pled her case.

They didn't all say yes, but enough did. And what they gave her would have to be enough to put it all into action.

When the chips were down, when there was a real chance at karmic retribution, women banded together.

She took everything they gave her and, pushing aside her now defunct thesis project notes, started a brand-new project.

Every word that she typed, every piece of information she gathered, she fit into the larger puzzle making her feel more hopeful, more in control. And when she was finally certain she had enough, she made one more phone call.

“Davenport, it's me Frankie. Do you still have that video from Barbados?”

* * *

Frankie couldn't sleep. She kept checking her phone to see if the gossip blogs had picked up the news yet. And when it finally landed on her newsfeed at seven, she danced a boogie in her kitchen.

There, on screens across the city, Margeaux screamed obscenities and drunkenly brawled in the pool with Taffany. There were hundreds of comments with more pouring in every minute.

Frankie danced over to the whiteboard she'd set up in her living room.

Step One: Discredit Marge.

She crossed it off with a flourish. And eyeballed step two. She was going to need some armor for this one.

She plucked the gift card off the board and dialed.

"Hi, I was wondering if Christian could squeeze me in today? I'm going to war."

An hour later, she was in a swiveling chair in front of a gilt framed mirror in a salon she couldn't afford. Christian was frowning at her tresses as he shoved his fingers through them. "You were supposed to come back last month," he chastised her.

"I didn't have to go into battle last month. Make me gorgeous and invincible."

Christian snapped his finger in the air. "Makeup!"

She kept an eye on her bag next to Christian's workstation as he and his minions set about endowing her with female weaponry. The smokey eye, contoured cheekbones, those gorgeous lowlights, and finally a blow out that made her look like she belonged in *the* red dress. If this didn't crush her enemy like a bug and prove irresistible to Aiden, she was going to swing by the shelter and get her first two cats... and then ask Gio if she could move in with him since she could no longer afford rent with no job and no degree.

Great. Really solid Plan B. But she was hoping that there'd be no need for it. She had a lot—everything—riding on Plan A.

"Christian? Christian's miracle workers?" she said, looking at the stranger in the mirror. "You guys are the shit."

She high-fived them down the line and handed over Aiden's gift card. Christian shoved an appointment card at her. "See you in six weeks."

"I'll be here," she said decisively. Positive mental attitude. She would win. Or she'd be curled in the fetal position being eaten by cats.

“Wish me luck!”

“Good luck!” they chorused after her as she strode out the door and into battle.

He was already there waiting for her at the bar. A double of something in front of him despite the fact that it was barely 11 in the morning.

“Good morning, Elliot,” she said, sliding onto the stool next to him.

The younger Kilbourn straightened in his seat, leering at her cleavage. “I had a feeling I’d be hearing from you again. What can I do for you? Help you get revenge on brother dearest?” He straightened his tie.

“Oooh. I’m afraid you’re about to be very disappointed,” Frankie said, unpacking a file from her bag. She slid it across to him. “Here. This is for you.”

With still too much confidence, Elliot flipped open the folder. It took a full four seconds for its contents to sink in. His eyes widened, pupils dilating. “What is this?” he demanded.

“This is every dirty deed I could dig up on you over the past ten years. I don’t know what Boris Donaldson has on you, but I’m willing to bet it’s somewhere in this file.”

“How do you know about Boris?” he asked, scrambling through the photos, the photocopies, and the interviews.

“You pushed for him for CFO despite the fact that he’s currently under investigation for fraud and, as of about ten minutes ago, embezzlement.”

“What?” He reached for his drink and drank it down.

“Well, what kind of investigation would I be doing if I didn’t pry into my boyfriend’s enemies? You people will never understand that your underlings see and hear things that your dirty money can’t cover up. By the way, the SEC’s anonymous tip website is *so* easy to navigate. Now, let’s talk about you.”

He was flipping through papers alternately going beet red and ashen.

“You’ve been a very naughty boy. Using your expense account to pay for prescription drugs and lap dances. Side note, they’re not actually into you. Then there’s these sticky consent cases that you paid off. Anything other than a yes is a no, Elliot. All of that I almost expected from you. But what even I was surprised by was you bringing a male prostitute back to your then-girlfriend’s apartment and—”

He slapped the bar. “She signed a non-disclosure agreement! I paid her!”

“Oh, sweetie,” Frankie said, laying on the phony sympathy. “She signed a non-disclosure, but her doorman and housekeeper and personal chef didn’t.”

He swore. “I’ll sue. I’ll sue you for defamation.”

“Then Chip will press charges for abducting him. That’s a felony, by the way. And I don’t think your defense is going to be able to come up with any character witnesses for you. Not with all of this in your history,” she said, tapping the file.

He picked up the file and ripped it in half.

Frankie sighed. “Is this a temper tantrum? Because you know I have copies of copies of copies.”

He braced his elbows on the bar and put his face in his hands. She didn’t feel the tiniest bit of guilt.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“I’m glad you asked. It’s very simple. I want you to leave Aiden alone. Permanently. You don’t have a blackmailer to pay off anymore. You’re welcome, by the way. So, you can have a fresh start. Step down from the company, stop acting like a fuck-up, and don’t so much as glance in Aiden’s direction except for the occasional uncomfortable family dinner. Got it?”

“If I do what you want, what will you do with this?” he asked, pointing at the shredded paper.

“I’m going to hang on to it, very quietly. But if you step a fucking toe out of line if you take advantage of one more woman or buy one more bottle of pills, I’ll know. And I’ll go

to every gossip blogger and society journalist in the country with this dirty little packet. Imagine what your mother would think. Or worse, your father. You're at my mercy. And with the SEC taking out your blackmail buddy, you basically won the lottery today. Don't fuck it up."

She slid off her stool and straightened her dress.

"Do we have a deal?" she asked.

He nodded glumly.

"Good. Now, there's just one more thing." She picked up his drink and tossed it in his face. "That's for every one of these women. Be better from now on."

Chapter Sixty-One

“Your one o’clock is here,” Oscar announced, poking his head in Aiden’s office doorway.

“My what?” Aiden looked at his open calendar on his monitor. Who the hell was he supposed to—

She walked in wearing the red dress that haunted his dreams.

Aiden wasn’t even aware that he’d risen from his desk so suddenly that his chair went spinning behind him.

“Franchesca?”

Had he finally lost his damn mind? Was he missing her so much he was now hallucinating her instead of catching the ghost of her scent, the echo of her laughter?

“May I come in?” she asked.

It felt as if a bolt of lightning struck the carpet that separated them. The room was charged with electricity. He knew by the parting of her lips, by the guarded expression on her face, that she felt it too.

It was pathetic how grateful he felt just to see her again. His heart pounded in his chest as if it knew that everything came down to the next few minutes of his life. And he wasn’t in control.

Franchesca was.

Oscar quietly shut the door, and Aiden knew it must have cost him dearly.

“Of course,” Aiden said gruffly. He wanted to cross to her, to take her in his arms and bury his face in her hair. Instead, he gestured toward one of the chairs in front of his desk. “Please. Sit.”

She sat, crossing one leg neatly over the other, and he went rigidly hard. His cock had no shame. The woman who had

destroyed him, who had turned the life he'd built into an empty shell, still made him want.

He'd crawl to her if he thought for a second it would work. But Frankie didn't want a man who crawled.

"I have a proposition for you," she began, slipping a folder from her bag.

She handed it to him across the desk, and when their fingers brushed, he knew without a doubt this woman would never leave his system. A storm was brewing between them, and he only hoped that when it broke, he wouldn't be alone.

"I'm listening," he said, his voice rougher than he meant it to be. He pulled his chair back and sank into it.

If she noticed, she didn't let on. Frankie cleared her throat. "Okay, there's a new gap in small business services in Brooklyn. I know the neighborhoods, I know the business owners. They need guidance, mentoring. They need education. They need loans and grants."

She was pitching him a fucking business proposal?

"I know you, Aiden. I know that all levels of entrepreneurship interest you. And it could start here," she flipped to a page in his packet and tapped a finger on a map of her parents' neighborhood. "Six storefronts are for sale on this block alone. The buildings themselves need some work, but they've got good bones. Most of the apartments are rented."

She talked real estate and revitalization, and Aiden felt his interest pique despite his profound disappointment.

She had photos of the street, detailed maps of neighborhood parking, the real estate listings, rental unit potential, and even an itemized list of types of stores that were missing from the neighborhood.

She talked about weekend farmers markets, about block parties and restaurants with outdoor seating. She painted a pretty picture.

"You could make a difference one city block at a time. You don't have that kind of real estate potential here in Manhattan.

Not anymore. Think of the communities you could build, the small businesses you could support and watch grow. You'd need a development center. Something that could guide new businesses and help older owners take advantage of new technologies."

"And who would manage it?" he asked.

"Me."

Aiden's gaze flew to her face. "You're asking me for a job?" He didn't know whether to be impressed or furious.

"Oh, Aide, I want you to give me a lot more than that."

Chapter Sixty-Two

Her heart hadn't stopped hammering against her ribs since she walked in here. Seeing him was hard. So impossibly hard. He was just as beautiful as before. But there was a wall between them. One that she had built. One that was up to her to tear down.

Frankie took a deep breath and took the plunge.

"I let you down, Aiden. And I'm having trouble forgiving myself."

"And you think me giving you a job will make you feel better?" he asked in confusion. He didn't even sound angry. But she had to appeal to all of him, starting with the successful entrepreneur driven to win at all costs.

"You need me, Aiden. And damn it, I need you. Not your money. Not your family connections. You."

He was watching her intently now, and she watched him back, noticed him carefully hide the spark of hope behind those cool blue eyes.

"You're thoughtful. You listen, really listen. You're smart and charming and funny and surprisingly sweet. You're so fucking generous I worry that you're going to get hurt."

She couldn't catch her breath. The words were spilling faster and faster from her lips. She reached into her bag and her fingers closed around the next part of her plan.

"No one's ever touched me the way you do. No one's ever loved me the way you do. And I've never loved anyone the way I love you." Her voice broke, and she saw his knuckles whiten as he closed his hands into fists.

With a shaky breath, she pushed herself out of her chair and walked around his desk on jelly legs. She knelt down in front of him and held up the jeweler box.

His face gave nothing away, so she popped the lid of the box revealing the simple gold band. “It was my grandfather’s,” she whispered. “It’s nothing fancy. But it’s family, loyalty, love. And I can give you all that. So marry me, Aiden. Be with me. Give me forever.”

She held her breath and blinked back the tears that were threatening to overflow her lashes.

“What about Chip and Pru?” he asked, staring at the band.

“The truth is, I had more trouble forgiving myself than I did you. I was looking for an excuse to end it, to be right, because I didn’t want to get hurt. And I ended up hurting us both. Also, Pru called me the Upper West Side version of a chicken shit, and I hate when she’s right.”

She saw the ghost of a smile play at the corners of his mouth, and her heart sang with hope.

“What about my family?” he asked. “They’ll always be a problem.”

“I have a feeling there will be less drama. I’ve discovered that I fit in quite well with manipulative backstabbers.”

“You’re going to have to explain that cryptic statement,” he said, reaching for her, his hands closing over her wrists. He stood, pulling her to her feet.

“First, answer me, please. Then I’ll tell you anything you want. Will you marry me, Aide? Will you take me as I am? Forgive me for being stubborn and proud and so very, very wrong? Because, damn it, Aiden, you fit in my life like you’re the missing piece. I can fit into yours, too. I want you for an ally, a partner. I was wrong to hold back, wrong to be looking for a way out. And I’m so fucking sorry. But I promise you from this day forward, I will be your partner, and we can build something beautiful together. And I swear to you I will always, always, have your back.”

She was shaking, with love, with fear, with hope.

Aiden nudged her chin higher and looked her in the eyes.

“We can’t both be chicken shits, now can we?”

“Aide, if you don’t give me a yes or a no right now, I swear to God I’m going to ruin your life like I just ruined your brother’s.”

He grinned down at her, the full wattage that made her weak in the knees.

“It’s always been yes with you, Franchesca. There is no one I’d rather have in my corner.”

“Yes?” she repeated.

He nodded. “Yes, and the sooner, the better.”

“Well, we don’t need to move *too* fast,” she began, feeling hesitation rush up.

“You got down on both your knees—”

“I can’t get down on one knee in this dress! You’d have been looking at my hooaha during my very sweet and inspiring speech!”

He was laughing now and lifting her off the ground. She felt him hard against her hip and went quiet. Her brain shifted gears into sexy time.

“I love you, Franchesca,” he whispered against her jaw.

“I love you, Aiden, you stubborn son of a—”

He covered her mouth with his, shutting her up with a kiss. She struggled for half a second, determined to make her point, and then lost her damn mind when his tongue stroked into her mouth. She shoved her fingers into his hair, gripping the silky strands she had missed so much. Breathing him in, she told him again and again as his mouth slanted over hers just how much she loved him.

“How are we going to celebrate?” he asked, breaking free for a second.

“You’re going to bend me over that desk and remind me of everything that I’ve been missing.”

“I’m the luckiest man on the planet.” He nipped at her neck, fisting a hand in her hair.

“Damn right you are.”

Epilogue

ONE MONTH LATER

“Cannonball!”

Franchesca rolled to her side to watch Aiden at the open terrace door. Sheer white curtains billowed in on the tropical breeze. He was naked, as he had been for most of the twelve hours since they'd been pronounced husband and wife. Her ring finger bore the weight and sparkle of their commitment to each other. A commitment they'd made on the white sand beaches where it had all begun and continued in the same bed where she'd first discovered Aiden Kilbourn's potency.

“Mmm,” she sighed, stretching her arms over her head. “I could get used to this view for the rest of my life.”

Aiden shot her a cocky grin over his shoulder. His muscled back, and gorgeous ass, showed evidence of the tracks her teeth and nails had taken throughout the night.

“I'm not sure if I'd want this view every day,” he commented. “Your dad just did a cannonball over Marco and Gio and splashed Rachel.”

Frankie snorted. “You did not have to bring them all along, you know.”

“They're family.”

Marco and Gio shouted something, and there was another loud splash.

“Antonio! Stop splashing. Don't you idiots encourage him, or they'll throw us all out of here,” May Baranski screeched at Frankie's favorite underage cab driver and her brothers.

Frankie flopped back on the pillow. “You can't take the Brooklyn out of the Baranskis. When are they leaving again?” she asked.

“Tomorrow with Chip and Pru and my parents.”

“I still can’t believe your dad came to the wedding,” Frankie said. She rolled out of bed and padded across the room to the small refrigerator where she found a bottle of water.

“He’s getting used to the idea of letting me make my own decisions. In another five years, he might even like you.”

Frankie laughed. “I’ll hold my breath for that possibility. Did you tell him about Elliot?”

Aiden shook his head and met her where she stood, his hand stroking over her breast and down to the curve of her hip. He circled her body as if he were taking stock of it. “Some things are best left between brothers. But I did tell him I bought Elliot out of the company.”

“A clean slate,” Frankie sighed.

She felt his erection stir as it brushed her ass cheeks. “You’re insatiable.” She reached for him, gripping him at the base.

“The same could be said of you, my wife.”

“Oh look! We can see in Frankie’s room from here! Yoo hoo, Frankie!” May stood up on her chaise lounge and waved.

“Oh my God.” Frankie shoved Aiden out of the line of sight and onto the floor. “I can’t take these people anywhere!”

“I guess we can go be social until tomorrow,” he sighed with disappointment.

But she was already sprawled on top of him. And he was already hard and pulsing between her thighs.

“Maybe we can spare a few minutes,” she suggested, moving to straddle his hips.

He was laying on top of her discarded veil and the skirt of her crumpled wedding dress. Both of which he’d stripped from her last night.

He’d refused to tell her just how much the dress had cost, but she’d caught the estimate in the gossip blogs. Leave it to Aiden to spend that much on a piece of clothing worn for a few hours.

Aiden's blue eyes hooded with desire. He was a beautiful sight, and he was all hers. He hinged forward, bringing his mouth to her closest breast, his abs rippling with the motion.

As he sucked and teased, Frankie took him inside her in one languorous slide.

"God, you're so beautiful," he murmured against her flesh, teasing the nipple with his lips.

"You're everything I didn't know I wanted, Aide," she breathed.

His hips thrust up to meet hers, rocking into her in a slow, steady rhythm.

She moaned, and he clamped a hand over her mouth. "Quiet now, sweetheart. We have an audience outside."

Frankie tasted the metal of his wedding band, felt the drag of him inside her against her trembling walls.

"It's never going to be enough," he whispered. "I'm never going to have enough of this with you, Franchesca."

His words, sweet and strained, echoed in her head, her heart. She dug her toes into the floor, rolling her hips against him.

He hissed out a breath, and she swore she felt him throb inside her.

"You'd better be with me," he growled, and with that, he rolled, trapping her between the skirt of her wedding dress and his unyielding body.

He drove into her powerfully, his hand still covering her mouth. But they didn't need words. Not when their gazes held, not when their souls locked into place and their bodies came apart at the seams. She felt the first hot burst of his release as she clamped down on his cock as her own climax bloomed like a flower.

"Yes, Franchesca. Yes." He chanted sweet and dirty vows as they came together.

All in. Forever.

Extended Epilogue

ONE YEAR LATER

Aiden Kilbourn and Frankie Baranski revitalize entire city block

Aiden Kilbourn's wife wears Target dress to ribbon cutting

Aiden Kilbourn's wife chokes on sausage at inaugural event

* * *

“Those are ridiculous,” Frankie insisted, pointing at the oversized shears Aiden held in his hand.

“A big ribbon-cutting calls for big scissors,” he said, slinging an arm around her shoulder. He’d left his trademark suits home today and wore jeans and a simple white button down. If it weren’t for his panty-dropping face of perfection, he could almost pass for a normal human being.

“What?” he asked, noting her attention.

She grinned. “Just feeling a little extra lucky today.”

“You should. It’s not every wife who can talk her husband into buying her a city block.”

“Us,” she reminded him.

“Us,” he agreed, squeezing her shoulder.

“I’m pretty impressed with us,” she said eyeing the street. “A grocer, a coffee shop, a sandwich place, a tiny brewery, and a small business development center open all on one day? You’re going down in neighborhood history.”

“You mean like Saint Franchesca?” he teased.

“Well, obviously you won’t be as revered as *me*. But close,” she predicted.

In just over a year, the little strip of street in Brooklyn had gone from ignored and dilapidated to rejuvenated. There was a lively jazz band playing on the restaurant’s patio, and the street was roped off with one big, red ribbon. Neighbors and business owners spilled out onto the sidewalks, ready for the festivities to begin. Aiden had hired local restaurants and food trucks to feed the crowds for the neighborhood’s first ever block party. Proceeds would go toward the grant program managed by the brand-new business center, where Franchesca had an office and about six weeks of work ahead of her already.

“Shall we do the honors?” he asked, nudging her toward the end of the street.

“Let’s do this.”

They tag-teamed the speech with a natural rhythm. Frankie’s parents and brothers waved from the front row. They talked about community and neighbors and pride, and then, together, to the raucous cheers of the crowd, they cut the ribbon.

The press was there in large numbers because it was a Kilbourn project. But Frankie didn’t mind the attention. Not when they had, for the most part, learned to treat her like any other entrepreneur. No one dared to ask her who she was wearing anymore.

After the ribbon was cut, the speech made, and the doors opened, Frankie and Aiden walked arm in arm down the revitalized street, mingling and munching, tasting and touring. They ate hot sausage from a food truck, drank Pilsner samples from the brewery, and toured each business with each owner. Frankie pinched herself and Aiden repeatedly just to make sure this wasn’t one big, beautiful dream.

No, it wasn’t, Frankie thought with satisfaction as she sunk her teeth into the Bratwurst Wagon’s bestselling foot-long sausage. She had played a role in the redevelopment of an entire city block. Something that would benefit both the neighborhood and the business community. And Aiden had stood with her,

guiding her, and trusting her throughout the process. She loved him desperately for it.

Her phone vibrated in the pocket of her smart sundress, and she pulled it out.

Aiden: You're giving me ideas with that sausage in your mouth.

She laughed, nearly choking, and then, spotting him in the crowd, made a private show of shoving as much of it into her mouth as possible.

“Mrs. Baranski,” someone said, shoving a phone into her face. “Care to comment on the predicted revenue of your project here?”

The sausage and bun turned to sand in her mouth, and she started coughing.

Aiden was at her side in a moment, slapping her on the back.

“Sorry,” Frankie gasped, tears stinging her eyes. “Too much sausage in my mouth.”

The journalist, a woman in a trim blazer and glasses, gaped at her.

Aiden covered his laugh with a cough. “I’d be happy to answer any of your questions while my wife finds a drink of water,” he said smoothly.

Frankie, still coughing, decided it was in her better interest to wash down the sausage wad with more beer to calm her butterflies. The public part of their big day was drawing to a close, but she had one hell of a surprise cooking for Aiden, and there was a good chance he would hate it. She took a steadying breath. He *had* to love it. If she had to love the expansive wardrobe he’d bought for her and the embarrassingly beautiful stash of jewelry and books and kitchen toys, he had to love her surprise.

She paused at the glass doors of the shiny new small business development center and traced her fingers over the lettering on the door. All her dreams had come true, thanks to the man who teased her about sausage. And she wasn’t going to let him

down. No, Aiden Kilbourn would have no choice but to be proud of his MBA-wielding, small business genius wife.

She ducked inside and found her parents, Hugo and May, huddled in the conference room over the cookie tray. Her brothers, Gio and Marco, were racing desk chairs around the four cubicles on the opposite side of the front desk. She'd hired a receptionist, a part-time employee, and an intern. Between the four of them, and the ever-growing list of resources Aiden was developing, they'd make a dent in the small business needs of Brooklyn Heights.

She glanced at the sign-up sheet on the front desk. Next week's workshop on business expenses and other accounting questions was already booked solid.

"There's our beautiful, amazing daughter," May announced as if it had been weeks rather than minutes since she'd last seen Frankie.

Gio cut Marco off with his chair and dumped his brother onto the floor.

"Winner!"

"You guys break it, you bought it," Frankie said, nudging Marco with her foot.

"Get your ass off the floor, you juvenile delinquents," Rachel snapped, bouncing little Maya on her hip. Frankie's niece was wearing a t-shirt that said My Aunt is Awesome.

Frankie liberated Maya from her mother's arms and held her aloft. She squealed in delight and clapped her little hands.

"Two of my favorite ladies," Aiden noted, poking his head in through the front door.

Frankie grinned at him. "How's it going out there, Mr. Mayor?"

"Everyone is eating, drinking, and shopping. I'd call it a success," he said, his eyes dipping to the V-neck of her dress.

May bustled out of the conference room and whacked her sons on the head. "Stop acting like wild animals," she snapped.

“Ouch!”

“Sorry, Ma.”

“Why can’t you act more like Aiden?” she demanded. “Look at him behaving.”

When she turned to point at Aiden, Marco and Gio flipped him off.

May spun to shoot her sons a fierce frown, and Aiden used the opportunity to return the one-fingered salute.

Frankie and Rachel shook their heads and laughed.

“You two did good here,” Hugo announced from the doorway of the conference room, a cookie in each hand.

“Thank you, Dad,” Frankie said. “I think we’re going to do a lot of good things here.”

“Maybe you can show your mother how that Book Face Twatter works,” he mused.

Gio snorted. “Frankie’s real good at the Twatter.”

Using the baby as cover, Frankie flipped Gio off.

Aiden plucked Maya from Frankie’s arms and jiggled the little girl in the air before pressing a kiss to her chubby little cheek.

“Think you have a few minutes to sneak away?” Frankie asked. She was going for casual, but the words came out strangled.

She saw the spark in his eyes, knew he thought she had other intentions.

“I always have time to sneak away,” he said, his voice husky.

“Hand over my baby before you say anything gross in front of her,” Marco demanded.

Frankie grinned. A year into the marriage, and neither she nor Aiden had put the brakes on in the fucking-like-rabbits department.

Aiden gave the little girl another kiss and turned her over to her father. He slid his arm around Frankie’s waist and pulled her into his side. “What did you have in mind?” he whispered.

“Let’s go for a little walk,” she suggested, pulling him toward the door.

She’d told no one what she’d done, and the secret was eating her soul. When they’d married, Aiden had opened an account in her name and dumped an obscene amount of money into it so Frankie never felt like she needed to ask for anything.

She’d refused to touch it on principal. Until now.

“Where are we going?” Aiden asked gruffly as he let Frankie pull him down the block, away from the festivities.

“You’ll see,” she said vaguely.

They followed the street west before skirting north and then west again into the historic district until Frankie came to a stop in front of a two-story brown brick building. It had a garage flanked by two doors.

“And what are we doing here?” Aiden asked indulgently.

Frankie pulled the key out of her pocket and took a deep breath. “Hopefully, being really happy and not yelling at me at all.”

She felt the weight of his gaze as she slid the key into the lock.

“Franchesca,” he said her name softly, questioningly.

She tossed him a shaky smile and gave the door a hard shove. It creaked open on rarely used hinges.

Aiden followed her inside.

Thick, worn floorboards drew the eye from the front to the back of the large space.

She waited while Aiden prowled, examining plaster walls and the rickety staircase up to the second floor. Everything was dirty and dusty. It was an abandoned construction zone. The beginning of a kitchen was tucked into a corner. But the back of the building with its series of arched windows that stretched from floor to ceiling were the wow factor.

Frankie waited, gnawing on her thumb while Aiden stood before one of the windows and stared out across the greenway

to the murky summer waters of the river. Beyond it, the Manhattan skyline loomed.

“Well? What do you think?” she asked, breathlessly.

“Why don’t you tell me exactly why we’re here, and then I’ll tell you what I think,” he said, eyeing her with that probing look.

“I bought it. For us.” She blurted the words out. “You’ve been saying you wanted to look for a place here, close to the development center and my family. It’s a carriage house or was before someone started the renovations. They ran out of money and sat on it for a few years. Your dad thinks we got a great deal on it—”

“My father?” Aiden asked, swiping his hand over his chin.

It irked her that she couldn’t read him. Frankie nodded. “Ferris helped me set up a corporation so I could buy it without you knowing. Surprise?”

He stared at the view once again and then returned to her face. Aiden started toward her.

“Tell me what you’re thinking before I die. Do you like it? Do you hate it? I thought we could renovate it together. The Greenway is literally in our backyard, and we’ve got the square footage for a couple of bedrooms and bathrooms upstairs. The roof is sound. We could have one of those cool rooftop terraces...”

He reached her and gripped her hips, pulling her against him.

“Aiden, seriously if you don’t say something right now, I’m going to freak out,” Frankie said.

He didn’t speak. He kissed her instead. A soft, sweet slide of tongues. A leisurely sampling that left her knees weak.

“You’re not yelling,” she said as she pulled back. Her hands fisted in his shirt.

“It’s perfect, Franchesca,” he said softly, nudging her chin up. She felt the knot in her stomach loosen. She met his gaze, saw the softness in his eyes.

“We can still keep your penthouse,” she began.

“Our,” he corrected her.

“Our,” Frankie repeated. “But this will be nice too... eventually. I mean, it’s kind of a pile of crap right now but—”

“I love that you did this,” Aiden said, cutting off her rambling. He started to sway from side to side to music only he could hear. Frankie followed his lead, hypnotized by the love she saw in his eyes. “We’ll make it our own. We’ll watch the fights with your brothers here, host Thanksgivings here. You and I will curl up on the couch at the end of the day and eat Chinese food and complain about the fortune cookies. We’ll argue about everything. You’ll break dishes. I’ll eat everything that you cook. We’ll escape from it all here. You and me.”

Frankie felt tears prick her eyes. He was painting her a picture of their future together, and she’d provided the canvas.

“All in,” Frankie whispered to him.

He brushed a thumb across her cheek. “All in, my Franchesca.”

Want more Frankie and Aiden?

**Find out how Frankie finally figured out the perfect gift
for Aiden in this**

FREE bonus epilogue.

[One Year Later](#)

Author's Note to the Reader

Dear Reader,

Where do I start? As always, I started the book with an idea of where it would go. I thought this was going to be just a light, funny, rom-com set in paradise. And then Frankie and Aiden got deeper, their conflict got more intense, their families got more complicated. Basically, I fell head over freaking heels for these two and their hot mess of a non-relationship.

I was so sure Frankie would get her heart broken and then she ended up doing the breaking. It's like I have no control over these people! I hope you loved them as much as I did!

I set the wedding in Barbados because it's one of my favorite places to go with Mr. Lucy. We went specifically so I could soak up the research for this book... also some sun. And all the rum. The white sandy beaches, the turquoise water, the insane minivan public transportation. It's ah-mazing.

Anyway, if you loved Frankie and Aiden, please feel free to hop over to [Amazon](#) and leave a gushing review. If you hated them and you're still reading this note, I admire your commitment.

Do you want to hang out and be BFFs? Follow me on [Facebook](#) and join me in my reader's group: [Lucy Score's Binge Readers Anonymous](#). And if you want first dibs sales and awesome bonus content, definitely [sign up for my newsletter](#)! I hope to see you around!

Xoxo,

Lucy

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- Jodi for once again turning my mangled chunk of a blurb into something exciting and one-click worthy
- Joyce and Tammy for being amazing in Binge Readers and in real life
- Sushi
- The Will & Grace reboot
- Tacos. Always tacos.

About the Author

Lucy Score is a *Wall Street Journal* and #1 Amazon bestselling author. She grew up in a literary family who insisted that the dinner table was for reading and earned a degree in journalism. She writes full-time from the Pennsylvania home she and Mr. Lucy share with their obnoxious cat, Cleo. When not spending hours crafting heartbreaker heroes and kick-ass heroines, Lucy can be found on the couch, in the kitchen, or at the gym. She hopes to someday write from a sailboat, or oceanfront condo, or tropical island with reliable Wi-Fi.

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By a Thread Sneak Peek

If you enjoyed The Worst Best Man by Lucy Score, you'll love her grumpy boss romantic comedy By a Thread.

Dominic

I'd avoided her since Tuesday just to prove that I could.

Just to prove to my stupid cock that it did *not* run my life. That I wasn't a carbon copy of Paul Russo.

I didn't know exactly what the hell was going on. But I'd wasted more brainpower on Ally Morales in the week and a half since I'd met her in that stupid pizza shop than on anything that actually deserved my attention.

That was a problem.

And I was the smart guy who decided that since I'd proved I could leave her alone, I next needed to prove that I could be around her... and not want to fuck her.

I'd requested her.

It wasn't a big deal, I told myself as I glanced at my watch *again*. I'd requested admins before. Ones I knew would be less annoying or wouldn't make weird nervous humming noises if I asked them a direct question.

Requesting Ally didn't mean anything.

I wasn't interested. Not in *that* way. I didn't sleep with people who pissed me off and pushed my buttons. I was, however, curious about her.

What took a woman from being a semi-successful graphic designer in Colorado to a server living off bananas in New York? Her credit wasn't great. The credit report noted a shit-ton of credit card debt in the last three months. But the street view of her home address—*yeah, okay, so I'd looked up her address. I wasn't happy about that either*—showed a family home in a nice neighborhood in a decent commuter town in Jersey.

She didn't own the house, but I'd stopped short of doing a totally legal property search to see who did.

I'd also stopped myself a dozen times from looking for her on social media.

I wasn't an impulsive guy. This itch to learn more about her annoyed me. I didn't even *like* her. But her company photo did make me laugh. I called up the picture again on my screen and smirked. Was she mid-sneeze?

There was a knock on my open door, and I jolted in my chair.

Ally was standing in my doorway with a coat draped over her arm and a backpack slung over her shoulder. "Ready to go, Charming? Or do you need a few more minutes with your porn?"

I closed her picture and rose.

Those eyes went wide, and her lips formed an O.

I glanced down, wondering if I'd forgotten to zip my pants or something.

Nope. Zipped. "What?" I demanded.

Silently, she shook her head.

I looked back down. No stains. My tie was still tied. My vest still buttoned.

"Do you have a problem?" I asked, enunciating each word.

She shook her head. "Nope. No problem," she finally croaked. Now she was looking everywhere but me. The carpet appeared to be quite fascinating. Her neck was turning an interesting shade of pink.

"Try to pull yourself together before the meeting," I suggested, brushing past her.

Greta was waiting by her desk with my coat and briefcase. "Be nice," she ordered.

Ally snorted behind me.

"I'm *always* nice," I growled, shoving my arms through the sleeves of my coat.

Both women shared a laugh at my expense.

“You’re a funny guy, Dom,” Ally said, slapping me on the shoulder. She had apparently recovered from whatever seizure or psychotic break had rendered her mute. “Nice to meet you, Greta.”

“Good luck, Ally,” Greta said with a traitorous wink.

We didn’t talk in the elevator, each doing our damndest to pretend the other didn’t exist. But as more people crowded in, I found myself pressed up against her in the corner. What was this annoying electric buzz every time we touched? Even through layers of clothing, I was still keenly aware of her shoulder pressing against my arm.

Hell, the guy from twenty-three was brushing my sleeve with his elbow as he played Tetris on his phone, but that contact barely drew my notice. There was a tension between Ally and me, wrapping itself around us and pinging back and forth.

I didn’t like it.

The doors finally opened like a reprieve, and we stepped out into the lobby. I led the way trying to get a few steps ahead of her so I could not smell that lemon scent that was messing with my head.

“Hey, Ally! How’s it going?” A man wearing brown cargo pants and a cap that looked like it had once been a woodland creature shifted the half-dozen Dior bags he was carrying to wave.

Ally beamed.

I’d seen her smirk. I’d witnessed her annoyance. I’d even seen her laugh once or twice. But this was something else entirely.

Her face lit up with actual joy. Didn’t she know joy had no place here? I wanted her to be as annoyed and uncomfortable by my presence as I was of hers. I wanted her unable to function.

“Buddy! Doing a little shopping?” she teased.

He laughed, a braying, donkey-like sound that was too loud to be dignified.

“Yeah, right! Doing a little pickup for a fancy photo shoot,” he called. “You?”

“Heading off to a fancy meeting,” she told him with a wink.

“See you at lunch tomorrow,” he yelled as the elevator doors closed.

She was still grinning when we climbed into the SUV.

“Good afternoon,” Nelson said when he slid behind the wheel. “I took the liberty of getting you each a protein shake for the drive.”

Nelson’s eyes met mine in the rearview mirror, and I felt his unasked question. Before today, I’d never once asked him to make a special trip for food or drink before a thirty-minute ride.

“Wow, thanks!” Ally said, making a grab for one of the shakes.

I picked up mine, pretending like I wanted it. “Who was that guy?” I asked her.

“Who? Buddy?” she asked, peering into the cup.

I saw the way her eyes lit up, and as annoying as I found her and as much as I enjoyed our back and forth, the hunger I saw there made my chest tight. I wanted to ask her why.

Why, when she had a full-time, decent-paying job, was she hungry?

“His name is Buddy?” I asked instead.

“I’m surprised you don’t know. Your mother hired him at the same bus stop she hired me. You know, after you got me fired.”

“You got yourself fired.” I peered out the window at cold, wet Manhattan and wished I were somewhere hot and tropical. Far away from everything else.

“Here’s a thought. Since we’re trapped working together,” Ally began, “why don’t we try this thing where we just agree to disagree.”

I shook my head. “That never works.”

“Okay. Fine. How about instead of mortal enemies, we make an effort to not be horrible to each other?”

“I don’t feel comfortable making promises I can’t keep.”

Her lips quirked. It wasn’t the full-on Buddy Beam. But I still liked it.

“How long of a drive is this?” she asked with a sigh.

“About thirty minutes, miss,” Nelson said from the front seat.

“It’s Ally,” she told him.

“Nice to meet you, Ally. I’m Nelson.”

“Thirty minutes seems like a long time to be trapped in a car with a guy like Dom,” she mused to my driver.

His eyes crinkled at the corners. “One gets used to it.”

“So we can’t pretend to be friends, and you can’t promise not to be an ass,” she recapped to me. “How about we clear the air? We can tell each other all the things we don’t like about each other. I’ll go first.”

She was joking. But the idea had merit. I *didn’t* like her. I *couldn’t* like her. We both needed to remember that.

“Your attitude,” I said, launching into my own list. “Your shoes. Your eyes are too big for your face. You have issues remembering that you’re an employee and should act accordingly. And your hair constantly looks like you just rolled out of bed.” *With a man.*

She blinked. Twice. And then her laugh filled the car. “You’ve put a lot of thought into that list for it to just roll off your tongue like that.”

“I was just stating the obvious. I don’t sit around thinking about you, Maleficent.”

Lies.

She sent a cocky look in my direction. “Sure you don’t, Dom.”

“Not only are you not my type. You’re so far in the opposite direction of my type you rank next to my great-aunt Rose.”

More lies.

I did, however, have a great-aunt Rose on my father's side. She, too, was a horrible human being. There was something profoundly wrong with the DNA on that side of the family.

Ally laughed. "Don't start being funny, Charming. I like a man with a sense of humor," she warned.

"You'll need to fight your baser instincts and resist me," I grumbled.

She reached out and actually patted my hand where it rested on my thigh. "Don't worry, Dom. You're not my type either."

I snorted to let her know I knew she was bluffing.

She turned in the seat to look at me straight on. The movement made that stupid swingy skirt she had on slip a little higher on her thigh.

"You're callous, disrespectful, generally in a bad mood, and I'd guess that you have trouble taking anyone else's feelings into consideration over your own."

Look at her hitting the nail on the head.

"You're a workaholic, which is fine. Work ethic is a good thing in my book. But you don't like your job, so that makes you either too stubborn or too scared to make a change. And I'm not a fan of either."

My eyes narrowed, and I could *feel* my nostrils flaring. "You don't know me."

"I know you're not my type," she said saucily.

She wished I wasn't her type.

"You're the type that waltzes into pizza shops and gets servers fired."

"I'd like to amend my list to add the fact that you're incapable of letting anything go," I said, pretending to be fascinated by the website traffic email that just came through.

"I was depending on that job, Dominic."

"And now you have a better one. You're welcome."

Ally growled. Actually physically growled. “There are consequences to our actions, Dominic Russo. And I’m going to make sure that one of your consequences is that you regret the day your mother hired me.”

“Mission accomplished already. Why don’t you quit and go ruin someone else’s day?”

“Please,” she scoffed. “I’m a tiny, little fish in your very big pond. You don’t even know I’m in the building.”

Now *she* was the delusional one.

We sat in silence for a few minutes. I gave up on pretending to read emails and stared out the window at dreary, frozen Manhattan.

“Tell me what got you to shut up for five full minutes upstairs,” I said finally.

The abrupt question threw her off balance, and I noticed she skimmed her gaze over me again.

Then her slow smile had my cold, dead heart doing something odd in my chest.

She leaned in a little closer so Nelson wouldn’t overhear her. I knew many things in that moment. I didn’t like her. I didn’t want to like her. I had no intention of treating her as anything but an annoyance. Yet none of that quelled my desire to be near her.

“I have this thing,” she began tentatively.

My breath stopped. I didn’t want the hammering of my heart to drown out her next words. When she didn’t continue, I merely stared at her.

“For vests,” she said, eyeing mine.

“But I’m not your type,” I shot back.

She smirked. “You’re only slightly less not my type in a vest. But don’t worry, Dom. I promise to resist you.”

We hoped you enjoyed The Worst Best Man and the excerpt of By a Thread by Lucy Score. If you want to read the rest of By a Thread, please click the following link

By a Thread

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Someone Else's Ocean

Kate Stewart

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Dedication

For my dear friend Donna Cooksley Sanderson. Thank you for setting your coffee down to become responsible for me.

For my ASL teacher Billy, thank you for showing me the beauty of a soundless language.

And for the people of St. Thomas.

Note to reader

For the purpose of being mindful about the nature of American Sign Language and the perception of the deaf culture, I'm writing my personal experience with personalities of those I've known, while incorporating my own knowledge of the language. While I do have a formal education in ASL, in the way of interpreter training, I do not claim to be an expert on the language nor the culture. Please keep in mind that the ASL communication in this book is between two individuals with years of experience interacting with the other, therefore leaving a broad avenue for *interpretation*.

Thank you, and I hope you enjoy it.

Kate

Prologue

Ian

“IAN.”

I turned to face my ex-wife as she moved toward me at warp speed. “Where is she?”

“In X-ray. She’s got stitches from a large gash in her arm and suffered a nasty break in her right leg.”

Her shoulders slumped as she exhaled a stressed breath. “Are the other girls okay?”

I slipped my hands in my slacks. “Just bumps and scratches. Ella got the worst of it.”

Tara looked at me accusingly. “You couldn’t go with her to X-ray?”

“She didn’t want me to. She’s still in the midst of claiming her independence.”

She pursed her lips. “You’re the parent.”

“Right, so you keep reminding me. Yet I was here first.”

“I was working,” she hissed, a ready defense on her tongue.

I raised a brow. “So that’s what you call it these days?” Tara was an assistant to her new boyfriend, or rather, an old boyfriend that she’d taken up with after our divorce. He was a commercial builder based in Houston.

“I’m sure the boss will have no issue giving you time off considering your duties last long past the five o’clock whistle.”

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms, her sundress lifting enough to see the six-hundred-dollar cowgirl boots I bought for our last anniversary. “If I didn’t know better, I would think you were jealous.”

“But you know better,” I said, sounding as bitter as I felt about the situation which had nothing to do with who she was with. It had everything to do with our custody agreement and the fact that I was expecting her to dispute it any day to suit her new ‘professional’ situation. And if the law saw fit, that meant my daughter would leave Dallas because of a man her *mother* was crazy about.

She gave me a wary glance. “Can we not do this now?”

“Fine. That was petty. I apologize. Ella lost some blood, and they had to give her a transfusion.”

Tara’s face went pale.

“She’s fine,” I assured her. “Thankfully she had been keeping up with her meds, so that helped. I didn’t know her blood type. I felt horrible. How could I not know that? She’s anemic for God’s sake.”

“We only just discovered it when she got her period a few months ago. Don’t be so hard on yourself.” Tara swallowed and stared at me with wide eyes. “By the way it’s—”

“Type B, I know now of course.” I moved to sit next to her as she studied me carefully. She was looking for anger. I knew it from years of being with her. What would I be angry about? She flinched as I took the cracked blue plastic seat next to her. The hospital’s bones were dinosaur, but the healthcare was top-notch. It was the only reason I wasn’t crawling out of my skin with worry.

“So, they did a blood test?” she asked quietly, her eyes cast down.

“Actually, I asked for a few tests just in case something like this arose again. The doctor said it’s a good precaution with her condition.”

Tara began shaking next to me, her fearful eyes meeting mine briefly before they flit away.

“What is it, Tara?”

“Ian, I—”

“Mr. and Mrs. Kemp?” The doctor interrupted and we both stood. “She’s going to be fine. We’ve ruled out surgery, managed to set her leg and have given her something mild for the pain.”

I blew out a long breath of relief. “Thank you.”

Tara spoke up. “We were supposed to leave for vacation tomorrow. We’re driving to my parents’ house in Houston. Will she be able to travel?”

“She’s going to have some discomfort no matter what, but it’s a short trip and as long as you’re equipped to care for her there, it should be fine.”

“She can stay with me—”

“That’s ridiculous,” Tara scoffed. “The whole point is for us to spend time together.”

“I thought the whole point was to spend time with Daniel?” I challenged.

Tara glanced away briefly in an attempt to hide her agitation before producing a fake smile for the doctor. “We’ll be fine. Can we see her?”

I was being a dick, but I rather enjoyed it at her expense. Tara had a way of getting under my skin by her presence alone.

The doctor’s eyes bounced between us. “They’re finishing up now, but you can go back.”

The walk down the stark white corridor was hell on earth. I was thankful the injuries weren’t severe and said a little prayer of gratitude. No feeling in the world had ever been worse than that phone call from the paramedics.

Ella perked up when I walked into the room behind her mother. Her eyes wide and lingering on her bright purple cast before she gave me a weak smile. She lifted her hands as I leaned in and kissed her forehead. I beat her to the punch, signing to her.

Had to go and break a leg, brat?

She grinned. *You’re such an asshole, Daddy.*

Does it hurt much?

Not too bad.

Who was driving?

She lifted her hands reluctantly. *Jessica.*

It was my worst fear as a parent. Most kids don't pay much attention in driving school—I know I didn't—and did the bare minimum just to get their driving freedom. Unfortunately, all you needed as a sixteen-year-old to get a license was decent eyesight and a little confidence to obtain that independence. With her friend Jessica being deaf and a new driver in a car full of deaf friends, she was already at a disadvantage. Sirens from speeding ambulances, warning sounds from car horns, and skidding brakes were forever silenced. Add youth and the fact that the girls relied solely on their hands for communication and it was a recipe for this father's worst nightmare. There were plenty of deaf and hard of hearing drivers on the road. I knew Ella would be a responsible and defensive driver when she got her license, but it did little to ease my nerves. She was still a year away from driving on her own and I was selfishly thankful for that blessing. My relief was cut short when I found out Ella had plenty of friends already behind the wheel. I had all but begged her mother to keep her away from the shitty clique of impressionable girls who were too old for her to hang out with. Tara hadn't taken my pleas under consideration. It was another reason for my irritation with her that day. Ignoring the surfacing anger toward her mother, I spoke to my daughter to keep the peace. Still, I couldn't help my hands.

You're fourteen. You don't need to be hanging out with sixteen-year-old girls.

Ella guffawed audibly and rolled her eyes.

I'm not that much younger. I turn fifteen next week. And I don't need a lecture. It was an accident.

Don't roll your eyes at me. And you'll get lectures until I'm dead. What happened?

I could see in Ella's hesitation to answer that the accident was Jessica's fault. And though it might not have anything to do with her disadvantage, her slow hands reluctant to respond told me different. Reading my face, Ella stiffened, her anger simmering. She was a lot like me and hated to admit when she was wrong.

I don't want to talk about it. I'm hurt and sleepy. Go back to work, Daddy.

Okay. I'll let you get to sleep. FaceTime me every day while you're in Houston. I'll miss you. Be good for your mother. With the sign of a P, I rubbed my hand over my chest. Promise?

Promise. Love you.

Love you, brat.

I looked over at Tara and signed while I spoke. "Stay safe and have a good trip."

Tara nodded, a distant look in her eyes, her porcelain skin tinted red in anger or embarrassment from our earlier exchange. I'd broken free from the responsibility of figuring her out when I left her a year ago. Her behavior was strange, but then again, we'd been strangers for years. Tara was good at reinventing herself every new moon, and I'd spent enough of my life figuring out who she'd decided to be with each moon that passed. I blew her bullshit off as a reaction to Ella being hurt. Taking my leave, I moved a few steps toward the door when Tara's earlier question began to gnaw at me.

"So, they did a blood test?"

A new sort of awareness plucked at my spine as I opened the door and froze. Sweat gathered at my temple as I turned to see my ex-wife had been staring at my retreating back. I stood statue-still as my daughter read my posture.

Daddy? What's wrong?

My gaze drifted over Ella—she had pale skin to my olive complexion, light hair to my dark, and deep-sea blue eyes to my gray.

In an attempt to mask the fear racing through me, I forced a smile worthy of an Oscar as my gaze drifted to Tara. If it was guilt etched all over her face, if I was reading her right—which I'd become a pro at over the years—*every-fucking-thing* was wrong.

Ella raised her hands, a frightened look on her face. *What's wrong?*

I glared at Tara who sank in her chair confirming my worst fear. Apparently, there was a feeling worse than what I felt just hours ago.

Ella waved frantically for my attention.

Daddy, what is it?

It's okay, sweetheart. I just need a minute with your mother. Tara, I need to speak to you outside.

I walked the hall quietly, trying to steady my heartbeat with even breaths as she followed slightly behind me. I made it to the garage barely able to handle the rattle under my skin from the rage that threatened.

I turned on Tara abruptly and she stopped just short of hitting my chest. She was beautiful. At one point in time, I thought she was the most beautiful woman alive. At one point in time, I couldn't imagine a life without her. At one point in time, I would've taken a bullet for her, no questions asked. She had been my life. She had been my purpose, my meaning, my everything. Seething, I fisted my hands at my sides and tried to hold my bite, but it was impossible. I prayed I would owe her an apology for the thoughts that surfaced.

"I've always given you credit for being more intelligent than you actually are. But by the look on your face, you're frightened about something that can't be true."

Tara stared at the stripes on my necktie.

"Look at me."

Her eyes shot to mine and were full of fear, tears threatening.

"Because in order to determine paternity, it would require more than a blood test."

“Ian—”

“I know my damned name. Fourteen years I was your husband, and fifteen her father. Tell me now, Tara. Right. Fucking. Now. Tell me my suspicions are ridiculous. Tell me Ella belongs to me in every sense. Tell me.”

“Ian—”

“Tell me!”

Fear and trepidation marked every inch of her as all the anger dissipated out of me in one breath and devastation took its place.

Don't ask her, Ian. It doesn't matter. Don't ask her!

I pointed behind her. “Tell me that’s my little girl in that room that calls me, Daddy, not *his*. Tell me I didn’t lose my life to your selfish fucking whims. Tell me!”

Incredulous tears fell down my face as my heart bottomed out.

“Tell me she’s mine, Tara,” I croaked, my face soaked, my heart obliterated. “Don’t do this to me. Please, I’m begging you. If you ever loved me at all, tell me she’s mine.”

“She is your daughter,” she offered weakly.

“But I didn’t father her, did I?”

Chapter One

Koti

I DON'T ALWAYS FEEL LIKE a failure, but as I picked up the iguana crap from the side of the pool, a small glimpse of the life I left behind hit me in a flash—sipping a designer martini with a killer view of the city from the thirty-fifth floor, a healthy bank account, and the feel of a new pair of heels.

“Freezing your ass off in those heels,” I muttered, studying my chipped blue toenails in the flip-flops I wore.

“Pardon?” Mrs. Osborne asked as I removed the ‘excrement’ that she had called about fifteen minutes after I thought I’d finished my day.

Holding the warm crap in my hand, I studied Mrs. Osborne lying in a lounge chair covering herself with thick glue-colored sunblock while inside the house, Mr. Osborne scoured the five-bedroom rental opening every single cabinet and drawer. “I think we’re all set.”

Half an hour prior, I’d been in my plush sun chair on my porch with a freshly corked pinot when I got the call.

“At Ease Property Management, Koti speaking.”

“Koti, this is Stephanie Osborne.”

“Hi, Mrs. Osborne, are you enjoying your stay so far?”

“I am, but we have an issue.” I took a well-deserved sip of my wine as I prepared for the worst. I loved my job, but there was always that one guest that could make said job a living hell. The Osbornes had only checked into their villa three hours prior. One call was typical from a new guest, even with the inch-thick notebook that was on the counter, filled with every single piece of information they would need. It was her fourth call since I left them.

“How can I help?”

“Well, there was a large iguana next to the pool.”

I choked down my laugh. “Yes ma’am, it’s common on the island.”

“I understand...” she said hesitantly, “and that’s fine. He gave us a fright, but that’s not the problem.”

“No?”

“Well, it seems he decided to relieve himself next to the pool.”

I sat up in my chair. “In the pool?”

“No, next to it.”

“I’m not following.”

“There’s iguana excrement next to the pool.”

I was already downing my wine and took my final swallow before I braved a reply. “Okayyyy.”

“I was wondering when you would be by to pick it up?”

And there you have it. My new life in a nutshell—sans new Jimmy Choos and Christmas at Rockefeller Center—now the proud owner of an anorexic bank account.

I threw the poop in the trash can and inhaled a calming breath as I scanned her three-million-dollar view which consisted of deep blue to aqua surf and the neighboring island—St. Johns.

Nothing bad happened here, at least not in my private universe. The universe I created when I left my toxic life in New York and retreated to the one place I remembered being happy.

If the island could cure me, I was sure after a few days it would work wonders on Mrs. Osborne.

“Can I help you with anything else while I’m here?”

With curious, crinkled eyes she looked up at me from where she sat. “Do you really make your own electricity here in St. Thomas?”

“Actually, no, we buried a giant extension cord below the ocean from the States.”

It was my best friend Jasmine's line for people who weren't smart enough to believe differently. I had never used it until I was forced to pick up iguana crap.

Mrs. Osborne—a seven-day refugee from Long Island—sat with a magazine on her lap, mouth open, her eyes on the surf while she pressed her brows together to try to make sense of it. I bit my lip to keep my laugh hidden. She was old money and hadn't earned a cent and it was painfully obvious. She'd clearly ignored the thousands of solar panels set up all over the top of the mountains as she was chauffeured in.

What was even more ironic was that I used to spend hours of my life on the phone with women just like her, answering endless questions and catering to their every whim much the same as I was at that moment, but for a much larger paycheck. Watching her ungreased wheels turn was entertaining, but I had a breathing bottle to get back to. "Well if that's all, I'll leave you to it."

The announcement of my departure led to another set of questions. "Is it true we will be bathing with rainwater?"

"Yes, Mrs. Osborne, as I explained when you arrived, we *do* use the rainwater since there are no real alternate water sources. The rain is captured by the gutters and then drained into a filtration system underneath the house. It's completely safe. I've checked your water level and it looks good for the length of your stay but feel free to give me a call if you need some delivered." Studying the excess amount of skin around her eyes and the sagging lady flaps underneath her arms, I was sure she wasn't worried about the pH of the water affecting her skin. Still, she was a beautiful older-looking woman. I had to give her credit, she put in a ton of effort when other women her age wouldn't.

"You'll deliver water?"

Please, God, I just want to go to my happy place.

"Absolutely."

"Okay, well as long as we won't run out."

"Have a good night."

I was halfway to the sliding door that led to my exit and the waiting bottle of wine when she spoke up behind me.

“Wait. Is it safe to drink, *you know*, or is it like Mexico?”

* * *

“Get the Osbornes settled?” I could hear the smile in Jasmine’s voice—she must have known when she took the reservation they would be a pain in the ass. I drove along the mountainside enjoying the breeze and glanced over the cliff to see a cruise ship had come in while I was at the Osbornes’.

“Shit.”

“What?” Jasmine asked through the speakers in the cabin of my Jeep.

“The cruise ship came in while I was dealing with shit, like literally. Now I’ll never get home.”

“What?” she asked absently.

“What to which part? I just picked up iguana crap. In fact, I was summoned to pick up *iguana crap*. Thanks, boss.”

Jasmine’s laugh belted out while I navigated through a thousand tourists. Shipwreckers walked around like new babies with their cell phones, arms up in selfie poses clicking away at the scenery while risking their lives in the rush of traffic.

“The ship never shows up this late. Damn it, I’m going to miss the sunset.” Routine was crucial to my well-being and the sunset was often a focal point of my day. For me, it was a finish line of sorts.

Parked in traffic, I surveyed the sparkling water next to me. It would never get old. Even when I got gray and ceased grooming, and had grown my own pair of lady flaps, I would enjoy the same view.

“All you do is complain, Koti.”

I shoved a fistful of French fries from my brown-bag dinner into my mouth. “Liar. I hardly ever give you grief. I’m the best employee you have.”

“You’re the only employee I have, so there is no comparison.”

Swallowing my food, I laid on the horn as a van veered slightly toward the median. In the rearview, I saw a lady whose attention seemed to be on anything but driving, her phone hanging out the window to get the perfect picture of the surrounding bay.

“Hey, lady, pay attention to the road!”

Jasmine ignored my shriek. “What are you doing tonight?”

I filled my mouth with more fries to keep from answering.

“Oh... let me guess. Nothing. *Again*,” she chided. “Come join me, I’m at the wine bar.”

“No,” I cut her off quickly. “No, no. No, lady, no. Last time we did ladies’ night, I ended up flashing my thong to a hundred people.”

And it was the best night I’d spent in St. Thomas, but I wasn’t about to tell her that. If there was one thing I’d learned, it was that you can’t repeat the same good time twice. And the only reason I partook in that night was because I was half-drunk before we got to the bar.

Jasmine’s infectious laughter was welcome amidst the chaos that surrounded me. “That was a great night. And if you would act a little more twenty-nine than eighty-nine we could have more of them. Besides, I only took one picture. *One*.”

“If that picture even exists.” She was forever threatening me with evidence she never produced. “I’m fine with being a homebody. You know I prefer it.” I laid on the horn again just as an old Cadillac cut off my progress. And seconds later, as if some cosmic force decided battling traffic on a ship day wasn’t enough, a chicken—lady flaps spread wide—appeared on the hood of my Jeep and came straight for me.

“ARE YOU KIDDING ME!” I swung my arm out in a knee-jerk reaction. “Shoo!”

“What? What’s going on?” Jasmine asked, more amused than concerned as I took up the inch of space between me and the car in front and tapped on my brakes to try to get the bird off my hood. The stoic chicken didn’t budge.

“A rooster just jumped on my hood!”

“You are shooing a chicken?”

“Is there chicken-speak etiquette?” Apparently, there was, because the chicken came toward me like it knew I had a freshly plucked, chopped, deep-fried and wrapped relative in the brown sack next to me. “It’s attacking my windshield!”

Honking the horn, I stood on my brakes as the rooster closed in. It would have been an easy jump into the open cabin of my Jeep. I was in full-on panic mode as the bird bobbed and weaved like we were in a Tyson fight. I might as well have put hot sauce on my ear because that bastard was ready to brawl and take a piece of it.

“What do I do?”

“It’s a chicken,” Jasmine cackled, “Shoo it away.”

“You are such an *asshole*,” I screeched, as her laughter filtered through the speakers. I rarely ever spoke on the phone while driving. Car accidents were the most notorious killer. And my Jeep just so happened to be a deathtrap as well. But the Jeep didn’t actually belong to me. It was on loan like much of the rest of my life. I had no choice but to drive it around the mountainous terrain of St. Thomas. The cloth hood made zero difference in safety. I’d checked. Being able to drive the SUV at all was my first milestone in the many I’d conquered in the last year. I wasn’t about to throw them all away for a psychotic chicken.

I had to keep calm.

I looked for anything I could throw at the real-life version of an Angry Bird to keep it from making the easy leap into my passenger seat, then realized all I had was my dinner. The bird

seemed satisfied with intimidation at that moment until I laid on the horn. Apparently, the sound was the chicken's trigger.

"Oh, come on!" The light I sat at had changed three times and I was in gridlock battling a psychotic rooster. "FUCKING SHIP DAY!" I screamed, hurling the bag at Tyson who let me have round two and jumped off the hood.

"Atta girl, blame it on ship day." Jasmine was still laughing as a group of people next to me applauded.

"I just nailed it with a chicken sandwich. How twisted is that?"

"I would give my left boob to see what just happened," she bellowed.

"Is there something you need, *boss*? Because I'm off the clock, and I really don't like you right now."

"No, you love me. You okay?"

And that was Jasmine, a friend first, boss second, but that wasn't the order we started in. She'd picked me up off the side of my quarter-life crisis and we'd been inseparable since. "Yes, I'm fine. Just really freaking done for the day. I love you too, you *jerk*. See you tomorrow."

She hung up as I battled cars, traffic, and new tourists for another half hour to get home. I managed to sip my pinot right as the sun met the water setting off an endless trail of diamonds too elusive to be captured by anything other than the naked eye.

I inhaled and thanked the God I hoped existed for the gift of it.

I dug my toes into the sand as Bon Iver's "33 GOD" drifted through the speakers off of my porch and melted the rest of my day away.

Chapter Two

Koti

“AT EASE PROPERTY MANAGEMENT, THIS is Koti.” The next morning, I sat behind my two-inch desk as Jasmine waltzed in with a handful of coffee for us. I mouthed her a ‘thank you’ as she placed the cup in front of me and took the desk opposite of mine.

I listened to Mrs. Osborne ranting and saw Jasmine waiting for me expectantly, a devious smile on her glossed lips, a fresh story on the edge of her tongue. Jasmine was gorgeous, from the tip of her silky long hair to her dark-skinned toes. She was a bit older than me, but you couldn’t tell because of her exotic looking features—caramel brown eyes bordering gold, a heart-shaped face, and ebony hair. She was curvy, and that day had poured herself into a loud yellow sundress that would look ridiculous on anyone else. Oversized sunglasses sat perched on the top of her head, a clothing staple for her. We were night and day in the looks department. Where she was dark, I was light. My mother had gifted me with silver-blue eyes and her body. I was the pint-size version of her. Where she had made millions with her frame, I was a bit more conservative in my dress. My mother kept her signature blonde locks even as she aged and though I’d inherited those as well, I’d razored them short after I landed in St. Thomas.

Blair Vaughn had been one of the first supermodels and ended her reign on her own terms before she married my father. My parents’ Fifth Avenue penthouse was a shrine to her illustrious career. Every room was covered in framed magazine covers she was featured on. She had owned Manhattan in her day in the way I had hoped to in my own. What she conquered with her breathtaking smile and figure, I’d attempted to master with my father’s business sense.

My mother’s smile won, and my smile was erased by reality. So, I created a new reality, where pavement was scarce and

there was always a soft place to land. A place where I didn't have my mother's high expectations weighing me down.

Annoyed I was in my own headspace with my mother and even more so with the woman who'd called me every hour since seven o'clock that morning, I assured Mrs. Osborne, again, that she wouldn't run out of water.

"Koti, I find this disturbing," she yapped on the other end of the phone as if she was now existing in a third-world country.

"I'll go ahead and send a truck." *You really need a hobby, lady.*

"I'd appreciate it. I just think with what we've paid for this rental we shouldn't have to worry about necessities like *water.*"

"I completely understand." *You old, flappy bat.*

Once I'd put her at ease—though I refused to assure there would be no more visits from the pesky iguana who lived there because she was ridiculous—we hung up.

"Mrs. Osborne?" Jasmine checked her lipstick in a compact she produced from her purse. No matter the time of day, her makeup was flawless. She gathered her hair into a self-adhesive bun. "Cinco de Mayo is coming up," I joked, as she curled her lip at me. "Should we celebrate with a margarita?"

The first time I met her, in fact, the first time anyone met Jasmine, they assumed she was Mexican or of Spanish descent, which always led to her favorite line, "I'm *half* filifuckingpino." Jasmine was raised in 'bumfuck'—her words, not mine—Minnesota and sounded like one of the cast of *Fargo*. There were a lot of ya's for yeah's, soda was pop, etc.

St. Thomas was an eclectic mix, even with the natives the accents were different, including the neighboring islands. Jasmine had moved to St. Thomas with an ex-fiancé and stayed after he decided he wanted to return to the States, without her.

"You know it was Mrs. Osborne and she's a pain in the ass," I said, typing a note on the property file. DO NOT RENT TO THESE PEOPLE.

“That commission is worth it,” she scolded, before I reluctantly backspaced my note with a single finger, one key at a time. I added a death glare in her direction for good measure.

“You’re checking them in next time.” Curling my lip at her, I picked up the phone to fetch Mrs. Osborne her water.

“So, I had sex in a tractor last night.”

With a raised brow, I paused my hand on the number pad and looked above my screen at her. “A... tractor. How is that even possible? How many tractors are on St. Thomas that you could have sex on?”

“At least one,” she said, sitting back in her seat. “I feel a little dirty about this one, I will admit.”

“Really?”

She stood and walked over to the coffee pot to refill her cup. “No, not at all. No regrets, my friend. And now that I think about it, I’m sure it was a backhoe.”

I shrugged. “Well, as long as it was a backhoe.”

“Exactly,” she turned to me, hands propping her up on the counter behind her. Our office was a shoebox, but Jasmine insisted we rent a small space when we managed enough properties to make us more “official.” Yet we never met any of our renters in the office and no one had ever occupied the two chairs we had waiting for clients. Jasmine claimed having a place to show up to made us more accountable. I agreed to a point because if I had it my way, I’d live as a happy recluse and work within the confines of my beach house. She started the company herself, heartbroken and determined to survive in St. Thomas without the man that lured her here and left her to fend for herself while licking her wounds. Our work hours could be grueling at times but, she paid well and after a year of being out of corporate hell, I wouldn’t dream of doing anything else.

“Will you be seeing this one again?”

“Meh, I don’t know.” She pulled up her skirt to show me her thong clad, purpling-brown ass. “But man, is this a sign of a good time or what?”

Sighing, I held up my hand to block the view of her tan globes. “It’s 9 a.m. Do I really need to see your ass this early?”

“I’ll sing you the “Thong Song,” come on.” She giggled, flexing her cheeks to make them bounce.

“Oh, you just go straight to hell.”

I grabbed my phone and purse as she resumed her seat and gave me a wink. “Best video ever.”

I stopped in my tracks. “You have video?”

“Just remember I love you, and I have only good intentions for keeping this.”

Panic raced through me as I thought of the night I’d let all my inhibitions go and I mean *let go*. The slow spreading smile on her lips revealed she was playing with me. There was no video.

“Where are you off to?”

“I’m getting new neighbors today.”

“Oh, right. The Kemps’ are booked, I forgot.”

“Yep, two weeks. Newlyweds.” I was excited about the idea of newlyweds. My parents and the Kemps bought our neighboring houses within a year of each other when I was five. They both purchased the properties for vacation houses/investment rental homes. And while the Kemps still rented theirs out, my parents were stuck with a daughter who had fled to theirs from New York costing them a year’s worth of profits. While my dad insisted the house had paid for itself tenfold and it was mine as long as I needed it, my mother kept her tongue idle. I knew it would eventually become a bargaining chip. I always felt guilty about taking away some of their retirement income, not to mention the small fortune they wasted on a degree I no longer used. While my mother was no stranger to money, Ryan Vaughn had been a scrapper and worked hard for his fortune.

But in a way, even with my mother’s grudge about my current situation, I think they knew that house had saved my life.

Or at least, helped me find a new one.

“Take it easy out there,” Jasmine chimed, as I refilled my coffee. “Careful of those chickens, though we both know you could use a little cock.”

“Classy,” I said, rolling my eyes. “You aren’t off the hook. I want to know what could have possibly led to backhoe sex.”

My phone rang, and I cringed while Jasmine smirked, but it quickly disappeared when I silenced the call. Mere seconds later the office phone rang. Jasmine narrowed her eyes as she picked up the phone. “Good morning, Mrs. Osborne.”

* * *

With the back of my floorboard full of clanking wine bottles, I pulled up to my piece of paradise, which was the second to last of two identical cottage-style houses on Vista Lane. To the right of the Kemp house, large boulders crowded the beach giving it an intimate feel, and to the left of my cottage lay a large stretch of silky beige sand and an endless view of the ocean. The builder had only erected two of the three planned houses before the Kemps intercepted and bought the last available lot for more privacy. Aside from the residences on the neighboring cliffs, I basically lived on a private beach, which was the richest real estate you could find on St. Thomas. And though the houses weren’t as modern as others—built in the eighties—they were equally as inviting. Between the two-story twin dwellings lay a wide sand path which was convenient for me.

I parked my Jeep between the two porches cutting off Bobby McFerrin singing to me “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” hopped out and grabbed the flowers and wine before I dug for the last bottle lodged under my seat. I cursed my timing as I heard tires on the gravel behind me.

Crap, they’re early.

I had no idea what condition the house was in and prayed the cleaning lady had done a decent job. Finally getting a grip on the loose bottle, I pulled it out along with the flowers and caught a glance at the retreating cab before I was motored over.

The bottle I'd retrieved hit my chin and I landed on my ass with a soundless thud. Large hands gripped me by my bare shoulders and I was instantly pulled back on my feet. A man dressed in a power suit stared down at me with shattered features and tortured gray eyes. Recognition of his pain was instantaneous, and I felt despair leaking from every part of him. Through thick black lashes, ready tears threatened to spill as he assessed me to make sure I was in one piece. It was a split second before he righted me on the sand and released me with a quick and barely audible, "I'm sorry," before he rushed away. I looked down at the crushed flowers on the ground and mourned them briefly along with dashed hopes of happy new neighbors.

If that man was one of my newlyweds, I was in for a shit two weeks.

I looked around for a bride to follow the groom and came up empty.

Shit. She left him at the altar!

My phone rattled in my pocket as I made my way toward the Kemps, my eyes in the direction of the groom, chin burning. He was standing at the edge of the water, shoulders slumped, hands in his suit pockets. Even from yards away I could see his devastation.

Poor guy. What an evil woman. How could she do that to him? Why do people do that? How do they leave someone standing at the altar thinking they are about to start the rest of their life and not show?

Even though I had made it out of New York a laughing stock with my peers, I got away with only a slightly jaded heart. And even that shit hurt. I'd been in the dating neighborhood, browsed but never decided to buy. I still had plenty of years to find Mr. Forever.

When it came to me, renting was a better option, and even with that decision, I hadn't bothered to act on it. It seemed the ideal thing to do when one goes flying off the handle, only to abandon her life and live in a new one. I was a work in progress and love could wait.

I tried to give my jilted groom privacy as I made my way to the porch of the Kemps' house and opened the door. It was spotless and up to standard; which was a relief. I doubted the guy would give a damn about the state of the house. I threw the broken flowers in the trash and stuck one of the wine bottles in the fridge as I eyed the window. My phone rattled again just as I pulled it out of my pocket to shoot a text to Jasmine and saw she was calling.

"Hey."

"We have a problem," Jasmine said without a trace of humor. That tone meant we had a serious problem.

"Oh, I can assure you we do. I'm staring at a jilted groom."

"Jilted groom?"

"My new neighbors. It looks like the bride was a no-show."

I'd managed to land us the Kemp account last summer when they had come to stay for a weekend before heading further south. I adored Rowan and William Kemp, they were worldly wise, extremely kind, and more than happy to hand the business over. I was sure I'd pissed on someone who had managed their rental for years, but I needed the commission. I loved the house, it was warm and inviting much like mine with subtle differences in décor. So far, the house had brought in a steady commission and was rented for every week of the summer.

"No, your bride and groom are about to pull up."

"No," I spoke slowly. "He's *here*, she's *not*."

"Tall? Late thirties, dark hair?"

I squinted in the afternoon sun. "Yeah."

"That's Ian Kemp. Mrs. Kemp has been calling all morning to see if he might have shown up there."

“Ian?” I walked out onto the porch and studied his back. “I haven’t seen him since I was seven. Well, I saw him for a few seconds when I was seventeen—”

“Babe, that’s all fine and dandy, but we have a bride and groom whose ETA is *now* and we have no place to put them.”

“We can relocate Ian.” Even as I said the words, I knew there was no way I was walking up to that man and asking him to leave. The look in his eyes alone would haunt me for weeks. He stood statue-still as he stared at the aqua glass water.

“Something’s wrong.”

“Uh, yeah,” Jasmine said, as I took another step forward. I had the overwhelming urge to go to him, but I was sure he wanted his space. His posture confirmed as much.

“No, I mean with Ian.”

Jasmine cursed before she growled into the phone, I could hear her frantically typing in the background. “Every place else is booked. We are going to have to put them at Margulis Mansion.”

“No, you can’t! That’s a twenty-two-million-dollar rental with nine rooms!”

“We’re going to have to make up the difference. At least for the night. I’ll call and see if anyone has something we can swap.”

“Crap,” I said, staring at the back of Ian’s suit. “I needed this commission.”

Jasmine sighed. “You and me both.”

“This sucks!” I may have said it a little loud, but Ian didn’t move. Not an inch. He was searching for answers. I knew that feeling. I’d done the same thing.

“Well, hell, why not a hotel room?”

“And risk a shit review? We’re trying to build the business. These are newlyweds. Can’t do it.” Jasmine sounded pissed which was rare, but I understood it. We were going to lose a ton of commission.

“There is nothing else?”

“Nothing,” she sighed over the line, defeated.

“Okay, text me the address. As soon as they get here, I’ll divert traffic.”

“K. Call me when you get home. Fucking ship day.”

“That was yesterday, Jasmine.”

“If you can use it, so can I.”

Chapter Three

Koti

AFTER WAVING TO THE TAXI driver like a bird trying to take flight, I threw the two newly discarded suitcases back into the taxi while I spoke rapidly to a confused bride and groom. After escorting them to their oversized mansion for two, where they repeatedly looked around with a “No shit? This is ours? No way!” I made my way back across the island to check Mrs. Osborne’s water—at her insistence—and scoured the porch for any poop before I turned two more rentals. When my workday was done, I pulled up to my house and pressed my forehead to the wheel. I had an ass full of sand, thanks to my new and unexpected neighbor.

A chuckle escaped me as I trotted down the alley to my porch where my serenity waited and paused when I saw Ian. He was still standing in the exact place I left him *hours* earlier. From what his mother had told me last summer, he’d been married and had a daughter. They lived in Dallas and were doing great. The Kemps had emigrated from South Africa and moved to the States. Ian had told me as much when we were kids. Smiling, I recalled the first time we met. It was just feet away from the water he was transfixed on.

Treading on the surface, I looked at my newly designated playmate. My mother saw fit to entertain our new summer neighbors with strict instructions that we get better acquainted. “You talk funny.” I stared at the brown-haired boy with bright eyes and a chipped front tooth.

“I lived in South Africa until last week,” he defended.

“Where did you move?”

“Texas. Dallas. A dreadful place surrounded by dirt. No weekend safaris. I hate it. Now—”

My giggle cut him off. “You’re so... proper.”

“Do you want my help or not?”

I jumped the wave that rolled through us to keep from getting another mouthful of water. My feet barely touched the sand and we were neck deep. The water was warm, and I could feel the sunburn on my back and arms even with the floaties my mother made me wear.

“I think I have it,” I said, lowering my mask and biting the mouthpiece.

“You don’t have it,” he challenged.

“You don’t have it,” I repeated in the worst imitation of a South African accent ever.

“Fine then. You’re on your own now.”

“Fine then,” I mocked with widening eyes through my mask. Ian laughed before he gripped my shoulders. “Don’t worry if it trickles in a little. Let the pressure of the water keep the mask to your face, even when you think it’s safe not to breathe, breathe anyway.”

The truth was I’d been out there for the better part of an hour panicking before he swam in, barking orders. I’d watched Jaws the night before with my father’s permission. It was the one time I regretted talking him into letting me get my way. I didn’t want to go anywhere near the water. No matter how many times I told myself it was just a movie, I heard the du-nuh every few seconds.

“Okay,” I said with false courage. “I’ve got it.”

He shook his head as if he knew I would choke. “All right, give it a go.”

“You sound like The Crocodile Hunter.”

“He is Australian.” He rolled his eyes. “And you sound ignorant. Now stop stalling.”

“Don’t be rude, crocky pants,” I piped.

Ian shrugged, pushing his dark hair off his forehead. “You’re scared.”

“I’m not scared of anything.”

“Well then go on, miss.”

“I’m six years old. I’m not a miss.”

“You sure don’t have tits enough to be called a miss.”

His eyes sparkled with his laugh.

“Pervert alert!” I yelled at the top of my lungs.

Ian cringed. “I was just joking.”

“My father says any time a boy says a word about privates in front of me to tell.”

“I’m not a pervert. And I’m too old to be babysitting you.”

Offended but too terrified to be alone in the water, I shrieked when the next wave got the best of me. I was too far out in the surf and I knew I was about to get in trouble for it.

“I’ll have tits one day,” I promised, unable to think of anything else to say. Ian rolled his eyes as he pulled me by my floaties closer to shore. Choking, I pushed my hair out of my face. “I know you aren’t a pervert.” I smiled the way my mother did when she wanted her way. “I was just joking too.”

Ian squinted at me as if he was trying to decide if I was being truthful.

“I want to be your friend. I’m sorry, Ian. Please don’t leave me out here.”

He grabbed hold of me then and pulled me to where I could safely stand.

“It’s okay, little puffer fish.” He lined my mask up for me. “All right. You can do this. I know you can. But,” he looked behind his shoulder and then back to me, “no one said you had to.”

“I asked for the mask and flippers for my birthday. I’m gonna be seven next week. I’m not afraid.” I was lying. And he knew it.

“Are you scared of what you’ll see under, then? Give them here.” He took the mask from me and peeked underwater before he pulled up and shook his head. “Nothing to see but a few fish.”

“Okay.” Taking the mask from him, I pulled it over my eyes and nose and he became harder to see when the lens fogged up.

“No big deal.” He knuckled the top of my head and I glared at him before I went under. Within seconds, a needle nose fish swam a centimeter from my mask and I began choking as I surfaced. “Holy shit!”

“Koti!” My mother shrieked from shore. She had the ears of a Doberman.

“Sorry, Mom, there was a fish!”

She stood in a bright red bikini and I saw Ian’s eyes float her way with interest. My mother had ‘tits’ in abundance and a whole lot of everything else. Curves from head to foot, I could see Ian deduce she was the ultimate miss. Even as a retired supermodel she commanded the eyes of everyone she sauntered past. “Young lady, I better not hear that language again.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I could feel the blood rush to my face. Ian shook his head and nudged his chin forward.

“Try again.”

Embarrassed, I shrugged. “I don’t want to.”

“Mad? Humiliated? Scared? That’s when you should do things anyway. It will always piss the other guy off.” He grinned at me with pencil point freckles dotting his nose. “Have fun anyway, Koti. I’ll keep a lookout for you.”

I knew a little about the boy inside the man I watched. The boy who had put together my first s’more, laughed with his whole body at the surprise in my eyes when I tasted the toasted marshmallow, a product from a fire which he, himself had built. While Ian was allowed freedoms like that, I was allowed very little sugar and spent an hour bubbling marshmallows and smashing them between graham crackers and melted chocolate. I could still remember Ian’s amused reaction as I gorged. He was a firecracker then, about to turn fourteen, but he took me under his wing that summer.

There wasn't a trace of that boy in the man who stood in a puddle at the edge of the sea.

Life was funny like that. For a moment in time, a few weeks in the summer when we were both just a couple of naïve kids, I called Ian Kemp a friend. Earlier that day he had treated me as a stranger. It was the summers after that turned us into nothing more than a few memories.

But those few memories turned significant.

Ian Kemp had introduced me to my comfort food. He'd also given me the confidence to smile to spite my mother when she got the best of me.

And for those memories, I felt a little indebted. A little bit more familiar to the stranger on the beach.

I made my way back to my house, my gaze fixed on Ian until I was forced to unload my sand-filled panties. A hot shower and a loofah scrub down later, I poured another glass of wine from my already corked bottle and took residence on my porch chair overlooking the calm sea. In an attempt not to screw up my routine, a routine I carefully followed to the letter on most days, I lit my hurricane candles on my porch as Novo Amor's "Faux" drifted through my speakers and out to sea.

I learned much too late, ambiance was the key for me. Music, wine, and candles created my safe haven. These little things made me feel like I was in the midst of something, instead of looking forward to something else. I had spent way too much of my life looking forward to things.

Those things rarely ever came the way I'd imagined them.

Certainties were pap smears, head colds, and flat tires. But the feeling you got wrapped up in a good book, the perfect song, surrounded by candlelight could be repeated over and over.

Endless self-made memories that no one could screw up? *Yes, please.*

Because when you date yourself, there is no one to disappoint you. Jasmine didn't get it. But me and my hesitant libido understood. I'd gone through an entire year without missing men. I'd go through another if I felt like it. But it wasn't about

setting restrictions on my life. It was about the way I felt about myself.

I'd come to the island anxiety-ridden and the blue water was my prescription. I'd set goals to forget my old ones and shed my skin for a better fit. One that bled life without calculations and bred alternate possibilities. I basked in the smell of the ocean—a new necessity—and marveled at the swirl of different shades of blue that hit the slightly rocky shore.

Several healthy sips of wine later, and much to my dismay, my bottle was empty.

As wrong as it was, I glanced over at Ian who remained in the same spot on the beach and then over to the Kemp's house, where I knew an expensive bottle was chilling in the fridge.

As the sun began to fade behind the new Armani-clad statue in the neighborhood, the ocean and surrounding mountain islands behind him, I tiptoed over to the house. In record time, I had the bottle in hand and walked out of the Kemps' ready to step lightly back to my side of the invisible fence. I shrieked when I saw the dark cloud that waited on the other side of the door and dropped my keys on the porch between us. Ian peered down at me as I scrambled to retrieve them.

“Shit, I'm sorry. Ian, hi, do you remember me? Koti?” He remained mute with no recognition on his face. “Well, it's good to see you. I was... just making sure the place was ready for you. I manage this property now, I don't know if your mother mentioned it?” Ian stood silent, his hands in his pockets. He was pale, his stubble-covered face was slightly bloated. Red-rimmed eyes were a sure sign of the day he'd had, and his full lips didn't move with a single tell.

Ian glanced at the bottle of wine with indifference before he sidestepped me, plucked the key out of my hand and went through the door shutting it soundly behind him.

“Well, that was good, Koti,” I muttered, taking a step away when he sounded through the door, his South African tongue slightly faded, but much more masculine.

“It was awful, actually. Terrible liar. But then I guess that’s a thing with you women.”

“Wow, uh, geesh. I’ll replace your wine tomorrow,” I said through the closed door. “Sorry, for... sorry.”

What in the hell was I apologizing for? He’d just thrown women into a collective group and labeled them all liars, insulted an entire sex because of my slight alcoholism on a Tuesday night.

The nerve.

Stomping across the sand, my cell phone rang. Already on edge, I shrieked in surprise before I pulled it out of my pocket. I’d forgotten to turn it off after my shift and it was Jasmine’s night for after-hours calls. I blew out a breath as I looked at the lifeless house behind me while dusk set in. He hadn’t turned on a single light. Reluctantly I answered. “At Ease Property Management, this is Koti.”

“Hi, Koti, it’s Rowan Kemp.”

“Oh, hello, Mrs. Kemp.”

“Koti, I insist you call me Rowan. Is Ian there? Is he still at the house?”

“Yes. He uh, showed up about six hours ago.”

“Oh, thank God, okay...” I could hear the fear in her voice. “Koti, darling, I need a huge favor,” I swore when the woman spoke to me she could make a simple sentence sound like a song lyric. Ian’s father was all-American, but his mother was where the South African roots lay.

“Sure, you know I’ll help any way I can.”

“I’m sure the rental was booked for the week, correct?”

“Yes, ma’am. Actually, it’s booked almost every week for the next several months. We had to spend a small fortune relocating the guests today.”

“I’ll cover all of it, double your commission. I really need your help.”

“Okay.” I was up for anything that had me in electricity and wines that didn’t taste like syrup. Living hand to mouth had been a refreshing change when I first moved to the island, until it became a burden. Maintaining island life took work and a lot of it. “What can I do for you?”

“Watch him.”

I pressed my phone closer to my ear. “Watch him?”

“Yes. He’s just been through the worst divorce. Almost a year of fighting. He left home without a word to anyone. His father and I were frantic. He won’t take my calls. Just please check in with him each day. Make sure he’s okay.”

I lived in the house next door, there was no way it would be hard for me to check on him and the commission alone had me speaking up. “Of course.”

“I’ll send the money right away. Whatever he needs, invoice me. If he stays longer than a few weeks, we’ll be down.”

I highly doubted Ian wanted a visit from his parents, but it wasn’t my place to say so. “Yes, ma’am. Can I ask... actually never mind.” I had to admit I was curious, the image of his tortured gray eyes flashed through my head.

“He wanted the divorce, he asked for it. I’m not sure what happened.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Ian is a good man, a very good man. I’ve raised an amazing son. This... running away is not like him.” I thought back to a year ago when I showed up to my parents’ sanctuary with nothing but the clothes on my back, my purse, and my passport.

Back inside my house, I sat in my living room, opened the table side window and listened to Simone as she began to sing her lullaby. “If any place can make him feel better, it’s this place.”

“I’m so worried.” She was crying now as I gripped the phone tight, hearing my own mother’s voice from a year ago. “*Koti, you can’t just run away. You need to face this head-on.*”

Thinking back to the worst day of my life, I spoke from experience. “This island frees people, Rowan. I promise I’ll look after him.”

“Thank you, Koti.”

“Call me anytime.”

Chapter Four

Koti

“WHAT THE FACK!”

In the midst of a foggy, wine-induced dream, I snapped to and looked at my bedside clock.

4 a.m.

Groaning, I grabbed my body pillow and cradled it between my legs as I heard repetitive banging in the house next door.

Everything went quiet for a few minutes before I heard another enraged growl. Pulling myself from the bed, I moved to my window where I saw every light in the Kemp house had been turned on.

“Okay, Ian, have your freak out and go to bed.” It was going to be a long night if he had insomnia.

Another loud clatter had me jumping away from the glass, while his growls grew louder.

“What in the *fack!* Eish!” It seemed his native tongue made more of an appearance when he was angry. “Fok hierdie plek!”

He stormed onto his porch with a broom in hand looking back at the house and tilting his head as if he were straining to hear. I moved out of sight before I turned my light on as he slammed his way back into the house. Another series of bangs had my head pounding. I moved to my kitchen and grabbed a bottled water when I heard the repeat thwack of his back door. Realization dawned, and I began to laugh when the door slammed again.

“Oh Simone, you’ve got yourself a new victim.” I grabbed a new pair of noise-canceling plugs from my nightstand and marched over to the porch where Ian paced. With a heated glance my way, he didn’t bother with pleasantries. “The

fucking smoke alarm is broken. I'm..." he tapped his forehead.
"Gatvol!"

"Gat what?"

"I've had it! Never mind. It's the alarms, we need to have them checked."

"No..."

Ian, still in his slacks and undershirt, glared at me. The porch light illuminated us in weak shadow. He was a beautiful man, even with a vampire tan and the slight bulge around his waist. His thick, gelled, dark-brown hair was scattered from a day of running his hand through it and feathered over his brow. He'd grown up pretty... and pretty *bitchy*.

"Don't tell me no. I've been listening to the screech for hours. I've dismantled them all!"

"Ian," I said carefully, as I closed the few feet between us like I was cornering a very angry six-foot-plus mouse. "It's not the smoke detectors."

He scrutinized me in my shorts and thin halter top, sans bra. "Brilliant, just brilliant. You manage this property, right? How does anyone get any sleep here?!"

"If you will just listen—"

"Are you *mad*, woman? I have been listening! I'm certain it's the alarms."

"It's not—"

He moved toward me his lips upturned. "Listen—"

"No listen, Ian, it's—"

"Shush!"

Pressing my lips together he craned his neck until his eyes widened. "Hear it? Don't tell me that's not an alarm!"

I stood with my hand on my hips, cupping his remedy—the earplugs—in my palm. Shrugging, I made my way off his porch. "Fine, it's the alarms. Good luck with that."

Marching into my house, I slammed the open window and turned on my AC. Even with the added white noise from the unit, I could hear the frog, who'd taken up residence in the thick brush behind the Kemp house, begin to sing. Simone, my sweet Coqui Frog, who I'd lovingly named after Nina Simone, appeared to me on one of the plants next to my porch after a three-week fight. Simone sounded very much like a smoke alarm with dying batteries. But Ian and his head-biting ass would just have to find out the hard way.

Welcome back to St. Thomas, Mr. Kemp.

Some horses you could lead to water and they would still walk straight through it believing it was a mirage. Such was the case with my angry new neighbor.

Still, angry was better than sad. And if Ian was about to fight the good fight, he needed that fire.

I fell asleep a few minutes later to a more muted, "What the fuck! A frog?!"

* * *

"I don't give a rat's ass, Kevin! This is unacceptable!"

I opened one eye and groaned before I pulled a pillow over my head.

"Rubbish! And she made sure of that!" Ian was growling into his phone and must have decided his back porch was the perfect place to vent. I looked at the bedside clock.

7 a.m.

I pulled myself from the comfort of my cloud and made my way outside, slamming my screen door and eyeing him from my porch with my hands on my hips, in hopes that would be enough to stop his tirade.

“Oh, bullshit! That’s bullshit!” He paced on the sand yard purposefully ignoring my presence and plea for peace.

“Excuse me,” I whispered on the wind. I needed to grow some balls and fast when it came to moody Mr. Kemp. I didn’t do well without my sleep. Years of sleep depravity in New York followed by a year of rested bliss had changed me.

“This is inexcusable! What I want, what I want? I want you to do your fucking job!” Ian’s accent had turned into a strange mix of pissed off Texan with a lash whip of South African. He stood in boxer briefs pacing as he ignored me. He was tall, disheveled and shirtless. The extra weight he carried did little to take away from his appeal. On any other day, I might have enjoyed the testosterone-filled man parading in front of me.

“So fucking wrong! Eish! All of this is wrong!” More silence, then, “That should have been brought to my attention a year ago!”

Ripping my eyes away from his muscular thighs, I found myself screaming along with him. “Hey, take that brawl inside, crocky!”

Ian glared at me and I swore he bared teeth as he made his way up his porch steps. I was dismissed as he began his pacing on the faded wood giving me a view of his muscular back.

“A little louder, I don’t think everyone on the island is awake yet,” I muttered as he continued his rant.

“Fine. I want a call within the hour.” Ian ended his call and threw his cell on one of the porch chairs before opening his screen without glancing my way.

“Hey!” I interjected as he paused his retreat and glanced my way. “Look, buddy, I’m all for getting a point across, but can we not do it at seven in the morning while our neighbor is sleeping?”

“Fine. Right.” He slammed the door behind him.

“I accept your apology!”

His voice drifted through the open windows in his living room. “I didn’t offer one, miss.”

“Koti. My name is *Koti* and you damn well know it. And from what I remember you were all about formalities and manners, Mr. Kemp, so how about showing some common courtesy?”

The only way to get privacy between our two houses was to shut them up *completely*. Even then, without a little white noise, you could hear a lot.

Fact: People have a lot of sex on vacation. A lot of sex.

The rumble of Ian’s voice drifted through the air. “It’s rude to listen to other people’s conversations.”

“As if I had a choice!”

“Who’s screaming now?”

“Well, we’re both up now anyway, thanks to you.”

He stayed mute as I growled from my own porch.

Koti Vaughn, you need this commission.

Minutes after my first sip of coffee, I found my calm in the crash of the waves on our shared beach. Ian made his way onto his porch dressed in his slacks from the day before, his own cup in hand. Wrinkled and wrecked were the best words to describe him and I couldn’t help the tug of recognition of the state of his distress yesterday. Mustering up some patience, I made another effort to extend the olive branch. “I’ll be by with your groceries at noon. I didn’t get a chance to check your water levels so let me know if you’re running low. My phone number is in the book on the counter, text me if you want me to pick up anything else for you.”

His reply was a curt nod.

“Okay, well, I’ll see you at noon.”

* * *

“That bad, huh?” Jasmine’s eyes surveyed me in my zombie-like state. I managed to throw on a sundress and applied some sunblock and deodorant before I made it out of my house. I left the state of my wet hair up to my Jeep.

“Nice hair.”

“Bite me and he’s a nightmare. He’s hurt, but hard to sympathize with. He spent half the night putting holes in his ceiling and the morning screaming into his cell phone.”

Jasmine filled a fresh cup of coffee and put it on my desk. “Is he hot?”

I sat back in my chair and winced due to the building throb in my skull.

“He’s a headache.”

“A hot headache?”

“He’s handsome, I guess.”

“Handsome? Who says handsome?”

“I just did.” I rolled my eyes as I logged into my desktop. “I know what you’re thinking and trust me, you don’t want to meet the ass. The first thing that came out of his mouth was that all women are liars.”

“So, he’s handsome?”

“Very handsome, and *very* pissed off. He taught me how to snorkel when I was six. He was cute then. He’s handsome now and completely standoffish.”

“Hmm.” Jasmine chewed her lower lip and scrutinized my face. “Sounds like an opportunity.”

I ignored her by typing an email reply to a new renter.

“Koti.” It was a demand. I met her soft brown eyes over the screen. There wasn’t a trace of humor anywhere. “You’ve barely dated since you’ve been here. Don’t you miss sex?”

“I told you... I fooled around enough in New York. I’m happy with being alone. It’s what I want for the moment. And my

angry neighbor is *not* the one to saddle up with.” She planted her ass on the edge of my desk and covered my busy hands.

“I worry about you. You are completely anti-social. No TV at home, what do you even do?”

“I read, I take long walks down the beach, I drink wine, I attempt to play the piano, and I get a lot of sleep. I’m fine.” It was the truth. The absolute truth. I’d found calm. I wanted to keep it.

“Fine, but a little flirtation wouldn’t hurt.”

“Trust me, he’s not the one to flirt with. He’s either yelling or grunting. Anyway, I spoke to Mrs. Kemp. She’s going to double our commission and cover the difference of the Margulis mansion.”

Jasmine perked up. “Really?”

“Yep, the only stipulation is that I have to keep an eye on him and it looks like I have my work cut out for me.”

Jasmine bit her hot pink lip. “Do you think he would... you know,” her eyes bulged, “hurt himself?”

I bit the edge of my nail and she slapped it away, it was a peeve of hers. “The way he looked yesterday... it was awful. But no, I don’t think so. Not after the fight I saw in him this morning. He seems as angry as he is hurt. He’s divorced, but his mother said he was the one who wanted it. I don’t think it has to do with his ex, but who knows.”

“Huh,” Jasmine said as she looked at me thoughtfully.

“He probably just needs a break. I’m bringing his groceries in a few hours and I intend to tread lightly. I’m going to make sure we get this commission.”

She lifted a brow. “Going to get creative?”

I shouldered my purse as she gave me a suggestive wink. “You are such a backhoe.”

Chapter Five

Koti

I PARKED MY JEEP AS Banion came out of his flower shop to greet me.

“Hey yank, you still look fresh from the boat.”

“Liar!” I accused, as he opened my door. “I passed the one-year mark. I’m officially a *local*.”

“Yank-*key*,” he said, adding more charm to the word with his thick island accent. “What ya need today?”

“Three bouquets please, we have a busy day.”

“Maybe four?” He looked over at me with a knowing smile. “One for you.”

“Perfect.” Ushering me inside he began to gather the bouquets, taking stems from various buckets he kept in a small cooler. He had the roughest looking florist shop in St. Thomas but made the most beautiful bouquets. I always told him if I ever struck it rich, he would be my lone investment. He was highly underrated and undervalued due to the state of his shop, but the locals knew. And though I’d spent six summers in St. Thomas over the course of my life, I could honestly say I was becoming an expert at navigating the potholed pavement.

“When are your parents coming, yank?”

“Thanksgiving, I pray.”

“You have not spoken to them?” He peered at me over a handful of orange and purple stems. One desperate and lonely night when I had first arrived on the island and just gotten my job with Jasmine, I’d spent a few drunken hours with Banion spilling the events that led me to St. Thomas. He hadn’t let me forget the night of verbal diarrhea, nor the physical vomit I had christened the floor of his store with. Not my finest hour, or week, or month.

“We talk.”

“But do you *really* talk?” Banion was ridiculously tall to the point of being intimidating. His charcoal-colored skin and dark eyes were only softened by the sincerest of white smiles and a smooth voice.

“We talk. They still badger me to go back.”

“And you want to stay?”

“I’m staying,” I insisted, adding a few pink sprays to the mix. Banion shook his head. “No, the green.” I pulled a few green stems from the basket as he wrapped the leaves around the flowers and tied them without a binding.

“Beautiful,” I said, amazed at his handiwork.

“One day, when you have the time, I’ll show you how to tie the flowers.” He pushed the bouquets into my hand as I handed him the cash. Banion was old school, person-to-person was his motto. It was also one of the reasons his flower shop wasn’t as widely known. But I understood it. My motto was very much the same. In fact, if you googled Koti Vaughn, you would see closed social media accounts. Being connected used to be the bane of my existence.

Years of conditioning—prep school, followed by a five-year stint in college to get my masters—had been wasted. I was one business move away from making myself immortal before I choked. Well... before I got a reality check. And in the Virgin Islands, on one of the mountains, surrounded by sea, I was a property manager dolling out bottles of wine and Banion’s bouquets to the ones who had gambled and won.

One day-*poof*. Dream job, *gone*, swanky apartment, *stripped away*. I went from being the real estate wolf of Manhattan to the black sheep of St. Thomas.

My piece of the Big Apple had a worm in it.

Like Ian, I spent the first day in St. Thomas staring at the ocean in the safety of my parents’ rental house.

Life was fucked in New York.

But in St. Thomas...

“Don’t forget yours,” Banion said, handing me another armful of beautifully tethered stems.

Thankful to be jerked out of the debilitating cold of my past life, I hugged him before I stepped out into the warming sun.

* * *

I set the bags down on the porch one by one before I knocked and got no answer. “Ian?” Knocking again, I pressed my face to the living room window. The house looked abandoned. “Shit.” I gripped an extra key that I’d taken from the office since Ian had stolen mine the night before and let myself in. Aside from a crumpled blanket on the edge of the plush white couch, the place was empty. In hopes that Ian was somewhere wandering the beach, I began to unload the groceries and replaced the bottle of red I’d stolen and added an extra. I skipped the customary liquor bottles to avoid a drunken tirade. The man was already off the rails, I wasn’t about to add strong alcohol to the mix.

I was a hypocrite of sorts. I drank like a fish when I arrived on the island in ashes. I added a few things to the list to keep Ian fed and put out several items I knew he hadn’t brought with him—shaving cream, a razor, deodorant, body wash, shampoo, and extra toilet paper. Just as I’d finished unloading, he walked through the door with several shopping bags in hand. He paused when he saw me standing next to the counter.

“Hi.”

Eyes averted he spoke low. “Seeing as how my parents *own* the home, I won’t be needing your services, Koti.”

“Well, this request came directly from your mother.” I surrendered the last rental key on the counter. “And I told you I’d be by with groceries.”

“And I rather hoped you’d left by now.”

I bit my tongue as he moved past me and set his bags down. I eyed the contents and saw several shirts and pairs of shorts with tags. I hid my excitement that he was staying. Not because he was ideal company, but because of the financially worry-free months ahead of me.

“I’ll leave you to it. Just let me know if you need anything.”

Gray eyes met my blue briefly. “I won’t.” Devastation. It was clear as day. Anyone who looked at the man could never question what he felt. His eyes were a window, though his features remained stoic.

“You know, Ian, I came here about a year ago a complete mess —”

“I’d like some privacy, please.”

Swallowing my pride, I walked out the door without another word.

* * *

Thwack.

Thwack.

Thwack.

“Fack!” It was another one of the hundreds of curses that erupted from the Kemp kitchen.

With wide eyes, I watched the wood fly across the porch and onto the sand and heard another loud crash as I stalked the house next door with my phone pressed to my ear.

“So how is my son?” His mother asked as I saw more of Rowan Kemp’s kitchen fly over the railing, off the porch, and into the sand. “Is he adjusting well?”

“Damnit! Oh, fack your motha,” Ian’s voice rang out in frustration. Giggling, I covered the mouthpiece of the phone as

another cabinet door hit the sand. He'd been at it for a few hours. It started with an explosive phone call that I managed to avoid, mostly due to my taking cover in the shower and ended with a bang.

"He... is. It looks like he's remodeling the kitchen."

In a flash, Ian stood on the porch only in shorts, his chest heaving, a bottle of the red in his hand. He studied the wood in the sand before he glanced at my house. I ducked out of his line of sight and answered her before more banging started. "He's fine."

"Oh, that's wonderful news. Maybe you could put him on the phone?"

More growling ensued and then a clear, "Damn you! EISH!"

"Well, at the moment, I think it would be impossible, he's in the midst of demolition."

I cringed at the ripping sound and poked my head out of my screen door just as he hurled more wood over the railing.

"You know he's always been so good at things like that. He built his father a beautiful bookshelf for his study."

"That's wonderful," I said, as Ian unloaded an entire can of lighter fluid on the discarded wood. I raced around the bottom floor of my house and collected every fire extinguisher I had before I sat them next to my front door. Seconds later I heard the whoosh of the wood go up in flames. The rising inferno seemed to fuel him as he added more of his mother's kitchen to it piece by piece.

Rowan went on, speaking of her pride and joy. "From boy scouts all the way through college, my boy excelled at everything he did. Honor student, swimming, tennis. I had to beat the women away with a stick."

Ian chose that moment to snap another cabinet door in half over his knee and used his empty wine bottle to bat it into the burning pile.

"You don't say."

“Oh, yes, he was such a ladies’ man before he met Tara, his ex-wife.”

Only mildly prepared, I walked out onto my porch at the same time Ian returned to it. He had several photo books in his hand. Rowan whispered in my ear as if he could hear her. “I was never really that fond of her, she seemed a little cold compared to his warmth.”

Ian pulled pictures from the books and began to burn them one by one. Something in my chest split as he walked around Rowan Kemp’s burning kitchen cabinets, tossing away what I was sure were irreplaceable pictures.

He had lost his shit. It was, without a doubt, Ian’s doomsday.

“Don’t!” I screamed from where I stood.

Ian ignored me as he tossed an entire book into the fire before shaking another so that the pictures fed the flames.

“Koti? What is it?” Rowan said anxiously on the phone.

“Oh nothing, I was just...”

“Is everything okay?”

“Oh, fine,” I said, as I paced the porch watching her son destroy his mother’s memories. He must have found the pictures in the linen closet. The Kemps had very few of their own things in the house.

“Rowan, I’m going to ask him if he needs any help.”

“Okay,” she said hesitantly. “But please ask him to ring me.”

“Will do.” I was already running toward the small bonfire just as Ian tossed another picture into it.

“What are you doing!?”

“Privacy,” he said through thick lips. “That’s all I asked for.”

“Kind of hard to ignore you, Ian. Since you’ve gone all Tom Hanks *Cast Away*—*me man, me make fire!*” I reached for the picture in his hand as he tossed it in. I watched it burn. It was a shot of a woman in her wedding dress who I assumed was Tara. She looked beautiful as she smiled at her groom. I was

only able to admire Ian in a well-fitted tux for seconds before the fire engulfed the photo.

Jesus, what could have happened?

“Ian, if you want to talk about it...”

He picked up another book and took a few pictures out shoving them into his pocket before he tossed it into the pile.

“Leave.”

“Please stop. You don’t understand what you’re doing.”

Blazing eyes scoured me before he looked back at the fire. “I know exactly what the fuck I’m doing.”

Sweat pooled on his forehead. He was covered in splintered wood. Ian Kemp had cracked, and he wasn’t coming back until he was ready.

Way too far into his headspace, he ignored me standing next to him.

I walked back to my house and watched him dismantle years of memories as he stared at the fire until it went out.

And then the house next to mine went completely quiet.

Chapter Six

Ian

I SAT IN THE DARK living room staring out the window at the brightly lit ocean. Thousands of stars littered the night sky as the sea swept the shore. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't temper the anger. I couldn't bring myself back to some semblance of the man I was just days before. It was a new beginning I didn't ask for—that I hadn't planned on—but I could feel a part of me coming to the surface, a part of me that I had ignored for years. The selfish part.

The last fifteen years of my life had been a series of compromises, and mostly on my part to be the man I was raised to be—a good husband and doting father. The things I swore I wanted. Another crack deep within bled freely when I thought of all that time I spent believing my family was a gift and purely my own. The irony is my ex-wife had been lost to me for years, a stranger before I left her and asked for a divorce. And my daughter... I scrubbed my face as I fought the threatening explosion within.

I would give anything to take those minutes at that hospital back. With everything in me, I wish I would have played dumb, instead of recognizing Tara's guilt and figuring it out. Not only did I have the knowledge that Ella wasn't mine, her mother was now threatening to tell her the truth. Threatening to reveal to my little girl she didn't belong to me in the biological sense. This was no doubt Tara's plan in an attempt to transition her boyfriend into being a family man. I didn't need a paternity test to know that Daniel was Ella's sperm donor. Tara had been dating him her whole life up until the month we met. It seemed as though their relationship didn't end when ours started.

Rage boiled again, refusing to let me feel anything else in that moment. If the look on Koti's face when she watched me unravel the last few days was any indication of my well-being,

I was safer sitting in the dark dealing with my temperament alone.

I left a loveless marriage for the sake of all three of us. Though Tara fought the divorce and claimed to love me even after the papers were signed, I still cared for her enough to set her free to find something more than the shackle of obligation we felt.

I wouldn't let my daughter suffer another needless argument. I refused to stay together and set that horrible example for her. It wasn't blissful or comfortable. It was waged war and over the simplest things. Everything I'd ever done, including the dissolution of my marriage, had been for Ella. I had no woman waiting.

But that was now the case. I had a little woman waiting. I had to go back. I had to go back and fight for what was right for Ella, but I had nothing inside me but hate and the taste of betrayal coating my tongue and clouding my vision. I would not abandon my daughter, but she would not recognize the man I was now.

As starlight struck the water and twilight hit, I couldn't see the beauty. I couldn't fixate on the awe-inspiring light, I only saw the darkness in-between.

Soft music drifted from Koti's bedroom as I slapped the water away from my eyes. I moved to the kitchen to see her bedroom clearly lit. On her stomach with a book in hand, her knees bent and bare feet up, she swung them back and forth to the melody. In that moment I envied her ability to live only for herself and the freedom that came with it. I wanted that. I'd just been granted that freedom in the cruelest of ways by Tara's confession. But I could never embrace that freedom because of the loss I would surely suffer. Still, the idea of it appealed to me more than anything. Not the loss of Ella but the need to do things differently, to finally make my life my own, about me. Anger blurred my vision as I sat back in the shadows of the house. The dark would have to do for now.

Chapter Seven

Koti

A DAY WENT BY WITHOUT a glimpse of him, and then another. I spent a good amount of time staring into the darkness watching for any movement, a trickle of light, but came up empty.

I tried to muster up any excuse to check on him but had none. He asked for privacy and I had to admit when I arrived on the island, I wanted the same.

Rowan called nightly and I assured her with a false update that her son was fine.

But after a third day, I no longer felt safe in assuming the best. When my alarm went off that morning, I grabbed some clothes and made my way to the house next door. After my knock went unanswered, I began to pound. “Ian?”

Nothing.

Fear crept through me as I stood on the porch for a solid five minutes knocking. Desperate, I glimpsed through the window and saw him lying on the couch with his eyes to the ceiling. “Ian. Open the door, please.” His eyes drifted to mine and my heart skipped a beat. Reluctantly, he moved to get up and a few seconds later, we were face to face. His jaw was covered in dark stubble, his hair a scattered mess, expression unreadable. I scoured him from his sad gray depths to his shirtless chest, to his bare feet. He was fine, aside from looking completely desolate.

“What is it, Koti?” It was a different tone, equal amounts of defeat and exasperation.

I lifted my folded clothes. “I’m out of water and running late for work.” It was a lie but a damned good excuse. I peered into the house behind him, before I made my case.

“Can I please borrow your shower? I’ll be quick.”

He let out a long breath and opened the door stepping back to let me in. With quick appraising eyes, I looked around the war zone. The kitchen was torn to shreds, the wood splintered. On the floor of the living room lay several empty boxes, one for a laptop that sat on his coffee table. Curious, I braved a look at the screen and saw nothing but a generic screensaver. I decided I'd made a good call about the absence of liquor when I saw the empty wine bottles on the floor. Walking down the hall, I noticed the holes in the ceiling from his attempt to silence the alarms and bit my lips to keep from laughing before I closed myself in the guest bathroom and made quick work of taking a shower. Under the warm water, I decided I'd had enough of his intimidation. There were people worried about him who needed assurances directly from the source. I never made my parents wait for word from me, even in my worst headspace.

I had no idea what had unglued Ian Kemp, but I knew I wasn't the reason.

Fully dressed, I walked into the living room to see him sitting on his couch signing at the screen. His hands moved skillfully in conversation, the computer open toward him so I couldn't see who he was conversing with.

Fascinated, I watched him for a few seconds.

He flashed a beautiful smile and waved at the screen before he closed it. Gray eyes drifted to me.

"Yes, Koti?"

"You know sign language. Wow."

Cold eyes roamed over my damp hair and sundress before they landed on my face. "Yes."

"That's—"

"So, you're showered."

I was being dismissed *again*, and just as rudely as the first time. I balled my fists, the New Yorker in me was ready to rip him to shreds. I pushed her aside for the moment to reason with him.

“Would it kill you to be decent to me? I know you’re going through a rough time, but would it hurt you so much to say one kind word?”

He pushed his computer off his lap and resumed the position he was in when I knocked on the door. Several seconds passed, I looked him over expectantly.

His lips barely moved. “I apologize.”

“You should,” I said without missing a beat, “sincerely and repeatedly.”

He lifted his head from the couch. The circles underneath his eyes ran deep. I doubted he’d touched a thing in the fridge. He’d drawn most of the curtains in the living room, so sunlight was scarce.

What happened to you, Ian?

“That’s none of your damned business.”

I’d said it out loud.

Crap.

“No, it’s not.”

“If that’s all...”

“Actually, it’s not. I’d like to extend a dinner invitation to thank you for the shower.”

His answer was immediate. “And I’d like to decline.” Moving to sit, he planted his feet on the floor while his hands gripped his hair.

“I’m sorry, Ian.”

He ripped his head free of his hands and turned to look at me.

“I’m sorry for whatever happened to you.”

He kept his eyes connected with mine as I took a careful step around the debris. “But your mother is worried, to the point she will probably show up here unannounced if you don’t call her.”

He frowned. “Tell her I’m fine.”

“But you’re not.”

“Again,” he said standing. “None of your business.”

“I get it, okay. I didn’t come here to fucking snorkel either.”

Surprised by my venom, he stayed mute. It seemed I had the floor for the first time since he arrived.

“A year ago, I showed up in the same shit shape as you.”

“You have no idea—”

I waved my hand in the air and cut him off, giving him a taste of his own medicine. “And that’s your secret to keep. I had my own reasons. Reasons that were just as personal to *me*.” People are selfish with their pain, but not their anger. I got it. I’d lived through it.

“I understand you right now more than you know, so just take a step back, okay? I’m not the enemy. I’m waving the white flag here. The dinner invitation stands. Seven o’clock. I’m a shit cook, but it’s better than staring at the ceiling.”

I made my leave without another word, relieved that he was capable of at least faking a smile for whomever he was on screen with.

Halfway to my Jeep I pulled my buzzing phone from my pocket and answered on the first ring. “Good morning, Rowan.”

Ian stepped out onto the beach in my line of sight before he disappeared down the shoreline.

“I just spoke to Ian. I invited him for dinner. I think he may come.”

“Oh? That’s wonderful news.”

“I was just at the house. It looks like the remodel is coming along.” Another lie. The next question was purely selfish. “He was on his computer signing with someone?”

“Oh good. He was speaking to Ella. His daughter, my granddaughter. She’s deaf.”

“Oh.” The smile he gave her was genuine.

“Okay, love, thank you. I was just checking in. I hate to bother you so much.” Her voice was sincere and apologetic.

“It’s fine, Rowan. Anytime.”

“Thank you, Koti.”

I inhaled the sea air as I gazed at the rolling waves. It once renewed my faith. I had no doubt they would work their magic on Ian.

Chapter Eight

Koti

I SAT THAT NIGHT WITH candles lit all over my deck, freshly broiled fish waiting in the oven and a crisp salad spoiling on the porch. Ian was a no-show. I was surprised at my disappointment when he stomped on my white flag and even more flabbergasted minutes later, when the sound of a woman's laugh filtered in the air before I heard the rumble of Ian's voice. Hopping to my feet as the sun set, I blew out the candles and dashed inside in an attempt to save face from his rejection. From my upstairs porch, stretching my neck and body, I peeked over the side of the house to see Ian ravaging a woman in our large sand-filled alley. He was dressed in slacks and a light button-down and she was plastered to the siding, hidden under his tall frame. I heard her moan underneath him before her head tilted up heavenward, her eyes tightly shut as he whispered to her before lifting her skirt, his hands working beneath. Too intoxicated to look away, I watched him devour her as she gasped under his touch.

Face flushed I looked on, silently scorning the total pervert I was and felt a slight twinge of... something.

Jealousy?

For Ian? No, he was a dick.

A total and complete dick.

So much for s'more loyalty.

Mentally I picked up my battered white flag and tucked it back in my pocket.

Was I jealous of the attention the woman was getting?

Definitely. It was one thing to go without, it was another thing entirely to have it tossed in your face. I loved a good kiss, the whisper of a man's lips on my neck. I was beginning to miss sex, but that was the most of it. I'd done long-term without the

happy ending, short-term with the abrupt record scratch ending and more one-night stands than a girl should admit to. When you referred to the last guy you were intimate with as the one with the black-checked tie, as I did, desire took a back seat to self-worth. I wanted the relationship with the next man to be a little more meaningful, but that would require commitment and I'd just gotten myself together.

Everything about my life in New York went fast.

My new focus was slow and meaningful.

Fighting with myself to look away; instead, I chose to drink in the scene below. Accusatory gray eyes met mine when I glanced back down at the couple and my face lit up in embarrassment. Ian ripped himself from her, his eyes still on mine. He was clearly drunk and staggered into his house with the woman in tow, slamming the door behind them.

I threw the untouched fish in the sink and grabbed a pair of silencing plugs from my nightstand. It was going to be a long night.

* * *

The next morning, Ian sat on the beach in nothing but swim trunks as I made my way out of the house for work. He barely glanced my way which was fine with me. I had nothing to say to him. At least I didn't have to worry about false reports to his mother because he had finally joined the land of the living. Despite my best efforts to block Ian out, I was up half the night hot and cold, tossing and turning, with body aches.

I knew what was coming and had the pissy mood to match.

In a freshly purchased pair of flip-flops, with an iced coffee in hand, I walked toward my Jeep to start my day when he spoke.

"Have you talked to my mother?" He wiped the sand off his swim trunks as he stood. Ripping my eyes from his profile, lit

by the early morning sun, I continued walking to my Jeep without a word.

“Oh, you are going to play hurt?” He barked at me. “I declined your dinner invitation. I was pretty clear.”

I bit the inside of both cheeks and kept my feet moving.

“Could you at least tell her not to come?”

“Tell her yourself,” I said, throwing my purse into the passenger seat.

“Favor for a favor, Koti. I lent you my shower. This is not a difficult request.”

Facing him, I crossed my arms. “Why are you so afraid of your mother?”

Hypocrite.

I barely answered my own mother’s calls. My failures looked horrible on her face and were no less daunting over the line. Her “in my day” speeches suffocated me and had my whole life. The less we spoke the closer we got to middle ground.

Ian took a step forward. “She’s a mother. She asks too many questions.”

“Seems like you had no issue talking last night.” A single brow rose while he studied my face.

“Dirty boy, aren’t you? Tell you what. Why don’t you take your spoiled ass inside that house and call your own damned mommy.”

Screw babysitting, I would make it work. If Ian left, spoke ill of me to his mother, if I lost the commission, I would beg Jasmine not to fire me while I rallied for another property.

Ian took an aggressive step forward. “Not that it’s any of your business but I haven’t had sex with anyone but my ex-wife in fifteen years so I guarantee you if I sleep with anyone, it’s a well-deserved fuck.”

“Well, I hope you wrapped it up tight because we don’t need you multiplying your kind of crazy around here.”

His face turned to stone and his jaw ticked. “What in the hell did you just say?”

Ah, the angry South African Texan had returned. I’d done a fine job of ruining my twenty-four-hour truce. My father always told me before I entered any argument to go in with three justifiable points, or the battle wasn’t worth it.

Where Ian was concerned, I was good to go. “News flash buddy, number one, I’ve made more allowances than I should for your rude behavior. You have not once thanked me for the trouble I’ve gone through on your behalf to keep you in that house. Number two, which by the way, was fully booked when you decided to show up with your shitshow circus and has made my work days harder. Number three, not only that, I’ve lost more nights of sleep since you’ve been here than I have in a year! I *said* call your own mother, burn her house down, starve to death. I’m done watching over you. You aren’t worth the trouble!”

“What’s your problem, Koti. Are you jealous? Do you fancy me?” He asked, his tone unmistakably mocking as he took a step forward and then another until I was pinned to my Jeep. “I noticed you watching us.”

Feeling the blush creep up on my face, I chose to ignore the fact that he busted me.

“Jealous?” I scoffed as ice gray eyes slanted down and stunned me. “Do I *fancy* you? You think an invitation to dinner is a request for sex? Man, you *have* been out of the game for some time, old sport. You were an arrogant ass as a kid, but you’ve got one hell of an ego on you now, don’t you, *crocky*? What in the *hell* would I possibly have to be jealous of? Drunk sex with a hyena? I bet you can’t even remember her name.”

He glared at me openly.

“What did you call her when she left this morning, barstool number five with big breasts?”

Ian’s eyes instantly went to my chest before he glanced up and raised a brow.

“Oh, you’re disgusting.”

“Fine. I’m disgusting. AG Man!”

“What is that, more South African sailor?”

This time he jerked his chin back. “What?” He rolled his eyes in understanding. “It means—go away. And mind your own damned business.”

My eyes were trained on his lips as I pushed at his chest. “Stay on your side of the fence, asshole!”

“Fine by me.” He turned toward the beach and my feet began to move on their own accord as the last of my patience flew away.

“What is *wrong* with you? You can be civil enough to some lady at a bar to get her into bed, but you can’t show me any common decency? We were friends once.”

He barely glanced over his shoulder. “I hardly knew you.”

“Still, what in the hell is your problem with me? Because it has to be specifically with *me*, right? I mean you can smile for your daughter!”

His turn was sharp as he leveled me with one single look. The man was pure venom and anger and he was dragging me down with him. I could feel the panic in me start to rise and blew out a breath.

“Forget it! Just keep the noise level down on your side of the fence. Screw half of the island for all I care. But I *live* here. Remember that. I’m not leaving, so deal with it.”

His broad muscular back to me, he muttered his reply. “Not like I have a choice.”

My brain didn’t bother to tell my hand to stop when I drew wet sand from the beach and formed it into a ball, my limbs didn’t bother to slow at all as I tossed it full force at the back of his head.

PMDD. Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder and sleep deprivation. When the two get together, sand bombs happen.

Ian stood with his back to me several seconds before he turned to look my way, his face covered in disbelief. I had a ready

middle finger stretched out in front of me, the only *sign* I knew before I stomped back to my Jeep. He was still glaring at me from where he stood in the sand as I sped off.

Chapter Nine

Koti

THE NEXT FEW WEEKS WERE much of the same. The Kemp house was quiet. Too quiet. I never saw flashing TV lights in the living room or heard any more of his ranting. He would disappear for a few days on the weekends, which I assumed was when he went to see his daughter. Despite my resolution to give him his space, I knew he wasn't improving. But I was gone during most of the day, never really having any idea what he did when I wasn't home.

"You're thinking about him," Jasmine said as I took a bite of my salad. We were on the sun-covered porch of the Oak Hotel. They had the best salads and an even better view of the bay.

"I just keep wondering what happened."

"Cheating."

"No, he wanted the divorce. That doesn't make sense." I forked some chicken and looked out at the water. "God, I love days like this." It was hot, but not to the point of being miserable. The breeze blew off the surface of the sparkling water yards away. Jasmine eyed the man who sat alone next to us and he smirked our way over his paper.

"God, you're terrible," I noted, glancing his way. His eyes met mine and I gave him a weak smile.

"I'm thirty-nine and single," she said a little too loudly as I sank in my seat. "I want to live a little."

"Oh, you've been living," I said just as loudly and the guy belted out a loud bark.

She glared at me. "Just because you decided the house was your new convent doesn't mean the rest of us are hanging it up."

“I’ve been thinking about that a little lately and maybe it’s time to give dating a chance.” The man Jasmine had been eyeing was suddenly at our table. I looked up to him as he plucked his wallet from his back pocket. “Pardon my eavesdropping, but I’m actually glad to hear it.” He set down a card in front of my plate and I winced at the sun-filled sky behind him trying to get a better look. He was beautiful, with thick coppery brown hair and a strong jawline. I couldn’t make out his eye color. Casually dressed in slacks and a polo, he looked down at me with curious eyes.

“Patrick.” He held out his hand and I took it, stunned. “Koti.” Patrick looked to Jasmine with a smirk, which she countered with one of her own. “I’m Jasmine.”

“Nice to meet you both. Koti, I would love to take you to dinner some time.”

“Okay, Patrick Roberts,” I said eyeing his card. “But it will be expensive.” He bit his lip and winked. “And she brings me a doggie bag,” Jasmine chimed in.

He leaned down slightly, so I caught the amusement in his eyes—which were blue—and a hint of some intoxicating cologne. “I look forward to it.”

We both watched him disappear, fully confident in his walk. The man had an ass and swagger to boot.

“That was bold. I bet he’s packing in the penis department.”

I choked on my water as she looked at me and shrugged. “And I’m just going to say right now, I totally thought he was staring at me. I may need my eyes checked.”

“He’s the one that’s blind,” I said, eyeing my best friend in her signature red dress. I’d been surrounded by beautiful people my whole life, but none of them shined quite as bright as the woman who held out her hand to me and picked me up when I was at my lowest.

“Stop doing that,” she said, popping a piece of bread in her mouth.

“Doing what?”

“She was beautiful, I’m sure, but it’s okay that you are beautiful too. Stop downplaying your looks to appease your mother. She’s not here.”

Mouth gaping, I jerked back in my seat. “Whoa, are we on the couch, Dr. Gersch?”

“Koti, I don’t think you realize how much you do it, but you are gorgeous. Case in point, that hot ass man wants to take you on a date and do the dirty.”

Our waitress grinned as she set the check down between us. “Sorry, I walked into that, but if I can be of any help to you, he had a black Amex. You really should call him.” The waitress made her leave as I stared at Patrick’s card.

“See,” Jasmine said with the nod of her chin. “Rich too.”

“I’ve dated rich and entitled. I’d rather date a man who has to work hard to buy me expensive wine.”

Jasmine tilted her head. “Why?”

“Because that would mean he would have to *work* for me, obviously.”

“Oh, as opposed to giving it away.” She threw her napkin on her plate.

“Don’t. This isn’t about the way *you* do things, it’s about what I want for myself.”

She darted her eyes around the table, a rare sign of the guilt she inflicted on herself for her random hookups.

“One day I *will* get over him.”

“You will,” I assured. “It’s okay to enjoy yourself.”

Jasmine chewed the inside of her cheek. “What if I can’t love another man?”

“Then we’ll love each other.”

She looked at me with gleaming eyes and asked in a shaky voice, “Promise?”

“Promise. You’re my person, Jasmine Ann Gersch. You don’t ever leave your person.”

She smiled, but it was weak. Even though it had been a little over a year since her fiancé had abandoned her in St. Thomas, her issues remained. It wasn't rocket science. We both knew why she wouldn't commit or even attempt to. She had been badly burned.

"You can talk about Steven, with me, if you want. You know that."

"I think I'm over that phase, but I appreciate it. My sisters won't even let me say his name. He's the reason I'm here and away from them and their children. My sisters are having babies and marrying their princes and I'm not even a part of their lives."

"Then go see them."

"I will. I want to, but I was too busy trying to get the business off the ground. I felt like I had something to prove to a man who doesn't give a shit about me." She took a sip of her water to cool the emotion budding on the tip of her tongue. "I just don't understand how I can feel so much after all this time and know he doesn't feel anything at all."

"You don't know that. And he's an idiot."

"That doesn't help."

"You had sex on a backhoe."

She chuckled as she pursed her lips. "What is *wrong* with me?"

"You got your heart broken and won't give it to anyone else," I stated. "You need more time."

She wiped underneath her eyes and whispered across the table. "How much more?"

"Until you and your heart are ready."

"What about you, Koti?"

"I'm holding out for the first time in my life. I'm not in a hurry. I just need my body to cooperate."

My abdomen chose that moment to start screaming. Jasmine saw me wince.

“It’s starting.”

“Okay,” she said shooing me away. “Go home. Text me later.”

When I didn’t move, she looked over at me. “I’ve got this, Koti.”

I lowered my eyes. “Everyone’s checked in, we shouldn’t have too many calls.”

“So, you check out.” She gripped my hand across the table. “It’s okay.”

Frustrated, I tried to ignore the deep throb in my center. “I can make it through the rest of the day,” I said, starting to inhale and exhale deeply. “This is ridiculous.”

Jasmine squeezed my hand. “Go home.”

* * *

On my deck wrapped up in a blanket and freezing, even with the day’s heat, I popped a pill from my prescription bottle, my jaw shaking from the onslaught of cramps. It felt like two tiny men had cut their way into my abdomen and were playing the bongos. I lay in my hammock in a ball as I listened to the waves in an attempt to ignore my treacherous body. My insides screamed and I braced myself for the worst. I’d been diagnosed with endometriosis a few years before I left New York. Clustered with severe mood swings and my anxiety, for several days of each month, I was a ticking time bomb. I did what I could to kick the mood swings with workouts that had me crawling toward a hot shower and relaxation techniques my therapist had taught me. Nothing helped but drugs and time. Though I’d been managing the clusterfuck for years, it still felt like a small Armageddon every single month. I was lucky enough to have a best friend as a boss who allowed me to slip away for a few days until the worst of it subsided. A

shock wave of pain coursed through me and I tensed when another set of cramps hit hard.

Some time later, with my eyes tightly shut I sensed I wasn't alone.

“Koti?”

I wiped the tears from my face and pressed my chin to my chest to hide them.

“Go away.”

Ian stood to the side of my hammock. I could feel the day's heat coming off him. Lifting my eyes, I noticed his skin had slightly bronzed from the sun. For the first time, I was able to study the solid wall of tattoos that covered his right pec—Semper Fidelis ran in a bold cursive pattern in the middle of two crossed swords on his bicep. He'd been a Marine. He'd also lost some of the weight around his middle in the last few weeks. If I wasn't so engrossed in my pain, I might have noticed how long his eyelashes were and how they were so dark they looked wet and spread out in a beautiful pattern over his cheek when he looked down at me. If I wasn't in complete agony, I might have noticed the fullness of his lips and the small white scar in a subtle divot on his chin where stubble refused to grow.

“You've been crying for hours.”

“I'm fine. Sorry about the noise.” I wrapped my arms around my stomach and bit my lip to keep from moaning. He scanned the porch and pulled the prescription bottle from the table and eyed it. I was too wrapped up to give a damn. Inside my body was unleashing hell.

“What happened? You're hurt?”

“Ian, what do you want?”

Meeting his gaze, I saw eyes filled with concern. It was completely ironic.

“I'm fine.” Even as I said it, my voice shook and fresh tears leaked out of my eyes.

He looked at me pointedly for a believable explanation, but I wouldn't bring myself to tell him I had the most painful periods in the history of womankind. And every month I cursed Eve for her treacherous act because of that tempting apple.

Ian opened the bottle and handed me another prescribed pill along with the bottled water I'd left on my table. I took the pill and swallowed it, overwhelmed by a fresh wave of cramping. I bared my teeth and grunted as it hit hard.

"Jesus, Koti, what's wrong?" It was odd seeing his concern for me. We'd remained complete strangers in his first few weeks on the island, yet I had felt the need to protect him from his own hurt. Maybe he was beginning to remember that for a few weeks, and endless summers ago, we *were* childhood friends.

"It will pass. I just want to sleep."

"Okay." He stood watching me shake for several moments before he reluctantly made his way off the porch.

Hours later I awoke in a sweaty heap. The sun had set and the only light was the moon's half glow. When I tried to shift in the hammock, I realized there was an arm wrapped around me. It tightened as I moved to get up.

Ian's smooth voice rumbled behind me. "Feeling better?"

I wanted to ask him what in the hell he was doing. I wanted to fight him and throw his comforting efforts away as he had mine, but in truth, it felt amazing being in his arms. Suddenly, I was aware of his breath on my neck and the gentle stroke of his fingers on my stomach. The breeze covered us both as I laid mute, too exhausted to argue instead embracing his rare gift of comfort.

"I'm sorry I've been such a bastard," he whispered, his apology sounding sincere. "Sleep."

I eased back into his strong hold as he took small liberties with his fingers. The weight of his body behind me was a reassuring reprieve from the constant ache. He pulled me tighter as the ocean breeze drifted over us. I pressed myself further into him and gripped the hand that stroked me as

another debilitating wave took hold. I breathed through it as he murmured into my hair. Body tense, I cried quietly in his arms until I slipped back into an exhausted sleep.

I barely stirred when the hammock moved some time later and when I woke up, I was alone.

* * *

A few days later, I emerged from my house feeling as if I'd been through a war. Ian had knocked on my door twice, but I couldn't bring myself to open it. As I walked down the steps to get to my Jeep, I saw him unload a handful of wood onto his deck, his eyes intent on me. "You're better then?"

"Yes, thank you."

Ian's eyes lowered to my sandals. "I see you are still fond of those dreadful gold sandals, but they suit you."

I smiled at him and he back at me.

"Oh, I remember you, puffer fish. And your tacky sandals."

I rolled my eyes. "Well, I'll ignore that snarky comment, seeing as how you aren't being a *complete* ass today."

In our short summer together, years ago, he'd poked fun at my sandals when I refused to take them off. As a six-year-old, I was convinced my few wardrobe staples in life would be my father's Fruit of the Loom white T-shirts that fell below my knees, gold belt, and matching sandals. I had a thing for Greek mythology, especially Aphrodite and I hadn't really grown out of it.

I shrugged, looking down to admire my new sandals. "Some things don't change."

"But some things do," he said carefully, studying me closely in my spaghetti strap white sundress. The morning sun's effect paled in comparison to the current of heat that swept through

me as our eyes locked. Ian broke contact first, pulling a hammer from one of the bags on the porch. With the way he swung that hammer, I felt like I had my very own Greek deity, my own Sucellus in front of me.

He paused his hammer briefly when I ripped my eyes away and moved to leave. "I apologize again," he offered, a small smile on his freshly licked lips, "repeatedly."

"You're forgiven," I said, watching a drop of sweat from the tip of his chin drip down to his navel and disappear below his waistband. I'd never wanted to be a drop of sweat so much in my life. "I'm off to work. If you need anything..."

"Koti, I'll take it from here," he said softly. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

I lingered in hopes of more conversation, but Ian turned his back and grabbed a box of nails. "Have a good day."

"You too."

Inside my Jeep, I stared at the ocean that lay beyond our houses.

Decades of life separated the two of us and I was more curious than ever of what his years held.

Nine hours later, I came home to a ripped and colorful sky. I went straight from my Jeep to the rocky shore and put my aching feet in the water. I glanced over my shoulder to see the Kemp house was dark. It didn't surprise me in the least. Ian was still struggling with his hurts and didn't want to share them. Pain didn't disappear overnight. He needed time. He had wounds to lick. Another few days of silence between our houses confirmed as much.

Chapter Ten

Ian

SHE HAD TO BE THE most beautiful woman I'd ever seen in my life and that was saying much. I'd been on every continent and to places most human eyes had never seen and even the most exotic-looking women couldn't hold a candle to her. It wasn't just her soul-filled eyes, perfect face, or full lips, her body was every man's dream—petite, toned, curves, day-long legs, and perfect feet. She was a wet dream and the kicker was, she had no knowledge of it or at least didn't use it to her advantage. From what I could tell she hadn't a clue of just how attractive she was. Holding her that day in the hammock, her pained cries had been agony for me. I ended up taking too many liberties with my fingers. I knew how soft the skin of her stomach was. I'd traced the curve of her hips and reveled in the way she fit inside my arms. After hours of studying her beautiful face partially covered by sun-bleached hair, I had to get the hell out of that hammock. I was there to comfort her and grew unbearably hard as the minutes passed. The need to touch her more intimately had my skin on fire. She was in a great deal of pain and though it bothered me to see her in such a state, I had no idea how holding her that way would affect me. And it had, so much so that I couldn't stop fantasizing about her days after.

I slammed the hammer down as I tried to reason with myself. She looked so beautiful this morning in that dress with freshly glossed lips. My first instinct was to close the space to rid her of it and smear that gloss with my lips and cock.

I wanted her and that was dangerous. I was in no position to offer her anything at all. I simply wasn't ready to begin to trust another woman after what Tara had done to the rest of our relationship. Though it wasn't Koti's fault, I was too angry, too bitter, too unsure of my feelings at that point that a friendship would be pushing it. What was worse, and from what I could

tell, the attraction was mutual and she had no idea that just moments ago, I was seconds away from pushing any moral thoughts aside and ravaging her. I discarded the hammer on the porch and laced up my takkies. I needed to clear my head.

Koti had zero place in my life, nor I in hers. I had absolutely no desire to start anything, whether it be sexual or more, with any woman. Keeping my distance would be the only way to avoid a disaster and I was good at that. She'd granted me the space I asked for. In an attempt to wipe thoughts of her away, I began to jog down the beach. I wasn't a teenage boy, I could handle attraction. It was nothing more than appreciation for the beauty that she was. An entanglement of any sort with me would only hurt her. With distance, I could rid myself of the ache to touch her.

I sped up as Koti's lingering gaze flashed through my head.

Fuck.

* * *

Koti

“What in the fuck? Koti!”

I hid in my bedroom with repressed laughter as the puppy squealed with cries. As soon as I saw her, I knew who her rightful owner was. It wasn't a man's dog, by any means, but Ian needed a friend and since he was opposed to the human kind, I'd taken it upon myself to get him a suitable companion. As soon as I put her down on Ian's porch in a box she couldn't climb out of, she began to howl bloody murder.

“Just look at her, Ian.” I urged in a whisper spying their first meet from my window. I heard the thwack of his back door and a brief pause of silence. I was sure they were staring at each other. More silence followed, before the boom of a loud knock on my door.

“Koti!”

The pooch whimpered in his arms, still traumatized for being a fifteen-minute orphan.

“I’m not dressed,” I yelled from the safety of my bedroom.

“Then get dressed!” he ordered.

“I have to shower,” I called out toward the door before slipping into my bathroom.

He knocked again ignoring my lies. I went and took an unneeded shower to give them a chance to bond. When I emerged from my room minutes later, all was silent. I peered through my living room window and saw no sign of either of them. Curious, I peeked out of my back door to see if the coast was clear.

“I appreciate what you’re trying to do,” Ian said with a lifeless voice sitting on my wicker loveseat with the tiny puppy in his lap. He slid thick fingers through her fur while her pink tongue darted out and rewarded his other hand in kind. “But this is the *last* thing I need.”

I squared off and stepped onto the porch. “I disagree. Everyone needs a best friend.”

“I can’t take on this responsibility.” His tone was distant, cold, his head down as he stared at the nameless dog.

I spoke up, far too uncomfortable with the pain that still radiated from him. “I was thinking Disco, for a name. She looks like a Disco, doesn’t she?”

“Koti,” there wasn’t an ounce of humor in his voice. Murky gray eyes trailed over my romper. For a flicker of a second, I had his attention and it felt way too rewarding.

“Just give it a week, okay?”

Ian stood from my love seat. Disco was dwarfed by his size, engulfed in his large hands. I inhaled his scent as he towered inches above me, his stubble had grown out slightly, but he never went more than a few days without shaving. In a little over a month, he’d settled nicely into the beach bum look. I was tempted to brush the unruly dark hair away from his brow.

I felt inexplicably drawn to him while he stared at Disco as if she were going to speak. Rows of curly white and beige hair made up the most of her. She weighed no more than a few pounds. Her dark chocolate eyes stared back at him before she let out a squeak.

I caught the subtle smile he tried to hide.

Come on, Ian. Can't you see she loves you already? She can give you a thousand of those smiles.

I saw his decision before he spoke. "Again, I appreciate the gesture, but—"

"I'm allergic." *Lie.* "And I couldn't bear to see her homeless." Another lie. I'd paid a fortune for her.

Ian studied me with ill-tempered eyes. It seemed he was immune to my bullshit.

"No."

"Ye-es." I said in a sing-song voice. "She won't be any trouble. Besides you've already entertained a hyena." I grinned cheekily.

He looked confused until he realized I was talking about his booty call. "Cute."

"What was that hyena's name again?"

Ian rolled his eyes as he gripped Disco and brought her to his face. Nose to nose they assessed each other before she licked him.

"You will get along famously," I cooed, itching to run my fingers through her hair.

Ian sighed and stretched Disco out in front of him. I began to scratch my arms as he held the puffy pooch toward me. "Sorry, can't. I'll break out in hives."

A moment of silence passed between us as we stared each other down in challenge.

"Koti, don't do this, okay? I don't need the hassle."

"You *need* her and she's helpless."

“Damn it, woman, just take her.” When I shook my head, a furious Ian left my porch and walked back to his house slamming the door behind him.

Hours later in bed, I heard the puppy cry and cringed with every loud protest, afraid for her because of her temperamental new owner. Who would have thought a dog that little would have such an amazing vocal range? It may not have been the best idea, but it made him accountable for something besides himself. Disco had needs and he would have to meet them and maybe, just for a few minutes a day, it would distract him from that hurt.

Another agonizing hour later, the dog kept two houses on Vista Lane awake.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!”

I withered in my bed as Ian’s growl drifted between our houses. And then all went quiet. She was sleeping with him. I was sure of it.

Lucky bitch.

* * *

The next morning, I slipped out the front door of my house and didn’t look back as I tore out of the driveway unable to face the wrath I was sure was coming to me. I was greeted by an equally sleep-deprived Jasmine as she walked through the door with two lattes.

“Double shots,” she said, offering me my cup. I took it, grateful.

“How’s the puppy?”

“She’s adorable and very *vocal*.”

“Oh, no. That bad? You’ve been looking forward to getting her for a month.” Jasmine laughed, studying my face. “Poor thing.

You can bring her in tomorrow so we can keep her awake during the day.” She took a seat behind her cluttered desk. “I love dogs.”

“Yeah, my mom never let me have one when I was a kid. She always said no puppies in the penthouse.”

“You’ve never had a pet?”

“Never.”

“Well then, go get her now. You haven’t shut up about her, I want to meet her.”

“I can’t.”

Jasmine gave me a sideways glance. “Sure you can. I’ll watch her here.”

I shrugged as I searched through the schedule. “She’s kind of in someone else’s custody.”

Jasmine pushed away from her desk and crossed her arms. “You gave her away?!”

“I loaned her out.”

“To?”

“Ian.”

“Really?” A wide smile covered her face. “You’ve got it bad for him, don’t you?”

“Not possible.”

“Oh, it’s possible,” she piped.

I sighed. “Jasmine, he’s in the middle of a crisis. The puppy will help. It’s no more than that. Maybe I’m just a little curious because, after a month of living next to him, he’s still a complete mystery.” Aside from the attraction I had for him, he was off-limits in every way. Emotionally unavailable and temperamental were far from on my wish list.

“I’m a little attracted to him. But you know crazy attracts crazy.”

“You aren’t crazy,” she said sharply. “You’re just a nervous nelly.”

“I left New York and my career because I had a brush with death and now I have an instilled fear of dying. There’s a big difference between having a breakdown in Target over the pillow selection and cracking up on *my* level.”

Jasmine jerked out of her chair. “You *ass*. I’ll have you know that breakdown was legit.”

“If you say so.”

“Target is the mecca of indecisiveness I’ll have you know. That breakdown on *sheet sets* was well warranted.”

“Forgive me, I forgot it was sheets. I appreciate you trying to relate, but a breakdown about bed sheets pales in comparison.”

“You haven’t had an episode in a few months though, right?”

“Yeah,” I said thoughtfully. “It’s been a little over a month, but that’s a very long time for me.” I looked her over. “Sorry, I’m sure it was traumatizing for you in Target. I didn’t mean to be a jerk. I’m tired. I’m sure your breakdown was legit.”

“It wasn’t legit, it was PMS.” She yawned. “I’m exhausted. I got *no* sleep because of Chris. He’s a sea captain and has a hooked penis.”

I swallowed down my latte with a chuckle. “Oh? Do tell.”

“And the man’s got a thing for Mexican women.”

“Please tell me you didn’t—”

“Oh, yes I *did*. Last night I was Maria Valdez. I even went as far as reciting some old high school Spanish.” She waggled her brows.

“That’s wrong on so many levels.” I shook my head. “Seriously, you spend half your time correcting people on your ethnicity and you mean to tell me you changed it for curvy cocked Chris?”

Jasmine wrinkled her nose. “Don’t say cock, that’s gross.”

“And penis is clinical,” I chided.

“Dick?” She offered as a middle ground.

That time I wrinkled my nose. “Better, but to me, that describes more of a type of personality than the actual body part.”

Loud laughter erupted from the door as Toby, our water deliveryman, stood holding our weekly five gallons on his shoulder. “Never a dull moment in here, huh ladies?”

Jasmine didn’t miss a beat. “Hey, Toby, what do you call your penis in the heat of the moment?”

I choked on a bite of bagel as he shook his head to ward off her question and switched the water bottles out.

I spoke up glaring at Jasmine. “Sorry Toby, I apologize on her behalf. She was raised by Mrs. Valdez, who ran a brothel in Mexico.”

“Har, har,” Jasmine snapped before narrowing her eyes at me. “And as far as *that* story goes, I grew up with my aunt in California who lived just over the border.” Jasmine walked over to where Toby stood and I cringed. “I’m serious. Toby, are you married?” Toby turned to us with his hands on his hips. He was stocky and a little taller than Jasmine but not by much. He had a teddy bear’s build and thick sandy blond hair. One side of his mouth lifted. “Married, no. And you really want to know?”

She nudged him with her shoulder. “Water cooler talk.” Toby and I shook our heads fighting a laugh before he assessed Jasmine with a thorough once-over. “Depends.”

“On?” Jasmine’s voice was syrupy sweet, and I rolled my eyes at her as she looked on at Toby unashamed and entertained.

“On how dirty the sex is,” Toby replied boldly.

Jasmine’s dark eyes fixed on his lips as he spoke. “If it’s dirty...”

Even I was leaning forward as Toby sucked all the air out of the room. “I mean if it’s *really* dirty...”

“Yes?” we said in unison. He leaned over and began whispering in her ear. She nodded as she kept her playful brown eyes on me. My bagel became chalk in my mouth as the

two whispered back and forth before I swallowed and demanded an answer. “Well?”

Jasmine’s mouth dropped as he leaned in one last time and whispered to her suggestively before he gave me a departing wink and walked out the door.

Her impossibly tan face turned crimson.

“Well?”

“It’s cock.”

“One point, Koti. I *told* you.”

“I think my breasts are sweating,” she said, fanning her boobs. “Did you feel the heat coming off of that one?”

I was definitely feeling... *something*. “Is it weird that just made me hot?”

Jasmine shook her head and we both laughed. “Babe, I would be worried about you if you weren’t. Phew,” she picked up one of our brochures and used it as a makeshift fan for her sweaty breasts. “Who knew the water boy had it in him? Then again that is the basis for good porn.”

“You are something else you know that? Get a grip, Gersch. Your escapades have turned you into a pervert.”

“Cock...” she practiced shaking her head and wrinkling her nose. “Cock.” She pushed her voice up a decibel. “Cock.” She looked over to me. “It sounds weird, right? In no way, does that sound sexy coming out of my mouth”

“Maybe it’s the Minnesota in you. It sounds more like you’re saying caulk.”

“Cock,” she repeated, shaking her head again as I buried my head between my hands and pressed my forehead to my desk. Her voice was low as she spoke it again. “Cock.” She practiced again and I banged my head on my desk. “Cock,” she repeated until... “Nope, it’s penis.”

Chapter Eleven

Koti

AFTER WORK, BECAUSE IT HAD been a decent day and I felt I had the strength to handle it, I answered my phone as I was stripping down for a shower.

“Hi, Mom.” I unbuttoned my shorts and slid them off before I laid on my bed in a sweaty heap.

“Koti, Troy Emerick wants to meet with you!” I ignored her attempt at getting straight down to business without greeting pleasantries and went on a spiel of my own.

“I’m fine. The weather is great. I think we may get some rain, which we need. Work is good. We’re gaining clients daily.”

“Koti.” Her voice held that sharpness I’d grown used to but had also become immune to.

“This is Troy Emerick, you know he’s one of the best agents in New York. He’s agreed to meet with you as a favor to me.”

“Thank you, but I’m happy here. I wish you hadn’t called in that favor on my account.”

“What you’re doing with your life is not sustainable forever.”

“I disagree,” I said, turning to study my body in the full-length mirror. It was a far cry from the stick thin skeleton frame it was a year ago. The circles under my eyes had disappeared. I’d gained the twenty pounds I needed to resemble healthy. I wondered if for one second my mother would forget her ambitions for me and notice the difference if she saw the new state I was in, or if it would even matter. “Mom, I’m in my underwear ready for a shower, can I call you back?”

“No, because you won’t.” I gritted my teeth but held in my impatient sigh as she continued. “He can get you back in. You might have to—”

“Mother, I already sold my soul. New York has it, okay? I’m never going back.” I took a deep breath in an attempt to ignore the stirring tension in my limbs.

“Okay, Koti, it’s been long enough. I’ve talked to your father and we need you to come back to discuss your future.” And there it was. I was sure it took a good amount of her strength to be a concerned parent first and put expectant on the back burner. Apparently, a year was her limit.

But she hadn’t been there, not in the way I needed her. And though my father tried, he couldn’t understand just how that day had changed me. I had a hard enough time coming to grips with it myself.

At that moment, I remembered running through endless faces in the freezing cold with a box full of my belongings in six-hundred-dollar heels, my face pouring defeat, my heart pounding out of my chest, passing stranger after stranger, the words ‘help me’ on my lips and not a single soul around who gave a shit. After wandering aimlessly around New York for hours without a future, I tossed the box that held my degree in the garbage and sat in front of it in the cold until my limbs went numb.

“Mom, I’m a little old for this talk of my future. If you’re going to threaten to take away the house, I’m prepared for that, so go ahead and do it. I’m too old to map out my life, instead, I’m living it. Here in St. Thomas. This is my future. Whatever issues you have with my failure, you’re just going to have to deal with it, like I have.”

“Deal with it!? You ran away!” Her breathing was erratic. She had totally planned to play the house card. But how much of a threat would it be anyway if the stipulation was to return to New York?

“Are you taking the house away?” I pressed on, unafraid of what she would say. There was nothing she could do to me that the world hadn’t done already.

“Of course not, Koti,” she feigned offense.

I heard my father ask to speak to me. That card I wasn't ready for. He was still disappointed I lied to him with my promise to come home for Christmas.

"I have to go, Mom. I have a renter calling."

"Koti! We haven't seen you in a year! You're breaking your father's heart."

"I know, Mom, and I'm sorry. I've already apologized for that. I'm not ready."

"Koti." My father's voice was a mix of concern and growing impatience for both of us, I was sure.

"Dad, I'm sorry I can't talk now."

"Listen to me, you either get on a plane or we will."

"Dad, I have to work," I said weakly, his deep voice piercing my heart. "I can't just leave; my boss depends on me."

"No more excuses on either side." I knew his stern words were also meant for my mother, who I was sure was the reason my father hadn't already shown up in St. Thomas. I knew she was sure I would come running back for financial help, guidance, or both. Another disappointment for her.

"I need to see my little girl."

His words struck hard and I did my best not to let him hear it.

"Soon, Dad, I promise. I love you both. I've got to go."

"Koti—"

"Dad, I'll call you back. I love you." I hung up as my heartbeat sped up and my face flamed.

I lay back in bed panting, a tear rolling down my cheek. In and out. Breathe. *Nothing's wrong. Nothing's wrong. You're okay. You're okay.*

"Nothing's wrong."

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

Five. Ten. Fifteen minutes passed before I lifted my newly drained bones off the bed and submerged them in a shower.

Twenty minutes and half a Xanax later, I was dead to the world.

* * *

Disco barked as I turned on my side and looked out the window toward the Kemp house before glancing at the clock.

2 a.m.

Unable to handle her yapping, I ripped myself away from the bed and slid on my flip-flops.

I could feel the tension behind the door before I knocked. Seconds later, a T-shirt clad Ian answered with wide, helpless eyes.

“Have you picked her up?” I pushed past him to see Disco in her box in the middle of the living room. “Ian, she can’t see that you’re here and that’s why she’s freaking out!”

“Well, she pisses and shats everywhere!”

“She’s a puppy,” I said, pulling her from her prison. “You have to take her outside every hour or so and reward her when she pees or poops.”

“I’m well aware,” he snapped. “So, you take her.”

“I can’t, I’m allergic,” I said with a mock cough. He crossed his arms as I held the dog toward him. Disco whimpered and scrambled in my grip before she leaped at him. He was forced to catch her and when he did, I could see the delight cover his face. He was reluctantly smitten. He looked over at me with narrowed eyes. “You are conniving.”

“Thank you, I do my best. This is a puppy we are talking about here,” I said, looking at the dog with longing. “Puppy breath, puppy love. Seriously, don’t miss out on this.”

He raised a thick brow and looked down at my camisole top before he averted his eyes without a single tell. Had I gone

over there in my skimpiest camisole on purpose?

Absolutely... not.

But my breasts were the elephant that now sat on the puppy at hand.

Disco lay quietly in his grip.

“See, she just needed some love,” I said, feathering her soft fur through my fingers. I leaned down and kissed her forehead before I looked up at a surprisingly close Ian. “Disco needs you, crocky.”

He rolled his eyes as I spotted a large dry erase board behind him.

“What’s this?”

Ian cradled Disco in his arm and stepped in front of me to obstruct my view of the board. “Just something I’m working on.”

I tilted my head. “Why so secretive? I’ve already seen you at war, Marine.”

His lips twitched in amusement. “That was years ago.” His eyes strayed down to his stomach. I saw his disappointment and felt my heart rip slightly at the degrading evaluation he gave himself. So he’d gained a few pounds since his service. No big deal. He’d already lost quite a bit of it in the month he’d been on the island. And I found it admirable that he served at all. Little love handles aside, the man was drop-dead gorgeous. He had to know that. But I wasn’t going to leave it unsaid, I’d been a victim of self-image awareness my whole life. So, what did I do to make sure he knew he still had it?

“Ouch! What in the hell are you doing, woman?”

My hand burned as I lifted my reddened palm away from his firm ass and presented it to him, “Still got it, eh?”

Not my best move, but when Ian Kemp threw his head back and laughed, a wave of pure bliss washed over me.

Ignoring the urge to kiss his prominent Adam’s apple, I shrugged as if I went around slapping men’s asses on a daily

basis. I sidestepped him as he kept Disco snug in his arms and looked at the board. There was a list of lecture topics and keynotes.

I nodded toward it in question.

“It’s a course shcedule. I teach.”

“Shcedule?” I grinned, and he grinned back.

“Right, you always had a thing for my accent.”

“Doesn’t every red-blooded American woman? I bet you cleaned up with the ladies *very* well in Texas.” I gave him a wink and his answering grin didn’t deny it.

My whole body tensed at the sight of his smile. Angry with my horny self, I moved to the defensive. “And your accent has faded a little, what a pity.” He gave me that all-knowing stare again. The one that told me he knew my next words before I spoke them. I walked over to the board and felt his eyes on me.

“I blame Texas.”

“South Africa to Dallas, what in the world made your parents make that move?”

“We went there initially to wait for my brother, the birth mother lived there.”

“Your parents told me a little about him last summer, I forgot his name...?”

“Adam. He’s adopted. My parents and I waited in Dallas for the length of the pregnancy. They got acclimated. I hated it, but we stayed.”

“Too hot?”

“I can handle hot,” he said, looking over the list on the board before he took a step forward with Disco cradled in his free arm and erased one of the notes. “The academics were lacking. I was several levels ahead, and it was all very boring.”

“I remember you griping about not being able to safari on the weekend. No chance of lions invading Dallas then?” He threw his head back at my shitty attempt at his accent. I felt like I

was batting a thousand every time I heard that sweet rumble erupt from his chest.

“No, there wasn’t much adventure for me in the concrete jungle.”

“I could say different about where I came from. I suffered from overstimulation. What do you teach?”

“Linguistics and American Sign Language and sometimes I dabble in creative writing.”

“Professor Kemp?” I mused, unable to picture him instructing a classroom. “You went from the Marines to teach?”

“Actually, it was my wife’s doing. My *ex-wife*, Tara. When we discovered our daughter was deaf, I dabbled in speech, speech pathology, audiology, and linguistics. She pushed me in the direction of teaching. I used to write letters to her when I was stationed overseas. She thought I had a knack for it.”

“So, you started it mostly for your daughter?”

He nodded. “I taught some classes at her school for a few years when she began attending.”

“Sign language is fascinating.”

He nodded thoughtfully and let Disco free. She ran straight toward me and jumped through my feet attacking my flip-flops.

“I agree. I spent years studying the language and the culture. And with Ella’s disability, it seemed a natural progression,” he shrugged.

“None of this is impressive at all,” I said sarcastically.

“Tara was more in tune with the Marine, I think. Her pursuit for me career-wise actually backfired.”

“Did you see yourself in this career?”

“I didn’t see myself as anything. I joined the Marines to buy time to figure it out.”

“And just so happened to finish some of the hardest military training in the world?”

Ian shrugged. "It was either that or go to college for a useless degree."

"Touché."

"Pardon?"

"I agree with you. I am a proud owner of one of those useless degrees."

He winced. "Sorry."

"I'm not. I'm glad I'm not wasting any more time." I nodded toward his full erase board. "So, teach me something, professor."

"This doesn't interest you."

"Everything interests me." I scooped up Disco and took a seat on the corner of his couch. "Were you practicing in here?"

He scrunched his nose as if he smelled something bad. "Practicing? I don't need practice. This is a list of lectures."

"Where do you teach now?"

"Nowhere at the moment. I'm hoping for a position at my daughter's new school."

"So, teach me, here, in St. Thomas."

Ian bit his lips and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I know what you're doing. Did my mother put you up to this?"

"Yes, your mother prodded Disco to whine all night and forced me over here to snoop at your dry erase board. My education awaits, Professor Kemp."

"And what was your major?"

"I got a master's in business, got my real estate license, joined a firm and blew a \$2 billion deal because I had a panic attack. I should have joined the Marines, it might have made a better woman out of me. Now, teach me something."

Ian looked down at me skeptically. "It's late."

"I'm wide awake," I said, eyeing the collection of books stacked on the TV stand. "If you won't teach me anything, how about we start a book club?"

“What do you read?”

“Everything. Lots of historical romance lately.”

“Really?” His demeanor changed and his shoulders relaxed. He was no longer on the defensive.

“Yes, historical romance. What’s wrong with that? You learn something *and* the boy gets the girl, but not before the widespread panic, famine, cannibalism, cholera, the Nazis, and of course, the hurdled forty or fifty life-threatening situations.”

Ian tilted his head back again. The rumble of his laughter my new driving force.

“So, will you teach me how to sign?”

“Maybe,” he said as he playfully squared his shoulders, “it depends, Mrs. Vaughn...”

“*Miss.*” I pressed my lips together wondering if he remembered his remark the day we met.

Ian’s lips twitched. *He did.* But he had enough tact not to stare at my miss tits.

We shared another smile, this one was far more intimate. Awareness of the unwanted distance between us began to creep into my thoughts.

Was I crushing on Ian Kemp? If so, I was developing a crush on the *mid-life* professor. And that wasn’t healthy for either of us.

“I should go. Thank you for the lesson.”

“I taught you nothing.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, Professor Kemp.”

“Koti.” His voice was glum, to say the least. I paused my feet at the door and glanced his way. “If we are going to engage in any sort of conversation, for future reference, I want honesty over everything. That’s important to me, all right?”

I stared at my toes. “All right.” A beat passed before I could brave another a look at him. I’d become acutely aware of my

body's response to his smile, his laugh, his voice. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." He took a step forward closing the space between us and my breathing picked up. I studied the sprinkle of hair on his navel that trailed down past the button on his shorts while I savored his smell—new leather and soap—and wished for a few moments we were back in that hammock so I would be surrounded in it, in *him*. I blinked the thought away and cleared my throat.

Ian seemed eager as he studied my face. "What do you want to ask me?"

"Are you okay?"

I braved a look and what I saw wasn't the scorn or the ever-present bitterness he carried, it was genuine curiosity. And for the first time since Ian landed on my island, I felt like I had his undivided attention.

"Why are you concerned about me?"

I could have told him I was paid to be worried about him. But that really wasn't the truth. I was paid to keep an eye on him, but that was the extent of it. My concern stemmed from somewhere else. A place I recognized, a place I felt like Ian was drowning in.

The lump I tried to speak around kept me quiet for a few moments. And then I gave him exactly what he asked for—honesty.

"Before I came here, I had a really shitty thing happen, the kind of thing that breaks people. I think you're familiar with that." He slowly nodded. "Well, I was alone—alone in a way no human should ever be—and I needed just *one* person to ask me that question. I was surrounded by thousands of people, but I just needed *one*. And I decided I wanted to be that person for you. Because I *do* want to know. Because I am worried for you and about you. Because you deserve to have that question asked. So, Ian, are you okay?"

He didn't hesitate a second. "No."

Tense moments passed as we stared at each other. “And what will you do with that answer, Koti?”

“I’ll keep it in confidence. I’ll respect your need for privacy and I’ll ask you until you say you are, or you could be, or you might be someday.”

Lost in his eyes, in the hurt they held, in the clench of his jaw, and the answer to his pain on his un-telling lips, he whispered to me. “I can’t say those things.”

“Then I won’t stop asking you.”

He hung his head and let out an audible breath. “It’s not your job to care about me.”

“See, this is where I disagree.” I reached over and gripped his hand and gently squeezed it. He tensed slightly. “What made you lay next to me in that hammock?”

“I don’t know.” He bit his lip as he browsed through his thoughts. “You were in pain. You were crying. It was the most agonizing sound I’d ever heard.”

“Okay, well what I saw in those eyes of yours the day you got here is the worst pain I’ve ever witnessed, Ian Kemp. And it’s everybody’s *job*, isn’t it?”

I slid my thumb over the top of his hand. “I mean, we are all just extras sipping coffee in the background of someone else’s life. But that could change at any second. If I wanted to, I could put my coffee down and become responsible for you. We are *all* responsible. We could all choose to take responsibility, couldn’t we? Human compassion. What the hell happened to that?”

Ian pressed his brows together while I got lost in my thoughts.

I wasn’t sure how much time passed before I finally snapped out of it and slowly pulled my hand away. Ian’s twisted face was a thing of beauty. I felt the blush creep through my cheeks at my rant and then even more so by his close scrutiny.

“Never mind, I’m talking nonsense to you. Goodnight.”

He opened his mouth to speak, maybe to address one of the hundred questions I saw in his eyes but kept them to himself

and instead responded with a curt, “Goodnight.”

Great, Koti, way to go. You sounded like a philosophical moron.

Taking my leave, I walked across the sand and back to solitude where I felt safer with my own ramblings. I felt his watchful eyes on me from where he stood on his porch. Maybe I should have been more embarrassed and a little more careful with the words I spoke. But in the last year of my life, I’d recognized my flaws and the depth of my narcissism while I licked my own wounds. After a hard look, I didn’t like a tenth of what I’d become. I saw my flaws, my differences and discovered a few of my strengths too. I was done with certain parts of myself that were a product of expectation. And what was left was a woman who embraced vulnerability, her idiosyncrasies, her ticking clock, *and* treacherous body.

In a way, I was proud for speaking up, especially to a man who was afraid to show his own defeat and weakness. If I had to write the story of my life post-apocalyptic Koti Vaughn, it *would* be of a story of hope.

It would be human. And that’s all I wanted to be. Striving for perfection had cost me enough sanity.

Chapter Twelve

Koti

THERE'S A NAME FOR HUMAN awareness and it's called Sonder.

The definition: the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own—populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness—an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground. It's a pocket in time, where you may redefine life by the idea of the struggle of others.

My time in my own purgatory, battling my anxiety and the crumble of my planned future had taught me to reflect not only on my own mess but on the life of my parents and their triumphs and failures. And after that in-depth analysis where I had to forgive them and myself, I paid close attention to everyone I came in contact with. It changed me in a way I couldn't ignore. It was a deep, emotional cleansing and one that I could never take lightly.

Everyone, at some point in their life, gets lost in their own head, whether it be a low or high point where they are looking down at the path they'd chosen. This type of reflection led me to the train of thought that brought me to revisit my first substantial memory.

My first foggy recollection as a child was getting stung by a wasp. I remembered being too small to open the door of my parents' Hamptons house and the relief I felt when my mother rescued me. I remembered her quieting my cries as she looked down at me with tender eyes and a soothing voice while she sprinkled powder on my bite to get the sting out. And I remembered very little after, just the lingering feeling that I was safe.

In searching through those memories, I remembered a bike ride on top of the handlebars and somewhere between that, a

string of nights spent with my mother in bed when I got the flu. She'd kicked my father out of their room and slept with me. I could still feel her cold hands on my hot back. A few childhood friends drifted through my memories as well, not exact memories but words and gestures, indistinct moments in places I couldn't remember. One of my classmates had died of pneumonia. She had blonde curly hair and big dimples. When she passed, I was observed by the adults around me in such a way I knew I was expected to grieve. Because of that expectation, I pretended to cry, but the concept of death was lost on me. I recall feeling bad as the casket was lowered to the ground because I felt nothing and everyone around me wasn't pretending. Their tears were real. It was the first time I felt guilty.

Everyone had those moments, where those bits and pieces surfaced, and memories were triggered, some of them more significant than others. Some of them a mystery as to why they stood out from the rest. Three hundred and sixty-five days a year, twenty-four hours in a day. What would I remember when I was forty?

It seemed incomprehensible no matter how well you know another person, that you could never fully understand them, and what memories they kept and *why* they were significant. I had no idea what my friend's name was that passed away, no idea whose handlebars I was riding on, but I do know the most vivid childhood memory I held was the day I met Ian Kemp.

“Good morning.”

Ian greeted me as I stood on my back porch sipping a cup of coffee in light cotton sleep shorts and the same cami I had on the night before. The waves rolled in and crashed against the rocky shore in front of me. I was far too deep in my reverie to do anything more than lift my cup and give him a low reply. “Morning.”

“Listen,” Ian said, stepping off his porch and making his way toward me, forcing me back into the moment. Delighted that his shirt was inevitably off, his newly tanned feet made good time between our houses. He stood on the bottom step of my porch, his back to the rail as he followed my line of sight and

studied the waves with me. “Last night. You took me by surprise, but I want you to know I understood what you were saying.”

“Okay.” I rolled my eyes as I wrapped my arms around myself, still holding my cup as a buffer between us. No matter how determined I was to be unapologetic about my newly adopted philosophies, I still felt a bit self-conscious about sharing that new part of myself, about voicing my thoughts to those who might not be so receptive or understanding.

“There’s no reason to get defensive.”

I shrugged, looking down at my cup. “Sorry.” I didn’t want to reveal more than I already had, but I couldn’t pretend I wasn’t slightly embarrassed. “I haven’t ever really said those things *out loud*. But if you are thinking I’m the weirdo hippie with healing crystals, who is walking around concerned about higher consciousness, you are barking up the *right* tree.”

“You have no idea what I’m thinking,” he said softly.

Unable to believe his sincerity, I defended myself. “I’m not some quack, you know. I lived years out there, in that world.” I gestured toward the ocean. “And I decided to unplug. A lot of people are doing it and we all have our reasons.”

“Again,” he said, taking another step up. “You don’t know what I’m thinking.”

“I’m pretty sure you’ve labeled me the crazy lady next door.”

“No,” he said, taking another step and taking my cup away from me. “I don’t think you’re crazy at all. There is absolutely *nothing* wrong with doing a little soul-searching.”

Soul-searching?

Soul-searching.

I’d spent the last year inside myself, and at times questioned if I was losing my mind.

In mere seconds he had simplified it so... *perfectly*.

Soul-searching!

I chuckled at how naïve I'd been to expect that no one else would understand what I was going through and felt a weight lift from my shoulders. Ian had just put it all into perspective in seconds.

In that moment, I wanted to throw my arms around him in gratitude. Instead, I watched him as he took a sip of my coffee. "Oh, man this brew could kill a horse."

"Like it?"

"Hell yes."

I grinned, and he grinned back keeping my cup in his hand. He glanced at me over the lifted cup before he spoke. "In my creative writing class, I deal with a lot of saturated minds and half of their problem is they want to expand those minds past the walls they built around themselves to become better people, better writers, but how do they do that? What tools could I give them?"

"You can't, right? They have to experience things for themselves, figure out how to open their own minds."

He nodded. "And that's exactly what I tell them. Unless they want their intellectual palate to be the size of the box of knowledge they already possess, they have to get out there and gain some real-life experience to add to that imagination. It's what makes the writing authentic and original."

"Can't write about a broken heart as well as a broken heart can?"

"Precisely. How do you ever really know true living if you do it vicariously?" He looked at me attentively. "And what if... what if that person sipping coffee in the background of your life, what if they," he said pausing to take another sip, "are the next chapter?"

My heart galloped as I stuttered through my next sentence. "So, w-what you're saying," I managed to mutter keeping my door opened for his invitation, "is that you get what I was saying."

He chuckled as he followed me into the house, and I pulled another mug from my cabinet pouring us both a fresh cup. We

sat there wordlessly sipping for a few minutes. I glanced over at him, but his eyes remained fixed on the sea.

“This place,” he said low before shifting his gaze to mine, “I never really appreciated how beautiful it was until *now*.”

Heart hammering, I made quick work of changing the subject. Some part of me knew that I was seconds away from offering Ian more than coffee and small talk. The way he undressed me with his eyes, not only to my bare skin but deeper, had me squirming where I stood.

“You know, Ian, you said something to me when we were kids that stuck with me.”

“Oh?” The twinkle in his eye was gratification enough, but I still paid him the compliment.

“You were only, what, fourteen?”

He nodded.

“You told me even if I was mad, or humiliated, or scared to have fun anyway.”

He grinned at the thought, surprised. “I did?”

I nodded. “You did. Pretty insightful for a kid who told me I didn’t have tits big enough to be called a miss.” Ian chuckled and it made my stomach flutter.

“You made a bit of an impression on me,” I confessed, my back to him while I dug through my cabinet and threw the ingredients on the counter. Turning back to him satisfied, I saw his face light up in recognition.

“You’re an addict,” he commented as he saw the mass amounts of chocolate, marshmallows, and graham crackers I kept on hand.

“I told you, you didn’t give yourself enough credit, Professor Kemp. You taught me well.”

He gawked at the massive pile of chocolate on my multi-colored tile island. “So, are we dining on s’mores for breakfast, then?”

Disco chose that moment to raise the Devil's hell from her box in his living room. "Guess not," he said with the shake of his head.

"I would go get her, but I'm allergic."

"And full of shit. You are a terrible liar and that's a wonderful thing, Koti."

Ian put his empty cup on the counter and moved to free Disco from her box of shackles. He paused at my back door. "How about tonight? I'll set up one of our bonfires for old times' sake?"

"I was beginning to think you forgot."

His grin took my breath. "Quite the opposite."

My chest filled with warmth. "Okay, but how about you use regular wood this time?"

He gave me a guilty smile. "Agreed." He glanced around the room and then back to me. "There are no crystals in here."

"Made you look though," I retorted playfully.

"Koti?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for asking me." Penetrating silver eyes stared me down and I had to force myself to speak.

"You really *do* get it, don't you, Ian?"

"I really do. I'll see you tonight?"

"See you, professor."

Chapter Thirteen

Koti

I SPENT THE DAY RUNNING around like a mad woman with Jasmine by my side. Her car had been vandalized at the grocery store where she had left it the night before to meet her date.

“Okay, I’m going to tell you about last night,” she said with a sigh.

“You banged a bag boy?” I asked, glancing toward the grocery store.

She turned to me, her dark hair tied up in a bun on top of her head, clad in an electric blue dress. She was rummaging through her thirty-gallon purse. “Me and the captain’s love affair is officially over.”

“So soon?”

“You’re judging me,” she snapped as she searched through the massive purse in her lap.

“Do you check for dead mice in there from time to time?” Jasmine thumped my shoulder and I gripped it with a shriek. “Oww, that shit hurt.”

“So did last night,” she said, wincing.

“Oh Lord. The freak came out of him?”

She nodded, managing to pry three pairs of shades out of her bright red bag. She picked through them as I started the Jeep. “That’s exactly what happened.”

“Jasmine, it’s nine in the morning. Can’t I be spared until at least noon?”

“I promise not to show you my ass.”

“That’s your idea of mercy?” I glanced at her as I turned out of the parking lot and she pushed out her bottom lip. “Okay, tell

me.”

“The captain decided he wanted to role play.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, and you know me, I’m down with that.”

“Right up your backhoe,” I said with a grin.

“Are you ever going to let me live that down?”

“Not likely, please continue.”

“So, I’m expecting like dirty French maid and millionaire boss or something juicy like that.”

“Okay.”

“And I was right.”

“Sounds good.”

“Except what the captain really meant was a role reversal.”

My eyes widened. “Oh?”

Her lips were trembling as she fessed up. “He came out in heels and a frilly frock.”

“Oh, my God!” We both burst into hysterical laughter as Jasmine shook her head with her hands covering her face. “I had no idea what to do. I just stood there while his crooked penis poked out of the apron. I’m telling you as blunt as I am, I lost it. I completely lost the ability to speak.”

“What did you do?”

“I ran. I picked up my purse and RAN!”

I pulled over at a gas station and face planted into my steering wheel. “You have got to be kidding me!”

“Nope. I walked it off until I could think to call a cab and went straight to the wine bar. There I met Mark and only let him get to first base before I passed out in his hot tub.”

I couldn’t contain myself, tears were pouring from my eyes as she wiped her own away.

I sighed, my laughter subsiding slightly. “Poor baby,” I said, leaning over to hug her to me. “You are something else, lady. And you should have called me. I would have come to get you.”

“I’ll never be the same,” she said mournfully.

“It’s probably for the best.”

* * *

“This is weird,” Jasmine said, noticing the missing key from the lockbox at the Harper rental. “They should have left it at checkout.”

She knocked on the front door and when she got no answer, she looked at me with a shrug.

“You don’t have the master?”

“I haven’t been home,” she said sheepishly. “Or to the office, remember?”

“That’s right, you were up late watching the Discovery Channel.”

“Shut up, or you’re fired,” she snapped. “Crap. Let me see if I can hop the deck. This is my bad.” We walked the side of the cliff house and I stood in the driveway as she made her way toward the upper deck. There was only a narrow margin for her to get her footing on the ledge.

“Don’t! Not smart, lady!”

“I’ve got this.” She tucked her cotton dress between her legs and scaled the deck like a pro.

“I give it a six at best. Sloppy landing,” I piped as I saw her head pop up behind it.

She shot me the bird.

“Hurry up, it’s hot out here!” I ordered. The sun was beating down on the top of my head and I moved to step into the shade when I heard Jasmine’s blood-curdling scream.

“What’s wrong?!” I yelled loud enough for the street to hear.

“Koti, oh, my GOD! KOTI!”

“What’s wrong? What is it?!” I scrambled to the deck and tried to peek over.

“KOTI!”

“Open the front door, JASMINE! Please!”

“OH, MY GOD! Koti! Don’t come in!”

Fearing for her life, I risked my own and leaped to the ledge of the deck holding on for dear life. My execution was far less graceful, I went over like an old maid clinging to the top of the railing before I landed on my ass. Jasmine was still screaming as I jumped to my feet, ran around the side of the house and came to a screeching halt at her back. “OH, MY GOD!”

Eighty-three-year-old John Harper lay in a deck chair spread eagle and naked as the day he was born, his dick standing at attention for all the world to see. I covered Jasmine’s eyes. “I’m so sorry, sir. I apologize. We must have had our schedules mixed up.” I turned Jasmine back the way we came as she ripped my arms away.

“What are you doing?” I bulged my eyes. “He’s naked, come on.”

With her next words, her voice got eerily calm. “I’ll meet you out front, okay?”

“Ugh, the man obviously needs some privacy.”

“Koti,” she took my shoulders in her hands. “Honey, he’s dead.”

“Dead?” I glanced over my shoulder and saw his mouth was wide open.

“Oh, my God.”

Jasmine was nodding slowly, weighing my reaction as my scrambled brain tried to process the sight before us.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, honey, he’s gone. I’ll call an ambulance and meet you out front, okay?”

A towel lay a few feet from where he expired, and I picked it up quickly and covered his saluting soldier. My heart ripped at the sight of him. “Oh no, poor Mr. Harper. I’m so sorry.”

Jasmine bowed her head. “I have to live with that image for the rest of my life.”

“Jasmine!” I scolded as she pulled out her phone from her boobs and frantically dialed emergency services.

As she explained our situation, I took a seat next to Mr. Harper and took in the view he was blankly staring at. If that wasn’t the way to go, I didn’t know what was. He’d probably just taken a swim and sat down to dry off. In the distant water, a whale breached just as Jasmine came back into view, her shoulders slumped.

“You scared the hell out of me. I thought you were being attacked.”

“All I saw was an old man’s penis. It was horrific.”

I glowered at her. “Can you please have a little respect here? This poor man just died.”

“He was what, early eighties? And he died rich,” she shrugged. “He definitely didn’t read the warning on the Viagra box.”

“Jasmine?!”

“What?!”

“I really can’t handle this today.” She made her way inside the house and raided the cabinets until she found a bottle of vodka. She poured herself a healthy cup as the emergency sirens sounded down the street.

She drank a half glass and then downed the orange juice in the fridge.

Crossing my arms at the sliding glass door that separated the patio and large kitchen, I watched her fill another glass of juice. “Hope it wasn’t the OJ that did it.”

She sprayed the juice all over the counter before she gave me the stink eye. “Now you’ve got jokes.” She scrutinized me. “Wait, why are you okay?”

“I don’t know. Just go with it.”

She nodded.

I moved to again sit next to Mr. Harper. The silent blue water seemed appropriate for the cloudless sky.

Another whale breached in the distance. I saw the large fin as it flipped on its side before disappearing below the deep blue surface.

Without glancing his way, I spoke to him. “I hope you got to see them before you went.”

The whole situation was completely depressing. John Harper might have been wealthy, but he was alone when he died. Alone with his fortune and his twenty-million-dollar view. Suddenly nothing about the water calmed me and my whole body broke out into a sweat.

Did he die knowing he was loved? Did he sit on that chair and mentally list his regrets? Did he call for help? I sat up as my throat began to burn. What if we could have helped him if we’d shown up a few minutes before. I looked over at his gaping mouth and sprang from the seat, my heart pounding.

“Koti?”

“I...” I held my chest as Jasmine crossed the deck to get to me. I stood mute as a wave of nausea hit. My chest tightened unbearably, and I looked to her in a full-fledged panic. “He was alone! That’s not right. It’s not right!”

“Koti,” Jasmine said with a small shake in her voice. “Baby, you can’t take this into yourself.”

“What if we could have helped him?”

“It happens. This stuff happens,” she said in a soothing voice as the sirens grew closer. “Try and calm down.”

“You know I *hate* that! Don’t tell me to calm down!”

“Okay babe, you’re having a freak-out. It’s cool. I’m here. Deep breaths.” She got to me just before my legs gave out and gripped me tightly to her.

“No.”

“It’s okay,” she said, gripping my hand. “Let’s just breathe.”

“Get away from me, please. I *can’t* breathe.”

“Koti, you *are* breathing. Come on, baby, just breathe. You can do this.”

“He was alone!”

“I know. I’m sorry I made a joke. In... out. You can do this.”

“I don’t have my pills.”

“You don’t need them, you’ve gone all this time without them. It’s just life. Let’s make it through this. Come on buddy, breathe.”

“Get away from me!” I shrieked, trying to pull away, but she held on tighter. The sirens blared outside the house as I began to melt down.

“Okay, Koti, listen,” Jasmine said softly “everything is okay.”

My body shook uncontrollably as I continued to try to yank my hand away. She stood undeterred. “Breathe, one, two, three...”

Pound. Pound. Pound.

“The door is open!” Jasmine yelled while she kept me captive in her stare and instruction.

“Please let me go.”

“Can you walk over to the couch?”

I pulled away from her as the medic emerged from the patio door and eyed us.

Jasmine, still engaging me fully, nodded toward the chair that held Mr. Harper. The man rushed to his side as his partner looked at me. I averted my eyes as I breathed in again trying to calm myself.

“Panic attack,” she mouthed to the second medic.

Instantly furious but unable to control my breathing or the shaking, I took steady breaths and let Jasmine walk me to the couch. “Sit tight, okay. I’ll take care of this.”

“It’s my worse fear,” I said, hot tears trailing down my face.

“I know.”

She picked up my hand and kissed it before she gently pushed me back into the cushions.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Jasmine,” I pleaded knowing I was making a fool of myself.

“I’ll be right back, Koti.”

I drew my knees up as my body quaked and took breaths until the fatigue set in.

Chapter Fourteen

Koti

“I’M SORRY,” I SAID, STARING at the mismatched houses that flew by us as Jasmine drove us to the office a short time later.

“Stop.”

“I’m so embarrassed,” I admitted.

“Stop it,” Jasmine said firmly.

“Why can’t I just make jokes like you or throw up like normal people?”

She let out a loud laugh. “You think I’m normal? Babe, please. My mother was a nurse. Her calm reaction would have made us both look crazy.”

“I *feel* crazy.”

“You are a little bit. That’s how you deal with things. I make jokes. Who knows what other people would have done in that situation.”

“Stop trying to make me feel better.” My limbs ached. I could barely keep my eyes open. “Why do you even deal with me?”

“Trade-off, you save me right back. I’m pretty selfish. That’s how this works.”

I let out a long breath and turned down the radio she’d just turned on.

“Where did he go, when he died, where did he go?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s the worst part,” I swallowed as the fear began to resurface, “we don’t know for sure. We don’t know, and even the truest of most faithful believers aren’t certain there’s a heaven or hell or just darkness. And if it’s just darkness, are we aware of it? We get to know *nothing* except that death is

every single living creature's fate. The thing I'm most afraid of in the world is the one thing that is inevitably going to happen to me and everyone I love. I get to know nothing else."

"We all have that disadvantage, no one knows for sure."

"But you aren't afraid to die. You've just accepted it. And you live every day of your life not worried about it."

"Give yourself credit, kid. You've done a damn good job curbing your fears this past year."

"I know, but then today this happens and I'm more terrified than ever."

She grabbed my hand and held it. "I wish I could say something that would change this for you, Koti, but I can't."

"I know," I said tearfully. "Some days I feel like our creator is the cruelest with the rules and some days I can't believe how amazing this world is. Ya know? It's like here, enjoy this life while I give it to you but be careful because at any moment I can take it away and you don't get to know what's next. And then there's religion and what if it's wrong, or if it's *right* and all the people who don't believe have this horrible fate because they are realists and need proof?"

"Deep breaths, Koti."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry."

"Stop it. Don't be sorry. These are all valid questions. You aren't crazy."

"I *feel* crazy."

"You're human. You have thanatophobia. It wouldn't be a phobia if you were the only one. There are millions of people with the same fear."

I swallowed and nodded.

"And your anxiety makes it worse."

I nodded as thoughts of the rest of our schedule raced around my head. "We have to open the Brewer house in five minutes."

"We'll make it."

She gripped my hand before I pulled it away.

“Stop, honey, stop beating yourself up.”

“God, I’m so sick of this. So *sick* of myself. One step forward, a hundred back. This is bullshit.”

Jasmine’s next order was a plea. “Stop.”

I turned in my seat to face her. “I’m so full of shit. You know I spewed off some crap last night to Ian about being proactive and taking care of other people. I’m such a spaz. Who the hell am I kidding?”

She eyed me for a long minute at a stop light. “That’s who you *are* for me. You take care of me.”

“I have all these ideas of the new and improved Koti Vaughn and then crap like this happens. I feel so out of control. My mother says it’s all in my head.”

“We all feel out of control most days. Especially on days like this, I really hate your mother for making you feel like that. It’s anxiety and we all have it in different degrees. My sister won’t leave her house. Trust me, yours could be a lot worse.”

“Is that how you knew how to deal with me?”

Her shoulders slumped. “I’m not *dealing* with you, I’m being your friend.”

I nodded as a hot tear slipped down my face. “Who’s going to want me like this?”

“A *very* intelligent fucking man.”

This time when she gripped my hand, I squeezed hers back. Jasmine was overly affectionate, at least that was my opinion when we first met. She was quick to hug and offer her sympathy. But over time, I learned to love it about her. In fact, it was what I loved most.

Even as I managed to get through our day, I still felt the dread course through my veins. I was thankful when I pulled up to my house and hit the pillow.

* * *

A knock at my back door had me scrambling from my bed. My chest and throat raw, I raced to the bathroom and cupped water in my mouth before I answered the door still half asleep.

Ian stood on the other side, his easy smile wiped the minute he saw me.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. What’s up?”

He drew his brows. “You forgot?”

“Forgot?”

“About our bonfire?”

Yes.

“No, I’m sorry. I must have drifted off.”

Ian took a step back as I pried my eyes open further to see he was dressed casually in shorts and a T-shirt. It was a far cry from the suit-clad man he arrived as a month before. His thick brown hair had gotten slightly sun-bleached and a few blond hairs had sprouted out of the thick disheveled mess. Gorgeous gray eyes peered at me through thick black lashes. It was always on the tip of my tongue to tell him how beautiful he was.

“Koti?”

“Yeah?”

“Bonfire?”

“Yeah.”

Ian patiently pressed his lips together to hide his grin.

“I mean, yeah. Let me wash my face, okay?”

“Must have been some nap,” he said with a small smile. “I’ll be out here.”

“Okay. Do I need to bring anything?”

He paused again and cupped the back of his head with his palm. “Chocolate, graham crackers, marshmallows?”

“Right.”

He frowned. “We can do this another time.”

Snapping out of my haze, I finally met his watchful gaze. “Nope, I’m on it.”

He turned to make his way to the beach as I admired the fit of his clothes. The man had swagger and it was dizzying. He carried himself as any military man would—with confidence and purpose.

Ian chose the exact moment I zeroed in on his ass to glance back at me. I didn’t bother acknowledging I was caught. Instead, I shut the door and raced to my bedroom.

I spent short minutes showering and scouring my skin in a sugar scrub that smelled like juniper before I raced to my closet and threw on my favorite white sundress and gold flip-flops. With another minute to spare, I brushed some bronzer on my cheeks and glossed my lips. Feeling lighter from the shower, I grabbed a small bag from my pantry and threw my stash into it along with a few other provisions. I grabbed a bottle of wine and two plastic wine glasses. Outside, Ian was carefully crafting our bonfire. I watched him work with it for a few seconds before I ran back inside and turned on my beach mix. The first few notes of Mazzy Star’s “Fade Into You” sounded as I shut my door and crossed the sand. Slightly nervous and still a little drained, I met Ian near the shore where he was setting up a pair of folding chairs next to his newly lit fire.

“This is perfect. I brought wine.”

He perked up and eyed the bottle I pulled from my bag. “Looks familiar.”

“Yeah, well, it’s delicious.” I pulled out a second bottle and we shared a smile.

“That kind of day?” he asked.

I slowly nodded as he took one of the bottles from my hands and I dug through the bag for my corkscrew. “We found a man lying dead in a lawn chair at one of our properties.”

“Oh?” Ian said with interest. “We?”

“Me and my boss, Jasmine.”

I held out an empty glass to Ian who poured generously into one and then the other. We clinked our plastic and took a seat.

Nervous laughter burst out of me. “He was naked.”

His eyes bulged. “Wow.”

“Yeah, nothing kinky. He wasn’t tied to the chair or anything. He probably didn’t expect to die naked on a porch. He was in his eighties.” I felt the lump in my throat threaten and pushed through it. “He was alone. I hate that.”

Ian took a sip of wine. “That’s unfortunate.”

“Yeah,” I said dismissively though my voice shook. “Yeah, it was.”

“Does he have family?” Ian asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. Let’s talk about something else. How is Disco?”

“She was asleep when I left.”

“Oh well, she’ll keep you up all night.”

Ian rolled his eyes. “As she has every night.”

“Got to get her on a *schedule*, professor.”

“She sleeps with me now,” he said affectionately.

Lucky bitch.

With a glass of wine in hand, we sat for several minutes simply enjoying the view, the sun slowly creeping down before us. The islands were becoming giant black rocks with twinkling lights as their canopy as each minute passed. I had

so many questions but decided to start with the one I thought was the safest.

“How long are you staying?”

He paused before he answered. “I’m not sure.”

“How long has it been since you’ve been here?”

“A few years after I got married. The last time I saw you was the last time I was here.”

“You were leaving,” I said, recalling the day he walked out of the Kemp house, keys in hand. I remembered pausing to look at him before I stepped out of my parents’ SUV.

“You recognized me right away,” I said with a grin.

“You had on gold sandals,” he laughed as he studied my feet. “What is it with you and gold sandals?”

I shrugged and sipped my wine to hide my smile and pushed off my sandals to drag a lazy toe through the cooling sand. “Why didn’t you say hi? You just took off.”

“I was in a rush to get home,” he said, taking a sip of his wine.

“And you couldn’t say hello?”

He sank a little into his chair while an expression I couldn’t place flit over his features. “I was late for my flight.”

“Oh.”

“Feels amazing out here,” he said, his eyes flicking to the firelight.

“It does.”

“You’re really here for good?” he asked.

“Yep. No other place I want to be.” Ian picked up our bottle and refreshed our glasses.

“Right now, with this view, I have no argument.” I sank further into my seat as the sun set, a wine buzz, and the music drifted between us. I’d only ever shared my bubble with Jasmine. I felt strangely comfortable doing it with Ian. Because though the man in front of me was a far cry from the boy who chased me through the sand, he wasn’t a stranger.

With a bottle between us and the false courage that went with it, I studied him.

“So, tell me about the Marines. Is the training really as hard as it’s made out to be?”

“Worse,” he muttered. “It didn’t matter, I was up for it and I had already been training for months before I went in. But it wasn’t a breeze by any means. God, that seems like another lifetime ago,” he whispered almost inaudibly.

“So, you got out right away?”

“I served four years and I could have served more, but I had a baby coming, I wanted to be out.” He pulled at his lip and nodded. “I didn’t want to miss anything.”

“How old is she?”

“Just turned fifteen.”

“Wow.”

He stoked the fire as I swallowed a little intimidation.

Ian had been married, divorced, and was raising a daughter. The longest commitment I’d had was with my Mac, who I murdered on my way out of the city.

I chuckled.

“What?”

“I was just thinking of how much further evolved you are than I am. You’ve already had a marriage and are almost done raising a kid.”

He shrugged as he dug his feet into the sand. “What’s the rush?”

“No rush, well actually, at this point...”

Prodding eyes flicked my way.

“I have no plans past today, and those are my plans tomorrow.”

“I like your life. I wish I had it so easy.”

“Trust me, I pay for it. My mother is pissed and my dad is utterly confused with my choice to stay here. I tell them constantly they should have had another child, at least then they could do that fun comparison thing. It’s not my fault my mother was worried about her figure instead of procreating, and they were forced to place their hopes on one kid.”

“Some pressure, huh?” Ian grinned. “I guess since my parents adopted I lucked out.”

“Trust me, in regards to your mother, there is no disappointment in the slightest when it comes to you. Rowan is wonderful and thinks the world of you.” I said with a smile. “We caught up briefly last summer, but I don’t remember much of her when we were kids, but I do remember her banana pops. God, what was in those?”

Ian grinned. “I’ll teach you.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” he said as he filled our glasses again. “If you fancy them that much.”

“I definitely fancy them. I’ve been dreaming of those for years.” I twisted in my seat and tucked my legs underneath me. “She was always smiling, I do remember that.”

“She’s an amazing woman. Both my parents are great people,” he said fondly.

“Call her. She’s worried. Okay?”

“I did.”

“Oh? Good.”

Ian chuckled, and I looked to him in question.

“Are you feeling a little loose then, Koti?”

I realized then I was rocking back and forth to the beat of the music. And I don’t mean casually, I mean shoulders and head into it like the guys from *Night at the Roxbury*.

“Oh, crap.” I pressed an embarrassed hand to my forehead. “I do it at the store too. It’s in my genes.”

“Your father is a musician, right?”

“No, he was a sound engineer, mostly for reunion concerts. He was the guy with the big soundboard in the middle of the crowd. He did a lot of reunion tours for seventies and eighties rock bands.”

“Oh,” he said perking up a bit in his lazy seat. “Anyone I would know?”

“All of them,” I said without missing a beat. “I’m not kidding. *All* of them.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, my favorite was Stevie Nicks. She is incredible.”

“So, your father knew rock stars and your mother was a model. Some childhood you must’ve had.”

“Yeah, their life.” I shrank in my seat. “Not mine.”

He smirked at me. “And you are the castaway.”

“And loving it.”

He raised a brow. “Right,” he said as he lifted his glass, “to the castaways.”

“To the black sheep.”

“Baaaa,” Ian belted out and we both burst into laughter.

“You look like you’re shedding a little wool,” I noted, glancing at his rapidly slimming physique.

“Yeah, and it’s hell,” he said, patting his stomach. “While you’re clearing naked dead men from rentals, I’m hauling my ass down the beach regretting about a thousand fast meals I ate during my divorce.”

“That bad?” I asked.

“That bad,” he muttered tonelessly as he studied the fire.

I picked up the wine this time. “But it didn’t kill you.”

“No, no it didn’t.”

So, what did?

Just on the tip of my tongue lay the intrusive words but there was no way I was breaking up the carefree vibe. I needed a reprieve from my own shit, just as much if not more than Ian did from anything that had to do with his hurts and I wasn't about to stir things up. I'd watched him tax his troubles for weeks. And I considered every smile, every laugh that erupted out of him a small miracle.

"You know, professor, every day I woke up when I got here... I was just numb. I'd been blindsided. It took me weeks to truly see the ocean and feel the sun on my face."

"I'm there." We exchanged a long look before he spoke. "It's a shame it wasn't the flying sand ball that did the trick." He smirked before he took a sip of wine.

"Yeah," I winced. "Not my finest moment. I'm sorry."

"I deserved it." He hesitated. "I have to admit, I was a bit resentful toward you when I arrived."

I gawked at him. "What in the world for?"

He leaned in toward me. "You know."

"No clue. My great taste in music?"

"No, I kind of like your nightly concerts," he said pensively. "You just..."

"Yes?" I drew out the word.

"You were all sunshine and smiles, just so fucking *happy*," he said with slight humor. "I wanted no part of it, still don't. I'm allergic."

"How inconsiderate of me." Still, his words stunned me and inwardly I beamed at his confession.

He gauged my repressed elation. "I don't expect you to apologize for being happy, Koti."

"Ha!" I said remembering my episode earlier that day. "Please don't take this the wrong way but you have no idea what you're saying."

"I'm pretty sure I may sneeze if you smile any wider. I can count your teeth."

“It’s the wine.”

“You’re *happy* here,” he said looking back at our matching houses. “And I want some of that for myself.”

I sat up in my seat, leaned over and gripped his hand. He flinched and turned to face me. “It’s already yours.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “You’re so sure.”

“I am. Trust me, okay?”

He pushed the hair that stuck to my gloss away from my lips. And it took every bit of strength I had not to lean into his touch.

“You sure about everything, Koti?”

Buzzed, I willed myself away from his lingering fingers. “Lord, no. I had an anxiety attack today when I saw a dead man on a sun chair. I’m afraid of my own shadow some days and I blur out the bad parts as quick as they come, but I know this island and it’s magical healing powers. This has nothing to do with me. I don’t have the answer to *anything*. But *here*, this place is where everything wrong can be made right.”

“I’ll just choose to believe you.”

“Hmmm, you’re a skeptic.”

“Realist.”

“Okay, tell me this. Of all the places in the world you could have fled to, why did you come here?”

Ian sat back and harrumphed. “I never thought about it.”

“Because you remember being happy here.”

“I guess so.”

“Me too. I hadn’t been back since I was seventeen. And now onto s’mores.”

Ian chuckled. “Well, that’s random.”

“No, I’m buzzing, and this is s’mores. I take them seriously.” I grabbed the metal skewers from my bag and divided the ingredients between our laps. With practiced precision, I

loaded a skewer with marshmallows and stuck it in the fire. Ian waited with a loaded cracker.

“Here, spread that on one of the crackers.”

“Nutella?”

“Yep, *and* chocolate. If I’m feeling wild, I’ll use *Ferrero Rocher*.”

“You do take this seriously.”

I placed a bubbling marshmallow on his cracker and pushed it toward his mouth.

“Ladies first,” he said pushing it my way.

“That one’s yours.”

I put my own s’more together in seconds and shoveled it into my mouth. I was ravenous because I’d missed lunch and dinner.

“Holy shit,” he said with a mouth full of goodness, “that’s delicious.”

I wagged my brows with my own mouth full and chewed.

His full smile had my heart pounding.

I’d told Jasmine he was handsome.

I was such a liar.

Ian Kemp was beautiful at fourteen. He was gorgeous when he was twenty-five and stood on his parents’ porch waving at me before he left me with a crush. At thirty-eight, he was devastating, sitting next to me watching me inhale my dessert.

“More wine to wash that down?”

“Please,” I said extending my glass.

The breeze kicked up at that moment and neither of us saw the tide had come in until a rogue wave came through and wiped out our fire.

Ian leapt to his feet and swept me out of the chair just before the gasping flames licked my dress.

His hands were all over me as he checked to make sure I was unharmed. I squirmed beneath him as I saw the bag with my dinner began to wash out to sea.

“Damn it!” I dropped my shoulders, helpless as we both watched the tide’s greedy retreat and I managed to reclaim my soaked bag.

Ian gripped the corked wine and brushed it off before he presented it to me with a wry smile.

“Well, grapes are in a food group,” I sighed nodding at his offering. “Come on, I have more of them.”

“You sure love your wine,” he said following me up the stairs into my house.

“My only vice.”

Inside my house, I lit candles and turned down the music. Ian stood unsure at my kitchen counter.

“What?”

“I hope I haven’t given you the wrong impression.” He glanced at the candles and then back at me.

It had been an eternity since I’d entertained a man sexually, it took me a second to catch on. “Yeah, uh, I light candles every day of my life.” I clicked on a lamp. “It’s an anxiety thing.” I turned to face him head-on. “But, should I be pissed you don’t want to make love to me with all this highly romantic ambiance?” I lifted my hands, palms up.

He sheepishly put the bottle on the counter and moved to find glasses.

“That’s right, go hide behind the cabinets. I’m pretty sure they can’t shield that inflated head of yours.”

“You sure do know how to bust a man’s balls,” he muttered lifting two glasses from the cabinet.

“You shouldn’t be so quick to assume I wanted your balls or any other part of your anatomy, professor. Besides,” I said as I stood on the other side of the island while he poured more

wine, “I’m sure your students are all too eager to play teacher’s pet.”

He grinned down at his wine glass. “Never went there. Had a few chances.”

“Ah, that’s right. You chose to break your gentlemen’s virtue on the side of my house.”

His head snapped up and my smile vanished as something passed between us. Three or four heartbeats later, he looked over my shoulder.

“You know you’re living in a time capsule. No TV, no computer, what gives?”

“My sanity. Do you even remember life without cell phones?”

“I do. Barely.”

“Well, I use them only when I have to. Do you have any idea how much time I got back in my day from putting that damn thing down?”

Still smiling he answered, “I can only imagine.”

“So much time. So. Much. Time.”

“I want to be you when I grow up,” he said softly.

“I don’t want to grow up,” I whispered back.

“Suits me.”

An hour later, we sat on my porch love seat after finishing another bottle of wine and listened to my latest mix as Neil Diamond sang “Love on the Rocks.”

Throwing myself into the song I mouthed the words, using my fist as my microphone and he chuckled and shook his head. A few minutes later, we were back to comfortable silence before he spoke up.

“God, this is so true,” Ian whispered.

“What?”

“This song. It’s so true. Every bit of it. You get so high off love and then it all turns to shit.”

I laughed inappropriately at his bluntness and glossy eyes before I saw brief emotion flicker over his face. I sat up and winced. “Sorry.”

He pulled up to sit and clasped his hands between his legs. “Don’t be. I haven’t been upset about my wife in years.” He stood and looked over at me. “This was truly a great time, Koti.”

“It was a unicorn type of night, right?”

“Most definitely.”

He looked over to me with a warm smile. “Goodnight, puffer fish.”

“Goodnight, crocky.”

I stood and leaned over to blow out the first candle.

“Koti.”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

I bit my lip and nodded before he disappeared out the door.

Chapter Fifteen

Koti

HOURS LATER, FLESH BURNING FROM the wine, alcohol-induced insomnia had set in. I rose from bed still in my dress and washed my face in the bathroom. I cranked my AC unit up high and spent a few minutes in front of it, cooling my skin from burning thoughts.

Ian's eyes haunted me, and in being honest with myself, they were what kept me awake. His eyes, his voice, the way I felt at ease with him. He looked at me like I had something he needed. I wondered briefly if he saw the mess inside of me would he look at me that same way. I loved the heat of his stare when he thought I didn't notice, and in my wine-induced haze, I felt sexy when I remembered catching that gaze before it flitted away. I opened my porch door in the pitch-black night and shut it softly instead of letting it snap close.

As I tread across the sand, I glanced at the Kemp house where Ian slept. In the past few days, he unknowingly revealed so many truths about me and accepted them like no man in my life ever had. We'd been at odds a majority of his time on the island and in just a matter of days, he'd unearthed so much. I should have felt uncomfortable, instead all I felt was relief.

Holding my dress to my thighs, I walked through the cool water in a daze, splashing around to cool the inferno that was building inside with thoughts of him. Finally able to feel some relief from my Ian-induced heat wave, I was taken by surprise when an unexpected wave had me scrambling to keep on my feet. Over the breeze, I could have sworn I heard his chuckle and narrowed my eyes in the direction of his house. I couldn't see past his porch stairs, but I had the distinct feeling I was being watched. Before I had a chance to investigate, another rogue wave smashed into me and leveled me flat onto my back.

Choking, I snapped to my feet before I was yanked in by the undertow. Freshly sober and trying my best to clear my throat, I heard Ian's porch door and in seconds he stood in front of me as I made it to shore.

"I'm trying—really, *really* trying hard not to laugh. Are you okay?"

"Yes," I answered, shaking off the pain like a wet dog before I looked at him accusingly. "You were watching me?!"

Shirt-free, tousled and deadly sexy, Ian stood in front of me, his eyes hooded.

Wiping my hands on my chest, I discovered one of my breasts was peeking through the shoulder of my dress. I twisted my body and righted it as Ian's breath hit my face. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

"I was hot!"

"Fucking right you were, until you wiped out," he said playfully as he pushed a heavy wad of hair off my forehead. "It was a good start, shitty finish. If someone put a gun to my head, I'd give it a six out of ten!"

"What is it with the freakish waves today? That came out of nowhere!"

"Just obeying the moon, I suppose," he said with a chuckle as I righted my dress while his eyes lingered on my bare shoulder.

"Or their muse," I whispered inaudibly, but he caught it.

"Muse?"

"I have a thing for Greek mythology," I said defensively. "Nothing wrong with that."

"So that's it? That's why you walk around dressed like Aphrodite?"

I rolled my eyes though I wasn't sure he could see.

"Old habits die hard I suppose," he said before lifting the strap of my dress back to my shoulder. "You are a right mess, *Miss*

Vaughn. I suppose it's good fate we ended up on this island together."

"Agreed. But you must admit, you're the victor of the mess this month."

"Not arguing with that," he said softly.

"Can't sleep?"

"Not tonight."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No, I don't. So please don't ask."

"Okay."

I didn't get a chance to blink before he turned the tables. "You tell me. What brought you here?"

"That's not fair."

"No, it's not." He took a seat on one of the smaller boulders nearby. "But you did offer."

"I did, didn't I?" I stood silent for several moments. It was hard to convey what happened to me, why I was there because it seemed so trivial to some. A few really bad days was the gist of it. A few *really* bad days was the sum of it. For a long time, so much of me believed my issues were trivial because I was told they were. I was *told* my attacks were just temporary setbacks. But they just kept coming. It had always seemed impossible to explain my circumstances to anyone other than my therapist. No one in my life, especially my mother, who heard about my condition gathered that my disorder wasn't anything other than someone trying to seek attention. Even my ex-boyfriend, Trevor, had downplayed my attacks and told me I just needed to relax.

I hated that word. As if it could really be so easily executed by a person with generalized anxiety disorder on demand. As if it was that simplistic. Relax.

That word was a hundred percent of the reason why I left him holding the bag of our new relationship in New York. It took me a few months to start liking Trevor enough to commit to

him and only minutes for me to decide that commitment was a mistake.

“Trevor, I need you.”

“Relax, Koti. Can this wait? I have a meeting in an hour and I need to concentrate. I’ll call you back.”

Everyone close to me in New York, even the best of my friends never could grasp the reality of the hell I went through just to be present for them. Ginger, my friend since grade school, had dismissed my anxiety the way my mother had. Anger surfaced every time I thought about the day I left New York and the last time I’d reached out to her. She’d answered the phone while entertaining a few of our mutual friends and before I could get a word out, I heard her excuse for taking my phone call. “It’s Koti, she’s having one of her *episodes*.” I hadn’t spoken to her since. And I probably never would again. So much of my life I’d left behind, the day I boarded that plane. Everything. I’d left everything. And though it had taken me some time to open up to Jasmine, I didn’t have to force the words out for Ian.

I’d watched him implode when he knew I was his audience. His breakdown, though not the same as mine, had been just as unavoidable. We were both matches on an island of fire and couldn’t be helped. For us, our ashes were all there was left to work with. But I wanted him to know there was something to be said for those ashes.

“My parents started me early. I went to the best schools, got the grades, had the friends, the life everybody wants. I really can’t complain. It all worked out the way it was supposed to, mostly, but when it didn’t that’s when the trouble started.”

Ian sat quietly perched on the rock and waited.

“I had my first panic attack when I was fourteen. I didn’t know what was happening. And it was for the dumbest reason.”

“Which was?”

“I couldn’t get a stain out of my skirt.”

Ian studied me briefly before his eyes drifted back to the sea. A spray of water pooled between us and covered our feet. I

moved to stand in front of him. If he wanted to know my answers, I wanted his attention. He didn't hesitate, his gaze landed squarely on mine. Even in the dimly starlit sky, I could see the storm in his eyes. If my story were only a mild distraction, I would give it to him. The odd part is that I *wanted* to tell him.

He spoke low erasing my doubts. "Tell me. I want to know."

"The first time it happened, I blamed it on PMS, but they just kept coming. My mother was completely intolerant of my 'weakness'. And I felt the expectation *every day*, her expectation. She set the bar so high, it began to choke me. It was both physical and mental, I just couldn't get to her kind of *normal*. But, oh, how I faked it, or tried to. I held it inside even though every day I struggled. I'd watch my friends and their reactions to certain situations and I would do my best to imitate, and then I would find a bathroom or a place to hide and have my freak out. There was no end to it. I just worked through it, all day *every day*, but worked as in an act of *labor*, I exhausted myself. I passed out a lot. I hid a lot, I faked illness, so I could hide and it would buy me just a few blissful days alone and away from the world. When I missed so much school, to the point of my parents being summoned by the headmaster, my father suggested therapy. My mother grudgingly agreed after years of telling me it was all in my head."

Soaked from my fall, I crossed my arms and gripped the tops of my shoulders as I shivered in the breeze, feeling heavy with my confession.

"My psychiatrist used to tell me to fold my fears into fourths. To mentally write down what I was afraid of and memorize and recognize it for what it was and then treat it like a piece of paper and fold it in half and then fourths and so on until it was so small I could put it in my pocket and forget about it."

"Your pockets overflowed," he said slowly as he picked up the hem of my skirt and rubbed it between his fingers.

I nodded. "I tried everything. I counted. I took the meds. I did the breathing exercises. All of it."

“Nothing worked?”

“No, because despite my mother’s permission to let me get help, her expectations outweighed my progress. I couldn’t keep up. I couldn’t be the daughter she expected, *and* anxiety-ridden, so I scrambled, and I hid it the best I could. I pretended the medication helped, for her, for my father and eventually convinced myself that I was capable of handling it.”

I moved to sit next to him but he caged me between his legs.
“Go on.”

“So... then...” Ian kept busy dusting the sand off the bottom of my dress. I felt the low burning fire stir up again with the accidental brush of his fingers along my thigh.

“So, I faked my way through high school and college, feigning progress up until the time I got my job.”

He dropped the dress and wiped the sand on his shorts. “What did you do?”

“Real estate. Biggest firm in New York. I was one of their best brokers.”

“That’s ludicrous. How did you manage that stress?”

“Sometimes I think I purposefully put myself into that mess to self-destruct.”

“Did you?”

“I don’t know. Probably. I was working so hard and to my own detriment, I didn’t stop for anything. My parents were so proud while inside I was screaming. My health got so bad. It was *all. So. Bad.* I started drinking heavily and went from having an attack every few weeks to daily. I spent years conditioning myself to stop listening to my body, and in a matter of days all my fears came to light and I mean *all* of them. Everything was gone, every single damn thing I’d worked for since I was in grade-school up to that point vanished.”

“What happened?”

“I was in the midst of setting up one of the biggest real estate deals in New York. I was showing a property to a slew of

investors. It was a billion-dollar deal. My job was to sell a set of high-rise buildings that were going to be turned into high-value condos, posh, exclusive, that sort of thing. I worked on it for a year. The day before I was set to pitch I was doing a walk-through of one of the buildings and I got attacked by a squatter.” I shivered at the thought of that day. “He pulled a knife on me.”

“Jesus.”

“I barely made it out of there with my life and that’s no exaggeration. One of my associates walked in and that’s what saved me. But that incident opened up a whole different can of worms.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s just say, I’ve done more research on the hereafter than most theologians.”

“Fear of death?”

“Yes.”

Ian grabbed my hand and I let him hold it between his.

“A majority of my anxiety comes from lack of control. I have to have things a certain way, not so much OCD but to the point where I know what will happen in my every day. I’m not a fan of surprises. Routine is crucial to me, I’d never experienced anything like I did that day. And as you can imagine the realization about death, well let’s save that conversation for a rainy day or *never*.”

I was shaking as I remembered the man on the beach chair that morning. Ian read my thoughts.

“Today, you had a horrible attack.” It was a statement. “And you joked about it. That’s what you do with everyone else?”

Tears sprang to my eyes. “Yes.”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize.”

“You couldn’t have. It’s not your place.”

“My job as much as it is yours, right?”

He turned my palm up and slowly brought it to his lips, kissing it softly. A small moan escaped me, and I wasn't sure if he heard it.

"What happened? With the deal?" He rested my hand on his shoulder as if it was the most natural thing. I was itching to run my fingers through his hair. My breaths came out faster, his subtle seduction was wrecking my train of thought.

"What happened?"

"The next day I was expected to move on as if it never happened. Unsympathetic boss, the show must go on, that type of thing. Anyway, I blew it. As soon as I entered the building with the buyers, I had the mother of all attacks. I was fired because I'd potentially blown one of the biggest deals in real estate history, though we all knew the real reason why. I had my first public meltdown on what should have been one of the best days of my career, a huge milestone for me. With that deal put to bed, the possibilities were endless, my commission would have made me wealthy, I would have made a name for myself, yadda, yadda. But in the blink of an eye, it was gone." Tears blurred my vision as he looked up to me and I smiled. "In a way, it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I didn't see it then when I was racing down snow-filled streets with a box full of my shit, having the worst day of my life. I didn't see it hours later when I abandoned my apartment in New York, my friends, my boyfriend, my family and took a cab to the airport. And I didn't see it in the weeks after as I stared at this ocean, or a month after that when Jasmine discovered me cowering in a bathroom of a Mexican restaurant after another attack. It's now, *now* where I truly understand what a blessing it was to give up the charade. Instead of continuing to live a life I couldn't live, I chose me."

"You chose wisely."

"I did. But you don't understand, Ian. I *wanted* that life. I did, *so badly*, for myself, for my parents, but I couldn't be that Koti and I never will be. There's a difference between can't and won't. *Can't* sucks. And I was good at it. I was *really* good at it. I loved my job, *that* part of it was never a lie. I loved my

apartment. I loved New York most of the time. This, living here, wasn't supposed to be my life."

"Koti," he said softly, "no part of you reeks of a mogul. Not that I don't think you were capable, but I just don't see you as that type. And your parents must not know you at all."

"My dad, he knew. He just let my mother do most of the parenting and I know it breaks his heart and my leaving New York broke the rest of it. He feels like he failed me, he thinks I'm punishing him, but I came here to save myself. I don't ever want to go back. I don't resent him. I'm not even that angry with my mother. All of it, everything that happened, even my brush with death was a means to an end. It was my one and only warning to rid myself of a life that was slowly killing me anyway. I obeyed. I yielded to that warning. And so, I'm here living someone else's life, in someone else's house staring at someone else's ocean." I sighed. "Anyway, it's over, I'm here. I've made peace with it and I'm not wasting any more time pretending to be someone I can't be."

Ian's body shook with an ironic laugh. "You really are a good muse."

"Glad you seem to think so." I sighed. "So, there's my five-minute sob story. Surprised?"

"A little," he said as he stared up at me from where he sat. We were close, very close to the point I was hovering above him. Even with that awareness, I didn't move.

"So welcome to the island of misfit-humans. It's pretty cool here. And, by the way, Ian, you aren't broken."

"No," he agreed quickly. "I'm not. I'm just really, *really* fucking mad."

"Whatever's wrong now, will make sense later. I hope you believe that."

"I don't." He stood then, forcing me to take a step back. Water sprayed our feet as we stood there getting lost in the other. Ian was the first to break the connection.

"Goodnight."

“Wait, Ian—”

“Don’t invite me into your life, Koti, or your heart, or your bed because I’m a selfish man right now and I’ll take you up on it without a second thought. If you move a single inch closer to me, I’m going to fuck you. And as much as we both want that, we both don’t need it. I will use you and it’s not because I don’t think you’re beautiful, or intelligent or worth more. It’s because right now, I’m incapable of being anything other than the man that uses you. And because I do think you are worthy of better, I’m not going to let it happen. So, goodnight.”

I stood stunned as he walked away. I expected him to head back to the house, instead, he walked down the beach.

Chapter Sixteen

Ian

I WAS SO CLOSE TO tasting her, but I knew I'd be forced to spit that taste out. And that was the part that made me walk away. I had restraint. I could give myself credit for that, but not much. I'd been so close to taking her into my bed and losing myself, that I practically had to run from her.

An entanglement couldn't happen. As beautiful as she was, as much as I loved the sound of her voice and the sight of her smile, my heart was completely out of the equation. I didn't think it had even made an appearance in the time I'd been on the island. Friendship... I was fine with that. And the wine hadn't helped the fact that I was dangerously attracted to her. My cock grew rock hard at the sight of her frolicking in the water. She was pure temptation, an itch I was growing desperate to scratch and unknowingly receptive to me. Tonight, I made her aware of it and I could see the same need in her eyes. We were in hazardous territory and in no way was there any outcome other than hurting her.

Beautiful, smart, intoxicating, and exhausting. Koti came with a string of issues I had no intention of helping with.

Selfish.

That was the point of my new crusade. I'd played my part for two other women and had no intention of auditioning for the role of lead in anyone else's life.

It was finally time for me to check off a few things on my own list.

Koti was right in the sense that the time was now. I had no obligation to anyone other than Ella. I needed to get back to my daughter, but I still felt the irrational burn every time I thought of her mother. I wasn't ready. And I wasn't sure when I would be but touching Koti would be a mistake.

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I cursed when I saw Tara's name. Thankfully, the wine hadn't worn off yet.

"Yeah."

"Ian?"

"Is my daughter okay?"

"I need to talk to you."

"Again, is Ella all right?"

"She's fine."

"Then we have no reason to be speaking."

"I feel terrible."

"Fuck you."

"Please don't say that to me." She was crying, and I couldn't muster a single ounce of pity.

"What do you want, Tara? Forgiveness would be laughable."

She sniffed, and I had the urge to snap my phone in half. "A chance to explain."

"Explain? Here's an explanation. When I was deployed, you fucked your ex-boyfriend and you had a fight or better yet, let me guess, he dumped you. So instead of telling him he's a father knowing he would be a dead-beat dad, you decided to tell your devoted soldier you were pregnant two days before he was set to re-enlist because he would do the honorable thing. Did I miss anything?"

"It was a mistake, one I regret every day."

"A mistake that you decided to let me pay for. And now that we're clearing the air, maybe it's time I told you something."

"Whatever it is," she said her voice hoarse, "I deserve it."

"I never loved you. Not the way I should have. After a few years, your charms wore off and I realized then I was stuck in a marriage I didn't want. In fact, I grew to despise you as the years passed. You were annoying and needy and didn't have a selfless bone in your body. You weren't the kind of woman I could respect, let alone truly and deeply love. I spent years

suffering at your hand because of my love for a daughter that wasn't mine. But here's the thing, you conniving bitch, you can't change her love for me. You can't twist it or turn it or direct it toward Daniel, no matter what you do. If you want to tell Ella, be my guest; but if you do, you'll get exactly what you deserve, her hatred. And she won't love Daniel more. He has to earn her love and affection the way I had to for the whole of her life. I dare you to try to piss away at the years I've built being a father, but let me repeat myself so we're clear. You will never, *ever* ruin what's between us. Ella and I are what true love is supposed to be. She and I were the best thing to come out of our marriage and it had *nothing* to do with you."

I was being vile, but it was the truth for the most part that she hadn't been kind enough to spare me.

"You never loved me?"

"No."

I ended the call and walked the beach until sunrise.

* * *

"Disco," I called out, rousing from sleep. I stood and stretched stepping into a fresh puddle of her piss. "Get over here, you little rat, it's time for our jog. Disco!"

I heard a muffled squeal of delight and made my way to my porch. Staring out of the screen, I finally spotted my dog and her kidnapper. Koti was running the beach with the tiny beast in tow, her timid bark sounding rapidly as she chased at Koti's heels.

Disco's ears flew back as she tried to keep up with her captor's sporadic movements. She dodged the puppy left and right as the storm winds blew in and thunder sounded in the distance. The only rays of sun left shone through the clouds on our

beach and lit them both up as they pranced around on the sand. Koti's smile and delighted laughter took my breath away.

She had on a pair of barely-there shorts that showcased the insane length of her toned legs. A thin top covered her gorgeous tits and tight stomach. The woman was radiant, so fucking beautiful, that it hurt to look at her. I couldn't imagine the life she explained to me where she wasn't in control. She seemed so at ease in both life, and in her skin, but apparently, that had taken her back-breaking, life-changing effort and I admired her for it.

She was the best possible muse and completely unaware of it which only made her more alluring. She'd always been a gentle soul, even when she was a little girl her strength remained hidden. I couldn't help my chuckle when Disco lost her footing and toppled over, ending up as a rolling ball of fur before popping up again. Koti's smile radiated in the space between us as I tried to catch my breath from the sight of her.

This. This is what happiness looks like.

I remembered her words from the night before. *"It's already yours."*

I was so far from the place she spoke of, but just for a moment, I hoped I would be able to navigate my way there. I knew that hope was dangerous. I wished for the same thing after gaining my freedom from Tara and so far, had been nothing but disappointed. I knew I had to give myself time to adjust from being a family man. I just didn't realize in leaving my wife, I might have lost my entire family.

Koti plucked Disco up from the sand and held her over her head before bringing her in for a kiss. The puppy lapped up every bit of her attention as I let my eyes feast. She was stunning. Silver eyes, full lips, and that killer body all taunted me from where she stood. I couldn't tear my eyes away.

Not only was she temptation. Not acting on the need to touch her last night was agony and she'd been so incredibly responsive.

Beautiful, stubborn, and full of quiet strength. I knew that about her even when we were kids. Back then she'd been nothing more than a distraction to pass the time with while I waited to get back to the States.

My parents had forced my hand the way they had hers to keep us occupied together and out of their hair for the summer. But even then, with our age gap and her temperament and squeaky voice, I liked her. She made the time on the island bearable. She softened me with her vulnerability. I could never forget the first time I saw her cry.

I found her sitting on the side of the house, her body shaking as she sat with her back to the siding, her knees drawn.

"Koti, what's wrong?"

"Go away, Ian. I don't want to play."

"Well, that's good then because I'm a little too old for a play date."

"You know what I mean," she sniffed. Her eyes watering even as her words came out in an angry huff.

"What's wrong?" I asked, taking a seat next to her.

"My mother is an asshole."

"You sure swear a lot for a little girl."

"I'm seven now," she defended. "I'm getting bigger every day."

"Yes, you'll be driving in no time." I laughed as she glared at me.

"Go away, Ian."

"Fine," I stood and brushed the sand off my shorts. I had better things to do, a Sega game on pause. She spoke before I'd taken my first step away from her.

"She's so mean."

"What did she do?"

"She found some Twinkies I snuck into my room and she went crazy."

“I’m sure she didn’t mean whatever she said.”

“That I was going to get fat? And that nobody thought much of a fat person because they looked like they had no self-control and that made them weak.”

“Jesus,” I sighed. “They are just Twinkies.”

“Tell that to her,” she said choking on another sob.

I squat down in front of her. “I just so happen to have some banana pops at my house. So much better than Twinkies, want one?”

“I can’t, I’ll be spanked.”

“You’re getting too big for spankings. And no one needs to know but us.” I held out my hand. “Come on, puffer fish.”

She looked up to me. “Don’t make fun of me for crying.”

“Never.”

“Okay.” She grabbed my hand and I sat her on my parents’ couch with a banana pop.

An hour later, I had to scrape her off the ceiling. As it turned out, she didn’t do well on sugar, probably because she was raised on a lack of it. Giving her those banana pops had been like giving her speed, but her smile had been worth it. The same smile she wore now as she collapsed on her back with the puppy in her arms before moving her gaze toward the sea.

I would have given anything in that moment to be kissing her breathless, before sinking between her legs on that sand. I closed my eyes tight as I imagined those legs wrapped around me while I slid my tongue against hers.

She sat up as if she’d heard my thoughts and glanced toward the house. I was sure she couldn’t see me staring at her through the screen. Resigned that acting on my desire for her was still a terrible idea, I made my way to the bathroom just as my screen door creaked open and seconds later heard the pitter patter of Disco’s feet.

Chapter Seventeen

Koti

I GRIPPED THE PHONE TO my ear while being browbeaten by the person on the other end of the line. “I paid for the rental months ago.”

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Tartar. We’ve arranged for you to stay—”

“I’m not having it, I’ll just cancel the whole trip.”

“I don’t want you to do that,” I pleaded, glancing at Jasmine, helpless. “Please just let me speak to the tenant at the property. I’m sure we can work it out.”

“I want an answer within the hour. I’ve been planning this trip for months!”

“I completely understand. You’ll have it.”

I hung up the phone and let out a breath of frustration. “Do not book the Kemp house anymore until we know how long he’s staying. I have to somehow get him to a hotel.”

“Is he still pissing and moaning?” Jasmine asked, looking up at me from her computer.

“Nope, I mean yes and no. He’s come a long way in only a month. He’s gotten some sun. He’s lost some weight. He loves Disco and he takes long walks with her. He’s no longer catatonic and doesn’t live in darkness, I would say that’s progress.”

Jasmine pulled her ridiculously thick hair through the tie on her wrist. “How observant of you.”

“It’s my job,” I defended. “And he’s a really nice man.”

“Handsome, right?” She snickered.

“Beautiful,” I whispered.

“Beautiful, huh? Ask him to sleep with you.”

I rolled my eyes.

“I mean at your house. You have three spare bedrooms. Let him crash there for a few days so we can keep the commission. It’s not like he’s a total stranger. You knew him when you were kids, right?”

“Yeah, we spent a summer together.” I chewed on the idea for a moment. “I think he’s repaired the kitchen. He’s been sawing nonstop for a week.”

A week he had barely acknowledged me. But I promised him space and in turn, he stopped the sawing when the sun set and even offered me a friendly wave when I got home from work.

“Okay, so ask him.”

“Nah, he can stay at a hotel.”

“Do you have the money for a hotel? Because I sure as hell don’t. We need the commission and you have the space.”

I stood and went to grab some coffee. “He’s the one imposing, *he* should pay.”

“Koti.”

I sighed. “Fine I’ll ask him, but I doubt he’ll go for it.”

“You need sex.”

“How many times do I have to explain this to you. Sex is mostly *painful* for me. My body doesn’t like it.” I pulled some Chapstick from my pint-sized purse and coated my lips before I lathered on a small layer of sunblock.

“Every time?”

“Almost. I suffer for days and hardly ever orgasm.”

“God, that’s horrible,” Jasmine said, terrified at the thought.

“It’s my life. I’ve been dealing with it since I lost my virginity at a Cheap Trick reunion concert.”

“That’s even more horrible.”

“It doesn’t bother me,” I said before I gripped her around the neck and gave her a hug from behind her chair. “You are loved, my little filifuckingpino.”

“You too,” she said staring up at me. “I want so much more for you, Koti.”

“And I’m happy where I’m at,” I promised. Ian’s comment last night by the bonfire made me smile.

“What?” she asked, trying to read my expression.

“He said I was happy.”

“Who?”

“Ian.”

“Well, if Ian says so,” she smirked. “Bow chica wow wow.”

“Shut up.”

“You like him, it’s okay to tell me.”

“There’s nothing to tell. Look, he’s newly divorced and already had a revenge screw outside of my house. He’s emotionally incapable and we are on two different planets. There’s no potential.”

Jasmine shrugged. “Okay, so he’s not a commitment candidate.”

“Not in the slightest. But, God, Jasmine, he’s so hard not to look at. I’m seriously having a terrible time not staring. I forgot how pretty men can be.”

“Yes, yes they are, and then they open their mouths and it’s like playing the lottery.”

“He’s still got a bit of a South African accent, it’s so sexy.”

“I’ll come over tonight and check him out,” she said, inviting herself before she tested the waters by glancing my way.

I was already shaking my head. “No, you won’t because I’m going to be nervous enough asking him to sleep with me... I mean to sleep there. At my house.”

She shrugged. “So, I’ll be a buffer.”

“Not tonight, okay? I don’t need you coming over and making him feel weird.”

She stood in her hot pink sundress and thin scarf and puckered her full lips before she crossed her eyes. “I would do no such thing.”

“Sorry.”

“Fine, I have a potential date anyway.”

“With who?”

“I’ll let you know if it happens. But all I have to say is that when it comes to this one, my body is ready.”

“All you do is talk about sex. I’m over it. Unless you can grace this office with something educational or a topic that doesn’t consist of it, I’m closing my ears to you. No more penis talk.” I reached in my desk and pulled out my earbuds.

Jasmine stood with her mouth gaping as I began typing. Twenty seconds later, I got a company email from my pest of a boss that was marked urgent. It was a YouTube video of talking cats.

Chapter Eighteen

Koti

THE CRANBERRIES' "ZOMBIE" BLASTED THROUGH my speakers down the narrow road home. Ian's rental, a large cab Ford, sat in the driveway. I ignored the small thrill that raced through me at the thought of having him at my house for a week. We'd barely spoken that morning, but I could feel his eyes on me while he stretched before he took off for his run. I turned off my Jeep and made my way straight to his back door.

I knocked twice, and to my surprise, he met me with a faint smile before opening the door and inviting me in. Paint was smudged on his fingertips and across his bare chest and the floor was covered in plastic. The paint fumes filled my nose.

"Looks like progress in here. Good for you."

"Yeah, thanks for telling my mother I was remodeling. She's making a special trip soon just to see it."

"My pleasure. And you should thank me, I was covering for your ass."

He resumed his work to hide his smile. "Thanks. So what's up?"

"Sorry to bother you, but..." Disco yapped from her box. I kept my eyes averted from a shirtless Ian and peeked over to see her bouncing off the sides for my attention. "Hey, baby. Want a break from the smell?" I picked her up and hugged her tiny body to me before I scanned his progress further. "It really looks great in here."

Ian had replaced the cabinet doors with glass paned frames and was distressing the freshly painted wood with metal wool. "Rowan is going to love it."

"Thanks," he said as he resumed rubbing wool down the side of one of the doors.

“You have a talent for this.”

“I went through a few houses with my ex-wife.”

“Well, she definitely brought out the artist in you.”

Ian said nothing, so I decided to keep those comments to myself. “You were saying?” Briefly, I admired his budding physique as he lifted another door to fasten it in. He’d spent most of his hours since he’d arrived at the island working out and it showed. I had to catch myself to keep from being embarrassed when he looked back at me expectantly.

“Okay, so we need to talk.” He stopped the working of his hands and turned to face me. His shorts hung at his waist and were dangerously close to falling down. He was rapidly losing weight and his newly bronzed skin made his gray eyes pop. I cleared my throat.

“I need this house. I’ve diverted four couples and sent them elsewhere since you’ve been here, but I have this woman—she’s threatening us—and I kind of told her I would make sure her reservation was...”

He nodded in understanding. “I need to leave.”

“Well,” I pointed to my house as if he didn’t know where it was. “It’s temporary. But you can sleep with me if you don’t want to get a hotel.”

Ian raised a brow, his lips twisted into a small smile.

“I mean, you can sleep in one of my spare bedrooms.”

Jesus, why was I so nervous? I shook it off.

“Will you be done with this today?”

“I should be.”

“Okay, great.”

He crossed his arms and studied me.

Get those balls out, Koti!

“Look, I’m sorry. Stay at a hotel or take one of my rooms. Either way, I need you out of here by ten in the morning.

Okay? This isn't a request. I have a business to run and I can't handle the loss of commission."

Ian bit his lip.

"Well?" I prompted, waiting for a response, the shake in my voice making my demand seem ridiculous.

"Oh, I think you've made yourself quite clear, Ms. Vaughn."

Deflating I took a step forward. "I don't want to fight."

"I'm not going to fight. I'll take your room."

"Good, because you're exhausting."

His eyes narrowed. "Thanks."

"Just stating the facts. Okay, so here's a key to my place." I pulled it from my pocket and set it on the counter. "Feel free to come and go as you please but if you take wine, make sure to replace it." The second he took a step forward to retrieve the key, his shorts went.

Our eyes locked right before I let mine drift down.

Commando.

I was staring at Ian's cock. Ian was staring at his own cock. Disco's eyes were on Ian's cock and I quickly covered them to save her virtue. It took every bit of strength I had to look away but not before I took a mental picture. Ian cursed as he pulled up his pants and apologized.

I held up my hand surprising myself with a steady voice. "It's fine, it's nothing I haven't seen before." That was a lie, his dick was impressive and beautiful. I regrouped and reclaimed my tongue.

"But you should probably wear shorts that fit and underwear while you stay with me."

"Agreed," he picked up his wool and turned his back to me. "See you tomorrow then."

* * *

The next morning, I heard Disco squeak at the foot of my bed and pushed off my covers just as Ian raced in after her. “Sorry, I tried to grab her before she got... *fuck me*—” his eyes lingered on my chest and I looked down and realized I wasn’t wearing anything but underwear and my cami. During the night it must have shifted above my *miss* sized tits. I laughed and pulled down my shirt to cover myself. “Now we’re even,” I yelled at Ian’s retreating back.

“Hardly. My cock is pointing north.”

“Still a Marine with that filthy mouth, huh?”

“I’ll keep it clean, Ms. Vaughn.”

I picked up a vying Disco from the foot of my bed. “Don’t worry about it, Ian. Thousands of people have seen these tits, Mardi Gras, not to mention hundreds of concerts. Alcohol has a way of temporarily curing anxiety. A few times a year, I could be quite the party girl.”

That was before you became a bohemian recluse.

I left that part out.

Ian’s voice echoed from the guest bathroom. “How worldly of you.”

“I’d like to think so.” Disco barked. “And Disco agrees.”

“Better take a Benadryl,” he said, peeking into my room to make sure I was decent before he again called me out on the fact that I was not allergic to the puppy as I tossed her around on my bed. “You needed her,” I said affectionately and unapologetically as I kissed her fluffy face. “And I wanted you to have her.”

Ian opened the door fully, sat on the edge of my bed and watched us play. After a few minutes, his voice cut through

my laughter. “You grew up beautiful, Koti Vaughn.”

Our eyes met before I gave him a lopsided grin. “And you grew up so handsome, Ian Kemp.”

His smile was a sledgehammer to my chest. “So, I’ve moved my stuff into the guest bedroom. I set up my board in the living room. Hope that’s okay.”

“Of course,” I said, lunging after Disco as she tried to wander off the bed.

“Damnit, woman! Could you stop that?” He asked, pushing me back to sit upright and pulling my comforter firmly in place to cover me. “I know we’re friends, but I’m still a man.”

“Really?” I said with a chuckle before eyeing his crotch with a smirk. I was shamelessly flirting and couldn’t have cared less. “Hadn’t noticed. Besides didn’t you hammer all that pent-up sexual frustration out with barstool number five?”

Ian grinned. “No, I failed at execution and accidentally passed out while I was taking a piss. I woke up with a couch pillow under my head on the bathroom floor. She did leave me a note to call her.”

“You lied?”

“Maybe I liked seeing you jealous.”

“I wasn’t jealous and how very immature of you.”

“I never said I was a saint, Koti.”

My name sounded like heaven rolling off his tongue. His eyes grew dark as I gripped Disco tightly to me. “Why would it make you happy if I *was* jealous?”

Ian’s eyes roamed my neck and chest before they drifted back to mine. “Are you hungry for breakfast?”

“Are you going to answer my question?”

“No,” he said, standing abruptly. “House rules, no nudity.”

“Hey, I’m not the one with the hat-trick trousers,” I said in an attempt to mock his accent.

“That was actually pretty decent.”

“I’m trying to get better.” We shared a smile before I forced myself to look away. It had been a long time since I’d had any testosterone in my bedroom. I was seconds away from stripping down and begging him to use me. Instead, I spoke to Disco.

“Hey baby, want some bacon?”

“Not us, we eat turkey.” Ian plucked Disco from my hold and I frowned. “She loves you more, doesn’t she?”

“She better, I’m the one who’s doing all the training. Plus, she loves our runs, we’re going ten miles today.”

“You can’t walk her that hard!” I said getting out of bed and shoving my pajama pants on.

Ian looked away as I pulled a thin T-shirt over my head.

“I don’t,” he called over his shoulder as I followed him down the hall.

“What?”

He turned to me and cradled Disco in his forearm.

“You run with her like that?”

He nodded.

“Ha! I bet you get a ton of attention.”

“She’s my ace in the hole. I have an orange juice waiting every morning at mile five.”

I looked at him skeptically. “Making rounds all over the island?”

He gave me a devilish grin. “But I’ll be coming home to you tonight.”

My heart skipped an odd beat before he disappeared out the door.

* * *

I spent my day getting three houses ready and the last of it walking Mrs. Tartar through the Kemps' spotless beach house. Ian's new cabinetwork opened the place up, made it seem light and a bit more... airy. It was truly beautiful.

"So you live next door?"

"Yes, but I would prefer you contact me by the number on the counter."

Mrs. Tartar twisted her lips in distaste before she rudely dismissed me. I wasn't looking forward to a week of her scrutiny. She had a definite bug up her ass. I was counting on my island to rid her of it.

Walking back to my house, I saw my porch candles were lit and my playlist was already on. I opened the door to see Ian in the kitchen. He was wearing a navy-blue T-shirt and loose sports shorts. His white smile greeted me. "Hey, didn't want to disturb your routine."

"That's very thoughtful of you, thanks."

"I wanted to cook tonight if that's okay?"

"Of course, smells good." I pulled a vase from the cabinet next to him and filled it with water before I slid Banion's latest creation in.

"You brought me flowers?" he asked teasingly.

"My friend owns a flower shop. I use him to make welcome bouquets for the rentals. Beautiful, aren't they?"

"They are," he said as he chopped up some figs.

"What ya' cooking?"

"Salad and very bland chicken."

“I’ll take it,” I said, snatching a fig from the cutting board and popping it into my mouth. I picked up a mason jar that sat next to a pile of vegetables. “What’s this?”

“Pomegranate dressing.”

“Wow,” I said before I shook it up and brought a fingerful to my mouth. “Delicious.”

“Yeah, my mother insisted she teach me a few things about cooking when I was growing up.”

“That’s awesome. I had to learn my cooking skills from Paula Dean and with your diet, I’ll be hard-pressed to find a recipe suitable for you.”

“No worries. I’m easy. I also bought some bananas,” he said his deep voice pure temptation. “I’m making you pops for dessert. I figured I’d reward you for being such a good muse.”

“Good muse?” I took a seat on the stool opposite of him. “How so?”

“You always have music going, it’s always lit up over here. I think I might enjoy your bubble while I’m here.”

“They *do* sell candles and docking stations everywhere. You could create a bubble of your very own.”

He grinned down at his cubed figs. “I said *your* bubble. Should I get crystals too? Then my man card should definitely get revoked.”

“Nothing wrong with wanting a little calm in your life.”

“I’ve been off the tit for some time, Koti. I can handle it.”

I took immediate offense. “Yeah cause *most* people can, right? They don’t need a silly routine when they get home to cope with everyday stresses.” I stood abruptly. “I need to go shower.”

“Shit,” regret was clear in his features as I glared at him over the counter. “I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry.”

“Rule number one of friendship, don’t ever use something against someone that they tell you in confidence, especially a weakness.”

“You aren’t weak at all.”

“Well, then you have a fucked-up way of delivering a compliment. Backasswards way, *friend*.”

Stomping down the hall, I heard Ian whisper under his breath, “Swallow your tongue, asshole.”

I kicked off my shoes in my bedroom and glared into my closet. My shower lasted fifteen minutes longer than usual, and I knew I was wasting water. I brushed my hair and threw on an old T-shirt sundress. When I rejoined Ian in the kitchen, another apology, in the form of a glass of wine was waiting for me.

Ian’s eyes flit over my face before he snatched a towel off his shoulder. “It was insensitive.”

“It’s fine. I’m used to it.”

He picked up the glass and held it out to me. “Well don’t get used to it from me, all right?”

I nodded, taking his offered wine, while he grabbed the chicken out of the oven.

“This is really nice of you.”

“Least I could do, since you’re putting me up.”

Ian plated up our dinner and took the cushioned seat next to me on the island. We sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes as we ate.

“This is delicious.”

“It’s the dish my mother taught me to make for my dates,” he confessed.

“And here I was thinking you had skills,” I said with the nudge of my elbow. “Still, it’s impressive.”

“My mother was always thinking of things like that. She made me a cookbook for quick reference in case there was a second date.”

“Wow.”

“She trained me well. She said she always wanted her children considerate more than any other characteristic.”

“I think I love your mother,” I said with a mouthful. “Rowan is good people.”

“So tomorrow, will I get a rain check on the dinner I missed?”

“Oh, I get it. This is a favor thing?” I turned to face him and felt the awareness of him shoot through every cell, every pore. He was temptation, his smell, his smile, his beautiful voice.

“In a way. But I was wondering what that dinner might have tasted like.”

“Well,” I said as I took the last bite of chicken off my fork. “I’m not a modest cook with truly mad skills. The fish will be dry, but the wine will be delicious.”

We clinked glasses. “I look forward to it.”

“I’ve got the dishes,” I said grabbing his plate.

“I’ll let you.” He grabbed Disco and nodded his head toward the door. “Going for a walk.”

I nodded as my hands shook in the dishwater.

This is not good, Koti.

* * *

Half an hour later, I was browsing through a painter’s magazine of canvas templates and accompanying paints while Ian set up his computer.

“Shit, the Wi-Fi here is barely catching with next door.”

“Waiting on a call from your daughter?”

“Yeah. I may have to go elsewhere.”

The glowing blue light flashed in front of him and I saw his eyes light in recognition. He waved at the screen.

Uncomfortable with the intrusion, I gestured toward my bedroom. "I'll just go."

"You don't have to."

He signed fluidly at the screen. "Stay."

"Okay." I sat back down in my seat and he began talking with his hands. I watched fascinated.

"I'm telling Ella," he said as he flicked two fingers out and closed them at his heart, "that I'm staying at my neighbor's as the paint dries at her grandmother's house." He twisted the computer and I saw his daughter wave at me excitedly. I straightened in my seat and waved back.

Ella waved a hand over her face and closed her fist before she began frantically signing.

"She wants to know if you're my new girlfriend."

I shook my head and wound my index finger next to my ear and pointed at her father to let her know I thought he was crazy. She laughed on screen. Ella was a beautiful little girl with long blonde hair and deep-water eyes. I assumed she favored her mother. And then she spoke. "Dad, what have you done to her?" Her English was clear but tainted in the way where she sounded as if she spoke through her nose.

He mocked offense and then spoke. "Nothing. I've done nothing to her."

"Does she read lips?" I asked.

He looked between us as Ella spoke up. "Yes, Koti, I read lips."

I moved in so she could get a better look at them.

"He's lying to you. He's an awful neighbor. I only let him come here because of this." I lifted Disco up and heard her loud squeal. Though her voice wasn't completely clear and she had a slightly off point tongue, she had mastered her speech. "Oh wow. Please, Daddy, tell me that puppy is for me!"

"She belongs to Koti and you'll meet her when you come," he signed as he spoke.

“What’s her name?” Ella asked animatedly.

“Disco,” Ian and I both answered before sharing a smile.

“I love it,” Ella said, beaming.

“I’m going to give you some privacy. It was nice meeting you.” I told Ella directly.

“Nice to meet you,” she waved. I was close to leaving the room when she spoke up again.

“Dad, she’s *so* pretty. Is she why you haven’t come home?”

I looked over my shoulder to see him jerk his head to cut her off. I made my way to my bedroom and plucked a book from my shelf. I was curious as to why his daughter would be encouraging him to date. And after meeting her, I was curious about far more than that. Ignoring the constant clench in my stomach and the new warmth that spread through me, I successfully immersed myself into the pages.

An hour or so later, there was a soft knock on my bedroom door.

“You decent?”

I was tangled in my body pillow. “Yep.”

“Sorry, I don’t want to make you feel like you have to retreat in your own house.”

“This isn’t my house,” I said with a wink. His gaze moved from the book I was holding to the bare leg that gripped the pillow.

“Trust me, I’m good here.”

“What are you reading?”

“*Outlander*.”

“Ah,” he said with a smile. “My daughter loves those books.”

“They’re amazing,” I said, sitting up.

“Well, I just wanted to say goodnight.”

“Thanks for dinner.”

“No problem.”

“There’s some extra pillows in your closet.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Goodnight.”

Chapter Nineteen

Koti

THE NEXT DAY AFTER WORK, Ian wasn't home when I got there so I did the twenty-minute prep for dinner. Foil, almonds, salt, butter. Simple and delicious. I went to my bathroom and disrobed before I realized I was out of shampoo. Knowing my hair would be a rat's nest if I used soap, I wrapped a towel around myself and crept down the hall to Ian's room and knocked out of consideration, which I was sure he would appreciate before I walked into the bathroom to grab the extra bottle. On my way back through the bedroom, I saw an open letter on his bed. Against my better judgment, I peeked. It had Ian's signature on the bottom. I glanced around briefly before I picked it up.

Tara,

I used to be the guy that gave the other guys hell. You know the guys who whined about home. I was the ballbuster, so to speak, and the perfect wingman, but hell on the family man. I was the one who swore the metal in his hands and his country were all that mattered.

In the mess hall tonight—if you want to call a tent in the middle of hell a hall—I finally figured out the issue with those sad bastards. They weren't sure if they would get to see the faces of the woman they decided on.

I get that agony. I'm living it now because I decided on you.

Sometimes I wish I hadn't looked your way when you smiled at me. Sometimes I think it would be better if I were out here with a clear heart and nothing to lose. But, the sweet agony, the burn of missing you, needing you, it feels phenomenal. And I get it. And I'm swimming in it because I know without a doubt, what we have is as real as what the sad bastard next to me has.

I miss your laugh, your face, the feel of your skin, the little moan you give when our lips connect. I miss your shitty jokes and giving you the answers to your mid-term prep questions. I miss the feel of your breasts on my back and waking up to fight you for bedsheets.

There are so many things that a soldier looks forward to, a hot shower, a decent meal, a good night's sleep, Chapstick, and a day without a bullet whizzing past their head. But even in a third-world country, where these things really matter, when a man has the comfort of a woman's eyes to concentrate on, the soft feel of her lips and fingers, it's like a lightning strike of ache that can't be ignored. I took you for granted even before I left your side. I didn't stare long enough, I didn't kiss you long enough, I didn't tell you how much that smile mattered. Because it mattered. It's why I chose you.

For the first time in my life, I'm that sad bastard.

It fucking hurts, but in the way that lets me know coming home will be the end of it.

Please send Chapstick.

I love you.

Ian

"Koti?" Ian's voice sounded as he burst through the door with a barking Disco. I set the letter down exactly as I found it and was at the frame of the door as he walked past it. He stopped abruptly and backed up slowly. His eyes landed on mine before they drifted to the letter on the bed behind me.

I lifted the shampoo bottle. "I was out, so I grabbed some from your bathroom."

Ian searched my eyes which I was sure were filled with guilt and his jaw ticked to confirm as much. He took a step back and let me through and Disco took the liberty of barking at my feet, doing her master's bidding. In the safety of my bedroom, I shut the door, my heart pounding and raced to my bathroom and shut the door leaving two closed between us and still I didn't feel safe. I paced while the hot water ran, in a fit of self-

loathing for invading his privacy, before I stepped in and let my skin burn beneath the hot stream.

Something inside me mourned the loss of his relationship while the other part of me longed for the same sentiment. Even more disturbing was that I would want that sentiment from *him*. I was jealous of his ex-wife and had absolutely no reason to be. And since I'd read the letter, I was more curious than ever about the reason behind his sudden presence in St. Thomas. With the stunt I'd just pulled, I was positive I'd distanced myself further from any answers.

It was wrong, so wrong. And he didn't deserve my prying eyes. He said he hadn't felt anything about his wife for years, but if that were true, why would he have an open love letter on his bed?

I shampooed my hair and let the water run as I tried to build up the confidence to leave my bedroom. If he was angry, he had every right to be.

I lathered on some tangerine lotion and threw on shorts and a cami. I half expected him not to be there when I emerged from the bedroom and walked down the hall. He was standing in the kitchen staring at the foil on the counter.

"Did you read it?"

Straight to the point. I should have been prepared for it, but I wasn't. I swallowed hard and took a step closer. "I'm so sorry. I had no right, I was really just getting the shampoo. Jesus, I'm sorry."

Gray eyes scoured me. "What did you think?"

"Think?"

I was equally unprepared for that question. "I think..." I frowned as he turned and pressed the broil button on the oven. I spoke up. "I can do that."

"Answer the question."

I exhaled unsure if I was ready for the wrath that would follow any answer I gave. "I think you were in love."

“I was a twenty-two-year-old soldier who could have died any minute. Do you think that was real love?”

I bit my lip and took a step forward. “I don’t know. But the man who wrote that seemed sure of it with his words.”

“Words mean nothing.” Ian whistled, and Disco came running with one of my flip-flops in her mouth. Ian released it and set it on the counter.

“You don’t really believe that. You can’t possibly mean that.”

His face was impassive. “I’m leaving in the morning. She’ll need to stay with you.”

“Ian—”

“Enjoy your dinner.”

* * *

Four hours later, the fish sat untouched in the pan on my stove. From my hammock on the porch, I watched the dark waves roll in and leave their foam. I searched the beach every few minutes for any sign of him. His things were still in my house and though it was wrong, I was dying to see if there were any more letters in his room. But I couldn’t concentrate on anything but the fact he was leaving and when he did, we would be on bad terms, or no terms. It was much later when I heard the creak of the porch steps and broke from my sleep. I stood as he paused on the bottom step.

“Please don’t leave angry with me.”

He exhaled and looked up at me, I could see him fight the scold on the tip of his tongue before he swallowed it.

“I’m truly sorry. I regret it. I crossed the line and violated the only thing you asked for.” I stood shivering in the air, but it was the emotion that was winning. “Please don’t leave angry with me.”

“Koti, what do you want from me?”

I want you to be happy. I want you not to hate me.

“I want you to say when you come back someday we will still be friends.”

He pressed his lips together and took another step up the porch gripping the railing. “Friday, okay?”

“What?”

“I’m going to see my daughter, I didn’t say I was leaving for good.”

“Oh,” I felt my cheeks flame.

I pushed my unruly hair away from my lips and looked at the blanket I left on the hammock before his eyes implored mine.

“You were out here the whole time?”

“No.” *Yes.*

Some sort of understanding crossed his features as his eyes slowly raked over me, leaving nothing untouched. A breath passed between us and turned into two and then three until the static between us became too much to handle. I opened my mouth to speak but found myself weak with want. Ian beat me to the punch.

“I’m sorry.”

I took a step back as he caged me on my porch. “For what?”

“For what I’m about to do to you.”

In an instant his lips were covering mine, my small moan of surprise was cut short by his tongue. All too easily, I wrapped around him as he opened the door behind us carrying me in. I moaned as his lips found my neck and I clawed at his shoulders through his T-shirt.

“Are you on birth control?” His voice was pure sex.

“Yes,” I hissed as his fingers dug into my waist when he slammed me into the wall of my hallway and ground his thick cock into my center.

“Damn,” I whispered as his lips and tongue covered every inch of available skin. He ripped at the strap of my cami as if it was a nuisance to get to my nipple and once it was free, he covered it with his lips and tongue. I was dripping wet and could already feel the accelerating pulse between my thighs.

“I’ve been dreaming of fucking you for a month,” he murmured into my neck. “If you don’t want this, say it now.”

“Don’t you dare stop,” I rasped out before his lips again claimed mine. Our tongues dueled, ravenous and coaxing until he let my legs down and pinned me to the wall by my wrists, his breaths coming out heavy as he pressed his forehead to mine in an attempt at restraint. I wasn’t having it.

“Ian?” I whispered as I fought against his hold pushing out my middle to rub against the straining cock in his pants. “Don’t stop. Use me. I don’t give a damn. I can handle it. I want this and I’m damn sure going to use you right back.”

His eyes opened then, full of fire and heat and I sucked in a breath. It was as if something had awakened inside him and my fear of it matched my elation. He lifted me easily and pulled me into my bedroom ripping at my shorts until I was free of them. He sat on the edge of my bed and dragged me toward him. Palming my breasts, he watched my reaction to his every touch. My chest rose and fell with heavy breaths. *Everything* felt heavy and I succumbed under his potent gaze. What lay beneath was hellfire and I couldn’t wait to tango with his demons.

Rattling with arousal, I gripped his hair in my fingers as he showered my navel with his lips and tongue. “I want you so much,” I confessed as he groaned when his fingers dipped into my panties finding me soaked.

“This is for me, Koti, make no mistake.”

“Then take it.”

He explored until I was drunk on him, and then pulled his soaked fingers into his mouth, tasting me and by his reaction to my taste, I could only conclude the man was starving. I’d never been so turned on in my life.

“Ian,” I implored in an urgent whisper. Typically, my fear of pain overshadowed my arousal but, in that moment, consequence be damned. “Ian, please, I don’t get turned on like this often, so—”

Before I could get another word out, I was jerked off my feet and onto the mattress before he spread me wide. Ian’s mouth covered my entire sex. Darting his tongue between my lips, he worked me over my panties and then moved the cotton out of the way and wrecked me with his fingers and tongue. Arching my back, I gasped out my surprise and he flattened me back to the bed with his palm. He devoured, his thick digits moving in and out, stretching and coaxing while filthy words poured out of him between savage licks. The whole of my body coiled as he lifted my lower half so that my knees rested on his shoulders while he drove his tongue in deep. Inside I began to come apart as he lapped me up and groaned in reward when I detonated. I’d never had an orgasm that fast. Still shaking from my release, his cock was at my entrance before I had a second to recover and then I was full, so incredibly full. I screamed at the severity of the feel of him. He stretched me wide and I moaned with every stroke. Dark, cloud-filled eyes watched my every reaction as he fucked me like it was his last time. I shrieked as he drove in deep and he rewarded me by shoving his fingers into my mouth.

“Suck,” he commanded. I did what I was told, while he drove in, again and again, his fingers muting me, his body going rigid under my touch. Picking up speed, he pumped into me at a maddening pace as I held on for dear life. Biting down on his fingers, I bucked, meeting his thrusts, before I started to unravel. “Look at me,” he demanded as I leaned up and kissed his chest.

He wrapped my hair in his fist and twisted my head, demanding my eyes. Mouth parted, I spread my legs wider knowing the hell I’d pay for it the next morning. He sank in deeper, his body shaking, while he slammed into me one last time and exploded, his mouth capturing mine in a devastating kiss that lasted long after he’d spilled his last drop. Pulling away we stared at each other, wordless, eyes searching before he collapsed on me, his weight welcome as I wrapped around

him without a second thought. We spent the next minutes quietly exploring with lazy fingertips before we drifted to sleep.

When I woke up, he was gone.

Chapter Twenty

Koti

FRIDAY, I RUSHED THROUGH MY workday and raced through the store picking up ingredients for a new recipe I thought Ian might like, only to find the driveway empty when I arrived home. Discouraged, I unloaded my groceries in the fridge. In my hammock surrounded by my candles and the whisper of music, I watched the cabbie struggle with Mrs. Tartar's luggage. When she was set to leave, she spotted me, walked over and thanked me. She looked refreshed and had a slight tan brewing. Though I didn't feel like smiling, I returned hers. My island had done wonders for her. She would be returning to wherever she came from with a clear head, if only for a little while. In bed that night, I heard the door open and fought the urge to greet Ian, even when he lightly knocked on my bedroom door. I ignored it because of the happiness I felt. I was traveling down a rocky road with him and I didn't have a single leg to stand on. He didn't come back for *me*. He came back for his reprieve. And I needed to face facts. If I hadn't spent so much time watching him, thinking about him, I wouldn't have found myself in that situation. Taking the amazing sex out of the equation was a given. He told me that night was just for him. Instead of hanging on to the hope it could lead to more between us, I decided to believe him. Because the truth was, at that point, I wanted more, which was ridiculous. Despite his progress, the man was still a minefield. One wrong step and I knew I would never find all my pieces. He didn't need to feel guilty or sorry about what happened between us. I told him I could handle it and I would... just as soon as I could stop fantasizing about him.

Perspective was everything. So I was a little fascinated with him, slightly infatuated and highly attracted, big deal. I felt that way about my first crush. Ian was in a no-fly zone. I wasn't desperate, but the feelings that brewed beneath the small friendship we'd formed already spoke volumes. And I

already had far too many thoughts of him. More than ever, I needed him to stay on his side of the fence, because that's where he wanted to be. That's where he needed to be. I was sure he regretted that night and I didn't want to see it on his face. So, I would ignore the lingering soreness that I still felt from the stretch of him. I would ignore the beautiful feeling of being excited for the first time in years about a man. I would ignore the threatening feelings that were trying to make themselves known. I would ignore it all.

I could not have Ian Kemp, it didn't matter if I wanted to love him or not.

* * *

The next morning, I was up at the crack of dawn. I slipped out of the house only to be met by Ian on the beach. Soaked with sweat, he was doing sit-ups as Disco ran between his legs. He saw me right away and flashed me a panty-soaking smile, "Morning."

His spare tire was now a flat and his muscular arms glistened next to the sparkling water. He shined, God how he shined.

"Hey. Did you have a good trip?" I was already taking small steps toward my Jeep.

With furrowed brows, he watched me fail at a sneaky retreat. "Yeah, it was really good. Off to work so early?" He glanced at his sports watch. "It's six thirty."

"Yeah, busy day. So, you had a good trip, that's good then. You can have your house back, she left last night. I'll, uh, come back and make sure you get a schedule of the days we need the house. You are free to take the room when it's booked, of course."

"Okay."

“Have a good day.” Disco was at my feet and even when Ian whistled for her, she refused to come.

“Go on, you little shit. I’m trying to make a clean getaway here.” The dunce refused to cooperate and instead growled at the tassels hanging off my sandals. Hesitantly, I picked her up as Ian met me halfway. “I’ll get her a leash,” I said without looking at him because my resolve had already slipped tenfold by the mere sight of him.

“Probably a good idea.” He plucked the puppy out of my arms. “Unless you want to finally take ownership of your dog.”

“No, no. She’s all yours.”

I didn’t bother to look for his reaction as I all but ran to my Jeep. Turning the ignition, I screamed out a little when The Beastie Boys blasted through my speakers. I turned it down and was out of breath as Ian approached, his forearms on my door. I buckled my seat belt. He looked me over before he spoke.

“Well I was hoping things wouldn’t be awkward after the night we had, but apparently that’s going to be impossible.”

I snorted. “Don’t get a big head, Ian. It was incredible, don’t get me wrong but I’m having an off morning.”

You are a total basket case.

“Okay, so if this isn’t about the other night, then what’s going on? Are you having a moment?”

I looked at him, *crossly*. “A moment? No, Ian, I’m not having a *moment*,” I grit out.

Well, not that kind of moment.

“This is not an attack, then?” I hated how proper he sounded with his distant tongue and exceptional manners.

“Yes, I’m in hysterics, can’t you tell?” I deadpanned.

“Well, you’re acting strangely.”

His face darkened slightly as he looked back at my house. “What’s with the blush? Did you entertain last night?”

His jaw ticked as he glanced my way with prodding eyes. I had to suppress the slight satisfaction I got from his question.

“No, why would you think that?”

“I’m at a loss here,” he said, resigned. “Have a good day.”

He was only feet away when I barked at his back. “Hey, you, you know what assuming makes you, right?”

He belted out a laugh as he turned back to stand in front of me. “An asshole?”

“Exactly. And for your information, I’ve only had a few attacks since I got here, and I don’t sleep around.”

He winced. “I’m sorry. That was horrible of me.”

“Yeah, well, I’m *handling* it.”

“I was just concerned. We are friends now. I think it’s safe to assume that, right?”

Feeling humiliated and remorse for my bite, I nodded. “Yes, we’re friends.”

I hated that he saw my weakness. I hated that was his first assumption. Even if it was an innocent question or asked out of concern, it stung.

More so, I hated that he would even think I could be intimate with anyone else.

“See you later?” he asked, pushing the hair off my forehead.

I met his gaze and saw nothing but warmth. “I’m sorry I’m on edge. Maybe I do feel a little weird about us sleeping together. It’s been a long time for me. And when I’ve done the casual hookup thing, I usually don’t see the person after.”

“No friends with benefits?” He grinned.

I grinned back. “You’re my first.”

He leaned in on a whisper. “You’re mine too. I was married forever, remember?”

“Really?”

“Really,” he said leaning in. “And I promise to make sure you benefit.”

Goosebumps trailed over my skin and I shrugged. “I don’t think I would *hate* it.”

He chuckled. “Are you free tonight? I’ll cook.”

I nodded, and he leaned in and pressed a promising kiss to my lips. “I look forward to it.”

I drove away cursing my stupidity.

Way to keep him on his side of the fence, Koti.

Chapter Twenty-One

Koti

“YOU WHAT!?”

Glaring at her, I put my purse in my desk drawer. “This is exactly why I didn’t tell you. Are those tears?” I laughed. “You are such an idiot.”

“I’m just so happy. You finally got laid.” She pulled me into her, pressing her huge boobs against my neck.

“Would you stop! I can’t believe you’re getting emotional because I had sex.”

“Come on, I’m taking you to breakfast.”

“No way, we have a full load today.”

“And I’ll take care of it. You’re getting the day off.”

“Jasmine, it’s Saturday. We have a shitload of houses to flip.”

“I’ve got them. Believe it or not, I did this all by myself before you came into the picture. I’m still the boss. Now get your purse and come on.”

“God, you act like I graduated college or something monumental. This is *not* a special occasion.”

“Did you orgasm?”

My face flushed.

“Oh, God. The man gave you multiples, didn’t he?”

Grinning, I nodded.

“Oh, my God!”

“Would you chill out. The therapist down the hall is going to file another complaint.”

“If you ask me, she could use some multiples. She has resting bitch face. Not only that, she made her own reserved sign for

her car. Like she actually went to Lowe's and bought the shit and made a sign. That's pathetic. Come on, we're going to celebrate."

"You're nuts."

"And you're glowing."

"You've seen me the last four days of work and haven't said a word about my glow." We piled into her convertible and buckled up.

"Better late than never. I'm hungry anyway, okay. Just stop being a killjoy and start from the beginning."

Jasmine grinned from ear to ear as I got most of the details out of the way before we pulled up to Pungy's Bistro. Their banana waffles with brown sugar syrup were my favorite and she knew it.

"I love you," I sighed with a mouthful of waffle.

"So tonight, he's cooking?"

"Yep." Swallowing half a glass of orange juice, I hesitated while she studied me.

"You really are glowing. Not that you'll believe me."

"Can I ask you something without you getting offended?"

"Sure," she said with a frown. "You can ask me anything."

"When you are done with a man or dating one, how do you keep your feelings out of it? I mean you do *date* some of these guys."

She sat back and grabbed her coffee cup. "You know I'm in love with someone else."

"That's the trick?"

"It is for me. I know that doesn't help you."

"I just... There's so much about him that I like. Aside from his beastly entrance, the man is truly worth a damn. I just don't know if I can separate the two."

"You might not be able to with him."

“I don’t want to analyze. I’m acting like I’ve never done this before, but with him, it feels like I haven’t. Does that make any sense?”

“Perfect.”

“It feels so different with him.”

“You may need to face the fact that you might already be in love with him.”

“No, I’m not, not yet, but if I spend more time with him, I will be. I know it. So, I guess the question is, do I go in and break my own heart or ax it now? He can’t stay. He has a daughter back in the States.”

“Then you know there’s a time limit and you work with what you have.”

“Even with the risk?”

“Is he worth it?”

“Yeah, yeah, he is.”

“I can’t tell you what to do, but I will tell you even though I hate Steven, I don’t regret falling in love with him. I never felt that way before or after. He’s probably ruined me, but I would do it all over again.”

“Why are we so damned stupid?”

She shrugged. “Built that way? But I look at it this way. Some people go their whole lives without that type of connection. Wouldn’t you rather have it? And with a man like him?”

“Hell yes.”

“Multiples.”

“Sign me up.”

“You can do this, Koti. Try to do what you said you were going to and use him right back.”

* * *

“You never told me the good stuff,” Jasmine scorned as I gathered my clipboard to turn one house I refused to compromise on. I’d been waiting to meet the renter for months.

“The good stuff?”

“Yeah, how did you orgasm?”

“First, it was his tongue and then from inside. I didn’t even know that was possible.”

“You poor thing, you got blasted.”

“What?”

“Blasted. You can come both ways. He rubs your G inside with his penis or stimulates the clit outside. You can have both at the same time too.”

Fire spread through my lower half as I imagined the possibilities.

“And I see today we’re getting educational,” Toby chimed in from the door of our office before he chuckled and looked over at me. “And I guess congratulations are in order?”

“God,” I buried my head in my hands and muffled a “Hi, Toby.”

“Happy Saturday, ladies,” he said carrying his water bottle in and making the switch.

“See you later, Jasmine,” I said in an attempt to make a quick exit. “Call me if you need anything.”

She waved me off as she drank Toby in with a crocodile smile. God bless the poor man, it was only a matter of time.

* * *

Warm wind whipped through my hair as I blazed a trail through the roads I'd come to know. After a year in St. Thomas, I really had no choice but to take on the 'Hakuna Matata' attitude. Len sang "Steal My Sunshine" as I pulled up to the rental and parked my Jeep. I opened three sets of glass double doors from the living room to the patio and let the ocean air filter in while I laid out a bottle of wine and one of Banion's bouquets on the countertop. Half an hour later, I greeted two pale-faced couples. As soon as they pulled up, the driver—a tall, thin, wiry man with thick brown hair—jumped out and held out the keys over the hood to the laughing passenger who I assumed was his wife.

"Oh, hell no, I'm not driving here," she said with a guilty smile.

"Did you know it was left side versus right here!?" He exclaimed as she winked at me in greeting, mid-argument with her husband. She knew, all right, she knew because I told her. The U.S. Virgin Islands were formerly owned by the *British*. It's kind of like renting a car in England, but... not. Same driver's side but you drive on the opposite side of the road. With steep mountain cliffs and neck breaking turns—not to mention impatient natives—for those unprepared, it's pretty much the scariest experience ever from the airport to their destination.

"I can arrange for a driver for the rest of your trip," I piped in as all four of them looked my way. "Hi, I'm Koti."

A woman close to my age came toward me and gripped me in a bear hug. "Oh, this place, Koti! It's even more amazing than the pictures."

"Hi, Kelli. Wait until you see the inside." I whispered, hugging her back. I greeted the two men pulling bags from the trunk of

the rental.

“Guys, I know you’re anxious to get settled, but if you can let the bags wait a minute so I could show you around, I would appreciate it.” The men reluctantly let the bags go and followed me down the tinted cement shell concrete stairs that sat surrounded by lush tropical plants. When I opened the door, they all gasped in unison. At the time I took the reservation and spoke to Kelli, I wanted to make sure she got the best rental we had. She had just survived her second round of chemo and deserved the oasis she was about to spend a week in. The tears that shimmered in her eyes as she assessed her piece of the island did it all for me. She lifted a grateful gaze to mine before she raced out onto the marble porch at the back of the house and tackled her husband, who had already covered half of the top floor. His smile matched hers and in a simple maneuver he gripped her from his back and pulled her tightly to him. Excited whispers were exchanged between them as he held her like his lifeline and his eyes conveyed everything he felt for her. My chest swelled with admiration while another part of me rejoiced in their excitement.

It was my favorite type of rush, sharing my peaceful island with those who deserved some peace of their own.

But I’d never had life be so ugly as to dish out cancer.

Kelli’s eyes found me again and I pushed a tear away with my finger in an attempt to mask it as she mouthed “thank you.”

The other couple, who Kelli told me was her best friend and husband, stood on a separate porch and rapidly spoke while they pointed to the lone mountain nestled across their lawn, made of deep blue water.

“That’s Hans Lolich,” I pointed out, “And it’s for sale. Thirty-five million and it’s yours.”

The couples roamed the house taking in their rented oasis and kept their eyes glued past the cliffside back patio that stretched the length of the large two-story villa. It took me several minutes to get their attention, but I had to admit I loved watching them run around like children who just arrived at their first carnival.

“Okay, guys listen up.” For the next few minutes, I showed them around the house and explained as much as I could get through to them, when their thoughts were on their first drink and a dive in their private pool.

Once I had them settled, and we’d said our goodbyes, I made my way out the front door and left the keys on the mahogany table next to it.

“Hey!” I turned to see Kelli close the front door behind her, her hands clasped on the knob. “I know you rented this house to me for under the normal weekly rate.” I saw her audibly swallow and had to fight emotion to keep my tears from coming. She needed this trip. I’d heard it in her voice when she made the reservation, the defeat, the need to be excited about something, *anything*. It was rare that I spoke to a client for more than a few minutes, but Kelli and I spoke for the better part of an hour when she called. After my talk with her, I spent a day or two trying to imagine what it was like having poison shoved into my veins while I fought for my life and counted on others to try to save it.

Living in St Thomas, away from the life I knew and being disconnected, actually helped me become more in tune with those around me. I haven’t always been a *person’s* person. In fact, the New Yorker in me had grown immune to brushing shoulders with millions of other people, indifferent to the presence of other wandering souls. I was completely apathetic and I was positive the old Koti Vaughn might have shied away from the hug Kelli gave me earlier. My hope was I had evolved from that narcissistic New Yorker.

Even if my involvement with her elation was small, the smile on her face was my reward.

Saluting me, Kelli squinted from the bright sun as she spoke. “Thank you, Koti.”

“You deserve to be happy.”

She laughed and gripped her arms. “You know, I was just thinking that the other day. I looked in the mirror at the woman who used to run a 5k in twenty minutes and asked myself—

what if there comes a time when I only have twenty minutes left. The answer was so simple.”

“And what was it?”

“Be simple and do whatever the hell it is you have to do to make yourself happy.”

“I think you’re right.” Except I knew she was, I’d been living as a simpleton for months.

She gave me a knowing grin. “*And* I’m not the only one who deserves it. New York lost a gem. Thank you again.” I may have overshared a little when she called. It was cheaper than therapy and more rewarding when we shared the common bond that reality, sometimes sucked.

But sometimes reality shifted the clouds and let in a light so bright, it was impossible to ignore.

My island was that light for me, and I had a feeling it could be hers too.

She winked at me before she slipped into the light blue, double-wide doors.

On the drive home, I meditated on her words. I’d been so nervous about the prospect of having feelings for Ian, I’d nearly lost sight of the fact that our newly rekindled friendship was a gift. The truth was, being with Ian made me happy. And I would enjoy it for as long as we had.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Koti

I CLIMBED MY PORCH STEPS and paused when I heard the first few keys of the piano sound. The baby grand that sat in the living room hadn't been touched in years, well, not by the fingers of an experienced pianist. My dad used to play when I was a little girl, often entertaining our friends in the penthouse. Opting to see if any more music would come, I stood waiting at the front door. My jaw dropped when a melody began to fill the air. I couldn't put my finger on the song, but it sounded familiar. After a few bars, I managed to slip into the house unnoticed. Mesmerized by the sight of him, I picked Disco up before she could make a sound. He missed a key or two, but quickly recovered, his timing was that of a practiced musician. It took every bit of strength I had to remain idle as he blew me away with his talent. While watching him, my new 'live for the moment' confidence was being obliterated away note by note.

Don't overthink this, Koti!

No matter how hard I tried to forget Ian Kemp once he left me, I knew no matter how much time passed, or how our relationship ended, I would never forget how I felt watching him play that piano.

Thunder sounded in the distance and rain began to hit the roof of the house and trail down the windowpane next to me while the rest of the afternoon sun faded under the cover of the clouds. With the room dimmed, I smiled at the sight of lit candles. Ian had created his own bubble.

Inwardly sighing, I sat back on the arm of my sofa and admired my view. He grimaced, once or twice and then sank into the music, his posture relaxing slightly while his chest flexed under the white T-shirt that covered him. When the last note was played, he sat back, rubbing his hands on his thighs

before he looked up and spotted me. I was sure I looked insane gawking at him, but he just grinned.

“Hi. I know that was horrible.”

I shook my head. “Hi, back. That was beautiful. I know that song.”

“I played it in my last recital, it’s “Clair de Lune” by Debussy.”

“Accomplished pianist too, huh? Is there anything you can’t do?”

“Lots of things,” he said, standing before he glanced at the large wall clock past my shoulder. “You’re home early.”

“Slow day. The boss told me to take the rest of it off. How long did you play?”

“Just through grade school.”

“That was grade school level?”

“I was a bit advanced.”

I harrumphed. “You think?”

He ignored my compliment as he stalked toward me, his eyes darkening.

“So lucky me,” he said moving to stand in front of me before he took a squirming Disco from my arms to grant her freedom. “You’re home early and it’s raining,” he murmured leaning in, “what shall we do?”

I swallowed. “I was thinking we could start our book club?”

“Sure,” he said with a smirk, pulling my purse off my shoulder and tossing it on the couch behind me. “After.”

“After?”

“After,” he whispered, crushing me to his chest before capturing my mouth.

* * *

Hours later, I lingered next to a hot running shower, my whole body vibrating as I stood in a daze, my hair a sex afro. My abdomen was screaming, and I winced at the pinch I still felt from his size. The man fucked like Tarzan.

“Hey,” he said in a raspy voice behind me. I turned to see him darken my doorway and took a step back. “I, uh... I can’t do it again, sorry.” I jumped into the shower and ducked under the stream as the door open and he joined me. He chuckled as he turned me to face him. “What’s with the brush-off?”

The banging began below, and I knew I was in a world of shit. I winced as I ducked for the shampoo.

“You’re hurt?”

“I’m sore.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, tilting my chin. “I’m a little rough.”

“A little,” I said with wide eyes.

“Shit, I really hurt you?”

“No, I mean I’m hurting, but it doesn’t really have to do with the sex. I mean it does but...”

“Koti, spit it out,” he said impatiently. “I’m feeling like an asshole here.”

“I have a condition that can make sex painful at times, well after sex.” I glanced at the tile floor. “Sometimes during.”

“You were hurting during?” he asked confused. “Those screams?”

“Were orgasms,” I assured. “Ian, you’re fine. It’s called endometriosis. That’s why I was on the hammock that day crying. It’s awful to endure and a shitty subject, so let’s not talk about it.”

He let out a breath and gripped my shoulders. “Be honest, did any part of that hurt *during*?”

“No, I swear. I like you but not enough to hurt myself.”

“Okay, so what do we do?”

I laughed. “What do you mean, what do we do? *We* do nothing. I just have to deal with it.”

I lathered up his hair while he studied me and gave him a faux hawk. “Sexy.”

“Yeah?” He poked his head out of the shower and looked in the mirror. “I like this look on me.”

“Me too,” I murmured pressing a kiss to his throat.

He looked down at me with a grin, as suds slipped down his temple.

I was so in love with him.

He gathered me to him and slid his hands down to where I ached. I leaned back into his frame as his cock hardened. “I’m sorry. I’ll take it easier on you.”

“Don’t you dare,” I said fisting his thickness between us. “Don’t. Please don’t do that. I can honestly say this is the only time the pain has been worth it.” Every single tooth he had was displayed with his answering crocky smile.

“Don’t smile at me like that.”

“So, what you’re saying is I’m the best lover you’ve ever had.”

Hell yes.

“I never said that, but thanks for blasting me, pal.”

“Blasting you?”

“It’s an inside joke.”

“Ah,” he said, lathering up. “Will I ever be privy to this information?”

“Doubtful,” I said, rubbing the soap over his chest and down his forearms. He clasped our hands and kissed the back of

mine. "I'm starving. Hungry?"

"Sure." The ache in my belly began to roar as I pressed my lips to his before I stepped out of the shower. Once dry, I frantically searched my cabinets. "Shit."

"What?" he asked, toweling off. I took a second to admire him. "You look great, Ian. Not that you didn't look good before, but, you really look so... great."

His eyes softened. "Can't find anything for the pain?"

"You're shit at taking compliments, you know that?"

"I'll run to the chemist and fetch something."

"No, you don't have to do that."

"Then you can just suffer," he said rolling his eyes.

* * *

Half an hour later, I was curled up in bed with my heating pad when Ian strolled in with two bags. "Did you stock up on Advil until the apocalypse?"

"I've got it all." He emptied the bag onto my bed. "Lift your shirt and lower your broeks."

"Broeks?"

"Panties."

I smiled. "Sexy."

He cut a hand through the air. "Just do it."

I did as I was told, and he stuck a patch above my pelvic bone, opened a box and gave me four pills and a bottled water to take them with. "That heating patch should do you good, the pharmacist said we can change it every four hours. You can take four of these pills in one go if you need to."

Stunned by his kindness, I nodded toward the other bag.
“What’s in there?”

“Chinese food—and a shit load of it—ice cream, and two movies. Come on, we have to go to my house since you’ve decided to live past century.” He held his hand out to me and I winced as I stood. He pressed a kiss to my temple. “I’m sorry.”

“Damn it, Ian, don’t. Okay? This isn’t going to change, and I don’t want it to interfere with our...” I nodded in embarrassment, “you know.”

“Quality time?”

“Exactly,” I said giving him a forced grin. I prayed for the pills to kick in as we walked to his house. He pulled me as close as I could be as we devoured the food and watched our favorite movies from when we were kids, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*—his—followed by mine, *Jaws*.

“Remember when we watched these?” he asked as he loaded *Jaws* into the DVD player.

“Of course.”

“You were so young, I didn’t know if you remembered a lot of that summer.”

“I remember *all* of that summer.”

He gave me warm eyes. “Me too.”

“You were a hot-headed ass.”

“You were a total crybaby brat,” he smarted back before he pulled me into his lap. Sometime later, I woke up cradled to his chest. He was staring at my lips in the dim light of the house, the movie flickering over his features. His eyes fluttered closed and he turned his attention back to the screen. I pressed a kiss to his Adam’s apple and drifted back to sleep.

Ian

Heaven or hell, I wasn't sure which I was dwelling in. I was leaning more toward the former. I'd spent my week on standby waiting for Ella after school to spend every moment I could with her. I applied for a few teaching positions for the fall. My life seemed to be back on track. I was feeling a little more like myself, aside from the new freedom I felt. I was running out of reasons to continue flying back to St. Thomas and I fucking hated the fact that I felt like I needed any other excuse than the one laying in my arms. The truth was we were on a slippery slope. At the same time, I still had so much hatred for Tara, I couldn't be civil to her for any amount of time. My plans for the summer were mine to make. I was a free man. Ella was going to summer camp in Washington. I had the summer. I could give her the summer. I studied her gorgeous face in the flickering light and got fixed on her lips. She stirred awake and gave me a small smile. I turned my attention back to the screen and felt her lips on my Adam's apple. My chest ached in that moment at the idea of leaving her.

I could give myself the summer.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Koti

I SUCKED MY BANANA POP on the love seat flipping the pages of my new book. It was an incredibly hot day, and my AC was working overtime to cool the house. Our book club had commenced a few hours prior. Ian sat back on the couch opposite of me, his feet crossed and propped on the other end. I'd been stealing glances at him every page flip since we started reading. Shirtless in his faded palm tree swim trunks, he looked completely relaxed as he turned through the pages of a mystery novel.

Slurping on the sweet deliciousness of the freshly made frozen concoction, I managed to get through a chapter before I stole my next glance. To my surprise, his eyes were hot on me.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, much.”

“You have beautiful lips.”

“Thank you.”

“Get over here and put them on my cock.”

“Whaa?” I sat up, my clit pulsing with the low rasp of his voice, my mouth watering at the idea. I couldn't look away. The whole situation was a train wreck because the New Yorker in me wanted to castrate him, while the feminist in me wanted to tell him to go straight to hell; but even as I feigned offense, I was strangely more turned on than I had ever been in my life.

Ian wore an infuriatingly sexy smirk. “I can see you fancy the idea as well.”

He was right, and a part of me hated it. Breathless, I rubbed my lips together as he zeroed in.

He slipped his shorts down enough so his ready cock sprang free. He was so hard, pre-cum dripped from the tip. He took it

in his hand and pumped a few times as I found myself gravitating toward it.

“You’re serious?”

“It’s sex and no one tops me in the bedroom, Koti, ever.” He wiped the tip of his dick with a finger and held it out for me. “Come here.”

I sank to my knees on the carpet looking up at his bedroom eyes. The man turned me on like no other.

“I’m going to need a view, *Miss Vaughn*.”

Taking his cue, I unhooked my bikini top.

“Now, *that’s* a view.”

I was dripping. My eyes half closed with arousal as I sucked his finger eagerly before I moved to brace myself above him, one hand on the couch the other gripping his thick dick.

I was just about to wrap my lips around him when he spoke. “Do a good job, and I’ll make sure you benefit.”

“Jesus, Ian.”

He gripped my hair in his fist and leaned down on a whisper. “Suck it.”

God, why was I so turned on? I wrapped my lips around him down to the base as his fingers threaded through my hair. Pulling away with a pop, I grazed his tip with my teeth before I swallowed and took him in again.

“Perfect,” he gritted out, gently guiding my head down. He never pushed, but lifted his hips, fucking my mouth as I pumped and sucked.

“Jesus, those lips, give them to me,” he demanded, pulling me up by my hair, my scalp screaming as he smashed his mouth to mine. Our tongues gave and took as I straddled him on the couch rubbing my covered seam along his dick and moaning into his mouth. He ripped himself away and stared down at me as we both panted. “You aren’t done, I just need to feel you right now,”

“Ian,” I breathed as his eyes trailed over my chest and further down before they flit to mine.

“Get rid of those fucking bottoms.” He yanked at the strings on the sides of my bikini until I was bared.

“How wonderfully convenient, these strings of yours, now bring that beautiful pussy to my mouth and ride my face.”

“You’re filthy.”

“It’s only going to get worse after I taste your beautiful ass,” he promised as he lifted me up to feast, diving in like a madman. I stared down at him with my mouth open as he cradled my ass with his hands and pressed into me. Flicking his tongue expertly, he ate me until I was writhing in his hold. My arms began to shake with my weight as I got closer to the brink. Fiery gray eyes flit to mine after a leisurely lick. “Let go, I’ve got you.”

“Ian,” I rasped out, as he dove in, sliding his nose against my clit and thrusting his tongue inside. Breaths coming fast, I ground into his face and was rewarded with another groan. He pulled my clit between his lips and sucked hard until I began spasming uncontrollably in his hands. Licking me mercilessly, he refused to let up until I had soaked his chin. He pulled away and wiped it as he lowered me to sit on his bare stomach.

His illicit whispers lit my skin on fire. “I’ll be at your mercy anywhere but in the bedroom.”

He thrust two fingers up into me and I rode his hand, tilting my head back as he captured my nipple in his mouth.

“You are so damned beautiful,” he murmured, before trailing his tongue from one side of my neck, across my chest to the other. I began to quicken as he sped up his fingers and without warning replaced them with his waiting dick and thrust into me. I shuddered on his cock as he cursed, bit his lip and closed his eyes. I bucked and slid my clit against the thick ridge of him as his eyes opened and lit the rest of me into an inferno.

We were nothing but movement then, lips and teeth gnashing as I jerked my hips down greedy for more.

“So tight,” he murmured before pushing up so my knees lifted off the couch and I was impaled. I fell forward while he held me in the air, rubbing me back and forth, so all I could do was hold on.

“Come for me.”

And I did, I imploded as he bit down on my nipple and reddened my ass with his palm. I’d never been touched like that and never felt so out of control. I cried into his chest as my orgasm lasted a small eternity and then rode him hard and fast until I saw him start to crumble. Mouth parted, he groaned, his hands palming my ass, his body glistening. I jerked my hips again as he let out a “Fuck, Fuck,” before he collapsed back into the couch. Eyes closed, a slight smile played on his lips before he opened them and met my gaze. Wordless, we both sank into our connection. Moving to kiss him, I slid down his body and settled my lips on his.

Happy and relaxed, we settled into a warmth-filled silence until I heard a voice sound on the side of my house.

“Don’t drag my suitcase through the sand, it’s expensive!”

I shot off the couch like I was still on fire. “Ian, that’s my mother.”

He stood as if he didn’t have a care in the world and casually pulled on his shorts. He had his second arm in his T-shirt hole as he walked down the hall toward his room when a knock finally sounded at the front door. I thanked God we’d shut it in an attempt to keep the cool air in.

“Jesus, it’s hot out here. Knock again,” my mother said as I managed to get my bikini tied.

Looking toward the direction Ian fled, I ignored the front door and ran down the hall. Opening his door, Ian looked at me puzzled as I raced up to him and kissed him, *hard*. He chuckled into my mouth.

“Like that, did you?”

“As soon as they leave, we’re doing that again.”

“Okay, puffer fish.”

“Don’t call me by my pet name after that kind of sex, it’s weird.”

“Would you *go* already? They’re definitely going to know I was fucking you, *now*.”

My clit pulsed at his vulgarity. “God, I love the way you say that.” Biting my lip, I roved my eyes down his sexy form and that earned me another chuckle.

He slapped my ass. “*Go*.”

“I’m going.”

“Koti?”

I stopped at his door just as another knock landed. “Yeah?”

“It was amazing and we will be repeating that, *repeatedly*.”

We shared a smile before I looked toward the front door. “This is going to suck.”

He reached out and gripped my hand.

“Everyone is a glass house, it’s up to you to decide who to give the rocks to.”

I nodded.

“Go.”

“So beautiful,” I heard him whisper before I closed his door.

* * *

“So, Ian,” my father said as he sipped his beer, “my daughter failed to mention you were staying here. What brought you to St. Thomas?”

I glanced over at Ian and saw the hesitation on his face and so I gave my parents a half-truth.

“He’s a teacher, so he’s here to spend the summer prepping for his fall schedule.”

“A teacher,” my mother said perched upon one of the barstools, her golden hair slicked back into a tidy bun, her makeup flawless even after a stint in the heat. “What do you teach?”

“He’s a professor actually, he teaches linguistics,” I said on a redundant search for approval, for no other reason than I didn’t like her tone. Ian gave me a pointed look that said he didn’t need my help and I hoped he recognized the answering apology on my face.

“No need for the third-degree, Mom. We aren’t dating. He’s just staying here because we rented out the Kemp house this week.”

Her lips tightened. “I’m not giving the third degree, I’m curious.” Tension filled the air as Ian eased into conversation quickly telling them about his career.

“A former Marine. Thank you for your service,” my father added thoughtfully before he looked at me. I kept my eyes down as my mother went on, using Ian’s career success as an excuse for an unwelcome subject about my future.

“Did Koti tell you she worked as a real estate broker in New York? She was one of the best.”

“She did,” Ian confirmed as he took a sip of his beer.

“She had a huge future.”

“Mom,” I warned. She looked around the beach house she hadn’t visited in years. “It still looks the same doesn’t it, babe? Nothing’s changed. I guess our girl is safe enough here.” My father shot her daggers as he took another sip of his beer.

“Ian, I’m sure you have things to do.” With the tension thickening to choking level, I had to give him an out. “Don’t feel obligated to hang around.”

Ian didn’t move, his eyes challenged mine. Thoughts of what happened between us swirled around my newly aching head. I

tried to read him but was disappointed when he flicked his eyes to my mother. “I have nothing pressing.”

“How long will you be staying?” I asked my parents as casually as I could muster, and my mother took immediate offense. Before she could open her perfectly painted lips and let words through, my dad piped in.

“Only a few days, and we’ll get a hotel tomorrow, we apologize for the intrusion.”

“It’s not an intrusion, Dad, this is your house.”

Uncomfortable silence followed until Ian swooped in and saved the day turning to engage him. “Koti told me you used to work with some pretty big bands.”

Conversation flowed easily from that point as my dad spoke about his days as a sound engineer and threw in a few stories including the one of how he met my mother.

“She hated me, it was so obvious.”

“I didn’t hate you,” she chimed in.

He gave Ian a wary look. “Oh, she hated me, and I’ve never had to work so hard for anything in my life.” My mother smiled, genuinely smiled at my father and a part of me sighed. Though I’d painted her the big bad wolf at times, and she was hard on me, she was a lot of other things. A loving wife being one of them. My parents clasped hands and my dad winked at her. They had a healthy marriage. It had been full of everything a union should be, mostly because my dad worshipped her, and she needed that worship. They met at a time where their hectic lives were winding down and I could always see their genuine appreciation for each other. I was a bit envious. And I saw Ian notice the same. My parents had wicker fights, mostly due to my mother being hardheaded in regards to me, but my father stood his ground and when he did, she seemed to respect him more for it. He’d done it a lot, especially where I was concerned. I’d almost missed the change of conversation until I felt all eyes on me.

“What?”

“I was just telling Ian how you tried the piano.”

“Yeah,” I said wrinkling my nose, “never got the hang of it. Ian plays beautifully.”

Ian’s flattered smile was brief, but I caught it. “I’m horrible.”

“I don’t think so.”

My dad’s eye darted between us and Ian looked at me with a mix of curiosity and something I couldn’t put my finger on.

My father smiled at me with pride. “This little woman has great taste in music, though. I think she got that from me.”

“I have your flat butt, that came from you.”

“Maybe” he laughed. “And my business sense.”

“Not sense enough,” my mother jabbed and everyone at the table ignored her.

She eyed me curiously and then let her gaze drift between Ian and me. Ian ignored her scrutiny and kept his beautiful grays on me, filling me with much-needed warmth. My father stepped in, offering us a reprieve from her silent interrogation. “Let’s go to bed, Blair. It’s been a long day.”

“I’m fine,” she said as she looked at me pointedly. I was too tired for the conversation she wanted to have and to answer the questions in her eyes, questions even I didn’t have the answers for when it came to me and Ian.

“*Now*, Blair.”

My mother’s eyes said it all as she reluctantly bid us goodnight and followed him upstairs.

Ian didn’t miss a beat before speaking up. “Jesus, you’re that uncomfortable with your own mother around?”

“I’m tired,” I moved to stand.

“Stop, look at me.” I turned to look up at him feeling the zing of his touch while electricity rode through my body and sent a shock wave to my core. He peered down at me. “Koti—”

“Please, just don’t. This isn’t fixable, no matter how you see it—she’s not going to let up, *ever*. I’ve been down this road so many times I could drive it blindfolded. So whatever

suggestions you have, just know I've tried it. And I have to agree with you to some degree. When it comes to her, words mean nothing."

Ian peered down at me as I bit my lip and shook my head. "Whatever you're thinking, don't tell me."

"You have no idea what I'm thinking." His fingers drifted up my arm slowly until they reached the strap of my cami. Eyes intent, he toyed with the material between his fingers before he gently pulled it down. His breath hit first sending goosebumps up my spine. I tilted my head back as soft lips landed and I sank into him. His teeth grazed my shoulder as his tongue darted out. I soundlessly moaned as he gripped the side of my neck with his palm and blazed a trail from the nape to just below my ear. I kept my moan internal as I gripped his hand, leaned into his mouth, and let out a word filled whimper. "Please."

"She doesn't hold a candle to you."

I attempted to pull myself away, but he held me firmly in his grip.

"What?! Why would you say that?"

"She is beautiful, Koti, but you are so much more," he whispered, continuing to explore, "so soft," he murmured, his scent consuming me. It took all my strength to fight him.

"You kissed me because you decided I was insecure about my mother?"

"It's apparent you're insecure about your mother, and I haven't kissed you, yet," he assured as he palmed my face in his hands.

"Look, I don't need your reassurances." I pulled away from his hold and faced him head on.

"Fine, my mistake," he whispered heatedly. "But I'm going to tell you how beautiful I think you are and what you do to me." He inched forward, his breath hitting my neck as he spoke low. "Before you let me, and even though I was angry, I thought about touching you every day for a month. You were a dream." He pressed his lips against my neck and I let out a soft

moan. “The most perfect dream,” he whispered. “I thought about the feel of your lips, my tongue in your mouth, my cock stretching you, the look in your eyes as I invaded you. I thought about sucking your tits while I buried myself deep enough, so you would never forget I was inside you. I thought about your ass and how red it could get under my palm. At night as I lay in bed, I thought about nothing *but* you. I’m so fucking hard for you right now it physically hurts, and I just had you hours ago.”

Without an ounce of fight, he tugged me toward him by pulling my arms around his neck. I licked my lips as his arousal brushed my stomach. Mouth parted, my panties soaked, I threaded my fingers in his hair. Leaning in, he pushed the hair away from my ear as he whispered the rest of his seduction. “And even though I’ve had you, I’ve touched your skin, and buried myself so far inside you that you won’t forget, you’re still a dream for me, so beautiful it hurts.”

We shared a breath and I could feel the frustration and need rolling off him.

He pulled back, demanding my eyes before our mouths met, his tongue diving deep as he fully tasted me. Between his confession and his perfect kiss, I was at his complete mercy. He thrust his tongue deep and I felt his every word match his desire. Returning it with the same fervor, he pulled away when I began to get aggressive. “I want you so much right now.”

“So, take me to bed.”

He shook his head. “It wouldn’t be appropriate.”

“Like you care.”

“It’s my respect for your father and nothing more.”

“Okay.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I’ll make myself scarce.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Koti,” his face twisted in regret. “I want to. I have to.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling my heart sink a little at his admission. But there were unspoken rules and he was holding us both to them.

This was a family matter and highly personal. He wasn't mine to claim, he didn't want to be involved and he was making it known.

"I can't do this with you." That admission left a crack in my chest.

"I know."

"Damn it." He ripped his arms away and instantly I felt cold. "I can't. I'm sorry."

"I understa..." but before the words left my lips, he was through the door to his room and I felt the finality as he softly shut it behind him.

Could Ian and I be more?

I had my answer.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Koti

“WHAT’S WRONG?”

Jasmine peered down at me as I entered the office mid-afternoon the next day. I explained I would be late due to the unexpected visit from my parents.

“I told you, my mother is here, need I say more?”

“She can’t be that bad.”

I shrugged. “She’s not unless she decides to bring up my future, and she *always* does. I can’t believe I was dumb enough to miss work to have breakfast with her, it was a massacre. My dad had to practically peel her off me so I could get to my Jeep.”

“She needs a hobby,” Jasmine frowned. “You aren’t a project.”

“Tell that to her,” I said as I sat defeated in my chair. Ian was gone when I woke up, no doubt on another run. I spent most of the night tossing and turning and hadn’t slept a single minute. I still felt his lips regardless of his words, but that was the scary part. No matter how transparent he was about our situation I’d ignored it and only saw him. And *oh*, how I wanted him in every way.

“If it’s okay, I’m going to knock off early to deal with the inevitable fall out, so they can leave.”

“Of course, you can take the day. I told you that on the phone.”

“I had to get out of there for a little while. I need to prepare.”

Her eyes rolled over me in concern. “You think it will be that bad?”

“I do, but I’m tired of running away from the conversation. It’s time.”

“Well, call me if you need me. I’ll drop everything.” She gave me a quick hug before the phone rang. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her what happened with Ian. To wait around and see what she had to say on the matter, but inside I knew the truth. He’d laid it out for me and I knew it. I’d be asking Jasmine to give me hope, which would be pointless. He would never be mine to love.

* * *

On the porch with my parents later that day, my mother sat expectantly. “So, you won’t come back and you’re determined to stay here? Why?”

Ian had made himself scarce as promised and I couldn’t help my wandering eyes as I searched the beach every so often for a sign of him. The renters had left that morning and I was sure he’d resumed residence at his house.

“I’m happy here.”

“You’re wasting your life,” she argued, “your potential.”

“I’m saving my fucking life,” I snapped before my father shot me a warning look.

“Easy, Koti.”

I swallowed the knot in my throat. “I’m happy here. Why can’t that mean anything?”

She glanced at my dad for backup and got none. I could already see the war brewing that she would wage on him later.

“It does mean something. It means a lot that you’ve finally pulled yourself together and now you can come back swinging.”

“This isn’t a resurrection, Mother. I’m not coming back for another round, I’ve accepted defeat as far as that goes and I wish you would too. I can’t hack it out there, not in that world

and not in that atmosphere. I have limitations, and I'm learning to deal with them."

"I can't believe you're hiding behind that excuse," she said incredulously. "We all have our stresses."

"You've talked to my therapist, Mom. You know I have it a little bit harder than that."

"It's an excuse."

I was on my feet instantly. "You have no idea what it's like to feel like you're drowning while life goes on around you, while people smile like they don't have a care in the world, while you're struggling to breathe! You have no idea!"

My mother bared her teeth. "Calm down."

I took a deep breath. "That's just it, Mother," I said with defeat, my bones aching from the emotions she stirred. "Sometimes I can't calm down until I'm so weak I can't move. You made an imperfect daughter—deal with it already. I'm tired of trying to explain it to you."

She looked at my father for more backup and he finally stepped in.

"Blair, listen to her. She's happy."

She shot daggers at him. "We agreed."

"We also agreed to hear her out." My father let out a heavy sigh as he looked over to me. His rehearsed question coming out as an obligation. "You won't even consider coming back?"

"No, Dad. I love New York but it's too hard for me. I won't go back to live in a place I can't breathe in. This is my life. I'm happy with it. The sooner you two accept it, the better."

"I'm selling this house," my mother stated plainly. "You can hide somewhere else."

"I was hiding in New York, Mom. *This* is who I am."

"We spent all that money on education, prep schools, what the hell was the point?" She argued, ruthlessly reminding me of the trouble she'd gone through to raise me.

“Maybe it was so she could figure this out on her own. Jesus Blair, give her some credit. She suffered for all those years just to please us, can’t you see that?” My father had taken a side and from the look on her face, it wasn’t the right one. “And you’re not selling this goddamn house.”

I felt the earth shift as he defied my mother and my pulse began to kick up.

“What in the hell did you just say?” She paled as he leaned forward, his face defiant.

“You heard me. Her happiness comes first, just like yours has for the last thirty-four years of our lives. I won’t let you alienate our little girl. This whole situation is *your* doing.”

Oh shit.

“Mom,” my voice was shaking. I could feel the rattle begin in my brain. “Look at me, please.”

Hurt and anger coursed through me as I pleaded to keep the situation from escalating further. “Please don’t fight. I never wanted to disappoint you. I love you both so much. Please don’t do this.”

She looked over to me as I begged her once again to try to understand. “I will never live up to what you want me to be. Ever. This won’t change. I’m not changing my mind and I can’t change yours. Don’t ruin what you have with daddy because you think I failed you. He didn’t disappoint you, I did. But I can’t let your ridiculous expectations ruin another minute of my life. If you can’t be proud of me this way, please just leave.”

“Blair, let’s go.”

Blair Vaughn stood five foot, nine inches of relentless beauty and never-ending expectation “The hell I will, we aren’t done talking.”

Twin tears rolled down my cheeks as I looked at my mother and accepted our fate. “*I’m* done, Mom. Please try to understand. *I’m* done.”

“We’re leaving. Blair, go get your bags.”

“Daddy, you don’t have to leave. Please, can we please just try to enjoy our time together?”

“We aren’t done discussing this!”

My father turned on her, his eyes cold. “Now, Blair, damn you! This is the last time you make our daughter feel unworthy of your love. Do you hear me? This is the last time. She’s a grown woman and old enough to choose her own happiness. Give it up and go get your things. We’re leaving!”

My mother swallowed as incredulous tears built up in her eyes.

“Now, Blair, go!”

We both jumped at the anger in his voice. Her eyes flitted to mine and I saw the rest of our ties start to snap. “Mom,” I called after her as she slammed the front door shut behind her.

Unable to handle the idea that I’d caused a rift between my parents, I pleaded with my dad who was shaking as he stared at the ocean. “Daddy, I’m so sorry.”

He took a few steadying breaths before he pulled me into his arms. “I know. Jesus, Koti, I feel so responsible. I should have stopped this shit years ago, I’m so sorry.”

“I hid it, Dad. I hid it from you both. This is just the way she is, she’ll never get it and that’s not your fault either.”

He pulled back and searched my eyes. “I’m proud of you anyway. Always. I hope you know that. I’m so proud of you. I’m so sorry you had to save yourself, but so proud you did.”

We cried together on the porch as my mother slammed her way through the house.

Licking the tears from my lips I apologized again, the guilt of what was in store for him hard to bear. “I’m sorry, I just can’t cater to her anymore.”

“I know. Just be happy. I know it’s hard to believe, but I think a majority of this is because she wants you home.”

“Daddy,” I said tearfully as I pulled away, “I *am* home.”

* * *

I sat on my porch hours after my parents left. My father's tearful goodbye on the forefront of my mind. There was a rift between my mother and I that may never be repaired, at least not in a way it would mend anytime in the foreseeable future. Though I was finally okay with it, I knew it had just broken his heart and ripped his family apart. And the sad part was, only the two of us knew it to be true. My mother would forever maintain this was my fault.

"Hey."

Ian walked up to the bottom step and looked up at me.

"Hey."

"Your parents left?"

"Yeah. Feel free to move about the cabin." The smile I offered was weak. "Sorry about that impromptu visit. They won't be back."

Ian winced. "That bad?"

"It always was."

He made his way on the porch and sat on the hammock.

Unexpected anger surfaced. "I don't need you to be here to tell me it's okay."

"Then I won't tell you it's okay."

"How's this? I don't *want* you here. And you didn't want to be here, remember?"

Ian flinched, pulling himself up from the hammock. He nodded, sliding his hands in his shorts before moving toward his house.

"Ian?"

He stared at the sand but stopped walking.

“You need to be out by Thursday. You can take the room.”

“I can get a hotel.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’ve invited some friends to the island.”

I wiped a tear from my eyes. “It’s fine, I have the space.”

“Koti...”

“It’s *fine*.”

He nodded before he disappeared down the beach.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ian

IT WAS FUN WHILE IT lasted, right?

Fuck me. I was an unbelievable asshole. She'd been there to hold my hand and I'd practically burned hers when she needed mine. That sort of guilt was exactly what I'd been trying to avoid. For once in my life, I didn't want to be responsible for anyone else's well-being and I should have been satisfied she'd let me off the hook. But that wasn't what bothered me. What bothered me was that I wanted to be there for her. I wanted to sit next to her and hold her hand. I wanted to kiss her worries quiet and pull her back into our bubble. Stomping down the sand with thoughts of her had me rattling with disquiet and threatened the peace I'd only just found. I glanced at her house in the distance with no idea what state she was in. If the devastation on her face and the quiet tears she was trying to hide were any indication, she was in a world of hurt.

"You're a son of a bitch, Ian Kemp," I muttered as my phone buzzed in my pocket. Reluctantly I answered. "Hi, Mom."

"Hello, darling. How are you?"

"Good, I'm good."

"I'm calling because I'm afraid we're going to have to cancel our trip to see you. Your father has developed a case of the shingles. Terrible. He's hurting something awful."

"Shit, I'm sorry."

"I am too. I was looking so forward to seeing you. Maybe we can meet you and Ella next time you come home?"

"Sounds good. Give my best to dad."

"Not so fast, son. Tell me how you are *really*."

"I'm fine."

“Bullshit.”

I chuckled because a curse out of Rowan Kemp was rare and sounded totally out of place.

“Tell me what upset you.”

“I can’t. Just trust me that I can’t talk about it yet. Soon. Okay?”

“Okay?” My mother was a warrior, solely devoted to her love of family. I couldn’t imagine life without her support and as I looked at the lifeless house next to mine, I was saddened for Koti that she hadn’t experienced the same.

“Mom...”

“Yes?”

“I just want you to know I love you. And I’m a lucky bastard to have you as a mother.”

“Oh, God. You aren’t going to hurt yourself, are you?”

“No, of course—”

“Ian, don’t do this to me, to Ella. Don’t do anything rash. You have so much waiting for you here.”

Though untimely because of her worry, I couldn’t help my laughter. “I obviously need to tell you these things more often. Of course, I’m not going to do anything like that.”

“Promise me, Ian. If things get so bad you have those thoughts...”

“That worry is unnecessary I assure you, but I promise. Take care of Dad and I’ll call you soon.”

“Liar, you never phone.”

“Once a week, that’s a new promise.”

Her sarcasm leaked over the line. “I’ll believe that, sure.”

“I’ll make you a believer.”

“How are you and Koti getting along?”

“Fine,” I said with a grimace. “We’ve been doing a lot of catching up.” Though wildly inappropriate while speaking

with my mother, I couldn't help to think of the look in her eyes when I had her clinging to me just a day before.

"You know we saw her last year. The poor thing looked malnourished. She's so beautiful though, don't you think?"

"I do," I said as gravel filled my throat. "Very beautiful."

"Yes, a little bit dazzling."

"Dazzling..." I faltered as Koti walked out of her house and began to light her candles before reggae started drifting through her speakers.

"She's such a beautiful spirit. Maybe you could take her out sometime? From what your dad and I saw, she doesn't venture out much."

"If you saw her, I think you would agree she's come a long way since the last time you were here."

"That's so good to know. So... do you think you two might be starting up more than a friendship?"

"I've got to go, Mom."

"Oh, come on! I'm an old lady, tell me something good. She finds you attractive, doesn't she?" she asked in a conspiratorial whisper. "Are you two flirting? Tell me anything."

"Ella made the honor roll."

"You are a right shit."

"You're cursing a lot." *Much like the other woman in my life that I seemed to bring out the worst in.*

"It's hot as hell here, it makes me crazy."

"Don't get me started on Dad's geographical choice to migrate."

"Adam was worth it. Did you know your brother is seeing a waitress at a bar called The Hooters?"

I chuckled. "It's just Hooters, Mom. No 'The' before it."

"He won't let us meet her. We offered to go. I think your dad and I might pop in as a surprise."

“I’m pretty sure Dad will enjoy it.”

“Really, do they serve good food?”

“The best,” I said, smiling. Adam was about to be humiliated.

“Right then, it’s settled.”

“Let me know how it goes,” I said doing my best to conceal my smile.

She was too sharp. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing Mom, enjoy *The Hooters*.”

“If you say so. I’m sure I will. Love you, son.”

“Love you.”

I hung up and made my way toward the house. Koti read in the safety of her hammock and didn’t bother to glance my way when I stepped up on my porch to let Disco out.

She couldn’t avoid me forever, and at the same time, a few days apart might give us both perspective. We were only in danger of becoming closer.

Thursday she would be forced to make conversation, to look at me, to talk to me.

Thursday.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Koti

SCRUBBING MY STOVE, I WAS nervous in a way I hadn't been in years. Ian and I had barely looked at each other since my parents left. Well, I'd barely looked at him. I knew I was being a little childish. He told me he didn't want to get involved and I understood it to a degree but being a friend with benefits required him to be a friend. I couldn't help my anger at his decision to leave me hanging knowing my whole story. Pushing past it for the greater good, I decided to try and put my hurt aside to make the trip the best I could for Ian and his friends, even if I was irritated with him. Two sharp knocks at my door had me pulling my rubber gloves off. I opened it with a smile only to have the wind knocked out of me by the sight of him. Disco barked at my feet as Ian's scowl and shitty greeting quickly erased all my good intentions.

"They're pulling up and you don't have any clothes on!"

"I live at the beach. These are my clothes."

"A bikini isn't clothes. Get something else on, *now*."

"Hello to you too. I agree the house looks nice. I've been cleaning all day. You're welcome."

"It's appreciated

"Could've fooled me."

"Koti," he said in warning. "We don't have time to argue."

"Then let's not argue."

"Damn it, woman."

I eyed my waiting coverup dress on the couch and thought better of it.

"Don't bark orders at me, I'm doing you another favor."

The creak of the screen behind him put a stop to our argument.

“S’up, fucker,” the guy at the door greeted as Ian turned to face him grinning from ear to ear.

“How the hell are you doing, Kemp?”

The man caught sight of me as they hugged and cleared his throat. “Sorry about the profanity, ma’am.” The man was tall, with shortly-cropped brown hair and gorgeous dark blue eyes. “I’m Julian Drake.”

I smiled. “Koti.”

“Ian, you didn’t tell us you had a new girl.”

Ian glanced between us and I let him sweat a little before I spoke up. “We’re just friends. Ian’s parents own the house next door, but it’s rented at the moment, so you guys are shacking up here.”

Julian did a full sweep over me with appreciative eyes before he looked back to Ian. “Did you go blind?”

“Shut up,” Ian snapped. “Where are dumb and dumber?”

“Getting their bags out of the car.”

“I’ve got your dumb and dumber, dickhead,” a guy said, climbing the porch steps and looking back at the ocean. “Nice spot.” He grinned at Ian. “Ian Kemp, you *ugly* bastard.”

“Doug, you piece of shit.” They clapped backs and he grinned wider as he looked over at me. “Damn, I see things are good for you, Kemp.”

“I’m Koti,” I offered as he kissed my hand.

“I’m Doug and you must be his new lady.”

I shook my head adamantly. “Nah, Ian’s more of a big brother to me.”

Ian cleared his throat, gray laser beams directed at me until he was struck by a duffle in the back and let out a loud “oomph.”

“What the hell, Drew,” Ian grunted out, as he turned to face his attacker.

“You poor bastard, you just keep getting uglier,” he said, as Drew hugged Ian before eyeing me. “God, please tell me she’s

my birthday present.”

Ian cringed as I spoke up on my own behalf. “Sorry pal, I’m more of a *Navy* guy kind of girl.”

All four of them looked at me with matching scowls before Drew spoke up with a shit-eating grin. “Beautiful *and* a ballbuster. I’m in love.”

Ian smacked him playfully in the back of the head. “I see you haven’t grown much. I’m assuming it’s the same sad case for your dick.”

I bit my lips to hide my smile. All four men spoke animatedly as beers were passed from the fridge and I sat on a stool with my wine in hand, the odd girl out. After half an hour of feeling like a fifth wheel, I decided if I was going to make it through the weekend, I would need backup.

* * *

“I could kick your ass for giving me a last-minute invite,” Jasmine said under her breath as she walked up the porch steps. “A house full of Marines? And you were going to keep this from moi?”

“Hell yes, I was,” I said, grabbing her bag. “Try to behave yourself.”

“Oh, well yeah, that’s impossible.”

She stepped into the room where four gorgeous men sat around my kitchen island shooting the shit.

“Jesus. Okay, let me pick out Ian. Oh God, he’s not handsome, he’s Bradley-*fucking*-Cooper hot. What the hell have you been hiding from me?! I’m decreasing your pay.”

“You can’t legally do that.”

“You’re a real asshole. God, Koti, he’s so beautiful.”

I sighed. "I know." *A beautiful self-absorbed asshole.*

"Who's the tall one with the blue eyes?"

"Julian."

"Dibs."

"There's no one else here to call it."

"Dibs anyway," she said retrieving a bottle of tequila. "Hey fellas, the party has officially started." All four men turned to see Jasmine in her Salma Hayek getup and all jaws dropped, including the jaw of the bastard I was sleeping with. I narrowed my eyes as he cleared his throat.

Two of the guys whistled as Ian searched for shot glasses. I moved to the kitchen to help him.

"In here," I said as he stood behind me and grabbed the glasses from the cabinet I couldn't reach. He pressed into me and I smelled a hint of his cologne and damn near fell into his frame.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"You seem to have the need to say that a lot."

I stood encased in his arms, his smell unavoidable, my body coming alive with every brush of his chest.

"I'm dying to touch you, but I'm afraid you'll slap me."

"I should."

"Don't complicate this, Koti. Please."

"Oh, you've made yourself clear." I pushed at his arm and he kept me trapped as he leaned down and whispered. "I'm just asking for you to understand."

"I understand just fine. But you're the one who blurred the line. A friend would have been the first to show up for me for that shit show. But don't worry, I have one of those and she's enough. I don't need you to go thinking I need you."

"Then why are you so pissed off?"

I turned in his arms as he kept me locked in place. "It's simple. You're a prick and you don't deserve my friendship *or* the

benefits.”

“Fine,” he said taking the glasses from the counter. “Is this typical of you? You can’t accept an apology and just move on. And you claim to be a grown-up.”

“I’m seconds away from kneeing your crotch, crocky. Trust me, you don’t want to meet the pissed off New Yorker.”

Ian’s eyes went cold and he stepped away. Everyone seemed oblivious to our exchange, except for Jasmine and Julian who watched us quietly and then scattered back into conversation as soon as we joined the rest of them. I poured everyone shots as Ian took out a few trays of food he’d bought from the deli earlier that day. He hadn’t bothered to show up at my house until he saw the taxi drop the guys off. He’d avoided me all week and with each day I grew more resentful of the fact that he wanted it that way.

* * *

Hours later, all four guys and Jasmine sat at my kitchen table with cigars and played poker. Jasmine was holding her own, thumping a cigar in the air and taking man-sized tugs as her and Julian eye fucked. Ian glanced at me every so often as I kept busy cleaning and airing out the house of the pungent smell. I felt like an old lady, drinking my wine off in the corner as everyone laughed and took shots. I had piped in here and there, but it was Jasmine who remained the life of the party. I was happy to give her that title as my spine prickled with nervous energy.

Not tonight. Come on, not tonight.

I kept busy, drinking a little more wine than I should as the music got louder and the voices more animated.

“Guys!” Jasmine shouted. “Listen!”

The guys looked between each other, a few leaning in.

After a few seconds, she harrumphed. “It’s “Roxanne””

The Police were playing the well-known song as she nudged Julian’s shoulder. “Let’s play the game.” She looked over at me with a ‘please’ on her face. “Koti! Will you get us some fresh beers?”

“I’ll get them,” Ian offered, ashing his cigar in the tray and glancing my way. I kept my eyes on his and didn’t let them stray until Jasmine squealed. “Hurry!”

Ian brought the beers back and passed them out and Julian spoke up. “Okay, so how does it go?”

“Easy,” Jasmine said, pouring more Patron into shot glasses. “Every time he sings Roxanne, you have to take a drink.”

The guys all grinned at her, amused, and she rolled her eyes. “Yes, the rules are *that* simple. You G.I. Joes won’t be so smug when you realize how hard it is to keep up. Now, get ready. And don’t stop tilting those beers until he stops.”

She lifted a shot and as soon as Sting got to the chorus, all the beers were tipped, except for Ian’s. He was glaring at me openly now, his eyes focused on my hand fidgeting with my necklace. I broke out in a mild sweat, as they all downed their beers.

“We need more, Koti? Please,” Jasmine said, trapped behind the table with Marines on either side of her. I nodded and quickly did her bidding before the next chorus. They all kept up with the song, downing four beers each, along with the free-flowing shots Jasmine poured. When a new hand was dealt, Ian excused himself, sprang from his seat and stalked toward me.

“Stop with the grudge, Koti. I said I was sorry.”

“Okay,” I said with a shrug. “You’re sorry. It’s fine. I’m not saying anything.”

“No, you’ve just been standing alone in the fucking kitchen all night.”

“I’m taking care of your company.”

“No one asked you to.”

“Well, this is my house and I’m hosting. It’s fine. We’re good. Just go enjoy yourself.”

“Fine, Eish! I’m so over this,” he hissed taking his seat and giving me one last eye full of ‘you’re the asshole’ before he turned his attention back to his friends. An hour later, I was scrubbing my countertops in an attempt to drown out the noise when the familiar pang hit me.

“Come on, not now,” I begged as one of the guys—I think it was Drew—yelled out a loud bark and the music was turned up. Jumping out of my skin, I took long breaths. “It’s just a party. Jesus, Koti, calm down.”

But I couldn’t as my chest began rising and falling rapidly. The blood drained from my face as I rushed out of the house without trying to direct any attention my way.

Yards away from the house I sat on the cool sand, closed my eyes, and began to count.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

“Koti?”

“Not now, okay. Please just leave me alone.”

“Jesus, it was a dick move. I’ve apologized. I don’t know what else to say!”

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

“Koti, damnit,” he barked moving to squat in front of me. “Look at me.”

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

“Ian, I’m having a moment, okay. Please, please leave me alone.”

Air burst out of me as I began hyperventilating.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

I breathed in sync with the sound of the waves and barely heard Ian’s pleas to try to help.

“Tell me what to do. Can you tell me how to help?”

I concentrated on my breathing and was only faintly aware when he sat next to me.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

The music stirred me back to life as all the energy drained from me. I concentrated on my breathing again until all I could hear were the waves. After a few moments, Ian spoke up.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“What triggered it? The noise? Fighting with me?”

“Yes, that or the fact that I’ve been on edge all week because of the fight with my parents. Or high tide. Ian, it could be anything,” I said as my body began to shut down and my limbs felt like lead attached to me.

“So, you’re okay now?”

“Yep.”

“That was a good one?”

I laughed ironically. “If there is such a thing, yes, that was a smaller one.”

His voice was stone. “Okay.”

He stood and made his way toward the house.

“What’s pissed you off now, Kemp?”

“Nothing, I’ll get the party outside. I’ll build a fire.”

“Fine.”

“Fine. Well, that seems to be the word for the day.”

“It’s a good word,” I smarted toward his back. He turned on me so quickly I stumbled in the sand.

“I didn’t want this! I spent fifteen fucking years catering to another woman’s happiness and most of it was miserable. Just for *once* I wanted to think about me! And only me! But no, I’ve spent a majority of my night with my best bra’s worrying about you, and how you feel, and if you’re angry. If I’ve said the wrong thing or if you’ll ever speak to me again!”

My eyes bulged. “You do hear what you’re saying, right?”

“I know how selfish it sounds and that’s the point!”

I swallowed as he took angry strides toward me. “You just couldn’t take an apology, so we could move past it. No! Instead, you make me feel terrible for *existing*. I can’t win! I didn’t want this! I don’t *want* to care about your feelings more than my own. I don’t *want* to be responsible for your moods. I just wanted some damned freedom!”

“Whoa,” I said, my head spinning with his wrath. Incredulous, I shook my head.

Three points to a good argument, Koti!

“Number one. Whoa. First of all, Tiger, you came to my island to implode and I rearranged everything to suit you. Number two, *for* you. Number three, because of the way *you* felt and what was happening to you. Which was what? Did you get bent out of shape over a hangnail, because *everything* seems to set you off.”

His jaw ticked as he took another step toward me.

“It would do you good to mind your mouth about things you know absolutely nothing about.”

“Only because you won’t tell me!”

“That’s right I won’t and that’s my choice.”

“Whatever. And by the way professor, your oh-so-polite way of telling me to shut up, isn’t going to fly. I left my parents’ in New York and even they don’t hold that right anymore. I shut up for NO MAN!”

“No, but you would never tell your parents that, would you? Instead, you hide!”

“Oh, you go to HELL!”

“Right back at you, love!”

We were chest to chest as I stumbled with exhaustion.

“I’m not going to coddle you from the truth, Koti.”

“Well, thank God for that, or else it would be a shame to see your soft side seeing as you’re about as subtle as HITLER!”

He gripped me tight to his body as I pushed at him with clenched fists. In an instant, his lips were on mine and I bit them so hard I knew I’d punctured skin. He ripped his mouth away and lifted me to wrap my legs around him, before kneeling on the sand. Our next kiss was savage and filled with need. I ripped at his thick hair as he thoroughly fucked me with his tongue until his will won, limp in his arms as he dove in and touched every part of my mouth. I pulled away scratching his shoulders.

“I hate you so much right now.”

He gripped my hair with his fist. “Feeling’s mutual at the moment.”

“What are you still doing here?” I said between kisses. “Just fucking go home!”

“Oh, how I want to, but I can’t seem to stay away from you.” Gliding his tongue over my chest he pulled away. “I need to, I do. I need to go,” he gritted out.

“I know,” I said truthfully.

“This is going to fuck us both.”

“I know that too,” I said, defeated, reaching between us and pulling his cock from his shorts, before he captured my mouth again. He snatched my dress away from my chest and sucked my nipple into his mouth.

Words fell away as we collided on that beach, our need for the other beating our senses away.

I sank onto him and we both groaned.

Licking the shell of my ear, his whisper had me halfway to the brink. “Fuck, I missed you.”

I agreed into his mouth as he slid his greedy tongue against mine.

“I need more than this,” he said, agitated as I struggled on his lap for friction I couldn’t find. He stood with me still connected, the darkness in his eyes highlighted by the porch light as he carried me to the side of the house. With every step, his cock throbbed deep and I whimpered at the feel, biting his neck. Once hidden, he pressed me against the wall of the house and I gave him a grin. “You’ve got a thing for the side of houses, don’t you?” He thrust into me so hard, it temporarily cut off my air supply.

“This will have to do until I can properly make it up to you.”

“Fuck me,” I rasped out, my heart banging in my chest.

“You just love to piss me off,” he grunted before he drove in hard, with zero mercy as I gasped, clutching onto his neck. “No,” he pushed at my chest, “lean back against the house, I want to see those beautiful tits bounce as I fuck you.”

I could hear my arousal as he buried himself, pumping so hard I saw stars.

“Ian.”

“This pussy is going to ruin me,” he swore as he tore through me with pure vengeance. “So perfect.”

“Please don’t stop.”

“No choice, love, this is going to be short and sweet. And I’m damn sure going to make it hurt as a warning. Stop fucking flirting with my friends or I’ll redden your ass.”

“I’ve barely looked at them.”

“That’s enough,” he said as we both managed a laugh between us, before the feel of our connection took hold.

Heat spread across my ass as his palm connected with a few slaps before he spread me wider with both hands and thrust up,

making us both call out to the other. I sank back against the house without much to hold onto. He was keeping me up with the sheer force of his thrusts. I came hard and fast just as he drove in one last time emptying himself into me.

He partially collapsed against me before kissing me so fiercely I had to pull back to draw my breath. Seconds after we recovered, I gave him a lazy smile before rubbing my palm down his jaw. "I guess you're forgiven."

I got nothing back aside from the show of emotion that surfaced in his eyes. Recognizing that look as fear and trepidation, we drew the same unspoken conclusion. We were no longer safe from attachment.

It was too late.

Way too late.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ian

WHEN WE STEPPED INSIDE THE house, the party had calmed considerably. Drew and Doug were cooking up some half-assed concoction in the kitchen and Julian and Jasmine had disappeared.

“He’s a good one,” I promised, kissing her hand. Both Drew and Doug looked to me with raised brows. “Yeah, she’s with me and it would do you good to keep your comments to yourself.”

Koti turned to me with a sheepish smile. “I’m going to go to bed.” I leaned in and took her lips. “I’ll be there soon. The pain pills are in the cabinet and,” I winced, “sorry in advance.”

“Don’t be,” she whispered with swollen kissable lips. “I’m not. I’ll keep your side warm.”

My side. I had a side?

My heart began to pound with that declaration. She leaned up on her toes. “Don’t overthink it, professor.”

“Right.”

“If I’m asleep, wake me up with your apology.”

“Won’t you be hurting?”

She gave me a warning look.

“Okay.”

With one more kiss, she disappeared into her bedroom.

“Some big brother you are,” Drew said, as they both broke down in a fit of laughter. “You fucked her so hard against the house we thought there was an earthquake.”

I couldn’t help my grin. “Mind your business, domkop.”

“Domkop?”

“Idiot.”

“Then say idiot. We don’t speak South African.”

I rolled my eyes. “*Domkop.*”

“Whatever. I think the entire island heard you two,” Drew said, taking a bite of his sandwich. “She’s truly beautiful, man. Congrats.”

Ignoring his comment, I gestured toward the beach. “Come on, let’s let the house rest.”

We built a fire fit for a king between the three of us and began the task of draining the cooler we packed.

“So, what’s the story between you and Koti?”

I glared at Drew as Doug sat back on the sand, threatening to pass out.

Throwing another piece of wood on the fire, I did my best to throw them off. “What are we, girlfriends? It’s none of your damned business.”

Drew looked at me pointedly. “We don’t hold back. Never have. That’s the deal. And why are you suddenly living in St. Thomas?”

“I’m interested to know that shit myself,” Julian said as he joined us around the fire.

“That was fast. Did you even use the gentlemen’s rule?” Doug said in a slur.

“They always come first,” Julian assured. “And don’t ask me shit. I like her.”

All eyes drifted back to me. Drew spoke up first.

“What’s the story, Ian? Will we be sending Christmas cards to St. Thomas?”

Toying with the cap of my beer, I pressed the wavy metal into my thumb and gave Drew a pointed look. “Let’s not pretend you know how to spell.”

The guys laughed, and Drew gave me the finger, but the heaviness of the question lingered in the air. They knew me

well, *too* well. That kind of bond only came with spending months together in the desert.

“I’m here...” I swallowed because it was the first time I was going to say it out loud. “I’m here because Tara told me that Ella isn’t mine.”

Julian got deathly silent as Drew cupped the back of his head. Doug was already snoring.

“Jesus, man, what the fuck?”

“Yeah.” I took a drink of beer. “So I came here to blow off some steam.”

“Damn.” Drew’s eyes bulged. “Can she take her from you?”

“No, she wouldn’t do that.” Panic ripped through me at the thought. “Well, I don’t know what in the hell she would do. If she went that far in the first place, who knows what she’s capable of.”

“Isn’t she like sixteen?” Drew asked. “She got pregnant when? Our second year overseas?”

“Yep,” I said, taking another swig. “She’s just turned fifteen.”

Drew spoke up. “You got fucking Jerry Springered. God, I knew I didn’t like her for a reason.”

“You loved Tara,” I pointed out. Julian, Drew, and Doug had been groomsmen at my wedding.

Julian remained quiet as he eyed me over the roaring fire.

“What, Drake? No words of wisdom?”

“Sorry, man, I’m still trying to wrap my head around it.”

“Me too,” I said, retiring my bottle for another.

“How long are you staying here?” Julian asked.

“Not sure.”

“What does that mean for Koti?” Drew asked.

“Not sure about that either, but you need to keep your hard-on to yourself, fucker,” I said, throwing a handful of sand his way.

Julian spoke up. "I've got your back, whatever happens. Whatever you need, man. I'll be there."

"Same here," Drew offered.

"Me too," Doug said before he resumed his snoring.

Sharing a laugh, we tossed some beer on Doug and dropped the subject before we spent the rest of the night bullshitting until the sun peaked on the horizon. Drunk and exhausted, I showered off the sand and climbed into bed with Koti, on *my* side.

"Have fun?" Koti asked as I pulled her to me and kissed her neck.

"Mmm," I answered, shifting her leg to rest on my thigh and stretching her ready pussy with my fingers. Cupping her perfect tit, my cock grew unbearably harder as I brushed over her nipple with my thumb.

"You must be exhausted." Reaching back, she ran her fingers through my hair. Her soothing touch a balm to cure the ache of needing her. "Aren't you worn out?"

"Not yet," I promised, placing tongue-filled kisses on her neck before biting into her shoulder.

"Tan," she rasped out, as I pressed into her wet heat sliding in nice and slow in an attempt to save her from any more pain. "God, you feel so good."

"So do you, beauty," I whispered before I tilted her face back toward me with my finger and kissed her.

She felt too good, too right, but I was done dwelling on it. I had her now, I had her until I couldn't have her and that had to be enough.

I gently fucked her, our eyes remained fixed on the other. Memorizing every gasp, every moan, I kept us connected, until I couldn't take another second and spilled into her. After we'd both come down, I pulled her closer to me as I drifted to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Koti

THAT MORNING I WOKE UP to the feel of Ian's arms around me. Deciding it was dangerous to bask in the sensation of being surrounded by him, I opted for a shower. By the time I tiptoed back into the bedroom, he was awake and sitting at the edge of the bed. Wordlessly I walked over to him when he stood, his eyes covering every inch of my exposed skin before they met mine. He gently pushed the wet hair away from my shoulder.

"I'm sorry I hurt you. I don't want to."

"What *do* you want from me, Ian?"

He paused, his thick brown hair a mess, his eyes etched with concern and tenderness.

"For the moment, it's simple. You. And I want that to be okay. So, you tell me, is that okay?"

I'd already decided to roll the dice with Ian. There was no decision to make. He was worth it and so I nodded, giving him permission to break my heart. He kissed me long and hard before I pulled away. "You need a toothbrush, crocky."

He chuckled before he tossed me onto the bed, his hard-on proudly displayed an inch from my face when I sat up. "Jeesh, you're like a teenager with a new toy." I motioned toward his erection.

"I know," he said, wagging his brows. "But I have no time to be your pleasure prince this morning. We're going deep sea fishing today. Want to come?"

"My pleasure prince?"

"Yep," he said, leaning down to ruffle my hair like he did when we were kids because he knew I *hated* it.

"Your ego gets bigger and bigger every day."

“Hey, I’m only gloating based on your screaming reviews. So, would you like to join us?”

“Join you out in the deep sea with only a life preserver if shit goes south? Uh, no thanks, but have fun.”

“You’ll be heavily guarded by four Marines.”

I scoffed. “Four ex-Marines *way* past their prime.”

“Ouch.” He scowled at me from where he stood and then looked down at his stiff cock. “Hear that, buddy? She’s trying to shoot us down. We’re not having that are we?” He made his way towards the bathroom, his perfect bare ass on display before he shut the door. He ticked my every box both intellectually and sexually. He was attentive and warm and had a huge capacity for love, which he proudly displayed whenever he spoke to his beautiful little girl. He was the perfect man to steal my heart, and I had zero doubts once he was done with it, it would never be the same.

* * *

Breakfast had been served by the time I got to the table. Everyone was munching down on freshly made eggs and crisp bacon, but when I went to grab a plate, I noticed Jasmine was missing.

Julian’s eyes met mine. “She’s taken the dog out.”

I walked out onto the porch as Jasmine jumped out of the hammock wiping at her eyes.

She dropped Disco on the porch who came running toward me. I picked her up and gave her a kiss. “Morning, baby.” Dispensing the puppy in the house, I moved to where Jasmine stood.

“Why are you crying? Did Julian do something?”

She shook her head adamantly and then smiled, which quickly turned into a grimace that had my heart splintering when she started crying again.

“Jasmine, please tell me what’s wrong. It’s physically hurting me to see you like this.”

“I just can’t stop doing this. I need to stop. I’m stopping.”

“Stopping what?”

“Being a slut, that’s what! I don’t *know* that man,” she said, pointing toward the house. “I don’t know these men I’m sleeping with. I don’t know why I can’t stop doing this or why I even started. Before Steven, I’d only slept with four men. I’m almost forty-one!”

“I thought you were thirty-nine?”

“*See*, I’m a liar too.” She cried harder and I couldn’t help my laugh.

“Babe, it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. It’s not fun anymore. It hasn’t been for a while. If my prince charming is out there, he missed the map.”

“Are you sure this isn’t about Julian? Did he hurt you?”

“No, if anything he saved me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean for the first time in forever, I got an inkling. Like ‘maybe if he didn’t live in fucking Iowa, I may have a shot at something real and amicable’ type inkling.”

“That’s amazing.”

“Yeah, except I’m not moving to Iowa to test chemistry. I mean, who the hell chooses to live in Iowa?”

“Hey, Midwesterners are the *best* kind of people and our nicest clients.”

“True,” she sniffed, while tying her hair up on top of her head.

“So, you’re done and you’re going to hold out now, good for you. It will happen, Jasmine, and at least you know it’s possible.”

“Also true.”

“Okay then. No more tears.” I pulled her back down into the hammock with me and we started swinging.

“I don’t know why I’m crying,” she said with a sigh.

“You think you really like Julian?”

“Not to that extent.”

“Maybe you’re lonely and you’re admitting it to yourself now.”

“Probably.”

“Well, you don’t have to be lonely. You can come over anytime. And at least now you know what you *don’t* want.”

“I’ll still be a pervert.”

“Just a pervert who isn’t getting any,” I said, nudging her.

“That’s probably going to worsen my condition.”

“I can live with that.”

“Here I am crying, and you’re the one with real penis problems. God, I love him for you already. He could not keep his eyes off you all night. I swear it was so beautiful to see the way he looked at you. Maybe that’s what has me crying. Maybe I’m jealous.”

“That’s a good thing—not you being jealous—but wanting it for yourself. Though I really don’t think you have a reason to be.”

“Well, you were too busy cleaning to see it. So, I’m guessing you two had it out?”

“Oh, we had it out.” I grinned.

“Sounded like it,” she grinned back. I threaded her fingers with mine.

“You are the best, you know that? I couldn’t have ever gotten my shit together without you. You will too, you know. You’ll get there.”

“I think I’m there. And maybe I’m crying because the party is over.”

“Julian’s the last one, huh?”

“Tonight’s my last night. And I’m glad it’s with him. Nothing’s going to top that ass for a while. I’m cutting my losses.”

“Really?”

“God, yes. He was so good, he knocked me out.”

“*Damn.*”

She pressed her lips together to hide a guilty smile.

“What?” I prompted.

“He’s just turned thirty-one.”

My eyes bulged. “I didn’t realize he was that much younger than the rest of them.”

“Me neither, he’s seems more mature. I’m officially a cougar.”

“That was your first younger guy?”

She nodded as the door opened and Jasmine looked to me to check her face for traces of weepy black streaks. When I nodded to let her know she was in the clear, we remained in the hammock as Ian greeted us.

“So, we’re off.” He looked mouthwatering in board shorts and a T-shirt that stretched over his new build. Gray eyes implored the both of us. “Julian said you won’t join us either, Jasmine. You two sure you won’t change your minds?”

“Nope, we’re going to hang out here—girl stuff.”

He nodded unsure of how to leave me. Making it easy, I stood and planted a wet kiss on his lips. Smiling into my kiss, he gripped me tightly to him and deepened it before he pulled away. I smoothed his cheek with my palm before I leaned in on a whisper. “See you later... pleasure prince.”

Rewarded with another smile, I sank back into the hammock as Drew, Doug, and Julian stomped down the steps. Julian

paused halfway to the alley and gripped Jasmine's hand over the railing. "See you tonight?"

"Sure."

"Have fun, fellas," I called out as they made their way toward Ian's truck. We eavesdropped as they packed their coolers.

"So, you're going to see her tonight?"

I think it was Drew who asked.

"Hell yes, if she'll have me."

Jasmine and I shared shit-eating grins.

"She doesn't know you well enough to deny you," Doug said.

"But it's nice to know someone's getting laid around here."

"You're married, dude."

"Exactly, like I said, it's nice to know *someone* is getting laid."

"It can't be that bad," Drew said as the truck doors collectively opened.

"She won't even let me take my socks off in bed anymore."

Julian spoke up next. "Have you seen your fucking feet, man? Get a damned pedicure already, or hacksaw or something. Get a little man care going on."

I covered my mouth as Jasmine gripped my thigh.

"What kind of pussy gets a pedicure?"

Two of them spoke up in unison, "I do."

Ian spoke up next. "Don't look at me, no one touches my feet. But hey, do any of you guys know what blasted means?" The truck doors slammed as Jasmine and I sank into the hammock with tears of laughter pouring down our faces.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Koti

LATER THAT NIGHT, FOUR SUNBURNED and drunken Marines came barreling through my front door with victorious stories about being captains at sea. Doug, I had learned, was always the first to pass out and went straight to his guest room. Julian and Jasmine made themselves scarce as Drew and Ian faced off in a game of dominoes. Games seemed to be the guys bonding medium. I pretended to read my book while spying on their progress.

“You are a sloppy drunk, figure it out,” Ian slurred.

“I’m working on it.”

“Working on losing your ass,” Ian said. “You already owe me fifty for the bet on the boat. You need to go ahead and cough it up now.”

“Put it on my tab.” He snickered at Ian as he popped open another beer.

“I best not have to clean up after your ugly ass tonight.”

“Calm down, Mom, I can handle another beer.”

Drew downed his beer in spite and Ian looked my way and gave me a drunken smile. “Hey, you.”

I couldn’t help my giggle. “Hey back.”

Drew leaned over the table and spoke in nothing close to the whisper he was aiming for. “You two are soooo cute. You’re sleeping with a supermodel, we get it.”

“I can hear you, Drew,” I said, turning a page.

“Well, I hope you take it as a compliment. Hey asshole, here’s your fifty. I’m out.”

“It was earned,” Ian said, pocketing the money as Drew gave me a wave goodnight before turning it into the bird for Ian. I

laughed as he retreated while Ian sauntered over to me, close to rearranging the furniture with his drunken sea legs.

“And it’s time for bed for you.”

His perma-smile only got wider. “I’ll agree to that.”

“Not that kind of bedtime, professor.”

He pushed his lips out in a pout which was so unlike him, and I laughed.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you,” he said as I pulled his arm around my neck.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. I think you’re stronger than you think you are. Much.”

“Ian, please don’t try to fix me.”

“I’m not. I swear, I’m not.”

“Did you Google anxiety and now you’re an expert?”

“Give me credit, I know it’s more complex to understand than watching a YouTube video.”

We stumbled down the hall and he pulled away from me, pointing an index finger at my lips.

“Hey, did you know miraculous things can happen more than once? It happens. It happens every day to someone who says *never*. I mean you think you know. You’re sure of it and it all falls apart or fades away and you can’t remember when it happened. Do you understand?”

I shook my head. “No clue.”

“Pity, try to keep up. It’s not simple, any of it. Not one part of life is simple. There are no arrows to guide you that help you make one fucking thing simple. Every important decision is complicated because it leads to more decisions. You decided to step into my life, instead of sipping tea.”

“Coffee,” I said with a smirk.

“A beverage,” he said in drunken agitation. “Anyway, emotions are a horrible catalyst for making decisions that matter. And some choices aren’t yours, they float away on a

cloud of emotions and come back made *for* you. Committing to how you *feel* is a recipe for disaster.” He stumbled into my bedroom and I followed, tempted to kick him right in his smug ass. To my horror, he continued his reverie.

“All of it’s ridiculous and cruelly unnatural for a realist.”

“That’s, uh, sad, Ian, if that’s your outlook, and horribly put by someone who claims to be an educator. It’s a good thing you don’t teach philosophy, professor.”

Ignoring my comment, he struggled with his sneakers as he began to undress.

“Free will is a bitch, puffer fish, and half the time it’s got both signals on which can only confuse you further.”

“Ah, the ponderings of a drunken sailor.”

“Marine,” he said, looking up at me pointedly, “and don’t you forget it.”

“Right.”

He ripped off his shirt and glared at me. “You aren’t taking me seriously.”

“Oh, I’m listening.”

“Good, you should.”

“I was taught young to listen to my elders.”

“Cute, that’s the second time you’ve made fun of my age. I’ll be reddening your ass for that.”

“I look forward to it.”

“So, I’m finally free to be a little selfish and I intend on enjoying every moment of it.”

“Haven’t we already had this conversation? I’m on your side and kudos to you.”

“Look, I know *this*,” he said, sitting on the edge of the bed. “I’ve been through *this* before, so I know this mystery, the need, the goddamn ache in my chest.”

“Ian—”

He slowly raised his head, his glossy eyes boring into mine. “You’re so beautiful.” It sounded agonizing coming from his lips as if it were a burden for him.

“So are you.” The irony was his beauty was just as much of a burden for me.

“I’m smashed, Koti.”

“I’ve gathered that.”

“You really are the most...” his voice turned hoarse, “what’s inside of you is a heart that is dying to live, and your head is too afraid to let you do it fully, the way you deserve. It’s the most tragic thing I’ve ever seen. You’re a prisoner of your own making.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said, crossing my arms despite my ache to touch him.

“It’s not your fault.”

“Good to know.”

“But what your mind won’t let you understand is you can’t control a single fucking thing. Control is an illusion and all your home remedies for coping aren’t ever going to change that.”

“I’m aware. This isn’t news, Ian. In fact, it’s redundant, and it changes nothing.”

“Exactly, because anxiety stems from emotion, it doesn’t listen to reason.”

He wasn’t saying it for me, to help me understand, he was explaining it to himself, so *he* could understand *me*.

“What’s your point?”

He laid down and threw his arm over his face. “The point is—I don’t believe in miracles, but I’m falling for mine.”

And with that, he passed out cold.

I stood stunned as I watched his breathing. Never had I thought he was capable of feeling for me the way I did for him. But I had to remember they were the ramblings of a

drunk and confused man. Even so, his confession filled me with a warmth that I didn't expect.

I took off his other sneaker and once I was sure he was comfortable, made my way to the kitchen. Julian was closing the fridge door with a water in hand. "Advil and a bottle of water before bed and you'll never have a hangover." He grinned, and I returned it.

"Have fun today?"

"Too much. I love the Virgin Islands, you're lucky to live here."

"Jasmine told me you live in Iowa."

"Yeah, I run a farm with my dad. He's getting ready to retire."

"Do you like it?"

"Love it, wouldn't dream of living anyplace else. I've seen the world and I like my version best. But yours doesn't suck. Want me to grab you something?"

"I'll take a water." Sitting on the other side of the island, I thanked him when he passed me the bottle and took a long drink.

"Ian got drunk early, try not to hold it against him."

"Does he always get so philosophical when he drinks?"

"Only when he's got something to think about. Today I'm thinking it was you?"

My cheeks heated slightly, but Julian was easy to talk to and far from hard to look at. He was shirtless and had an incredible build. I was happy Jasmine's last fix was with a man that hot, and for the most part he seemed to be intuitive and kind.

"He's a stand-up guy, but a bit opinionated and a little arrogant."

Raising my pointer and thumb, I showed Julian an inch. He pushed my fingers wider apart and we both laughed.

"Did you know his wife?"

Julian nodded. "I was his best man."

I left the question open because I was dying to know if his presence here had anything to do with her.

“He didn’t tell you why he was here, did he?”

Intuitive Julian. I liked him.

“I bet you’re the peacekeeper of the crew.”

“Yep, Drew is the clown, Doug is the “always up for it” guy. I’m the peacekeeper and Ian is the thinker.”

“I love that you guys still keep in touch.”

“Ian’s passed on most of our trips over the years, but he surprised us all with the invite out here.”

“Why do you think he passed?”

“His daughter. Always Ella. He’s a helicopter dad and won’t miss anything when it comes to her. None of us blame him.”

Finishing my water, I stood and threw it in the trash.

“I will tell you this. He’s not here because of his ex-wife.”

I nodded.

“But he’s been through hell because of her and the damage she’s done is going to fuck with him for some time.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure.”

“As long as we’re giving fair warning, you should know Jasmine’s in a... strange place.”

“We’ve been talking most of the night.”

“Okay, cool,” I said, relieved to be off the hook. “Well, see you in the morning.”

He pushed off from the counter. “Night.”

I got halfway to the hall when he spoke up. “Koti?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks for having us.”

“Of course. I had fun.”

“And just in case you need to hear it from someone who knows him, you won’t be easily forgotten.”

But I would be forgotten, at least that’s the way I interpreted it. Unable to think of Julian as spiteful or having any reason to hurt me, my new hopes, even with Ian’s confession of falling, were obliterated. Though I was confused, I refused to ask Julian for a better explanation. I’d already shown too much vulnerability when it came to Ian. I’d given Julian a rock to my glass house and he’d used it.

“Night, Julian.”

“Night.”

Chapter Thirty

Ian

Hi, Daddy.

Hi, brat.

Pain ripped through my chest and threatened my smile as I stared at my daughter on the screen. How many of his features did she have? Were any of her traits, the ones I thought were mine, his? Her smiles, especially those I earned, were those as hard-pressed to get from him? Did she suspect anything? Tara obviously hadn't told her.

You look happy.

I am happy. It's beautiful here. I can't wait for you to come.

Next week?

Yes. I'll be waiting at the airport. Are you sure you're okay with flying alone?

She rolled her eyes and I cut my hand through the air to tell her that was not okay. It was a sign of disrespect and she got away with little in the way of that.

Sorry.

Forgiven.

Her beautiful smile faltered by the presence of someone coming into her bedroom.

Mom's here, she wants to talk to you.

Later. I want to know how things are going. One more week until school is out. Are you excited?

Hell yes.

Language.

I reprimanded her even though I often let her get away with calling me an asshole. It was a long-running joke between us.

Do you love Koti?

No. Why would you ask that?

You can't lie to me, Dad. You look happy and she's behind you, staring at you.

That's because she's fascinated by sign language.

You should teach her.

I will.

Good.

What else is new?

Mom keeps asking me if I like Houston. I don't want to move; all my friends are here.

I'm working on that.

Work harder.

Easy, brat. I'm not going to let her move the two of you without a fight. But that's our business.

My business too.

True. But trust me to handle it.

She signed okay, but I could see the fear in her eyes which only infuriated me. It was only natural for Tara to move on and build a new life for herself, but her selfish choices were always an issue when it came between our daughter's happiness and her own.

Are you getting excited about Washington?

Yes. They had us start writing to our camp roommates to get to know them before we went. I have a pen pal, her name is Melissa and she goes to The School for the Deaf and Blind in South Carolina. She might be going to DC next year too for the program so we can be friends.

Do you think you'll like her?

I think so. Not sure.

No boys.

Dad!

If you roll your eyes again, you'll be grounded.

Fine. But Jessica gets to date.

I'm not Jessica's father.

Why are you so hard on me about this?

You know why.

I'm deaf, not stupid.

Exactly.

Then why can't you trust me? What if I like a hearing boy?

No boys period. Let's talk about something else.

She blew her bangs out of her eyes and nodded. Are you staying in St. Thomas for the whole summer?

Yes, and you know you can come here with me instead of Washington. I would love it.

She was already shaking her head.

That was a quick decision. Don't worry about my feelings being hurt. I bulged my eyes and she laughed. That sound would forever be the best sound of my life.

Sorry. I just don't want you hounding me. You are the fun police.

Have I lost my little girl already? I finished signing slowly. My devastation unintentional.

Daddy? What's wrong?

Nothing, baby. I'm just sad you're growing up so fast.

Mom keeps telling me she wants to talk.

I shook my head. I'll call her later. I'll see you at the airport.

Can't wait. Love you.

Love you so much. Be safe and get to me in one piece, okay?

She rubbed her chest with the sign of the P. Promise.

You are my heart, Ella Danielle Kemp.

You are my heart, Daddy Asshole.

I laughed as the screen cut off and then spoke to the sun-kissed beauty behind me.

“Ella says you were staring at me during our whole conversation.” I glanced back at the island where Koti stood peeling potatoes, her cheeks reddening.

“I love to watch you two sign, it’s fascinating.”

I drew my brows and stood. “That’s the only reason?”

“Yep. Love *it*,” she said, toying with me. Everything about her from her chin-length, gold-spun hair to the tip of her polished blue toes made my veins ache. I wanted to possess her. Her silver-blue eyes bled me and often. It was damn near physically painful to be so attracted to her. The warmth I felt when I was with her was something else entirely.

“If you really want to learn, I’ll teach you.”

“Really?” My heart began to race at the appearance of her smile. Nothing affected me quite as much as the sight of it.

“We can start tonight after dinner. I’m going to teach you exactly as I was taught. There are strict rules.”

“I’m up for it. I learned the alphabet for sign language in grade school. I still remember it.”

“That will help,” I made my way toward her and saw her falter slightly when she read my posture. “You’ll have to do your part, study on your own, and use the workbooks.”

“I will, I swear. We have a few deaf renters come in once in a while...” she subtly smiled in an effort to hide her anticipation as I drew closer. “I can’t wait to be able to talk to them. Oh, and I can sign to Ella next week!”

“It takes time to master this language like any other and there’s slang to learn too.”

“Okay.”

I could feel the rattle in her posture as I slipped in behind her and leaned in a whisper. “It could take you months to be conversational.”

“Bring it on,” she said as her skin heated beneath my fingertips.

“After.” I pulled the peeler from her hands and set it on the counter.

“After.” She repeated, leaning against me and slipping her hand between us to brush it over my ready cock.

“After.” Turning her in my arms, I covered her mouth with my own.

* * *

Koti

After turned into a couple of hours of rough exploration by my nutty professor. The man was a God in the sack and though some days were filled with the painful effects of his aftermath, I couldn't stop myself from my new addiction. He was a thorough lover with endless imagination. I smiled as I waited outside my front door playing with Disco. Ian demanded that we conduct class just as he would anywhere else and had been adamant about treating me as he would any other student. Restless with anticipation, I waited the five minutes he asked for to ready himself for our first class.

When I walked into the house, I saw he had rearranged the furniture putting his dry erase board where my coffee table usually sat.

“It's getting hot out—”

My sentence was cut short by Ian's stomping on the hardwood floor and the shake of his head.

I took his cue and zipped it. He pointed to the couch as he stood next to the board that read “My name is Ian.”

Once seated, he waved at me in greeting and I waved back. I could see a repressed grin lay idle on his lips before he wiped

it away and replaced it with what I assumed was his teacher mask. He lifted his hands and signed.

Confused, I shrugged. He looked at me expectantly and signed again.

I gave him wide eyes.

Ten minutes later, we were in a lock of wills. He kept placing his hand to his chest, then crossing closed pointer and middle fingers on each hand before rapidly spelling out a word. I'd been working on that word the whole time because it was all of the language I knew but his fingers were moving so fast from letter to letter I couldn't read it. The last letter was an N. I was sure of it. A light bulb went off and I jumped in my seat excitedly with an "Oh, damn, how did I not get that!?"

Ian stomped his foot again and shook his head, eyes narrowed.

He signed the same phrase, this time slower so I could follow.

My name is Ian.

This time I lifted my own hands repeating his movements.

My name is Koti.

He nodded and made a quick sign, which I assumed was the word good or yes.

Over the next hour, we remained in silent conversation as I stayed puzzled half the time before I began to catch on. By the time class was over I'd learned to introduce myself and ask, "How are you?" Also a few basic signs, how, who, why, when and where.

"That was pretty good," he said as he erased the board.

"That was incredible! You learned sign language this way?"

"Yes, my teacher was a deaf woman named Billy, and she was incredible."

"It seems impossible to learn this way, but it's really kind of amazing."

"She could read lips and talk, but speaking was forbidden in her classroom."

Excited, I jumped on him, he laughed at my unexpected enthusiasm and caught me easily, gripping my ass and holding me close to him. “I love it!”

“Really?”

“Yes, so much. I can’t wait for more. Do we have to stop today?”

“Yes. It’s easy to forget the signs. I want you to practice them all night and all morning. It may seem trivial to you, but you’ll understand why later. Okay?”

“Is this like the *Karate Kid*, where you make me wax on, wax off and then show me some kick-ass moves?”

Ian chuckled. “Something like that.”

“Well, I’ll make you proud, sensei.”

His eyes shone with something that resembled adoration and my heart warmed with the hope of it. “I suspect you will, puffer fish.”

Our matching grins disappeared as he leaned in and took my lips, kissing me with a lazy and seductive tongue.

“About what I said the other night while I was smashed.”

I gave him a side-eye. “You actually remember that?”

He winced. “Some of it?”

I shook my head. “No more. No more fighting, no more misconception, no more judging, speculating, worrying, none of it. I’m having a great time and so are you. That’s all we need to know. Let’s move on already.”

He let out a breath of relief. “Music to my ears.”

“Same here. Let’s leave it at the egg comes first and have some more fun.”

“What if I said the chicken came first?”

“Well then, I would have to burden you with coming up with proof, professor.”

“I have no proof.”

“Then we can debate about it during our swim like adults.”

“Swim?”

“Let’s go swimming and after,” I waggled my brows, “we can *after*.”

“Aren’t you hurting?”

“I’m good. Actually, I’m great. I’m growing into a huge fan of sex after years of being on team abstinence. Also, sex between us requires little communication which, if we’re honest, we seem to suck at.”

“Good point,” he said, smiling down at me. “But I think we’re getting better.”

“Agreed,” I said, as he let me on my feet.

“I’ll get my suit on.”

I took his hand and moved toward the front door. “That won’t be necessary, professor.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Koti

ANXIOUS, I CHECKED THE ROAST in the oven for the second time in ten minutes. Any second, Ella would be walking through the door and I wanted more than anything for her to like me. Even if Ian and I didn't have a future, some part of me hoped for a lasting friendship. I lost everything when I left New York and severed ties with everyone I thought was close to me, but Ian and I were a different kind of close. He understood me like no one else in my life ever had, including Jasmine. He knew me intimately and touched me in ways I needed. He knew my secrets, my fears and asked me constantly what my hopes were, to which I had no reply. I never thought past getting through my days when I arrived on the island. And now it seemed I had a whole different life in front of me. I didn't tell him my hopes because the truth was I wasn't sure. For the first time in my life, it wasn't mapped out, which was both amazing and a bit terrifying. But I had learned I didn't need big dreams and accomplishments to matter. And his question was more geared toward my happiness, I knew it without him telling me. So, when it came to hopes, I would let them evolve just like I had when I set foot in St. Thomas. And maybe before he left, I would have something to share. Even when our time ended, I hoped to remain a part of his life, even if it meant I would have to witness him living it with someone else.

His friendship was a rare gift when it came to acceptance. While a part of me knew I was in love with him, a larger part of me knew that for some reason, when I was six-years-old I was gifted with a best friend who later turned into a soulmate. We spent the first month together at odds, but the last few weeks had been some of the most blissful days of my entire life. When I knocked off work, I raced home without a clue as to where our night would lead. It was different from the

predictability I learned to count on every day, but oddly the new routine felt just as safe because of Ian.

And the fact that I had never been in love played a large part of the reason for my happiness. I tried not to dwell on it due to the impending heartbreak, but the truth was I had never experienced the constant pounding heart, desire, the elation, the need, the torturous want, the playful comfort. All of that, from the time I was in my teens, was stripped from my life by my ambitious schedule and the aftermath of trying to keep up with it. There had been boyfriends, a few of them memorable but never had I ever felt such an attraction to a man. I'd never in my life been inspired the way I was by Ian. His ability to make me feel everything with a single look was unparalleled by any before him.

I was weeks away from thirty years old and had just found my first love.

And my soulmate.

But not my forever.

The front door opened as I lit a candle, and Ian and Ella appeared. I waved my hello frantically and Ella rushed to my side. We both hesitated briefly before we hugged.

I took my time signing my greeting.

I'm so happy you are here.

She began frantically signing as her father corrected her while talking. He made a fist with one hand and slid spaced fingers over it toward him.

“Slow, Ella. She’s only been doing this for two weeks.”

She turned back to me and signed with the letter S rubbing her chest.

Sorry.

I signed back.

It's okay.

She spoke then. “We can practice more while I’m here.”

“I would love that.”

“Can I see the puppy?”

“Of course.” I moved to the bedroom where I had locked Disco in so I could mop the floors and jumped out of my skin when Ella shrieked. Ian had told me Ella was unbelievably loud at times. I shook my head at my foolish reaction and Ian gave a wink. “It’s okay, beautiful. She startles me too at times.”

“You aren’t allowed to talk when you know she can’t hear you. It’s disrespectful.”

“I can’t call you beautiful in front of her.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Right. It’s bad manners. You must have a good teacher.”

“He’s the best.” I managed to sign that part and Ella caught it.

“Who is the best?”

“Your dad, for teaching me.”

She lifted her hands. *I’ll be a better teacher.*

“I bet.”

I poked her shoulder to get her attention as she fawned over the dog. *Do you like...* I took my time spelling out pot roast because I had no idea what the sign was. I was only halfway through the letters when she nodded.

“You knew what I was signing?”

She nodded again. “Of course.”

“Wow. I hope I get that sharp with the language.”

“You will,” Ian assured.

We sat at the table as Ian and Ella went back and forth signing while talking at the same time so I could understand their conversation. I felt oddly emotional as I watched their interaction. It was like watching the most important part of Ian in those moments with his daughter. Their love was palpable, their relationship completely unique. They were close, as close as two people could be within the boundaries of a parent/child

relationship. Although close with my own father, we never talked so candidly. Ian had told me that deaf people don't often beat around the bush and can sometimes come off as brash or rude, but most were just naturally and brutally honest. Since my classes with Ian started, I'd been learning a little about the deaf culture and it had only piqued my curiosity.

"You are such an asshole, Daddy," Ella said, leaving me with wide eyes to gauge his reaction. Ian didn't seem offended in the least which made me laugh. They both looked at me with matching grins.

"What?" Ella asked.

"You just called your dad an asshole. And while I agree, I'm surprised you get away with it."

"Not nice," Ian scolded me before he looked at Ella. "Do you want to tell the story?"

Ella nodded. "If I speak funny, tell me, okay?"

"You sound perfect." I signed the word good.

"Don't lie, Koti, that doesn't help me grow."

I sat shocked but then nodded. "Okay, you sound pretty damn good for someone who's never heard a single sound."

She immediately turned to Ian. "I like her."

"Me too," he said, his eyes darkening as he looked over at me. I felt the blush creep up my cheeks.

Ella picked up on the chemistry. "You two are more than friends. When are you going to break it to me?"

I choked on a sip of water as Ian shook his head and spoke. "Tell the story, brat."

"Okay fine." Ella turned to me. "He wanted dad to be my first sign. He spent a long time trying his best to make me do it."

I stuck my thumb to my forehead the rest of my fingers pointing up at the ceiling and then pulled it away a half inch.

"Close, you don't have to touch your forehead with your thumb, but yes, that's the sign for dad."

I nodded.

“From what Daddy says, I wasn’t good at lifting my thumb up to reach my forehead and instead of having my finger straight out... I’ll show you.” She took my hand and closed my thumb and pointer in a circle while leaving the other fingers open and spaced apart.

“This is the sign for asshole, isn’t it?”

Ella laughed so loudly next to me I fought myself to keep from jumping in my seat.

“Yes. I’ve been calling him an asshole since I was little, and he got used to it.”

“It was the only time I was ever happy she couldn’t talk,” Ian said with an embarrassed shake of his head.

“But you made sure I knew how to say it,” Ella said with a giggle.

“Yes, I did.” He was a proud dad, it leaked out of his every pore. I briefly wondered what it would be like to raise another human being. I never imagined it for myself, but Ian had done it. And from what I could tell, he’d done it well.

“So, are we sleeping here?”

“Yes, Grandma’s house is rented for the rest of the summer,” Ian answered. I tried to concentrate on his signing as he spoke. They were both too fast. Ian noticed my frown before he slowed down, which earned him a smile from me.

I loved his patience, the way he cared for me and those around him. He may have wanted to be selfish, but that was one thing Ian wasn’t. And because I couldn’t handle another second of watching him without expressing exactly what I loved about him, I excused myself and cleared the dishes. Ian spoke up.

“Ella’s got dish duty. That’s a rule.”

At your house. I managed to sign. “She’s on vacation.”

Ian’s jaw ticked and I did damage control. “Just for tonight.”

He nodded and gave her a pointed look. “Wipe the table. And don’t forget your manners.”

She nodded before she turned to me. “Thank you so much for dinner”

“You are most welcome.”

She then tilted her head at Ian. “Sir, may I be excused?”

“Yes, brat.”

Ella joined me at the sink. “Marines,” she cooed in what she thought was a whisper. Her father slashed his hand through the air and I gave her big eyes and brought her to me in a protective hold while she giggled.

Ian narrowed his eyes at me as he made his way toward his bedroom. “Don’t encourage her.”

Ella helped with the dishes anyway and we made small talk as she told me about the camp in Washington D.C. She planned to go to college there, but they had an early entrance program that she hoped to get into for her last two years of high school. I was sure that Ian had a future somewhere in D.C. In an attempt to mask the sting that threatened I told her of my common love for the *Outlander* books. She squealed in excitement and agreed to join our book club during her stay.

Minutes later, Ian returned with a brand-new iPad with a bow on top.

Ella squealed with delight.

“I wanted you to have it while you were here. I loaded it with age-appropriate books. Do not even think about downloading that smut I caught you with last month.”

“Yes, sir! Thank you, Daddy!” She wrapped her arms around him tight as he hugged her with his whole being. Something about that had my emotion spilling over. I couldn’t get over the appeal of the several sides of Ian Kemp and I loved every single one of them.

Jesus, Koti, get a grip.

Excusing myself for the second time, I grabbed my book and made my way onto the porch. Lighting candles, I turned on my music, Bob Marley’s “Three Little Birds” and sank into my

sanctuary. Minutes later, I looked up to see Ian on the porch staring at me with confusion.

“What are you doing?”

“Uh, reading?”

“Do you feel out of place?”

I sat up. “Not at all. I just wanted to give you time alone with her.”

“Okay.”

“I shouldn’t... we shouldn’t give her the wrong impression. We discussed this.”

He glanced at the front door. “I know, I just thought tonight you would hang out with us.”

“Ian Kemp, are you pouting?”

“I might be.”

“Get your ass in there and spend time with your kid.”

“Fine. But are you coming to the beach tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

“And tonight, when she goes to bed, I’m going to sneak into your room and lick—”

“You will do no such thing. There will be no licking of anything.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“I’m locking my door.”

“Don’t threaten me or every door in this house will be without locks within the hour.”

“Behave yourself.” I shooed him away as he glanced back at me from the front door.

“Koti, I don’t mind you spending time with us.”

But I mind, Ian, I’m falling for both of you.

“She already suspects foul play. Do you want to be the one to explain friends with benefits to her?”

“No.”

“There you go.”

“But that doesn’t mean I can’t discreetly *lick* things.”

“Go lick a banana pop.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Koti

MAGENS BAY WAS A BEAUTIFUL horseshoe shaped beach with white sand and turquoise water. It was the most bustling tourist attraction of St. Thomas and one of the best spots for water play in the Virgin Islands. Ella had Disco clutched to her as she raced toward the sand while Ian and I set up a camp that consisted of an umbrella and a few foldable beach chairs we'd purchased from the store on the way over.

"Do you come here much?" Ian asked, tossing a towel on his chair.

"Not really. I mean, what's the point? We *do* have a beach in our backyard."

"True, but you hardly leave home. Don't you get out at all?" His question was innocent, with an edge of curiosity mixed in.

"My first six months here I went hermit, but Jasmine helped me snap out of it a little. I went out a few times and will on occasion, but I'm to the point it doesn't appeal to me."

"Sign of old age, huh?"

"I turn thirty in a few weeks."

"That would be what, twenty-four years ago that we met?"

His sentiment took me by surprise. "Wow, I didn't think of that. That makes you the oldest friend I've ever had," I teased before cowering under his glare. "I mean the longest friendship. Jasmine's the oldest friend I have anyway."

He looked down at the sand between us. "Too bad we didn't keep in touch."

"We might have been decent pen pals, but here we are anyway."

“Here we are,” he said, his eyes meeting mine. “I had to stay away from you the last time I saw you.”

“What?”

“When you were seventeen. I was already married, and you were...”

I sat up in my chair. “I was, what?”

He glanced down at his lap, attempting to hide his smirk with a few of my favorite fingers covering his mouth. “Can I be perfectly honest without ruining whatever favorable opinion you may have of me?”

“You’re still so proper, crocky. Of course.”

He raked his teeth over his bottom lip sending a shiver down my spine regardless of the heat. “My whole body tensed when I saw you. I know it was wrong, but there was no way I could stand to be in the same room as you if I stayed. I left St. Thomas a day early and wanked that night thinking about you when I got home.”

“So *that’s* why you didn’t say hi. Professor! I was underage!”

“And I was married. Does it make a difference that my marriage was over for me by then?”

“Wait, you were only twenty-five, that was only a few years after you got married, right?”

“I’d just had my birthday and I needed a break from Tara, things were at their worst, so I’d flown in to check on the house for my parents. My mom was recovering from a minor surgery and there had been a storm. I made a few repairs and hired a contractor to take care of the rest. I was about ready to leave when you were coming in.”

“I wish you would have stayed.”

“Too dangerous for me. You were wearing your ridiculous gold sandals and a white sundress with tiny gold flowers all over it. Your hair was tied up, and you had on bright red lipstick.”

My mouth parted as he leaned in.

“I’ll never forget the way you looked that day, you took the breath right out of my body.”

“I can’t believe you remember what I was wearing.”

“I remember every detail including the swish of your skirt when you got out of the SUV. I thought about nothing but smearing that lipstick for months.”

“I remember feeling the same thing... I kind of had an instant crush on you the minute I saw you. I wish you would have talked to me.”

“I couldn’t. I knew I wouldn’t be able to resist temptation. And seeing you when I got here was much, much, worse.”

My heart lit up. “Well, I couldn’t tell by the warm reception you gave.”

“And I’ve apologized sincerely and repeatedly by mouth and orgasm.”

It was my turn to bite my lip. “Forgiven.”

“Fuck, I’m a lucky bastard to be able to touch you now. I mean it, Koti. I have no clue how you remained single all these years but am I damn glad you are at the moment.” Utterly turned on, his eyes rested on my lips before they trailed the length of my body. “Lucky. Fucking. Me.”

I didn’t know how it was possible, but his words managed to fill me up and sting all at the same time.

“Yeah, well you’re temporary,” I said nudging his arm. “*Your* bad.” I was only partially teasing.

He looked at me with unamused gray eyes. “I can’t believe you locked me out of your bedroom last night.”

I laughed as I lathered some oil on. “You checked?”

“Of course I checked. I had things I wanted to lick.”

“Serves you right with your daughter in the house, pervert.”

I looked over at Ella who looked adorable in her newly purchased pink bikini, her blonde hair soaked from the sea as she and Disco hurdled the incoming waves at the shore.

“This is nice.” Ian cracked a beer and held it out to me.

“Agreed,” I stood shaking my head at his offered beer. “No thanks, I’m going to go get in the water.”

He raised a wicked brow. “Going to put on a show for me?”

“Such a pervy professor.”

“I was just thinking about the last time you wore that bikini.” He playfully tugged at the string on my hip and slid his teeth over his lip.

“Maybe you should slow down yourself on that drinking. Pick out some music, I’ll be back, and we can make some sandwiches.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Damn it, stop with the bedroom eyes.”

“I have no clue what you’re talking about,” he teased as his darkening gaze smoldered me into a puddle.

“And don’t watch me as I walk away.”

“Not a snowball’s chance in hell.”

I ‘harrumphed’ as I walked toward the surf before I braved a quick glance over my shoulder. Ian had already zeroed in on my ass and I shook it a little before I gave him a wink.

Eat your heart out, professor.

* * *

Ella and I chased Disco through the waves until I was dying of thirst.

I waved to get her attention before I signed to her.

Thirsty?

She shook her head, “No thanks, but you’re doing well with your signs.”

Thank You. I’m trying. I shook my head in frustration, unable to sign the rest of what I wanted to say.

“If you don’t know the signs, speak to me.”

“It’s reading them that’s the hardest part.”

She waved a dismissive hand. “It takes time. You’ll get it. You have come a long way already.”

Thank You. I nodded toward Ian to let her know where I would be.

“I’ll be up there in a little while.” She picked up a soggy Disco and inspected her an inch from her face. Disco rewarded Ella with a lick on the lips that had her giggling. “I love her soooo much,” Ella said, giving me a smile.

I ran my hands through her soaked fur. “Me too.”

I pranced toward Ian hoping his eyes had been on me unable to think of anything else but his confession as I played in the water. I loved his attention and reveled in it knowing I shouldn’t. Pushing all shitty thoughts aside and preparing for some more flirting, I paused when I saw Ian in his chair feet away, his face buried in a towel. I wouldn’t have thought anything of it if his entire body wasn’t shaking. Cautiously, I approached him.

“Ian?”

He shook his head keeping the towel in place as I took a seat next to him and reached out to touch his thigh. His cries were soundless, but I could feel the pain rolling off him.

“Ian, what’s wrong?” After another minute of watching him in soundless agony, I tried again. “Please talk to me.”

His body shook a minute longer until he spoke low. “Where’s Ella?”

“She’s playing, she can’t see. Ian, please,” though I didn’t know why, my heart was cracking. He finally lowered the towel and his red-rimmed eyes met mine as his face twisted.

“Please,” I said as I pushed a quick tear away. “Please,” I whispered, taking his hand. He squeezed it back so hard I winced as he pulled me closer to sit next to him shielding himself from prying eyes.

“She can’t see us. No one is watching.”

“She’s...” his face twisted again as he puffed out incredulous air and began shaking again. “Jesus, I can’t breathe.”

“Take your time,” I said softly.

“Fuck, Christ, this hurts so much,” he said, his body trembling with emotion as I sank in the sand, my heart plummeting with the ache in his voice.

“I don’t want to say it out loud. I feel like if I acknowledge it, it makes it true.”

“Makes what true?”

He took a deep breath and blew it out, closing his eyes. I jerked back at the presence of tears trickling down his face. Unable to help myself, I moved to sit next to him, partially covering his body with my own to embrace him as much as I could without being obvious. “I’m here. Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

My eyes were starting to fill with the sheer heartbreak etched on his face, though I had no idea why.

“She’s...” his swallow was audible, “I didn’t father Ella, she’s not mine, not my biological daughter,” he managed to get out before he pressed his chin to his chest and a gasp escaped him. “Fuck,” he sat up and again pulled a towel to cover his face. Shock filtered through my body as I glanced around us. We were yards away from prying ears.

“Ian, there’s no one around, it’s okay.”

“Fuck, it’s so *not* okay.” He pulled the towel away. Devastated, tear-filled eyes met mine. “The day I found out was the day I showed up here. I lost it. I totally fucking lost it.”

I held my breath, unable to believe what he was telling me.

“The minute I found out I was going to be a father I felt like something clicked. It wasn’t planned, I’d only been dating Tara for months, but it didn’t matter. It was the greatest moment of my life and now I feel like it was a lie and it was. It’s been taken from me.”

He shook his head, his face coated in disbelief and hurt. “Koti, that little girl’s first sign was daddy, and it meant *everything* to me. I’ve been there for every single step, every hurt, every heartbreak, every milestone—she’s my whole fucking life.” He shuddered as he tried to stifle his cries and more tears spilled from his eyes. The ache to touch him ripped through me as I inched forward, and he shook his head. “Don’t, please,” his misery paralyzed me as despair trailed down his face and he wiped it away with the back of his hand. “I know firsthand how much blood doesn’t matter. I know, I have an adopted brother. It means nothing to our relationship. Adam is my brother in every sense of the word. But I can’t help it, I feel like I’ve been robbed.”

“I understand, I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

“I do. It’s wrong thinking. Because I think other things too. I could’ve done things so differently. Married differently, and I know how wrong it is to think that way, I know it, but I feel robbed of years where I had choices and maybe could have had a different life.”

“That’s the twenty-two-year-old pissed off you talking, and you have the right to be furious about that. You’re mourning what could have been if she hadn’t lied to you. You *could* be living a totally different life right now.”

“Ella became my life and I don’t regret it, I probably would have married Tara anyway. I’m just... I still have my little girl, that’s all that matters.” For the first time and in front of me, he bled freely as I sat shocked and leaned in to whisper.

“She is yours in every way, you know that.”

He nodded several times in agreement. “I know, I’m just fucking wrecked. I can’t believe it, after all these years. How could she do that to me? When I devoted my life to her, to them both... how?”

“Daddy!” Ella called as we both snapped our heads in her direction. “Watch!”

He nodded as she picked Disco up and her paws started frantically moving before the wave swept through. “See? She’s surfing!”

Ian and I nodded as she pranced away with her new prize tucked in her arms.

“Fuck,” Ian said, wiping his face. I felt his raw heart bleed between us, helpless to come up with the right words.

“I don’t know what to say. What she’s done is unforgivable. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be, I can’t be sorry. I refuse to do this pity party shit any longer, I have her,” he said as he nodded toward where Ella stood in the ocean, a picture of health and happiness. “I have her.”

“She is beautiful, kind, well-mannered and has a heart of gold. I’m so taken with her already. You have every reason to be proud.”

Worry creased his brow. “Her mother is threatening to tell her the truth. She’s back with the asshole who fathered her.”

“Jesus, really?”

He nodded, and fear replaced devastation. “I don’t know what this is going to mean. She’s just turned fifteen years old, so it could result in an ugly custody battle if Tara presses it. And I can’t find it in me to be civil to her long enough to discuss it.”

“I know I’m prying, but will you tell me why you burned all those photos and kept the letter?”

“I didn’t keep it.” He sat back and ran a hand down his face before his eyes met mine. “I hadn’t used that luggage since I left her. I’m assuming she put it in there while I was packing the day I told her I was leaving and I’ve only just found it. She didn’t want the divorce and I assume she stuck it in my suitcase to try to stir up some nostalgia for feelings that hadn’t been there in over a decade.” He took a long sip of his beer. “It was just another attempt at manipulation. I found it while

rifling through my bag the night I came to stay with you. I did read it. And all it did was prove what a fucking idiot I was to feel that way about her in the first place.”

He shook his head in aggravation. “It’s just that she played me so well. She played me, and I let her because I loved her so fucking much. And then she broke me... *twice*.”

I ignored the sting in my chest though I had no right to be jealous of his *ex-wife*. “You *did* love her.”

He gave me a sharp nod. We sat watching the commotion around us before he spoke again. “I’m not entirely proud of the way I’ve behaved. She phoned weeks ago and I told her I never loved her.”

“You lied to hurt her?”

He nodded. “I did. I loved her so much that my disappointment killed me when she didn’t turn out to be the woman I thought she was. She doesn’t deserve to know and will never know the extent of my love.”

I stayed mute, too afraid to lose the rest of his confession.

“She...” he swallowed, “when we found out about Ella’s disability, Tara’s behavior ruined our relationship. It’s really that simple. She wouldn’t accept the fact that Ella wasn’t a candidate for getting cochlear implants. Her attitude just completely ruined her for me. She acted as if we had a defective baby and refused to learn how to sign until every last specialist had told her there was no chance. I couldn’t understand Tara then, I felt like I had married someone else. It ruined us and because I felt so strongly about it, I let it ruin us. I couldn’t forgive her, and I never looked at her the same way again.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. I stayed married, but it was pointless. After a few years, we were two zombies and our marriage the apocalypse. But I stayed with her for Ella’s sake, until I couldn’t take it anymore.”

“For a majority of your marriage?”

“Well over a decade,” he said before taking a long pull of his beer, his eyes on Ella.

“No wonder you don’t want to risk going through that again. I hate that I’m saying this, but as your friend, I totally understand why you don’t want to get involved.”

“And what about the woman I’m sleeping with?” he asked, eyeing me intently. “What would she say?”

“I don’t think she can fault you either.”

He leaned in as if to kiss me and then glanced Ella’s way.

“I can’t blame you for being selfish about your freedom, Ian. I really do understand. But I hope you know if it came down to a custody battle, Ella would choose you. She would. I have no doubts.”

He nodded. “I pray she does.”

“You fight, you fucking fight her so hard. I’m having a terrible time believing a judge would ever grant her full custody based on a lie she kept up for fifteen years! Did she tell you purposefully to hurt you?”

“No, it was a coincidence I found out. She could have pulled that at any time, but she didn’t. I think she knew it would destroy me. But now that I’ve found out and she’s with Daniel, I think she wants to use paternity as an excuse to bring that fucker closer to Ella. Not only that, it seems like she wants me to be okay with it.”

“What the fuck is wrong with her?!”

“I know it’s screwed up. Let’s...” he shook his head sighing, “let’s let this go for now.”

“Why?”

His grin at me seemed out of place. “Because you’re yelling.”

“I’m pissed for you!”

“I can tell.”

“She’s a horrible person!”

He nodded. “Seems to be the case.”

“If she was here, I don’t think I could hold myself back from beating the dog shit out of her!”

He gave me a beautiful grin. “So, *this* is the angry New Yorker? Cute.”

“What a bitch!”

“Come on, Koti,” he said, brushing some hair away from my face. “Let’s drop it.”

“Okay... okay, fine. But for the record, I hate your ex-wife.”

“That makes two of us.”

I pressed my lips together as the hairs rose on the back of my neck. It took me three beers to calm down.

“Easy killer,” Ian said as I finished my beer, taking healthy gulps. “You know sun-drunk is not fun.”

“I’m aware.” I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand as he chuckled.

“Such a lady. Still mad?”

“Yes.” Reaching out I ran my palm down his jaw. “But I’m glad you told me.”

“Me too.”

I frowned as I looked at my chipped blue toes. “I owe you an apology. On the beach that day. When I threw that sand ball at your head. I told you we didn’t need you reproducing your kind of crazy. I’m sorry for that.”

“Koti, I’ve been such an asshole, I deserved much worse from you.” He reached out and gripped the back of my head, pulling me forward and kissed me on the temple and then chanced a kiss on my lips.

“Thank you,” he said softly. “For listening, for being upset for me, and for understanding.”

I sighed as Ian popped the top on two fresh beers and handed one to me. “What a mess we are, crocky.” I clinked my bottleneck to his.

“Rather be in the thick of the mess with you, puffer fish.”

He brushed his knuckles along my thigh and I leaned into his touch.

“Ian?”

“Mmm?” We both got lost in the contact as my breathing picked up and his eyes pooled with desire watching my reaction to him.

I licked my lips. “Try my door tonight.”

* * *

Sometime after midnight, I heard the click of my bedroom door followed by the lock. My body tensed as the covers were slowly pulled away from my waiting skin. I was on fire with need and already moaning before his lips brushed my ankle. I spread at his urging while the low rumble of his commands filled the room. He sank between my thighs, his eager tongue lapping up my arousal as I gripped the sheets next to me. We'd spent the majority of our dinner eye-fucking each other until it became too much, and I was forced to step away from the table. When Ella offered to take Disco for a walk, Ian had cornered me at the kitchen sink, biting into my shoulder and brushing his cock along my back with promising words.

“Fuck,” Ian said pushing into me, I was dripping as he drove his way in, forcing us both to stifle our moans as I scratched at his back. “Easy,” he whispered as he drove in again, his control lost a second later when I spoke.

“Fuck me.” Gripping him closer, I crossed my legs around his back spreading wider.

“You're perfect,” he grunted out before pulling me to ride his lap.

Moonlight shone just enough through the window to allow me to see his eager lips close around my nipple. A light shadow crossed over his face, his eyes closed as he sucked hard. The

sight of it had me riding him harder before he gripped my wrists to slow me down.

“We’ve got all night. We are *taking* all night.”

Helpless without the ability to cling to him, he forced me to gain the friction I needed by pumping my hips. That led to a whole new kind of ecstasy for us both. Our breaths came out fast, bodies covered in sweat and lust, we worked ourselves into a frenzy until he let go of my wrists and we collided, *hard*. Time didn’t exist, though we stole those moments and breathed for only the other. Our bodies molded in the most beautiful way as he took away my fears and I absorbed his hurts.

“You’re still dangerous,” he whispered before we collapsed in a heap, our mouths refusing to separate until the moon disappeared and the stars faded into the morning sky.

* * *

Ian

Ella’s glee-filled shriek warmed my heart as she pulled out her gift. “Thank you, Koti!”

“You’re welcome. I got a set too so we can snorkel together, and I got one for you too.” Koti tossed the bag my way.

“Thank you,” I said, pulling the mask from the package.

“Welcome,” Koti said, an intimate smile passed between us for a split second before she addressed Ella. “Your fins are on the porch.” Ella raced to the screen door, letting it smack closed. I yanked Koti to me and kissed her soundly on the mouth, sucking on her lower lip before I kissed her just long enough to thank her properly.

“Every day you’re getting worse. You’re going to blow our cover.”

The truth was, I couldn't help myself. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't resist her. That need was a far cry from the only one I had the day I'd landed on that island. Then I only wanted isolation, now it was hard to imagine being there without her.

She was dangerous for me in every way. I was addicted to her warmth, her kiss, her body.

Not only that, the more time she spent with Ella, the more I was drawn to her. She didn't treat her like a kid, but a friend, which I respected. She wanted no part of authority and respected those boundaries as well. After her first few days in St. Thomas, Ella made it impossible for Koti to feel left out. She refused to do anything without her. Their fast bond made Ella's trip much easier to manage. I didn't constantly have the need to cater to one or the other. If I was honest, it was one of the best times I'd had with Ella. Our first vacation away from Texas just us, father and daughter, a new definition of family.

Except Koti really wasn't a part of it, so she played friend to *both* of us. I couldn't help but get a little sentimental at the sight of Koti when she slid on her mask.

"Now there is a familiar sight."

She grinned and pushed her chest out. "Except *this* time, I have *miss* tits."

I groaned. "Don't remind me."

She bounced from flipper to flipper. "You were all hot and bothered over my mother then, ewww."

"Hey, she was a retired supermodel and I was fourteen, sue me."

"Whatever happened to your chipped tooth?"

"The miracle of modern dentistry."

"You should have kept it, you were a lot cuter with it."

"Was I?"

"Your freckles are gone too, shame, and a lot of your accent. I would say I improved and you went downhill." Throwing my

head back, I laughed as Ella came barreling through the front door with her flippers attached.

“Let’s go!”

We all made our way down to the beach as Disco avoided the water, barking at the tide. After a day of sun and snorkeling, the girls settled by a fresh fire I constructed, marshmallows roasting.

“This is the life. That’s how you say it right, Koti?”

“Yes. That’s exactly how you say it.”

“I wish I lived here,” Ella piped. “Do you ever get tired of it?”

“Never. And I’ll never leave.”

“Do you ever go back to the States?”

“Technically, St. Thomas is the US.”

“You know what I mean,” Ella snorted.

“I haven’t yet. I’m not a fan of flying, but I will.”

“Will you come see me at my new school?”

I slashed the air with my hand, my eyes all warning and Ella went immediately on the defensive.

“Sorry, Dad, but I like her. She’s *my* friend too. And you could let her sleep at our house since she let us stay with her all this time.”

A moment of uncomfortable silence passed before I spoke up.

“True. Koti, you’re welcome to come to Texas anytime.”

“Thanks,” she said, with a laugh due to my discomfort. She’d been true to her word and hadn’t made any part of our situation awkward. A part of me hoped our time together meant more to her than a fling because it was becoming the case for me, but I knew I couldn’t have it both ways.

“Or we could come back here, right Daddy? I’m sure Grandma won’t mind.”

“Right.” I stared at the fire as the girls stuffed their mouths with s’mores and compared their chocolate-covered faces. I

gazed at my daughter who was the perfect picture of innocence and the woman who sat next to her, who didn't deserve the shit cards she was dealt but looked just as pure sitting next to her. Inwardly I sighed as I snuffed out the fire and followed them in the house. Our nightly book club had begun, but it seemed I was the only one serious about reading as they giggled back and forth comparing notes about *Outlander* while snacking on grapes.

“Jamieeeee,” Ella snorted. “He’s so hot.”

“He totally is,” Koti said, with far too much enthusiasm for my taste.

After several minutes of listening to their fawning over a fictional man, I lowered my book and gave them a pointed look. “Would you two shut up.” I picked up my novel in an attempt to resume my reading. A second later, I was smacked in the head with a fistful of grapes. I glared over at the two of them who feigned innocence and hid my grin behind my book.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Koti

STEVIE NICKS SANG “EDGE OF Seventeen” as I pulled into the small parking lot singing along at the top of my lungs. Banion greeted me with his usual thousand-watt smile. “Yank, you look fresh.”

“Not from the boat?”

“Nope, you’ve finally got the island glow.”

“Finally, huh?”

“Yep, or something else making you happy. You got a new man?”

“Nope.” And that was the truth of it. “New friend. And I’ve known him since I was a kid.”

“Oh well, he gay?”

I laughed through my reply. “No.”

“Well, then he’s a blind yank. You were bones when ya got here.”

“I know.”

“All fixed up then?”

I nodded, my smile disappearing. “My parents came and *went*.”

He looked me over, his skin darker from days of endless sun.

“Not such a good time?”

“Not at all.”

He shrugged. “Things happen the way they are supposed to happen, nothing you can do.”

“Yeah.”

“Something else bothering ya?”

“Nope.”

“So, this friend is nothing more? I think you pretend. I will wait here with a bottle of your banana rum,” he joked as he handed me three fresh bouquets.

A month had passed since Ella left the island and Ian had managed to get back to the States twice. Each time he went I got a taste of missing him. Wanting to believe it was good exercise for my heart, I spent my days alone venturing out of my house, keeping dinner dates with Jasmine. I’d even graced her infamous wine bar again, got drunk off my ass and ended up dancing until the wee hours of the morning. I may have accidentally slipped up that night and borrowed Jasmine’s phone to FaceTime my soon to be ex non-boyfriend.

He appeared on screen with a scowl. It was, after all, two o’clock in the morning.

“What in the hell are you doing, Koti?”

“Just wanted to check in with you, crocky.”

“It’s late.”

“Or early, don’t be such a pessimist.”

He groaned as I tilted the phone down giving him an ample shot of my cleavage. “Try to use your nice words, I might be in the midst of missing you and you’re going to fuck it all up.”

He grinned then as he sat up in bed. “I might be missing you too. A little. But I have to say there are perks of sleeping in my own bed.”

“Yeah, like what?”

“I don’t get slapped in the head every night.”

“That’s active dreaming, totally unintentional.”

“I don’t have a dog trying to lick my balls in the morning.”

“That’s not her fault, they look a lot more fun than they are.”

He lifted a brow. “I’ll grant you that.”

Ziggy Marley sang “Drive” over the radio as I stood and swayed my hips.

“So, I take it Jasmine finally talked you into another night out.”

“Are you proud of me?”

*His smile had me melting on the spot I was swaying in.
“Very.”*

“Well, I didn’t do it so you would be proud of me. Believe it or not, I love to dance.”

“Then we should dance together.”

Stopping my hips, I stood at a nearby stool at the bar. “You dance?”

“God, you act like I’m the Grinch.”

“If the Whoville hat fits.”

He shook his head, giving me that dead stare I’d grown to love.

“I’ll be back in four days. I’m trying to tie some things up here.”

It wasn’t my place to ask what things, so I didn’t. “K. See you then. Night.”

There was a pause on his end as his eyes swept my face, the silence conveying more than we were allowed. “Night, beauty.”

** * **

Ian’s bag was left abandoned on the porch as he pressed me against my back door taking turns between nipping and biting at my neck.

“This dress, *damn*,” he said as I smiled against his kiss.

“You like it?”

“I hope you aren’t wearing this out.”

My deep red backless sundress dipped so low you could see the divot at the top of my ass. My tits were bared on either side by a thin strip of material. Tilting my head back, I gasped as he discovered I wasn't wearing a thing underneath.

"You *better* not be wearing this out of the house."

"Chill out, *Dad*."

He turned me then lifted my dress and proceeded to redden my ass with his palm as I laughed. He pulled me into his arms and lifted me so I was cradled to his chest. "You look beautiful."

Ignoring the sting of tears, I slid my palm down his stubble-covered jaw. "You need a shave."

Rubbing his chin against my skin, I moaned as he made his intentions known. I would be covered in his beard rash by the time he was finished.

"Such an animal."

I began to sign.

Fuck me, Ian.

His eyes bulged. "Where did you learn that?"

"Your precious informational channel—YouTube. And don't get thinking I'm back online. It's not happening."

"Damn, you got my hopes up, I was thinking maybe you had plugged back in and joined the land of the living."

"Never."

"Who doesn't have a smartphone in this day and age? It's baffling."

"Me."

"You." He threw me on my bed and began to undress. The man was in amazing shape and my body started to flutter with anticipation.

"Pull your dress up and spread your legs."

I didn't hesitate a second.

"Show me more."

I reached between my legs and did his bidding.

“Hold it there.”

“Ian... hurry.”

“Not this time,” he said with slow piercing gray eyes.

Once he'd shed his shoes, he tugged at the clasp on his watch. In his slacks, I moaned as he kept his darkening gaze on me. I loved it when he wore a suit home. Something about him in dress attire did it for me.

“Are you wet?”

“Come find out.”

“Show me,” he said, leaning against my dresser and slipping off his shoes.

“Please,” I begged, dipping my fingers in my center, so he could hear that I was ready. His cock jumped in his pants.

His eyes trailed down my body and jumped to meet mine. “I'll never tire of you, ever.”

“I missed you. Please, *please*, Ian. I want you.”

He was still partially clothed and driving me out of my mind with his control. His hair was combed neatly and gelled. He looked so sophisticated, so well put together—dashing—I could only imagine the fantasies of his students and felt a pang of jealousy as the idea struck.

I began to writhe on the bed, a completely different woman than I was before he'd become my lover. Never in a million years could I have dreamed of having the appetite I did then. Not every time was painful, but I would risk it every day for the slightest feel of him. It was hopeless, I was addicted to him and hopelessly in love.

“Say it again.”

“I want you.”

“Again.”

“I fucking want you,” I said as he remained where he stood.

“Please.”

When he didn't move, I sat up. "What are you doing?"

"Again."

"I want you."

"Again."

Anger began to surface. "What are you doing?"

"Again."

"Go to hell."

Moving to the edge of the bed, he stopped me from my retreat as tears sprang to my eyes.

"Fine," I sighed as my tears fell. "I *need* you, happy?"

"No," he said before kissing me within an inch of my life. When he pulled away, I was emotionally raw.

"Damn it, Ian, this wasn't supposed to happen."

He nodded. "I know."

"This isn't good, is it?"

"No, but you aren't alone."

I ripped his hair as he tilted my neck and bit and sucked until I was begging again.

I unzipped his pants freeing his cock, pumping it between us.

"Every time I see you, I feel so relieved. Like I'd been living in some sort of dream and then I come back and you're here," he put my hand over his chest, "and I can breathe again."

Emotion bounced between us as he slid into me, stretching me full while my throat burned with emotion. When we'd both come, he pulled me to his chest as the room began to darken with the setting sun.

"This is the best I've ever felt," he whispered, "ever."

"You're my first, Ian."

He paused his movements. "What?"

"You're the first man I've ever had this sort of connection with." I sat up and looked back at him with a smile. "You're

the first man I've ever felt this way for. I never got this far with anyone because... you know. I just couldn't, so you're my first."

His eyes searched mine before he slowly pushed inside me again. Words failed us as we moved in sync, our hearts pounding out the words we weren't allowed to utter. We broke in a breathless mess and he pulled me against his chest, his heart hammering against my ear as I ran my nails down his skin.

"How was Ella?"

"I didn't get to see her, she's in Washington for the next week."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," he whispered. "Would you be terribly pissed off if I slept?"

"No, of course not."

"I was so busy getting things sorted I didn't get much done and this drunk crazy lady managed to call me on the one night I managed a few winks."

"Sorry."

"I loved watching you dance. It was..." he swallowed, "it was good."

"Good?"

"For lack of a better word. I'm sleep deprived, remember?"

I kissed his chest and pulled away. "Room's all yours."

He pulled me back and kissed me soundly. "Sit tight for a bit, okay?"

"Okay."

Seconds later his breathing deepened and for a solid day, he slept.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Koti

I GREETED MY NEW RENTERS with a smile as they exited the cab both wrinkled and exhausted from a day of travel.

The husband pulled the sleeping little boy from his car seat as he roused wrapping his chubby arms around his father's neck. "Come on, buddy."

The baby glanced around, his beautiful green eyes meeting mine before he buried his head into his father's neck. "Come on, Noble, can you say hi to the lady?"

I waved at him and he giggled as his father extended a hand. "You must be Koti, nice to meet you. I'm Cameron and this is my wife, Abbie."

Abbie greeted me with a warm smile. "Nice to meet you. Wow, this place is truly beautiful."

"I'm hoping the surprise was a good one?" I'd been planning the trip with her husband for the past few weeks.

"I still can't believe he pulled this off," she said, glancing back at her family with love-soaked eyes. "We, uh, didn't really get to have a honeymoon. I got sick on our first try."

"Morning sickness?"

"Yes, it's the worst. Do you have children?"

"No," I said, staring at their beautiful little boy who wore a T-shirt that read *Woo King*.

"No kids yet, someday?"

Someday?

"Well, my little man was definitely worth it," Abbie said, kissing his hand before she scoured the rental with a smile.

Pangs of envy hit in that moment as Cameron leaned in and kissed his son on the forehead. “Ready to go swimming, buddy?”

He nodded and nestled further into his father’s arms.

Realization struck, even with all the families I’d checked into rentals over the past year, it was the first time in my life I wished for a family of my own. My own baby boy with eyes the color of his father’s.

Shocked at my personal admission, I walked the beautiful family through their beach house. Abbie ambled with me as Cameron chased Noble through the expansive living room. “Noble, stop. Don’t touch that, buddy. Why you little...” he picked the baby up easily and tossed him up over his head, catching him as he squealed. “Gain, Dada, gain!”

Abbie took a step out onto the long back porch where she was met with the sight of thousands of miles of expansive ocean.

“You can get to the beach from the first level,” I said as she looked back at her husband with utter love. Abbie’s excitement was infectious. “This is incredible, baby!” She yelled to Cameron who answered back with a pride-filled grin. “Happy you love it, babe.”

I chimed in. “You won’t get used to the view and that’s a good thing.”

“I just can’t believe we’re here,” she smiled. “I didn’t realize how much we needed this.”

“You’ll be a new woman by the time you leave. Cameron’s scheduled a massage for you in a few hours, there is a week’s worth of groceries in the fridge. He’s also opted for concierge service and a driver for the length of your stay. My number is in the book on the table.” Abbie stood, eyes glistening, her smile growing with every word I spoke.

“Happy?”

“Ecstatic.”

“Awesome. There are two keys to the house on the foyer table. And please don’t hesitate to call if you need anything.”

Cameron joined us standing by Abbie's side with a newly animated little boy wiggling in his arms.

"Thank you so much, Koti, I couldn't have pulled this off without you."

"You're welcome and welcome to St. Thomas."

I left the smiling family with a new kind of ache in my chest. I was just about to head back to the office when Jasmine called.

"Hey buddy, did you get the Bledsoe's checked in?"

"Yep, all set."

"We're done for the day if you want to knock off."

"Are you sure?" I asked with a smile.

"Yes girl, go play with Ian. But just keep your phone on for calls. I have a date tonight."

"Really? With who?"

She paused. "Jasmine, with who?"

"Toby. Am I crazy?"

"Of course not, I kind of figured that was going to happen."

"Really, you see us together? He's so..."

"Bold? Confident? Perfect for you?"

"If you thought that, why didn't you say something?"

"I wanted you two to figure it out for yourselves."

I pulled up to a stoplight where a Jeep, the same style as mine waited with me. I glanced over to see I had the attention of the passengers, a group of teenage guys.

"Let's just hope he doesn't come out in an apron or want me to R. Kelly his ass."

"What?"

"Pee on him or some freaky shit."

The guys burst into laughter as I hung my head. "You just embarrassed me at a stoplight," I hissed as I smashed onto the gas the minute the light changed.

It was all I remembered aside from the crunch of metal.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Ian

IGNORING MY PHONE, I RAN through my list of lectures and made notes. Looking around the expansive beach house, I basked in the serenity of Koti's bubble. As soon as she got home, I was going to cook her my favorite meal and spend the night making her moan. I wasn't taking a single fucking minute of our time together for granted. After making sure I had everything I needed I glanced at the clock. She would be home any minute. Warmth spread as I thought of the way she'd woken me up that morning, her lips wrapped around my cock before she lifted herself to sink on top of me. We didn't utter a word, just reveled in the connection as I pulled her to me so we were chest to chest, hearts pounding as she slowly rode me until we had no choice but to break the silence with words of praise.

There was something to be said about the sex we had, but the connection we shared was what made it so fucking incredible. Koti was a safe haven, and I drank with greed from her never-ending fountain of beauty and warmth. There was always an understanding in her eyes, kindness of her words. Our relationship was effortless, she was a relatable friend and an incredible lover. She gave and gave, and I took without hesitation because even though at the heart of it, I felt selfish, I felt like she too was thriving on letting me have my way. Anything else would have been unacceptable, I knew that I cared too much about her to hurt her. If I felt for one second over the last month we shared that she had suffered in any way, I wouldn't have returned to St. Thomas. There was no benefit in making her confess she needed me the night before, but my desire to know if the feeling was mutual was too much.

Because I needed her too, and as dangerous as it was to get that admission, I didn't feel so alone in my ache and maybe,

just maybe, my confession that I needed her the same would be enough for us for the moment.

My phone vibrated again, and I picked it up to see a local area code.

“Hello.”

“Ian, it’s Jasmine.”

My heart sank as every nerve in my body fired. “No, oh fuck, is she all right?”

“She’s been in an accident. Some asshole t-boned her at a light but thankfully he wasn’t going that fast. She’s got a rash from the airbag, but she’s okay. I’m bringing her home now. She just didn’t want you to worry.”

“Why didn’t she call me?”

The silence confirmed my worst fear. “She had an attack?”

“Yes,” Jasmine confirmed with a whisper, “and it was nasty. They gave her some meds and she’s a little loopy.”

“Okay.”

“Just don’t walk on eggshells, okay, or she’ll know I told you.”

“I won’t.”

“Ian, at some point you *aren’t* going to be there, right?”

Pressing my lips together I tried to push away the burn in my chest. “Right.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

On the defensive but feeling like a bastard, I answered. “I don’t want to hurt her.”

“But you’re going to. And if I’m being honest, I think you already are.”

* * *

Pacing the floor, I let out a sigh of relief when the front door opened. Koti appeared with a small red rash on the side of her nose and a larger stretch of it covering her chin.

“So today sucked,” she said with a laugh. “I’m slightly medicated.”

In an instant, she was in my arms. “I’m so sorry.” I pulled away.

“I’m totally fine. Airbags fucking hurt though just so you know, stay as far away from the wheel when you drive as you possibly can. I feel like I got punched by a heavyweight.”

“That bad?”

“Not on Vicodin and Xanax,” she said with a laugh. “I’m feeling pretty damn loose, professor, tonight might be a good time to experiment.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Look at you, rolling your eyes. I do remember you grounding your daughter for that.”

“Are you okay, really?”

She paused when she read my expression. “She told you, didn’t she? That asshole.”

“Why can’t I know?”

“Why should you know?” She ran her hands through her longer blonde hair. She’d been growing it out since I’d arrived at the island. I hadn’t told her, but I loved it that length. I hadn’t told her I loved a lot of things. “Because I’m the man waiting for you, that’s why.”

Ignoring me, she took a seat on the barstool by the island. “You’re cooking for me?”

Her smile was forced, but I went with it.

“Yeah, I wanted to surprise you with my favorite dish from when I was a boy.”

“What is it?”

“It’s called Boboties. It’s spiced meat with egg custard and topped with raisins.”

“That sounds... interesting. Let’s do this, I’m starving. All I’ve had to eat today was flying metal with a side of glass soup.”

I frowned at her indifference, feeling her rattle with nerves across from me. “Not funny.”

She held up her thumb and forefinger about an inch apart in front of her. “A little bit funny. My Jeep is totaled, well, my *parents’* Jeep. I don’t even own a car, how am I going to have a baby?”

I froze the workings of my hands and faced her. “You’re pregnant?”

She must have realized her slip. “No. God, Ian, no. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” she waved her hand like any drugged person would.

“Why are you talking about a baby then?”

“I just, in the future if I *wanted* to have a baby, I don’t even own a car. I’m too poor to be a mother. Never mind, I’m rambling.”

I pressed for more information, high on pills or not, I had to know.

“Are you thinking about a family?”

“I just saw the cutest little boy ever and it made my ovaries ache, that’s all. Don’t get weird.”

“I’m not being weird, *you’re* being weird.”

“I’m high, what’s your excuse? And why aren’t you cooking, crocky? I’m starving!”

“On it, your highness.”

A beat of silence passed. “He was beautiful though—the baby, Noble—he was perfect. Shy, and just so... they were happy, you know, it wasn’t forced or fake, you could see how happy they were.”

I began slicing some onion. “It’s okay to want a family, Koti.”

She laughed without an ounce of humor. “Yeah, uh, I’d be a great mom. ‘Hold on honey, mommy’s having an anxiety attack in the pantry because I can’t handle making a hundred cupcakes for your class tomorrow.’” She spun on the stool animatedly delivering her own self-deprecating blows as my chest cracked for her.

“Thousands of people with anxiety have children, stop it.”

“I full-on had a meltdown because I wasn’t sure if God existed today. Do you think it’s okay to subject your child to that?”

I set the oven temperature and leaned over the counter. “You were in a car accident, it’s okay to feel—however the hell you want to feel—after something like that happens. Stop hurting yourself with lies.”

Imploring eyes sought mine. “Are you afraid to die, Ian?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“It’s a part of life I accepted when I was a soldier and I grew immune to death, as tragic as that sounds.”

“Where did they go, Ian? When your friends died, where did they go?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then how are you not afraid?”

“Because if it’s nothingness then we aren’t aware of it and if God exists, we have to assume it’s a place far better than the one we’re standing in. Those are the two options, right?”

“Guess so. Well... there’s hellfire and damnation for being faithless.”

“See, I’m of the belief that if there is a creator so divine, he wouldn’t have the capacity to be so cruel to those he created.”

“That’s comforting.”

“Good, then take comfort you’ll either be blissfully in paradise or completely unaware you no longer exist.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“I’m sorry that it is for me.”

Her face twisted to mask the sob she was holding. “I’m not sorry for you. I’m happy you aren’t afraid. You’re so smart.”

“As are you.”

“And still so polite,” she said as tears made their way down her cheeks.

“I have to believe there is a place for us because I want there to be for my daughter.”

Koti nodded, “I understand. I want that for her too.”

“And I want it for you,” I told her truthfully.

“Thank you.”

I moved around and gripped her shoulders. “Koti.”

“Yes, Ian?”

“Are you okay?”

“No,” she sniffed, more tears budding in her eyes. “I’m not okay. That scared the shit out of me.”

“I know, so let me put my tea down and be responsible for you, just for tonight, okay?”

“Coffee,” she corrected as her voice cracked.

“Coffee,” I whispered.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Ian

Three weeks later...

I WHISPERED THROUGH A HALO of blonde hair. “Hey, beautiful, wake-up.”

“I should probably tell you those are fighting words.”

I chuckled and kissed her until she roused from sleep.

“Would you please let me recover? Surely there’s no skin on your penis after that last round.”

This time I couldn’t help my laughter as I gathered her to me and lifted her from the bed.

“Ian,” she sighed, kissing my neck and wrapping her legs around my waist. “I can appreciate how sexually starved you must have been after going without, trust me, I love sleeping with you.” I made my way down the porch steps and onto the sand. “Sex with you is my favorite hobby, but there are necessities that need priority as well. Wine, s’mores, and sleep.”

Setting her on the beach, I smiled down at her and turned her to face the ocean. “Shut your drivel, woman, and look.”

Her grin disappeared as her mouth parted. “Oh, my god!”

She sank into my frame as we stared at a moonlit sky. The islands below easily seen due to the sheer size of it. Thousands of stars littered the sky leaving us momentarily speechless.

“My God, now this is a good excuse to wake a girl up.”

“I thought you would appreciate it.”

“I used to be such a huge fan of the stars,” she sighed. “So much mystery. I believed all that hoopla about mythology until my science teacher told me they were balls of fire. It was kind of like finding out Santa wasn’t real.”

“Sucked the magic right out of it?”

“Exactly. Like why can’t we leave certain things a mystery?”

“Some would argue that those balls of fire in relation to where we stand are important.”

“I don’t *want* to know if some asteroid is coming for me.”

“You’re safe tonight.”

“I feel safe.” My stomach dropped as she settled further into me and I reveled in the feel of her warm skin.

She turned in my arms more beautiful than anything I’d ever seen in my thirty-eight years.

“This is wildly romantic, Kemp. Are you feeling okay?”

“Got a little moonstruck is all. I remember skies like this when we camped after a safari in South Africa.”

“I can’t imagine how amazing that was. Growing up there must have been incredible.”

“I’ll be a Saffa till I die. I can’t believe my parents moved us to Texas. I’m still pissed.”

We both laughed.

“That’s the way it is, right? You think you’ll end up one place and you end up on a different planet.”

With both hands, I pushed the hair away from her face. “I loved this planet.”

Even with the white noise of the waves, I was sure she could hear me swallow.

Her eyes watered as she looked at me for the truth. “This *is* an asteroid, isn’t it?”

She searched my eyes before she hung her head. “When do you leave?”

I choked on the answer. “Tomorrow afternoon.”

She turned in my arms again to face the sky, seconds later I felt one of her tears fall on my hand as the rest of me shattered with the weight of it.

“I understand why you didn’t tell me. I’m not angry.”

“I want to stay. If that makes any difference at all.”

“Of course it does.”

Minutes later, in an attempt for any conversation other than the suffocating silence, I leaned in to whisper, “I have a favor to ask.”

“Sure.”

“Can you look out for Disco?”

She sniffed. “Of course.”

“Thank you.”

Agonizing seconds later, she finally spoke.

“So,” she said as she took a deep breath. “I’m assuming you pulled this all together last minute to break it to me gently? Did a FaceTime with NASA to lasso the moon?”

I chuckled though I was already aching. We stood wordlessly a moment longer as she clutched my arms.

“I’ll be okay. I don’t want you to worry about me. I know Ella needs you.”

“I know you will.”

“You know I would live on your planet if I could.”

I gripped her tighter to me. “The invitation stands.”

“This sucks. Of all the beaches in the world, why did you have to have your breakdown on mine?”

“I’m not at all sorry we happened.”

She sniffed again. “Me either.”

“Koti, look at me.”

“I can’t. You can’t make promises and I swear to God, that’s all I want to hear from you right now so... just give me a minute.”

“Okay.” That minute was agony as we felt the reality come crashing in through the dream we’d existed in for months. An

eternity later, I turned her to face me and kissed her tear-stained cheeks.

“You’re making breakfast due to the deliverance of shitty news.”

“Deal.”

I brushed the tears away from her eyes as she looked up at me.

“Please be honest. Would you stay here with me if you could?”

“Without a second thought.”

She sniffed again before I took her lips.

When we pulled away, she gave me a sad smile. “That’s good enough.”

“Koti—”

“There’s nothing to say. Not tonight.”

I nodded.

“Take me back to bed?”

“Let’s go.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Ian

I WATCHED HER SLEEP, TRACING her skin with my fingers. She stirred slightly, her hair askew and then turned to face away from me. The pain that tiny move caused was unbearable. No part of me wanted to leave her. No part of me wanted the life that waited. I'd taken a job and sold my house to move into a rental. My future idle and dependent on Ella's. Decisions had been made, life was in order, my daughter was waiting. I had to leave. Koti stirred, and again I was graced with the sight of her face. She slept restlessly most of the time, her beautiful form flailing at all hours of the night. I'd been on the receiving end of some seriously rough hours but had grown used to it over the months on my side of her bed. The only time she fully stilled was when she lay on my chest. I pulled her into my arms to give her more peaceful minutes of sleep and she went instantly lax. I whispered my apology while she slept.

“What have I done to us? I'm so sorry.”

I let it happen. She played a part too, but in the end, I'd given her every part of me. She knew my every side, the small details, and I knew hers. We shared the things that made *us* significant and I'd allowed it, knowing how much it would hurt to lose it.

Aside from my little girl, life had never gifted me anything so beautiful. I knew every inch of her golden skin, had drowned in the icy-blue pools of her eyes and basked in her warmth. I'd pulled every sweet sip from her lips. We'd become magnetic and inseparable and I let it happen in my selfish haze knowing it would rip us to shreds to lose it.

She was my golden shore after the shipwreck that was my life and she'd loved me with her whole heart, only to let me break it.

“Ian! Where are you, Ian!” she cried as she raced around the house.

“Over here, Koti,” I said, gathering wood in the alley for the fire I was building us.

“I’m leaving. Mom says we have to leave early. I can’t do the bonfire with you.”

“Okay, it’s okay, don’t cry.”

“She’s making me go to the school camp, so I can make friends. I don’t like those girls. I told you about them.”

“I know. But you’re easy to like so just let them come to you, okay? Remember what I said?”

“Have fun anyway?”

“Right.”

She hiccupped as her chest heaved with her upset. “You’re my best friend. Don’t forget me just ‘cause you get bigger, okay?”

“I won’t. Besides, we’re neighbors. I will probably see you around sometime next summer. Right?”

She nodded and nodded. “Maybe you’ll come back, and we can be best friends again.”

I rubbed the top of her head and she pushed it away with a smile.

“Of course.”

“Okay, and you’ll make me s’mores again?” She was still crying but trying her best to be brave for me.

“Banana pops too.”

“Promise?”

“I swear it.”

She hugged me tight with her whole little body and let go just as fast. “Bye, crocky”

“Bye, puffer fish.”

“Forgive me,” I whispered as I sank into sleep with her one last time.

* * *

Koti

Ian's duffle bag fell heavy on the porch as I swayed in the hammock with Disco in my arms. Seconds later, Ian knelt at my feet and rubbed his fingers through her fur. His voice alone was enough to threaten the strength I'd mustered up.

"I was just thinking earlier this morning about the first time we said goodbye. Do you remember that?"

I cleared my throat. "Nope, must be the one that got away. So, here's the way I see it." I stood and let Disco down at his feet. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way. I'm taking the easy route."

Pushing up on my toes I pressed my lips to his briefly and smoothed his cheek with my palm. "Go be happy, Ian. And do me a favor, take one small piece of advice from your muse?"

He bit his lip and nodded.

"Do whatever the hell it is you have to do to make yourself happy."

I was fighting hard and losing as my throat burned with each passing second. "Okay?"

"I will."

"Okay. And by the way," I said, rambling on as I took the steps off the porch, "you're a good friend. The best. And if you ever get back to St. Tho—"

I was pulled from the sand and crushed in his arms. Tumultuous gray eyes burned through me as he leaned in. "I choose the hard way." His mouth crushed mine in a soul-stealing kiss and I felt the rest of me break beneath him. He pulled away, his eyes shredding me as they filled with regret.

He didn't want to hurt me, and I drew comfort that it hurt him just as much.

"I'm fucking miserable about leaving, but I would never ask you to give up your life for me. But if you ever find yourself in need of a change from the routine. Come to Texas."

I nodded as tears collected in my eyes, unable to speak for fear of begging.

"Kissing you feels like a free fall, touching you makes me ache, and being inside you is so damn addicting. I'll miss that, and our talks, our friendship. I'll miss your bubble, Koti because that's where I want to be, where I want to stay. And if it weren't for Ella—"

"I understand," I said around the ball in my throat. "I do. I swear. But watching you fall apart and put yourself back together was a gift. I'm so amazed by you."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. It's ridiculous. We're like a bad movie line, aren't we? We'll always have St. Thomas," I rasped out.

"Jesus, I feel like hell."

"Me too."

"I already miss you."

"Me too."

"And because I'm a complete masochist, I can't help but mention I've fallen madly in love with you."

The world started crumbling beneath my feet as my stars were stripped away one by one. Swallowing a sob, I briefly showed him my pain. "Please go. I don't think I can do this with you much longer."

He nodded and picked up his bag. "Okay."

He made it halfway down our sand alley when I stopped him.

"Bye, crocky."

He turned to me with a sad smile. "Bye, puffer fish."

Tears streamed down my face as he walked toward his truck before once more glancing back at me.

I whispered my plea to the wind. "Maybe you'll come back, and we can be best friends again."

He nodded as if he'd heard me and I fell apart where I stood. He took a step toward me and I shook my head.

"Go," I begged.

Shoulders slumped he got into his truck as I croaked out his name, but it was silenced by the wind.

And then he was gone.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Koti

Three months later...

“MORNING BABE,” JASMINE CHIMED AS she put her desk phone on speaker and some melodic hold music filled the office.”

“Hey,” I said, trying to clear my head to start my workday. I’d had an attack last night and Disco had peed on the bed next to me. It had been a shit morning and I didn’t at all feel like sharing. The pattern I’d started years ago had begun to recycle. I’d been having more attacks than usual, and I knew the reason. No one was to blame, but I’d never been so emotionally strung out. Horrible thoughts of Ian with someone else kept racing around my head as I attempted to fall asleep each night. I couldn’t really blame myself, it had been months. There was a chance he was dating, or worse might be developing feelings for someone else. But if he felt a tenth of what I was feeling, maybe he wasn’t living at all.

“You’re a wreck. Call him.”

“Why? Why do I have to be the one? I don’t even know if he’s feeling it on his end at all. Maybe I was imagining it.”

“He told you he was madly in love with you. He didn’t leave because he wanted to. He left because he had to. There’s a difference. You didn’t get left.”

Brown eyes stared down at me as I swallowed. “I’m forwarding the phones to my cell. You look like shit and I don’t want you greeting the renters this morning.”

“I know. I’m so sorry. I was up late last night.”

She slapped the top of my computer screen. “Look at me.”

Gazing up at her, I did my best to keep my chin from wobbling.

“Do I look upset?”

“No, well I really can’t tell, you look kind of scary right now.”

“That’s because I’m mad at you for thinking I would be upset. You’ve held my hand for the last year and a half.”

“I just want to stop missing him. God, just one day, I want this to go away. I don’t know how you handled it.”

“Not well, remember, I had sex in a backhoe?”

“That’s not even funny now. But I’m glad you’re happy with Toby.”

“Don’t send out wedding invites yet, we’re taking things so slow, sometimes I think we’re just friends.”

“You still haven’t had sex with Toby?” I couldn’t remember the last time I’d even asked her for an update, what was even odder was that she hadn’t offered one.

“Nope. I’m holding out. You and Ian were an amazing influence on me. And Julian is still calling.”

“Really? Julian, huh? Well don’t use me as an influence, look at me now. And your corn-fed man was the one that told me Ian would dump me no matter what. I don’t know if I’m his biggest fan.”

She tied her hair up before pouring some coffee. “Julian is brutally honest. Sometimes it gets on my nerves, but mostly I love it. And you need to call Ian. I think half of the problem is you’re still hoping he’ll come back or you’ll get back together. And that’s what’s eating you alive. You need some sort of closure.”

“I think the fact that I haven’t heard a word from him is closure enough. What if he’s moved on and I end up embarrassing myself?”

She pulled her roller chair over and took a seat next to me. “Then you know, and you get to move on too.”

“I don’t want that.”

Her eyes watered in sympathy, which only made me feel more pathetic. “I know baby, and it’s killing me to see you hurt, but

you've got to do something. Tell him how you feel. Are you still glad you took the chance?"

I didn't hesitate. "Yes."

"Then take one more. Call him and see how that goes."

"And if it's really over?"

"Then you won't be alone. I'll be here, and you can start sharing your new war stories."

"This is the worst."

"I know." She leaned in to hug me. "You can do this, Koti, you are so much braver than you will ever know. Every chance you take shows how much you've grown."

"God, I love you. I know this is strange, but I'm so glad I had a panic attack in that Mexican restaurant. What if you hadn't found me in that corner? I hate to think we wouldn't have met."

"I think life would have made sure we found a way."

"You think so?" I sniffed as she pulled away

"I'm sure of it. I'll always be your Mexican."

* * *

Ian

Three months of agony because I made the same decision I did fifteen years ago. It would always be my daughter, DNA or none, she was mine. I was taught early that blood didn't matter. My adopted brother was black, and when we got him, I was old enough to know better than ask questions about why he was different. My parents were careful with me the first few months, going out of their way to coddle me when we adopted him. I was never upset, in fact, that extra attention irritated me.

Adam was the one who felt the most anguish, growing up in a home where he constantly felt the difference.

Blood didn't matter, skin nor eye color, or native tongue. What mattered was what that person meant to you. If my ex-wife had charged her sperm donor with the task of raising Ella, I would've been free to be whatever I wanted, I would've known that Tara was a liar and a cheat, and I would've had my choice of lives. But that wasn't what happened, and at the end of my selfish tirade, I found myself grateful for her deceit. It made me Ella's daddy.

And so, while I've never fathered a child, I was a father, a daddy, a dad, and on most days, she deemed me an asshole. My range of titles stemmed from trusting the one thing in the world I know to be true for so long, and it was the one thing that could never be taken away from me.

Hurt or not, I was never going to let that happen.

And then I think of Koti and our summer by the sea and how that was the life I wanted. With her. I didn't want to be waiting in the wings while my daughter lived her life. I wanted to be with the woman whose smiles lit up my soul, whose voice soothed the bullshit, whose heart was made of flesh and gold. I wanted to whisper to her that I love her every night before she drifted to sleep. To be her comfort when she got nervous. I wanted to ease her mind and make her laugh, make her come, make her mine. But that was the selfish part of me who still brimmed with anger about a life I didn't get to choose.

The father I am says there is no choice. That man remembers the chubby hands reaching for him along with the alligator tears. He remembers the first muddled sounds she made that were solely for him. She needed me and I needed her. Ella would always be my purpose in life.

The ache will eventually recede. I'll find a woman to keep my bed warm. And Koti would—

I cut myself off mid-thought. It shouldn't hurt this fucking much.

We hadn't spoken. Nothing to say. What can we say? I made my choice. She doesn't want to leave her life and my job as a father binds me to where I need to be. It was never supposed to start, and it was never going to last. We both knew it.

Doesn't matter you're in ashes, you love her, you miss her.

My throat burned with emotion as I tipped my coffee and stared at the green expanse of my new backyard. It wasn't the view I wanted.

She has my view and soon enough someone else will have my ocean.

My phone buzzed on the counter and I ignored it, sure it was my mother. Thinking better of it, I caught it just before it stopped.

"Hello," I said, looking at the screen and freezing when I saw her name.

"I love you," she whispered softly. "Ian, I love you."

I closed my eyes. I could hear the waves crash. I imagined her on her hammock staring at her toes.

"I should have said it when you were here. I would give anything to see your face right now, to see if it even matters to you."

My heart sank. "Of course it matters."

"I hate this. I hate it here without you."

"I'm in hell," I said my voice sandpaper. "I won't put on a brave front to spare you."

"Have you ever?" I could hear her smile, but it was solemn. "I don't want to leave, Ian. You know I've accepted my limits. I don't want to throw all this work away. I won't be the woman you love. I would never ask you to leave Ella, I just want you to know how not okay I am. Because I miss you and even though I was supposed to let you go, I can't."

"I'm not okay either."

"This is horrible."

“Agreed.”

“Can you... will you come ho... back?”

“If I come back, we start this all over again when I leave. I don’t think I can handle it twice.”

She sobbed quietly as my heart shattered along with my coffee cup against my kitchen wall.

She sniffed as I wiped my eyes. “I’m sorry I called you. I’m so sorry. It was selfish.”

“I still can’t regret it. You are the true love of my life. You should know that.”

That was the wrong thing to say. It took her minutes of silence to speak again.

“I’ll be here, okay. I’ll be here, Ian. I’ll wait as long as you need me to. I’m being selfish so I can pay for it that way. If I wait for you, will you come?”

“Koti, don’t waste your life on love’s obligations. Things may change for you.”

“Do you think you will still love me?”

“I know I will, I’ll never stop loving you.”

“Then I’ll wait.”

“I can’t ask you for that.”

“You didn’t.”

“Koti, this is ridiculous. You’ve wasted enough time.”

“The stars are back, Ian, because of you, they’re back. I don’t see them the same way. Do you still want to be here?”

“More than anything.”

“I’ll wait for you.”

“No. That’s ridiculous.”

“Why? Why is it so ridiculous? I waited my whole life for you. I can wait a little longer. If you feel the same, ask me to wait.”

“No. I could never ask that of you.”

“Ask me.”

I fought the words on the tip on my tongue. “No.”

“Please ask me,” she sobbed. “You said you loved me.”

“I do. More than I ever thought possible. But this is a foolish notion. It’s your heartache speaking. I love you, I do and that’s why I refuse to let you do this.”

“It’s not foolish to me.”

I sighed. “You’re still so young. We’re talking years, I won’t be able to come to the island often, and you won’t leave.”

“For you, I would try.”

“Then come now. Right now. I can’t leave, I have to teach. Be with me.”

“Ian.”

“Right. That’s what I thought.”

“You know how hard it is for me.”

“That’s why I’m not begging you to do something you aren’t capable of.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I won’t ask you.”

Silence. And it might as well have meant death.

“Koti, please don’t take it the wrong way. You have to understand, I put my life on hold for so long. I don’t want you to feel obligated to do the same for me.”

“How am I supposed to take it? You’re telling me to let you go when I’m telling you I’ll wait. Because I think you’re worth it. I guess I’m alone in that too.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth.”

“You’ve said enough. Goodbye, Ian.” Her voice broke as did our connection.

“Koti!”

I hit redial and got her voicemail.

After several tries, I left my first message.

“Answer the phone!”

And then rang her again.

“Koti, I can’t ask you. Don’t put me in this position please.”

And the day after.

“I’ve never been so fucking miserable. Please just try to understand.”

And the day after that.

“You’re being childish.”

And the day after.

“If I were there, your ass would be purple. God, but I’m not there and I’m dying to purple your ass. I miss you so much. I can’t come to you now just to leave you. Please believe me, I have no choice. You might not understand it, but I do, and I know in my heart asking you to wait is wrong. I won’t bother you again... but please call me back.”

* * *

Koti

Trailing my fingers down the piano keys, I tried in vain to keep the tears from surfacing. Before he left and after our signing lesson, he’d played for me daily while I lit candles and uncorked some wine. We’d taken great care of our bubble before it burst. Disco came running at the sound and when she realized it was me, she resumed the wait of her master in front of the screen door.

“Come on, baby girl, please,” I begged as I sat with her on the floor. Her missing him kept her alert. Any sound other than the noise inside the house had her scrambling for the door. Even

after months away from him, her loyalty and unyielding love hadn't faltered a single day.

"I know how you feel, but we have to get our shit together. Hey... who want's *bacon*?"

She didn't move, and I was out of cards to play. That morning it seemed she was suffering the worst of it as if the realization struck he was never coming back. I started my mourning the minute he left the driveway. My days spent wiping away tears every time I woke up and realized he wasn't there to share a smile with and the fact that I would never again wake up to see his.

The devastation remained as the weeks passed and I couldn't bring myself to call him back. I was at my breaking point. A mental list full of my new hopes weaved between my racing thoughts and the irony was, those hopes for my future all included *him*. There was no one else I wanted to share my life with. He was never coming back for me—for us—and I agreed to the heartbreak. I'd allowed it in.

Ian was it for me. And he was gone in every sense of the word.

We agreed on a clean break, but I never agreed to stop loving him because that would be too much to ask of a woman who was finally using her heart for something other than pumping blood through a string of years filled with anxious days.

Though I knew I loved him before he left, I didn't realize how deep it ran. I didn't realize the extent of my love or how hard I would love him, or how much it would break me to lose his daily affection. I didn't realize how his presence would linger in my house or how I would forever sleep on the opposite side of the bed waiting for him to return to his side.

My love hadn't faded, my tears weren't anything more than fresh reminders on recycle. The pain of losing him wasn't lessening as the days and weeks passed, my insides only grew heavier with ache.

His presence and our relationship had restored my faith in the possibility of a different life other than just managing my disorder. His absence took that faith away when he left me

with nothing but a house full of memories and days filled with longing. We'd only had a few months to love each other, but that love would have to be enough to last my lifetime. I understood Jasmine and her hesitance to move on. I understood her stubborn heart and crumbling morals. I understood the unending pain and the scars love could leave.

I finally understood, and I fucking hated it.

I grieved him with every breath.

“So, this is what a broken heart feels like, huh, girl?”

Disco began to cry again, the same sorrowful whimper that started months ago as I pulled her into my arms and cried with her. For a moment in time, I lived in a dream with a man who could read my thoughts, whose attention took me to unbelievable heights, whose touch set me on fire and filled me with hope. I had the love of a good man, the best of love stories.

I found the one person in the world who understood me and loved me wholly as I was.

Love stories aren't always perfect. They can wreak havoc on the heart and distort the soul. I'd gotten lost in love and found the reality at the end of it where I lived in the truth.

Not all love stories come with happy endings.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Ian

Two Months later

I SAT ELLA'S COCOA DOWN on the wiry table at the park and took a sip of my coffee as she fed the birds the rest of her croissant. Once seated, she took a sip and commanded my attention with lifted hands.

Dad, you're still sad.

I'm fine.

You're lying.

I'm okay. How is school?

Please go. I'll be okay. I miss her too.

I put up my hands and she covered them with hers.

"Dad," she said. When it was just the two of us, she saved her voice for when she wanted to make her point. "You were happy with her."

Her speech was close to perfect. Her structure still lacked a little, but I'd never been a prouder father. Her voice was a gift, as was she.

"You sound beautiful," I said as she read my lips.

"I do not. I won't ever sound good. But one day a man will love me like you love her. Do you want me to be without that man?"

I lifted my hands. *No.*

"Talk," she commanded.

"No, I want you to have love."

"And I want that for you. This is not the time to give up." She swallowed and looked around us still a bit self-conscious from

talking in public. “I’m going to the Washington program soon. You don’t need to be here anymore.”

I shook my head as she stomped her foot on the pavement. “Listen to me!”

She was loud, but I didn’t flinch. She was showing me what was in her heart.

“You are a good dad. But I’m growing up to be a woman.”

That time I couldn’t help but laugh at the ironic tantrum.

I took a sip of my coffee. “And I haven’t missed any of it and I don’t intend to.”

“You get on my nerves,” she huffed.

“That’s not nice.”

“I don’t want to be nice. You need to go. Mom is here if I need her.”

“Good for her.”

I still wasn’t speaking to my ex-wife. I wasn’t sure if I ever would. Daniel had buckled under the pressure of her expectations in their first few months of dating and left Tara holding the bag, especially when she told him Ella was his. I’d been spared a custody battle and because he was the piece of shit he was, Ella had been spared too. I got no satisfaction from any of it aside from the fact that my daughter didn’t have to deal with the heartbreak I had.

Ella lifted her chin in defiance. “Go to her.”

“No.”

“What if Koti loves someone else now?” The burn in my chest scattered, singeing every part of me as Ella pulled an envelope out of her purse. Inside was a small square picture of Koti. Pain radiated through me as I fixated on the perfection of her face. Had she moved on? Everything inside me ached at the thought and at the same time, it was exactly what I’d asked her to do. The picture had been taken a month ago and if her smile was any indication of her progress, she was in far better shape than me.

“She writes to me all the time. She loves me. She loves *you*. This is the good love you said you wanted me to know about. The kind you and Mom didn’t have. Dad, *listen to me.*”

I choked on the lump in my throat. “I’m listening, baby. I promise.”

“Good.” Tears sprung up as her passion flew out of her mouth. “I won’t let you keep *me* from that love.”

“I understand, but this is different.”

“No. I’m almost a woman!” She seemed more intent than ever on making that clear.

“There are plenty of things you aren’t old enough for.”

She rolled her eyes dramatically. “Dad. Go to her before it’s too late.”

“I can’t leave you. I won’t.”

“I’m leaving *you*, Dad!”

My head snapped up as she lifted her hands. *I’m leaving you. I’m sorry. It’s time for you to find your new life.*

I lifted my hands. *You are my life.*

“No,” she spoke again. “Koti too.”

Shocked at her admission and the weight of what she was saying, I couldn’t help the build of emotion that swam in my eyes. At the sight of it, Ella flew into my arms and spoke directly into my ear. “We can both be happy. I promise. I know you love me. Go be with her. She still loves you too. I know it.”

Praying I could whisper back, just once, to my little girl she pulled away as we both righted ourselves. I wiped my face of more tears.

You are the best thing that ever happened to me. I want you to know that.

“I know,” she said plainly.

I laughed at that as she took her seat and spoke again. “Do whatever the hell you have to do to make yourself happy. We

only get one life, Daddy.”

A small group of women walked by staring wide-eyed in our direction before they spoke up to encourage her.

“Damn right, baby!”

“You tell him, honey!”

I raised a brow in an attempt to hide my smirk. “Where did you get that?”

She signed back.

An asshole I’m proud of.

* * *

Ian

One week later...

I pulled into the driveway and took a deep breath as I studied the identical houses. So much time had passed, yet the sight remained as much the same as the feeling in my chest. I’d abandoned her here months ago, and the last time I’d spoken to her, I’d given her no reason to wait for me. No reason to believe I would ever return. Exiting the cab of the truck, I glanced around the darkening sky. Koti always made it home by sunset, and I was losing my window by screwing around. All week I’d run in circles in an attempt to settle things in the States, so I didn’t have to leave her again in the near future. If by some miracle she took me back, if I had any place at all in her life, I was going to make damn sure I was able to be there. It took me a majority of the time to find someone to cover my class load, the rest I spent subletting my apartment. If Koti didn’t take me back, I would be a gypsy. That fear had me on the sand making headway toward her house before I could even begin to think about the right words. I’d phoned her, but her number no longer worked, which only had me scrambling

faster to get to her. At Ease Property was on hiatus according to the answering service and the number I had for Jasmine had long since been erased from my phone from her one time calling me. I was at a dead end in reaching her and had only one option.

I breached the clearing of the alley only to be disappointed by the sight of the ocean without her standing in front of it. The loud clatter of wood on her porch had me jumping out of my reverie.

“Can I help you?”

I scoured the guy questioning me from head to toe. Tall, dark, built, and decent looking. Instantly, I hated him.

“I’m looking for Koti Vaughn.”

“She’s not here.”

Rage boiled through my veins as he gave me a subtle smirk. I wasn’t in the mood for bullshit and it seemed the opposite for him. He positioned a large piece of wood over one of her windows and began nailing it in.

“Can I ask what in the hell you are doing?”

“Uh,” he said with a furrowed brow. “I guess you could say I’m paying penance.

“Are you a friend of Koti’s?” I asked, my tone full of accusation.

“Something like that,” he said, giving me another disgusting fucking grin.

“In case it isn’t apparent, I’m not in the mood for this. Where is she and what are you to her?”

The guy smiled showing me every single one of his white teeth. “I’ve never met Koti man, chill out.”

“Then can I ask why you’re on her porch boarding up her house?”

“A favor for her friend, Jasmine,” he replied. “It’s a long story, but made short she asked me to board up this house and the one over before the storm comes.”

“Storm?”

“Big cell, hurricane headed straight for the islands. I don’t know when you got here man, but you better turn around and get out fast. It’s going to start tomorrow.”

“I’ve been busy all week, haven’t bothered to look at the news.”

“Did you miss every TV screen on the way here?”

“Shit,” I said, wiping my face.

“It’s everywhere.”

“Can you give me Jasmine’s number?”

“No,” he said. “But maybe she’ll pick up if I call her.”

“Maybe?”

“Like I said, long story.”

I rolled up my sleeves and picked up some of the boards.

“That’s my parents’ place next door. I’ll get this done and come back and give you a hand.”

“Thanks, man, I appreciate it. Tell you what, I have a jet leaving at six. You help me out here, and I’ll make sure you get out of here in one piece.”

“Where’s Jasmine?”

“Iowa.”

“Iowa?” I grinned. She was with Julian.

“Want to tell me what that grin is about, brother? I’ve been begging for crumbs for the last few months.”

“I think it’s best that I don’t tell you for now.”

“Fair enough.” He swung the hammer as I got to work boarding up my parents’ house. Once I finished, I helped to finish boarding up Koti’s place. Every nail planted felt like more of what I didn’t want. I choked down the emotion of being on the island without her as I did everything I could to board her house up. Wherever she was, I was sure she was terrified.

When we were finished, the guy held out his hand. “I’m Steven.”

“Ian,” I offered, shaking his hand.

“I’m not sure this is going to help these houses, but let’s get the hell out of here.”

“I’m not leaving without Koti.”

“She’s not here in St. Thomas. Sorry, I thought you understood me.”

“And you don’t know where she is?”

“Nope. Let’s get on the plane and we can give Jasmine a call.”

“Sounds good.”

Two hours later, I was seated on a luxury jet when Steven put a cell phone in my hand.

“Hello?”

“You stupid ass men. I swear to God, I’m glad you found Steven, you two idiots deserve each other. If I was there, I would rip your damned balls off. You ASSHOLE!”

Steven chuckled across from me in his seat. “She’s a live one.”

I covered the mouthpiece. “I can see why you’re so smitten.”

“I’m so fucked,” he muttered, sinking back in his seat before he closed his eyes.

“It’s good to talk to you too, Jasmine. I’ve missed you as well.”

“Your ‘I’m a gentleman’ crap won’t work with me, and you damn well know it.” I heard a muffled, “Is that Ian? Let me talk to him.”

I would know Julian’s voice anywhere and heard Jasmine’s response to his request in the form of a painful grunt and a relenting, “Okay, baby, okay no need to get all batshit. Jeez!”

Jasmine responded to Julian by screaming in my ear. “I’ll show you batshit. You’re on my side. My SIDE!”

“You’re right, I’m on your side.” Seconds later, Julian’s voice was on the line. “Hey, man!”

“What in the hell have you gotten yourself into,” I muttered as Jasmine’s voice rang out.

“I heard that you Australian asshole!”

“It’s South African,” Julian corrected. I chuckled as the phone was dropped, another grunt sounded and then Jasmine came on the line breathless.

“You don’t deserve her.”

“I know. But I love her, and I swear to God, I’ll do everything I can to make it right.”

“It’s probably already too late.”

“What do you mean?”

“She went back to New York. Ian... you really fucked up.”

“Too late for what?”

“Her parents own a Fifth Avenue apartment. I’ll text Steven the address, and that’s all you’re getting from me.”

“Fair enough. Thank you. Out of curiosity, what’s the situation with this guy, Steven?”

Steven opened one of his eyes across from me and sat up as if I’d thrown him a bone.

“He’s just as screwed as you for the moment.”

I chuckled again. “That bad, huh?”

“Tell her I’m coming to get her,” Steven spoke up.

“Tell him I’m being taken care of,” she shouted back. “Good luck, Ian, you’re going to need it.”

“Jasmine, I know you’re pissed, but before you go, will you just tell me if she’s okay?”

“She got her heart shattered by an asshole who knew better, is about to have her home destroyed by an act of nature, and is currently living with her mother, what do you think?”

“Jasmine, please tell me what I might be too late for?”

The line went dead, and I cringed in my seat.

Steven let out a sigh. “She’s gotten a lot tougher since I left.” I recognized a bit of a southern drawl as he spoke.

“Left? You’re the ex-fiancé who left her in St. Thomas?”

“Yep,” he said, rolling a tumbler of whiskey in his fingers. “Biggest mistake of my life.”

“Why did you do it?”

“I had my reasons. None were good enough, hence the penance she’s making me pay. I know she’s with someone else right now. I’m biding my time and sooner or later she’s going to have to hear me out.”

“So, she’s taking her revenge by making you board her friend’s house?”

“Amongst other things,” he said dryly. “It was my pleasure to do it. I’m not the total bastard she paints me to be.”

“I’m afraid I may be the bastard she’s accused me of being,” I said, taking his whiskey and tossing it back. “My apologies. I think I needed it more than you.”

He motioned for the attendant. “Don’t worry about it, man. Plenty where that came from.”

I looked down at the islands as they slowly disappeared from view and briefly wondered how the sight of it would change when I returned.

“So where can I drop you?”

“As close to Fifth Avenue in New York City as possible.”

Steven grinned. “Looks like today’s your lucky day.”

I watched the expansive darkening sea fade as we drifted through the sky. “Hope so.”

* * *

Dark clouds laced the sky as I walked toward Fifth Avenue, my thoughts as muddled as the sounds of the bustling city. We'd had a layover in Atlanta for a day and a half due to a string of storms from the approaching hurricane. I spent the night in one of Steven's mansions. Jasmine, in her wine-induced tale of woe months ago in St. Thomas, had failed to mention that Steven owned half of the media in the southeast. I liked him well enough and he'd been kind to lend me the use of his plane to get to New York. Despite that, Julian had my loyalty. I couldn't fault Jasmine for her indecision. Steven had a certain likability. Julian, if he had real feelings for Jasmine, was in for a fight.

Racing thoughts multiplied as Jasmine's words had me panicking.

Too late?

For what?

Had she found someone else?

And how long had she been in New York?

I couldn't breathe, and maybe that agony was the penance I deserved, still, the idea of seeing her had my flesh burning. Needing her wasn't the plan all those months ago, but each of my steps was purposeful, a way back to the truth of the fact that I did. I needed her. And she had to know that I was half a man without her. I had nothing rehearsed, no great speech planned of what a screw up I was to think we could treat our time together as a fling, that it hadn't changed my life, my dreams, me.

All thoughts slipped away as I saw her exit the building feet away from me. My wind knocked out from the mere sight of her, I scoured her from head to heels. She was dressed in a

sleek black power suit, a curtain of long blonde hair shielding her face. The wind graced me by pushing it away so I could get a glimpse of her. She was painted perfectly, her eyes lined with black, her lips colored in deep red. My whole body spiked in awareness as she surveyed the street in front of her, stunning me motionless. Her head held high, she was the perfect picture of a Park Avenue princess. I'd never seen her in more than a smile and a bikini, and although it was my preference, for a moment, I was a bit intimidated by how incredible she looked. She glanced in my direction not seeing me before slipping into a waiting town car.

"Koti!" I chased after her as the car began to pull away. *Months*, I'd waited months to try to mend the gap between us. Fear of every color clouded my vision as did jealousy I didn't have the right to feel. Rain started to pour from the sky as all of my hopes began to fade.

What if her heart was no longer mine?

My veins screamed at the idea as I spit out the threatening defeat. There was no greater pain in life than losing love. Koti's own brand of affection had smashed through the brick and mortar of my resurrected heart. Rights be damned. I wanted her, she belonged to me and I to her, so much so my soul bled in that street streamlining in her direction. I managed to hail a cab just as her town car passed me.

"Follow that car, please."

The cabbie gave me a disbelieving grin in the rearview. "Are you fucking *serious*, man?"

I pushed my drenched hair away from my eyes. "I'll give you every fucking dollar in my wallet, *man*. Follow it!"

Taking off like a shot, I sat back in the cab as the sight of her swam in my head. Absolutely nothing about her appearance resembled the woman I fell so much in love with.

Was I too late? No, it could never be too late, no matter what the case and I was desperate enough to breach anything between us. Repaying the favor, no matter what it took, I would break down every wall she built, even if I helped to

resurrect them. I would never love another woman, of that I was certain. My fate was in her hands and I would make it known. We had something time and geography couldn't touch. Regardless of my mindset, fear scorched me everywhere making me nauseous. Seconds after the cabbie pulled up behind the town car, Koti dashed into the building as I looked up at the sign in bold letters next to the front door. C. Zanders-OBGYN.

“Hey man, is this your stop or what?”

All the blood left my face as I stared after her.

Too late?

I shoved all the promised cash into the cabbie's glove covered hand as blood filled my ears and my heart slammed against my chest.

Confused thoughts multiplied while I caught the door and held it for a woman with a stroller. She thanked me as I waited for her to move past before I rushed down the corridor. I stopped in the lobby searching for the floor. After a trip in the elevator, I stopped outside the office door and tried to collect myself.

Was she pregnant? Half of me boiled in thoughts of betrayal at the fact that she'd hidden it from me while the other half of me begged that was the truth of it. Jasmine had been cruel with her warning and maybe I deserved the state I was in, but I couldn't let it last a minute longer. The waiting receptionist gave me a kind smile.

“I'm here to meet Koti Vaughn. She has an appointment today.”

“And you are?”

“Her husband?”

“Is that a question?”

I cleared my throat. “No, I'm her husband.”

She picked up a file and eyed it. “Says here she's single.”

I swallowed as the older woman with dyed fire red hair narrowed her eyes but couldn't contain the threatening smile

on her lips.

“Is this a good story?”

“Not sure,” I said hanging my head as droplets of rain hit her desk. “But I’m begging your pardon for lying and for your mercy. In the most unromantic gesture imaginable, I’m about to barge into her appointment and demand she marry me.”

Her eyes widened. “In an OB appointment? You’re serious?”

“Quite serious, yes.”

“Love your Australian accent.”

I held my bite. “Thank you.”

“Down the hall, last door on the right, but if anyone asks you found it on your own.”

“Thanks again.”

“I hope she says yes.”

We shared a smile. “Me too.” I raced down the hall and burst through the door just as Koti sat down in a hospital gown tying it in place behind her. Shock, confusion and then anger transformed in seconds over her beautiful face.

“What in the hell are you doing here?”

I couldn’t wait a single second longer. “What in the hell are *you* doing here? What is this? What am I too late for?”

“Ian, you can’t be here.”

“The hell I can’t,” I said, closing the door. “Tell me what this is.”

“*This* is none of your damned business. Get out, I’m not decent.”

I raised a brow. “I’ve seen you in far more compromising positions with a lot less on.”

“How did you know I was here and you were too late for... Jasmine?” Without confirmation, she closed her eyes and shook her head. “I’m going to kill her.”

“I just took a ride with her ex, Steven on his plane. Seems to be some unfinished business there.”

“Yeah, well she has three men madly in love with her.”

“Three?”

“Toby, the water guy is in the running too, may the best man win.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, wow. Great talking to you, can you please leave now?”

It took every bit of strength I had not to sweep her off the bed and into my arms. I loved her sass more than I should, but even in a hideously loud hospital gown with bright orange flowers, she had me at her mercy. Still, panic more than anything strangled me at the thought she could betray me in a way I could never forgive.

“Are you pregnant?”

“Knock, knock,” the doctor said, entering the room and looking at me in surprise.

“Hi there, didn’t realize she had company. I’m Dr. Zanders,” she introduced herself and I shook her hand. Koti spoke on my behalf before I could get a word out.

“He was just leaving,” Koti offered before looking pointedly at me, “*now*.”

I gave her a menacing smile. “Not a chance, puffer fish.”

Dr. Zanders laughed. “I thought you were single, Koti.”

“I am.”

I cut in with an answer of my own. “She’s not, I assure you.”

Koti straightened herself on the bed in an attempt to muster as much dignity as she could in her gown. “You assure wrong. This isn’t cute, Ian, you need to leave.”

“No. Fucking. Way.” I stood, my chest heaving as I looked her over. If she was pregnant, I would have to find a way to forgive her, every part of me hoped it was true, but a larger part of me was boiling mad... She wasn’t showing, at that

thought my chest sank at the idea something could be wrong. I turned to the doctor who seemed to be enjoying our back and forth.

“So, this is just routine then?”

She nodded. “There’s no need to worry. Hysterectomies are *very* common. I perform about ten a week.”

I felt sick as I tried to swallow the threatening bile. Not pregnant. Most definitely *not* pregnant.

I turned to face Koti who was staring at her red painted toes. Wrong color, wrong place, wrong news. I didn’t know if anything would ever be right again.

Fighting a hundred different emotions, I spoke up to try to save face. “Dr. Zander, could you please excuse us for a moment?”

“Sure.” She made her leave as I stared at the woman who owned me and refused to look my way.

Chapter Forty

Koti

I WONDERED WHAT COLOR COFFIN Jasmine wanted, or if she wanted to be cremated, either way, I hoped she was enjoying her last day alive with Julian and that she'd broken her abstinence streak because she was a dead woman.

Seconds after the door closed, Ian stalked over to where I sat, pulled me to stand and grabbed the clothes I had laying over the chair and threw them on the bed toward me.

I stood arms crossed as he gathered my shoes throwing them my way as well. "This is like the opening of a bad joke. Your ex-boyfriend walks into your OB appointment. Care to tell me the punch line?"

Furious gray eyes met mine. "I'm still madly in love with you. Get dressed."

Trying to ignore the shock at the sight of him and his words, I shook my head.

"That's unfortunate, *crocky* because I've moved on." He looked gorgeous in a form-fitting button-down that matched his eyes and slacks. His hair was a little longer and even more unruly and it looked dead sexy on him. He was in even better shape than when he left the island and I tried my best not to stare too long. It hurt me to see him that way. It hurt me to see him at all. But I'd done my share of mourning over the way he'd left me with no trace of his love, of us.

"Moved on?" His eyes drank me in before he moved toward me. "Sorry if I don't believe you. And I've been chasing you all over to find you doing this? The surgery is not happening, get dressed."

"Sorry, Ian, I'm not that scared woman you left bleeding in the sand anymore. Things have changed. I've changed."

“Well now, *that* would be unfortunate, but fortunately I don’t believe you on that either.”

“This needs to happen.”

I refused to believe the genuine fear that covered his features.

“*Are you sick?*”

Ignoring him, I shed my nightgown as his eyes greedily took in my naked form. Eat your heart out, buddy. He wasn’t the only one who’d been working out. It wasn’t a lie, things had changed, I just wasn’t sure if I was happy with all of them.

“Answer me, Koti,” he commanded. “Please.”

I sighed out my answer. “No, I’m not sick.”

“Are you at risk of anything?”

“Well... no more than usual.” Pulling my panties on, I could see desire stir in his eyes. I pretended to ignore that too.

“Then it’s not happening.”

“It *is* happening, tomorrow morning and you need to *leave*.” I moved to grab my slacks and he stopped me with a hand on my arm.

“Not a damned chance.”

I ripped myself away feigning indifference to his touch. “How about you answer some questions for me. Like, why are you here?”

“Because I came to tell you I was an idiot and I want another chance with you.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Oh, it’s happening.”

Hand on my hips, I faced him head on. “Are you taking steroids now? Who in the hell are you to tell me what’s happening?!”

“I’m the man in your life.”

“You’re the man who left me!”

“And I’ve paid for it in every imaginable way. You remember the hell I told you I didn’t believe existed? I’ve been living in it because I can’t stand life without you. And you aren’t having this surgery.”

“Ian, I’m having it. It’s what’s best for me.”

“Why?” He shook his head, calling bullshit. “Because you’re mad at me?”

“Still an egomaniac? It’s sad to see not much has changed for you. Not everything revolves around you. Endometriosis is painful. Trust me on this.”

“And there’s a possibility the pain can lessen with childbirth.”

“Did you YouTube that fact on the way over here? Good for you.”

He narrowed his eyes. “No, I read up when I was on the island, making love to you every night and fucking you every day.”

I swallowed as he took a step toward me.

“You were holding out to have this surgery because you thought there might be a chance for a family someday. You endured the pain because you were hoping for a child. Tell me that’s not the truth.” I stayed mute as his furious eyes bore into mine, his jaw clenched. “If I thought for one second this is what you really wanted, I would walk away, but it isn’t. You don’t want this surgery. You want to have babies, in St. Thomas, *my* babies. Now finish dressing, damnit, I’m here to take you home.”

“There is no home.” I pulled on my blouse and started tugging on the buttons, fighting my tears I turned away from him. “It’s gone, *both* of our houses.”

“What?”

I glanced at him over my shoulder. “Jasmine just called to let me know Banion’s okay. He can’t even get to our street. It’s all gone. St. Thomas is in shambles.”

His face paled. “Thank Christ you weren’t there when it hit. But it’s *still* our home.”

I smiled ironically. “No, that was never my home.”

The doctor poked her head in the door. “Koti, I have another appointment and we didn’t really need an exam today. This visit was more for Q & A, so if you have any question feel free to call me on my cell. You can grab it at the receptionist’s desk. Good to meet you...”

“Ian,” he offered, his tone ice.

“Good to meet you, Ian.”

“She’s not having the surgery,” he said matter-of-fact, “but we appreciate your time. Nice to meet you as well.”

Dr. Zander smiled at me, her eyes alight with mischief. She was enjoying the volley between us far too much.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I told her. “I’m sorry about this.”

“She won’t be here,” Ian said, fuming as he glared at me across the bed.

The Dr. spoke up with a smile on her face. “I’ll wait for your call, Koti.”

Once the door was shut, I turned on him, my anger spilling over.

“You have no right to speak on my behalf and you need to leave.”

“And you need to wake the hell up. You aren’t making this decision because it’s what’s best. It’s an emotional call, you’re still angry with me for leaving and you want to give up. I won’t let you.”

“It’s my decision.”

“The hell it is! Get your things we’re leaving!”

“I’m not going anywhere with you!”

“You don’t belong here.”

“I don’t belong on an island in the middle of the damned ocean, either. I’m not sure it’s here, but I’m figuring it out.”

“Jesus,” he said taking a step closer, his eyes accusing. “What happened to you?”

“I woke up, and I needed to grow up. I can’t live in my parents’ vacation rental for the rest of my life, it’s not practical. I’m staying in New York for now. I’m going back to work for a small firm after I recover. It’s major progress, you should be happy for me.”

He crossed his arms. “Are you kidding me?”

I fastened my belt while he fumed on the other side of the bed.

“Look, I’ve been battling this my whole life. I’ll manage. You don’t have to worry about me. I’ve got new plans. The house is gone, there’s nothing to go home to. Jasmine’s considering moving back to the States as well. It’s just not home to either of us anymore. Things change. I took a cue from you, it’s time to be responsible. *You* of all people should be proud of me.”

“Proud of you? Aikona! No fucking way.” Ian’s face turned crimson as I slid into my heels.

“Thank you for your concern, but I assure you I’m fine.”

He narrowed his eyes and strode toward me until the back of my knees touched the bed. I tried not to react to a whiff of his scent. He towered over me as I stood to my full height, thankful for the few inches of advantage my stilettos gave me.

“You want to have this surgery? Fine, tell me how this decision came to pass? You just woke up and decided to change the course of the rest of your life, to give away your chance of having a family, why?”

“I’m in pain!” I defended.

“Bullshit, Koti.”

“No, what’s bullshit is me having to explain myself to you. You don’t have a say in my life. Not anymore.”

“The hell I don’t. I’m the father of your future children so I damn sure do have a say.”

Instant tears filled my eyes and I turned to look out of the window watching the bustling traffic and a woman with a stroller move toward Central Park.

“That’s rich. I haven’t seen or heard from you in months.”

“Doesn’t matter how much time has passed, we’re still in love. I felt it the minute I walked through the door, I’m not playing the denial game with you, or any game ever, for that matter. That isn’t who we are. We’re closer than two people could ever be. I still love you, probably now more than I ever have. And I have loved you. Maybe in different ways and in different degrees over the years but I have loved you. You want to know what I’m doing here? I came to tell you that you’re worth it. And I’ve been stupid and selfish, and I want to spend my life with you.”

I turned back to glare at him. “News flash, egomaniac, I can live without you.”

“I know.”

“You left me with nothing.”

“I know.”

“I don’t *need* you anymore.”

“Maybe you don’t, but I still need you.”

He hung his head as I stood shaking with fury.

“That’s funny, I remember begging for any sign that you might. I remember telling you I would wait for you and getting nothing.”

“So, what’s this then? The final fuck you to our relationship? Tell me something, Koti. That day you dreamed of having a baby, the day of the accident, what color eyes did that baby have?”

“Ian, stop it. Okay, stop it!”

“They were my eyes, weren’t they? You never wanted a family, you never dreamed that far ahead until we fell in love.”

I stayed quiet.

“They were my eyes. I’m the man you pictured having a child with. I’m here to tell you I want the same.”

“Please,” I pleaded. “Please stop. That’s not the life I was supposed to live, remember? It’s not realistic. It was a childish

move to run and throw it all away. As much as I hate to admit it, my mother was right.”

“Bullshit, that’s your *mother* talking. I won’t believe that of you. You were happy, and I destroyed it with my selfish shit and now you’ve used it as an excuse to move on the *wrong* way and in the wrong direction.”

“Who are you to judge me? You don’t know what it was like being in that house without—”

He took a step forward closing all the distance between us. “Without what? Me?”

“Just leave. I don’t want you here. How can I make that any more clear?”

“You could stop lying, not have tears in your eyes, not be searching for my lips to kiss you and itching for me to reach out and touch you. I see it all because I know you that well. I watched you and worshipped you for the best months of my life. I *know* what you need because I loved giving it to you and I will touch you the way you need me to and kiss you the way you want me to, but I need you to stop lying to me... right now.”

“So what, because you finally showed up I’m just supposed to get on my knees and be grateful you came back. Go to hell. It’s too late.”

His eyes closed painfully and when they opened, I could see them swimming with emotion.

“Maybe it is too late for us, if that’s what you say, I have no choice but to believe you, but this life you’re living now *isn’t* you.”

“No, this *is* me, the side you don’t know and the part you’ve never met, just like there’s an entire life you lived before me, that I don’t have a clue about. These are our real lives. St. Thomas was a dream. What happened on that island was beautiful and magical and a once-in-a-lifetime thing, but it wasn’t real or sustainable, and it was always going to end. We both knew eventually we would have to get back to reality. After you left to face yours, I decided to do the same for

myself. *This* is who I am, that time on the island was a much-needed *break*. I was never supposed to be there.”

“I know you don’t believe that. That place, that beach, that ocean is ours, Koti, and maybe it’s not the life either of us planned, but it’s what I want now more than anything. We were happy there.”

Anger won over ache. “You’re still selfish. Words mean nothing to you because you don’t listen. My life is here now, St. Thomas is over. Fucking me for a few months doesn’t make you an authority on me. *We* are over. You made sure of it.”

He continually swallowed, tears brimming in his eyes as he lifted his hands.

I love you.

I need you.

I want that beautiful dream back.

I can’t live without you.

I tried, and I hated it.

I’ll be there when you make mistakes, when you hurt, when you’re scared.

I’ll be there.

I’ll marry you.

I’ll want children with you.

We can live anywhere you want.

I’m lost without my love.

I need you back.

Tell me what to do.

If you don’t want words, tell me what you want. Please. Please. Please.

Raw, I bit my lips to stifle the sob. “Stop. You broke my heart and you meant to. You can’t take that back.”

He gripped the sides of my face. “I’m late, but I’m here. And I’m sorry. I can’t stop, I won’t stop. I can’t stay away from you any longer. I can’t lose you again. And you can’t lose the part of you that I know will be one of the best parts. You’ll be the most beautiful and amazing mother. You’ll give our children pure love and acceptance. Please don’t do this. Tell me I’m not too late. Tell me your heart hasn’t closed to me. Tell me our children are safe.”

His tears fell rapidly down his beautiful face as my heart tried to claw its way out of my body toward the refuge of him.

“I have no place being a mother.”

“You’re the strongest woman I’ve ever met, despite your fears. I’d be so incredibly proud to have you mother my children. And as long as it’s in my power, you won’t be alone to ice those hundred cupcakes for the class. I’ll be by your side through all of it. Every minute, good or hard. I want to be that man for you. I *want* to be there. I want our love story more than my selfish freedom. I want our life. I’m so sorry I ever made you doubt that. I’ll never leave you again.”

My walls began to crumble one by one.

“Please,” he said, his eyes overflowing with love. “Baby, please be honest with me. I’m begging you. Be honest with me now before I do as you ask and walk out that door.”

He searched my eyes as I swallowed hard.

“I know you still love me because I can feel it. I can feel it no matter how hard you’re trying to fight it. I can feel your need for me, just like you feel mine. We’re still in love, and I know we always will be. You are worthy of love and a life fuller than you can ever imagine. You’re my best friend and I miss you. I miss laughing with you, I miss talking to you, I miss filling you with my cock and hearing your beautiful moans, I miss eating late at night in front of the fridge door, swimming naked and waking up together covered in sand. I miss fighting with you because making up feels so fucking good. I miss the Koti who can’t stop laughing when she’s had too much wine, I miss the way you hug my daughter with your eyes closed

because you mean it. I miss the turned-on sounds you make when you're reading your romance novels."

"I make sounds?"

"Yes, that's why I never let you finish but a few chapters at a time, it drove me mad."

We both laughed despite our sagging hearts.

"I miss Disco and the way you loved her without trying to show me you'd grown too attached. There are so many things I miss, but your smile is the first. I'll do everything in my power to keep it there, to light you up the way you do me. I'm not just here because I miss you, because I need you, I'm begging for the beautiful dream of that life we started together. You think it's not realistic, but it can be a reality for *both* of us. We can go back and own that fucking life. No rules but our own. Our happiness won't ride on fulfilling anyone else's expectations, it will be a life catered to *us*."

A tear ran down my cheek and he brushed it away with his thumb.

"I just... couldn't think of a good enough reason to be in any more pain." I sniffed and tried to pull my face from his grip, but he kept me close.

"I'll be your reason, let our son or daughter be your reason and they will be worth it, I promise you. I promise you." He kissed my forehead, my eyelids, my cheeks and then stole my breath when he placed a slow kiss to my lips. I sank against the weight of it, my walls obliterated as my heart sprang free.

"It hurt so much when you left. I couldn't handle it without you. It was like everything I loved about being there evaporated without you to share it with. I didn't know it, but I think I was waiting for you before you came, and when you left, I could never love that place the same. I missed you so much, I felt like I was dying every day you stayed gone." He exhaled, closing his eyes before he kissed my tears away.

"I was a shitty boyfriend, but I'll be a better husband."

"I would have waited forever if you had asked me to."

He bit his lip and nodded. "I know."

"Why didn't you ask me, Ian? I hate you for it. You know muses don't just fall from the sky every day." It was my shitty attempt at humor, but I couldn't even manage a smile. "Domkop." I deadpanned.

He chuckled. "I'm swimming in regret. Please, Koti, please take me back."

"What about Ella?"

"She's fine. She's good, she sent me to you. The one thing that held me down set me free to love you because she loves you too. We both want you back."

"I'm so pissed at you."

"I'll fix this so you never have a reason to doubt me again. Say yes."

"To what?"

"To all of it, to everything. Be my life. Marry me and if you say yes, I promise the only thing I'll ever be selfish about again is you. Say yes and let's go back to our beach."

Three points to make a good argument, Koti.

Number one, you love him. Number two, you love him. Number three, you love him.

I didn't want to fight anymore.

"Yes."

"Again," he whispered hoarsely, his gray eyes pleading with mine.

"Yes, to all of it. I love you, Ian."

He let out a sigh as he gently took my lips, his slow kiss melting the space between us. "Let's go home."

"We don't have a home."

"Then we'll do what we do best, and this time together."

"What's that?"

"Start over."

Epilogue

Koti

Eight months later...

JASMINE CLASPED A GOLD BRACELET on my arm and stood back, tossing a piece of wavy hair off of my shoulder.

“You look so beautiful.”

“Don’t make me cry.”

“I’m not trying to. Today looks good on you. I’d be jealous if I didn’t have a hot ass man waiting on me.”

“I wish he could have been here,” I said, turning to look at my reflection. Most of my residual nerves of the day had faded as I took a sip of champagne. The last week had been kind and I was thankful. It had been weeks since I’d had an attack and for the most part, my body had been cooperating despite the stress of the past month.

But on the other side of my fear was a freedom I could never have imagined. In trusting Ian with my worries, in having him to lean on with my daily stresses, I found it much more bearable to deal instead of internalizing everything. It was incredible to me, the feeling of someone knowing me so intimately, he often knew just what to do, what to say so I didn’t feel alone with my fears. I had a partner for the first time in my life. He never dismissed my anxiety or placated it either when I needed to work it out. Simply put, he was just there in any capacity I needed him.

“Maybe I’ll get here someday,” Jasmine said, fidgeting with one of Banion’s beautiful bouquets.

“Oh,” I said with a knowing grin. “I have zero doubts you will.”

“I’d look ridiculous as a bride.”

“Please,” I said giving her an eye roll. “You’re still fresh, I think Banion started to cry a little when I told him you weren’t single.”

“I *am* single.”

I gave her a pointed look. “You are so *not* single.”

“I’m undecided.”

“And you’re loving it,” I said, kissing her cheek. “And I’m so proud of you.”

Her eyes glistened. “If you want to run away, now is the time. I know a sucker with a getaway plane.”

“I’m good.”

“God, I know you are. But he’s still lucky I didn’t rip his balls off.”

“I am too, I have plans for those balls.”

My dad cleared his throat as Jasmine and I made bulging eyes at each other and I coughed out a laugh. “Sorry, Dad.”

He gave me a soft look. “She’s here.”

I frowned in confusion before realization struck. “How?”

“Ian called her last night.”

My mother and I hadn’t spoken since I left New York with Ian. I knew deep down her real disappointment was that she finally had me back in her life and on her path. Her vocally expressed distaste for our new plans as I packed my things had led to a nasty fight. Ian had held his tongue until she insulted our relationship and he, in turn, had blown up by calling her an eleventh-hour mother. My dad hadn’t faulted either of us for her upset when we left New York to pick up the literal pieces of our life in St. Thomas. Even as I wrestled with the fact that my mother and I would never see eye to eye, my heart made a decision that that day was as good as any to give our relationship another chance. It was, after all, a day of new beginnings.

I looked to Jasmine whose eyes shimmered with happy tears. “I knew she would come.”

“Let’s do this.” I couldn’t get to him fast enough.

Jasmine gripped my hand and squeezed before handing me my bouquet. “Let’s get you married.”

“Ready, Daddy?”

He nodded. “She loves you. Please try, if you can, to forgive her.”

I hugged him close. “I already did.”

My father put my hand in his as we made our way off my freshly painted back porch toward my finish line. Brilliant colors glittered the sky as the sun began to sink beneath the sparkling ocean’s surface. Jars full of votive candles were scattered in the sand around the small arch lighting up our beach. Ian stood in wait for me looking gorgeous in a simple white button-down and slacks. Flowers of every color were strewn where I stepped as I was escorted toward my waiting groom. I smiled at Ian’s family, Rowan, William, and his brother Adam as they stood in wait with matching smiles. Rowan’s eyes overflowed the minute she caught sight of me. After sharing a tearful smile, I turned my attention back to Ian who mouthed “you’re beautiful.” Halfway down the aisle, Ella stepped away from her place beside her father and moved toward me stopping just a few feet away.

“Hi,” she said simply in greeting.

“H h-hi,” I whispered back with a nervous laugh.

“I love you, Koti,” she said in the most sincere and perfect voice imaginable.

Instant tears sprang to my eyes. “I love you, too.”

Seconds later, a change in music filled the air and Ella looked back to her father who did a short three finger countdown for her before she turned and began to sign the words of the song to me. It was a gift from Ian who stood behind her with a clear view as I tried to hold in my threatening sobs. Ella threw her heart into her every movement as she signed Calum Scott’s “The Reason”. Happy tears trailed down her sun-kissed cheeks as she told me of her father’s love for me and pressed her hands against her heart swaying back and forth to the music

she couldn't hear, but to words she could feel. Piano keys struck every chord in my heart as I looked past Ella to Ian who began to sign with her on the second verse. An ache of the purest kind poured from my heart as I watched my future happiness tell me of a love so incredible it was limitless, endless and ours. I crumbled in my father's hold as he looked on at me with shimmering eyes and faith-filled assurance. They swayed together as my heart overflowed with love for them both. Ella stood back next to her father as Ian signed the rest of the lyrics. When the last of the notes had played, I resumed my walk toward my forever.

My mother was weeping freely as she stood and searched my eyes for forgiveness before her and my father agreed to give me away. I eagerly hugged her as she held me tightly in her arms and pulled back to tell me I was a beautiful bride. We shared a smile before Jasmine stepped in to take my bouquet while wiping the tears from her eyes.

Breathless and overwhelmed I turned to face my groom, my heart alight with love and acceptance I could never have dreamed up. Ian and I stared at each other, filled with unconditional love as we promised our lives to one another, our hearts united in our place of peace, where we began the dream that had become our reality.

* * *

Later at the reception under our star-sprinkled sky, Ian pulled me onto the porch full of guests and we slow danced to Cyndi Lauper's "Time after Time".

"You made me choose the song," he whispered, "I think it's fitting."

"So fitting," I whispered. "I can't believe we just got married, crocky."

“I can’t believe you wore those damned gold sandals,” he said, pulling me closer and rubbing his nose against mine.

“Of course you can. You sure you’re up for this? You ready to be a Home Depot dad again?”

“I’m up for whatever happens. I can’t believe you’re mine.”

“I can’t believe you’re building us a house.” We both turned to the framed skeleton sitting where our sand alley used to lay. The only thing finished was the expansive deck and that had only happened days ago as a request from a bride to a groom for her wedding day. The width of the house took up both lots that our houses used to dwell on. Ian planned to repurpose some of the wood from the old houses to add character. I think a part of him was just as sentimental that a cherished part of our childhood was gone, and it was his way of incorporating our past into our future. It had taken us close to a month to get back to the island and far longer to handle the desolation that surrounded us. The day we arrived in St. Thomas, Ian proposed to me in front of our wrecked houses amongst the scattered remains all over our beach. He wanted to turn one of our most miserable days into the happiest, and he managed it on bended knee with the question of forever and future promises pouring from his beautiful lips. We spent our days helping with the cleanup and our nights catching up. Our love paved the way through the endless wreckage that once was our paradise. We lived off love in the worst of conditions and nearly a year later, we were beginning to see some semblance of our dream. The day we broke ground on our new house, I started to plan our wedding.

I danced with my husband as Cyndi sang our love’s lullaby thinking about the past year and the ones ahead of us.

“This is everything I had hoped,” I said, feeling tearful. “Gah, I’m so emotional lately.”

Ian’s smile deepened. “You think maybe that’s a good sign?”

“No,” I said with a sigh. “Dr. Z said it will probably take a while with being on birth control so long and then there are my asshole ovaries.”

“Have faith, beauty,” he said. “We have time, plenty of time.”

“I know, I’m not worried about it. I just gained a teenager.”

“She’s just agreed to stay for the summer, and she keeps eyeing that kid who lives a few streets over,” he shook his head, “let the good times roll. Remember new wife of mine, no boys, those are the rules.”

“I have equal say now and you just made it so. I think it’s time for her to date.”

Ian winced as if I’d punched him. “Are you kidding me? No way.”

“She’s plenty old enough and she’s probably going to start with or without your consent. So, you might as well give her a little freedom.”

“Are you purposefully trying to give me a fucking heart attack on our wedding night?”

“Don’t die just yet. I need your sperm.”

He scoffed. “How romantic.”

“And I’m horny. We should go fuck while everyone is dancing.”

Ian’s eyes bulged. “Do you hear yourself right now?”

“What? Like your mouth isn’t ten times worse. Besides, it’s the hormones,” I whispered. “We can make all the sweet wedding night love later. Now come see to my needs, *Pleasure Prince*.”

I yanked at his hand as he laughed loudly behind me. “Oh, my God, woman, I love you so damned much.”

Behind his back, I signaled Ella the okay as she pulled her island crush toward the dance floor and mouthed. “Thank you.”

Giving her the thumbs up, I smiled inwardly as Ian stomped enthusiastically through the sand toward our half a house. Minutes later, my back against the wood frame, my dress was around my waist, Ian drove into me as I bit into his shoulder to stifle my moans.

“I could do this forever with you,” he whispered as he cradled me in his palms, holding me tightly to him.

“That’s kind of the point of the day,” I whispered against his neck, “we get to do this forever.”

He pulled back to gaze down at me, slowing his pace as he thrust in, the feel of him too much and not enough. There was nothing funny about the look in his eyes.

He stopped his movements and leaned down kissing me so tenderly, tears surfaced.

“My beautiful wife,” he dipped in. “I never thought I would be this happy.”

“Ian.”

“I love you so much, baby,” he said making me ache and filling it all at once. “So much.”

Connected on every level, he gently pushed in again filling me over and over as I clung to him, our labored breaths mingling as we sank into a slow rhythm until I came apart, my body shuddering as he kissed me again and again, his tongue tasting, taking, savoring as he slid it gently against mine.

His body tensed as I leaned in and whispered, “I love you.” He let go then, his frame shaking as he let out a long breath. He pulled back as we stared at each other in wonder, neither of us taking a single second for granted. It was a testament to what we had to look forward to, a collection of minutes, hours, days, weeks, months that would turn into years of the same love we both thrived on. His excitement matched mine as we shared our happiness with a smile and then sealed it with a kiss underneath the stars we unveiled for the other.

* * *

Koti

Eleven months later...

Ella smiled between us sensing our shared secret before her eyes lingered on her father who gave her a reassuring nod.

She lifted her hands. *What's the news?*

Ian grabbed my hand and we beamed at each other before we both turned to Ella. "We're pregnant."

Ella's smile disappeared, her face twisting in agony as she lifted her hands to sign.

Excuse me.

She shot up from the table unaware her water glass had spilled. I managed to catch it before it hit the floor and shattered and looked up to see Ian try to stop her with a hand on her arm while she tried her best to pull away. When she finally managed to get free, she began frantically signing.

"No," he spoke and signed in unison, "You're signing too fast. Slow down or speak."

Her face twisted as her broken voice sounded out breaking both our hearts. "Congrats, *Ian*, you finally get a child of your own."

"What?" Ian paled as I sucked in a breath.

Tears flooding her eyes, Ella leveled us both with her next words. "I know you're not my father."

Ian flinched as Ella faced him head-on.

"I'm deaf, not stupid, remember? You've been telling me that my whole life. Hey, *Ian*—"

"Stop calling me that!" He was smashing his hands together as he signed, pain twisting his features.

"Fine, *Dad*, how could you think I wouldn't know? Haven't you ever seen a picture of Daniel?"

Ian closed his eyes and I could feel the shatter in his chest from a foot away.

"I look just like him!" She was screaming, her voice faltering in heartbreak as she continued. "I have his face, his eyes! I'm

not an idiot. All those months ago when you were sad, when you first came to St. Thomas, I saw you crying when you thought I wasn't watching. The minute I met Daniel, I knew why."

Ian slowly lifted his hands. *You knew this whole time?*

Ella slowly nodded. "So, it's true?"

Ian's tears were instant, the hurt on his face etched in every line. "I'm so sorry, baby."

Ella sobbed in our kitchen, her words coming out in an angry burst. "I hate her!"

Ian signed slowly. "You told her you know?"

"No, she was too busy kissing his *dick* until he broke up with her."

"Language!"

"It doesn't matter, I don't care about her or him. And now I'm losing you because you will have this new family without me. I know you got what you want now. A baby of your *own*."

"That's not why Koti got pregnant, not for that reason."

"You're too old."

"Now who's the asshole? And I'm not too old, I'm still in my thirties until tomorrow."

"Then why?"

"Because I love her, and I'm meant to be a dad."

"You got your wish." Her heart was breaking, and I could feel the pain radiating off him. Ella shook with emotion as her father cut the air with his hand furiously until she raised her eyes to his.

"You. Are. Mine," he whispered fiercely, as he signed slow and with the same emphasis.

"But I'm not. I'm not your daughter, I'm *his*."

I coughed back a sob standing on the sidelines, helpless and wanting to comfort them both.

“You are mine and you know it. Neither of us can help what your mother did, but we can move past it because of the truth, nothing will ever come between us. I love you as much now as I did the minute I found out you were coming. It was the happiest moment of my life.”

Ella broke before us, watching his hands as Ian fought with emotion, on the verge of losing his own battle. He cut the air, again and again, stomping his foot so she could feel the vibration as Ella’s shoulders fell forward in defeat. He moved swiftly toward her but remained inches away so she had no choice but to watch his plea. She lifted shimmering eyes to meet his before she followed his hands.

“I’m so proud of you. You are mine. Your sarcasm, that’s mine, your need to fix things, that’s me, your independence, me, your mean right hook, your love for superhero movies, that all comes from *me*. All of those things and much more. You are a reflection of me. And you will never be replaced.”

“Daddy.” She crumbled, and he stood where he was, his eyes filling as his voice broke. “But I deserve to be happy too. You are the one who pointed that out to me. And Koti makes me happy and this baby is a blessing and you will finally have the brother or sister you’ve been asking for since you were five.”

Ella cried harder as Ian stood strong, adamant on making his point as he fought his need to physically comfort her. “Look at me, little woman. I’m your father, your Dad, *forever*. Don’t be afraid of this change, of this baby, or of losing an ounce of my love. Don’t be afraid of *anything*, because you are mine.”

He pressed both hands to his chest and closed his eyes moving his body back and forth. I muffled back a sob. “You are mine, since the day your mother put you in my arms and we got linked.” He clasped his fingers together and pushed them toward her. “We are forever, Ella, nothing or no one can or will ever change that. Tell me you understand. Tell me you know that.”

She nodded before she rushed into his open arms and broke inside them with relief. Ella’s cries had Ian faltering as I coughed out my own tears. After a few minutes of their

embrace, Ella lifted her soaked face from his shoulder and stretched a hand out to me. “I’m sorry, Koti. I didn’t mean to ruin it for you.”

Don’t you dare be sorry. You didn’t ruin anything. I love you and you are mine too.

She nodded as she moved from her father’s embrace and nestled into my arms. After a few minutes, she looked up at me with stained cheeks and a sheepish smile. “I hope it’s a girl.”

“I don’t,” Ian coughed out with a sigh as I shook with laughter. Ella frowned sensing her father’s smartassed comment and glanced behind at him before she looked to me for an answer.

“What?”

“Your dad is an asshole.”

“That’s not news.”

* * *

My dreams and I spent the rest of the day playing in the waves on the shore in the backyard of our new home and later that night, two childhood friends held hands beneath the stars.

“Well that went wonderfully,” Ian said with a chuckle. “Fuck, I think I had a small stroke.”

“I think it went the way it was supposed to.”

“I never wanted her to know.”

“Ian, she’s lived with it for a while. She just needed to hear from you what she already knew, that it doesn’t matter.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. Also, you’re kind of incredible. Who knew the insane man with the shitty accent and bubble butt, would turn out to be Mr. Wonderful? Definitely *not* me.”

He kissed the back of our clasped hands.

“I think I first loved you when I was fourteen. Not the way I do now, but I’m pretty sure I loved you even then.”

“I loved you because you gave me sweets.”

“I know,” he chuckled.

I stopped and turned to stare at my husband whose laughter lines had deepened and only made him more appealing. I reveled in the sexy grays that framed his temple. I looked forward to every year I noticed those subtle differences because it meant we would spend those years together. “Ian, how lucky are we to have met at all?”

“Coming from different worlds, we had so many chances to miss each other.”

I nodded. “Does this make you a believer?”

“It makes me a believer of *us*.”

“Forever a realist.”

“Not so much anymore.”

“Why is that?”

He cupped my face and brushed his lips against mine. “Because I married my miracle.”

* * *

I laid in bed gazing at the twinkling galaxy outside of our skylight window thinking of the narrow roads that brought us back together. Sometimes what’s meant to be isn’t written in the stars, instead, it’s a journey on the path less traveled without a map of guidance, without certainty. Though Ian didn’t fully admit it, I was sure he had to believe that every battle we fought in our separate lives—good or bad—led us to that beach, to a glimpse of the life we could share together,

and that was enough for us. That brief blip in time was all we needed to decide on the life we wanted. In that moment, I was grudgingly thankful for a body that wouldn't cooperate and a mind that ran in circles, and I knew without a doubt my husband was grateful for the trials that led him to me because, without them, our stars wouldn't have finally aligned. Our lives would've turned out differently, and for me, that would have been the real tragedy. In finding each other, we also discovered the *why* of our journey.

Ian tenderly kissed my stomach while I whispered a prayer of thanks to the stars above with renewed faith.

Not all love stories come with happy endings, but some do.

THE END

[Listen to *Someone Else's Ocean* playlist on Spotify.](#)

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About the Author

USA Today bestselling author and Texas native, Kate Stewart, lives in North Carolina with her husband, Nick, and her naughty beagle, Sadie. She pens messy, sexy, angst-filled contemporary romance, as well as romantic comedy and erotic suspense. Kate's title, *Drive*, was named one of the best romances of 2017 by *The New York Daily News* and *Huffington Post*. *Drive* was also a finalist in the Goodreads Choice awards for best contemporary romance of 2017. Her works have been featured in *USA TODAY*, *BuzzFeed*, and translated in five languages.

Kate is a lover of all things '80s and '90s, especially John Hughes films and rap. She dabbles a little in photography, can knit a simple stitch scarf for necessity, and on occasion, does very well at whiskey.

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