

A close-up photograph of a man with dark hair and a light beard, wearing a white dress shirt and a dark tie. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a plain, light color.

A SEXY AND
SCREWED NOVEL

BEAUTIFUL MISTAKE

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

VI KEELAND

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Sometimes we forge our own path.

Sometimes the path is created for us, and we can only follow.



Chapter 1

Rachel

There has to be a corollary scientific relationship between being genetically blessed and acting like an asshole.

I looked again at the reason for my friend's inebriation standing outside the men's room. Of course, the line for the ladies' room was five deep, because only men should be allowed to relieve themselves at their leisure. Married Guy was standing there, texting away on his phone—probably lying to some other unsuspecting woman. I studied his left ring finger as his fingers worked furiously. No ring. *Shocker*. I'm sure a shiny metal band that symbolizes eternally committing yourself to another person tends to make selling that you're single and *looking for the woman of your dreams* more difficult.

Ugh. What an asshole.

I loved Ava, but I think I'd be suspicious of any thirty-year-old guy who said that type of crap on a first date.

My eyes lifted from Married Guy's hand to his face, just as he looked up. If only eyes could really shoot daggers. I scowled at the bastard. I'm not sure why I was surprised when he smiled at me.

Jerk.

Probably thought I was checking him out.

I took my own phone from my pocket to distract myself and cast my eyes down to catch up on texts while I waited. Only...I couldn't see the damn letters without my glasses. I put the phone away and felt eyes on me as I patiently waited, but frowning uses more facial muscles than smiling, and this jerk wasn't worth a wrinkle.

After I used the ladies' room and almost scalded my hands washing them—the sink at O'Leary's only has one temperature: hotter than shit—I was ready to go home. My shift was over an hour ago, and Ava had been miserable since the cheater walked in, so I doubted she would object to calling it an early night.

A rich baritone voice stopped me on the way out of the ladies' room. “Do I know you from somewhere?”

I turned to find Married Guy pushing off the wall as if he'd been waiting for me. *Ignore him, Rachel. He's not worth your time.* I looked him in the eyes to make certain he knew I'd heard him, then turned my back and headed down the long hallway to the bar.

He didn't take the hint. Falling in stride next to me, he started to say something when I stopped abruptly. I turned to face him. “You're a total asshole. You know that?”

He had the nerve to look shocked. “Me? I guess we do know each other?”

“I know your *kind*.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

I rolled my eyes. “You think just because you're gorgeous you can go shitting all over people, that you can smile your way out of anything. Well, I really hope karma bites you in the ass someday, that your pretty little wife winds up fucking half of New York and passes you an STD that makes your big dick fall off.”

He held up his hands. “Listen, sweetheart, I don't know who you think I

am or what you think my *big dick* has done wrong, but I'm pretty sure you're confusing me with someone else."

My face told him to save his bullshit. "I'm here with *Ava*."

"*Oh, Ava*. That explains it."

I growled at him—literally. "Grrrrrrrr...Well, it should."

The jerk flashed a mega-watt smile. "You're cute when you growl like that."

My eyes nearly bulged from my head. "Are you actually *hitting on me*?"

"That would be wrong, wouldn't it? Considering...you know...me and *Ava* and all."

"You're a piece of work." I turned to walk away.

"Wait." He grabbed my arm, stopping me again. "Can I just ask you one thing?"

"What?"

"Who's *Ava*?"

Unreal. A guy like him—it was possible he didn't remember the names of the women he screwed over. I mean, it had been a whole *two weeks* since the last time they'd slept together. "Go home to your wife, *Owen*."

I left married *Owen* standing in the hallway and went back to the table where *Ava* was quietly drinking away her pain.

"You wanna get out of here? I'm sort of tired, and I need to be up early in the morning."

I figured there was no use in mentioning my little run-in with *Owen*. It would only make things worse. Unfortunately, *Ava* had really started to fall for the asshole. In the month they were seeing each other, he'd made her swoon—feeding her crap about how he saw their future with two kids and a pug.

Ironically, he was right. Their future did entail two kids and a pug.

Because he'd been holding a leash while walking with his two, tow-headed little girls when she ran into him in the park. Only he'd failed to mention that in this version of his future, his *wife* would also be holding their month-old son as they strolled.

Ava wobbled a bit as she hopped from the barstool. "I should climb up on this bar and tell every woman to watch out for that asshole."

Normally, I would've agreed. But tonight I was pretty sure her climbing up on the bar would end in a trip to the emergency room.

"He's not worth your breath." I slipped her sweater from the back of the stool and held it up for her to put on. She sighed and missed putting her arm into the hole the first two times.

Behind the bar, Charlie—who had been listening to us for most of the night—was pouring a beer. "That's it. From now on I want names." He slammed the full mug on the wooden bar, causing beer to slosh all over. "I'm runnin' any assholes either of you go out with." Charlie O'Leary owned the Brooklyn pub where Ava and I worked. He was also a retired cop.

I smiled. "Okay. But you know that makes me want to give you the names of suspected serial killers—just to watch your ears turn that lovely shade of purple they turn when you're pissed off." I leaned over the bar and kissed him on the cheek. "'Night, Charlie-o."

He grumbled something about being grateful he didn't have daughters and waved me off.

"Can we go out the back door?" Ava asked. "I don't want to pass him on the way out."

"Sure. Of course."

I hooked my arm with hers to make sure she stayed steady as we walked. After a few steps, I looked up and saw Married Guy standing next to the back door.

“Ummm, Ava, we should go out the front. He’s standing at the back door now.”

She looked around the room. “No, he’s at the front door talking to Sal, the new waiter.”

She was more wasted than I thought. I lifted my chin toward the rear exit, a straight line to Owen. “That’s the back door, Ava.”

“I know. Owen’s at the front door.”

I furrowed my brow. “Isn’t that Owen? With the blue button-up shirt?”

She drunk-snorted. “I said he was the good-looking guy in the blue shirt, not the Greek god modeling one.”

My head whipped to the front of the bar. There was only one guy near the front door who I didn’t know, and he was talking to Sal. “Owen is talking to the new waiter right now?”

She looked again and then sighed and nodded. “I should tell Sal to punch him.”

“Ava—the guy talking to Sal right now, right at this moment, is Owen?”

“Yes.”

“His shirt is *brown*, Ava. Not blue.”

She turned again toward the front door, squinted, and shrugged. “Maybe. I can’t see so good. My contacts are all smudgy from my makeup and crying.”

When she’d said her ex had just walked into the bar and pointed in the general direction of the front door, there’d been only one guy with a blue button-up on.

Shit.

I’d told off the wrong guy.

Since I couldn’t very well make Ava leave through the front door where the *real* Owen was standing, I sucked it up. Of course, Not Owen had his eye

on me, with a smirk, the entire way to the back door.

He nodded at my friend as we passed. "Have a good night, Ava. 'Night, Feisty."

I took the cowardly way out and kept my head straight, not making eye contact with the guy, until we were out the door.

Ava wasn't so strong willed. Her head turned as she kept her eyes fixed on Not Owen, even as we made our way into the alley. She might have been drunk with smudgy contacts, but she wasn't blind.

"Holy shit. Did you see that guy? And did he just say my name?"

I glanced back just as the bar door was closing. Not Owen waved with a cheeky grin.

"You're hearing things."



God, I was going to be late.

As if Monday classes weren't bad enough after working a double shift on Sunday, I had a stain on my blouse from spilling my coffee when I had to jam on the brakes for an old man driving an enormous Cadillac. He'd decided he needed to make a left...from the right lane.

The first day of school was always a nightmare. People wandered around campus, standing in the middle of the road while giving fellow classmates directions to various buildings. I honked my horn at two underclassmen doing just that. They looked at me like I was the annoying one.

Come on. Move it, people.

After circling the parking lot three times, I parked in a reserved spot in front of Nordic Hall. Leaning over, I rummaged through the glove compartment, half of the contents falling to the floor as I searched for what I needed.

Got it.

I tucked an old ticket under my windshield wiper and took off for lecture hall 208. I really needed to pee, but was going to have to hold it until after class. I knew three things about Professor West, other than that he was in the music composition department. One: He'd gotten rid of his last TA because she refused to grade as hard as he wanted her to. Two: For the last week, whenever I told anyone I'd been reassigned to Professor West, they made a face—not an encouraging one—and said he was an asshole who almost got fired a few years back. And, three: He hated when students were late. He was known to lock the door as class started so latecomers couldn't interrupt his lecture.

None of those boded well for me. But what choice did I have? My TA position with Professor Clarence had been eliminated when he died suddenly three weeks ago from an aneurysm. I was lucky to secure anything, at this point. And without a teaching assistant position, there was no way I'd be able to afford the tuition at the Music Conservatory. I was already waitressing full time at O'Leary's just to pay my rent and partially reduced tuition.

Beads of sweat trickled into my cleavage as I arrived at the classroom. The door was closed, so I took a minute in an attempt to make myself presentable, smoothing down my dark, wild curls as best I could, considering the humidity. It was hopeless to try to fix the stain that pretty much covered my right breast, so instead I switched hands and hid it with the leather portfolio I was carrying. Taking a deep breath, I reached for the door handle.

Locked.

Shit.

Now what? I checked the time on my phone. I was only eight minutes late, and it was the first day of the fall semester, yet I heard the professor already lecturing inside. Did I knock and interrupt the class, knowing it was

his pet peeve? Or did I pull a no-show on day one of my new position?

Lateness was the lesser of two evils.

Or so I thought.

Rapping my knuckles lightly on the door a few times, I hoped a student at the back of the classroom would hear it, and I could slip in unnoticed.

The professor's booming voice silenced just as the door opened. It was a stadium-seating lecture hall, so I was entering at the top row, while the professor was down at the bottom. Luckily for me, he was facing the other way and writing on the board when I tiptoed in. "Thanks," I whispered as I settled into the closest seat in the back and let out a relieved breath.

But perhaps that feeling of reprieve was premature.

The professor continued to write as he spoke. "Who arrived late?"

Ugh.

I wanted to sink down into my seat and pretend it wasn't me. But I was the TA, not a student. I needed them to respect me, as I'd be teaching this class on occasion.

I cleared my throat. "I was late, Professor."

He capped the dry erase marker and turned around.

I blinked a few times. My eyes had to be screwing with me. Reaching into my purse, I pulled out my glasses and slipped them on—even though my distance vision was perfectly fine—as if by some miracle putting on my reading glasses would make the man standing in front of the room someone other than who he was.

But he wasn't someone else.

There was no mistaking that. He had a face people didn't forget.

A damn gorgeous one.

It was *him*.

Holy shit.

It was really *him*.

Screwed.

I was royally screwed.

The professor scanned the room of more than two hundred students, unable to ascertain where the voice had come from. I prayed he'd drop it and give the class a general warning on his intolerance for lateness.

No such luck. I never had any.

“Stand up. Whoever was late, please stand up.”

Oh, God.

I felt the weight of the twenty-five-thousand-dollar tuition discount I had as a TA sink in my stomach like lead. It made it hard to get up from the chair. But he was waiting. There was no avoiding it. This was going to be a problem.

Hesitantly, I stood, holding my breath that he wouldn't recognize me.

Maybe he'd had too much to drink and wouldn't even remember our short exchange at the bar last night.

“I will not tolerate student lateness. It interrupts my class.”

“I understand.”

The overhead lighting reflected into his face as if he were an actor on a stage, making it difficult for him to see up to the top rows of the classroom. He held a hand up, shielding his eyes. Now, I was elevated twenty rows above him—we had to have been more than fifty yards apart—yet when our eyes met, they locked like we were the only two people in an empty room.

I knew it the minute he recognized me. I watched it play out in slow motion. A lazy smile spread across his handsome face, though not a happy one. I'd say it was more reminiscent of a dog who'd just backed a kitten into a corner and was about to have his fun playing with the poor little pussy.

I swallowed. “It won't happen again. I'm Rachel Martin, Professor. Your

TA.”



Chapter 2

Rachel

The class was completely empty. I wasn't even sure he knew I was still in my seat. If he did, he was good at ignoring me as he packed up his laptop.

“Contrary to the rumors you’ve probably heard, I don’t bite.”

I jumped when he spoke. Now that the lecture hall was no longer filled with students, the acoustics of the large space bounced his deep voice all over the walls.

I stood and began my walk of shame down to the front of the classroom. There was no doubt I owed the man an apology, even if he wasn't a professor—a professor who would be my new boss for at least the next fifteen weeks. I wanted to kick myself in the ass for not apologizing last night before I left the bar. Now it would seem like I was only doing it because of the situation I was in.

Which was true, don't get me wrong, but I didn't want it to *seem* that way.

I took a deep breath. “I’m so sorry about last night.”

His face was unreadable. “I figured you might be, right about now.”

“I obviously thought you were someone else.”

“So I assumed. You thought I was the asshole. The one with the big dick, was it?”

I shut my eyes. For the last ninety minutes, I'd replayed the entire exchange from last night over and over in my head. I thought I'd remembered everything I said, but apparently I hadn't. When I reopened my eyes, Professor West was still watching me. His stare was pretty damn intense.

I started to babble. "My friend Ava went out with this guy Owen for a month or so. He was full of shit from day one, but she didn't see it. Actually walked up to her when she was leaving work one night and said, 'Do you mind if I walk you home? My mother always told me to follow my dreams.' She fell for it, the entire act, from the first day. Then one Saturday, he was supposedly out of town on business, and she was across town running errands for her mother. She took a shortcut through Madison Square Park on her way back from the grocery store and ran into him. He was with his wife and kids."

"And you thought I was him, apparently?"

I nodded. "She came in during my shift and started drinking Long Island iced teas. When Owen walked in, she pointed to where he was standing and said he was the one in the blue shirt."

"And we were both wearing blue shirts, I take it?"

I couldn't help but smile, thinking of Ava last night. "Actually, no. Ava's not much of a drinker. Turned out she was more sloshed than I thought. Owen's shirt was brown—not even black that could be mistaken as navy or something."

I saw Professor West's lip twitch.

"Anyway, I'm really sorry. I barely gave you a chance to speak, and then when I realized what had happened, I was so mortified I didn't even stop to apologize."

"I accept your apology for last night. Even though you shouldn't be approaching a man in the hallway to tell him off alone, your intentions were admirable."

I should have shut up and been grateful he'd accepted my apology. *Should have.* "Why can't I approach a man in the hallway?"

He leveled me with a stare. "Because you're five foot nothing in a loud bar, and no one would have heard you if I'd dragged you into the men's room and locked the door."

I folded my arms over my chest. "I can take care of myself."

"I didn't say you couldn't. I said you shouldn't put yourself in those situations."

"But you insinuated that I couldn't by making that statement."

He zipped his leather bag closed. "Ms. Martin, I just accepted your apology for calling me an asshole last night. Would you like me to retract that acceptance?"

God, I really was an idiot. Being around this man seemed to turn me into a psychopath. "No. I'm sorry. I acted like a jerk, and I'd like to start over, if that's possible."

He nodded. "Everything prior to this morning is forgotten."

"Thank you."

"But this morning is not. I won't accept lateness. Don't let it happen again."

I swallowed. "It won't."

He lifted his worn, brown leather laptop bag over one shoulder. "Meet me here at five tomorrow. We'll go over the syllabus and the classes you'll teach, as well as my grading rubric."

That was smack in the middle of my shift, but I'd figure something out. "Okay."

"Are you done for the day?"

"I am. I actually have to get to work. I'm covering Ava's shift because she isn't feeling too well after last night. We both work at O'Leary's."

“You waitress there?”

“Waitress, bartend, occasionally tell off patrons.”

That earned me a full smile from Professor West. *God, he should do that more often.* No, forget that. He definitely shouldn't.

“I'll walk out with you.”

We walked through the halls together and out to the parking lot. When we arrived at my car, I stopped. “This is me. So...five o'clock tomorrow?”

Professor West looked at my beat-up old Subaru. “You're parked in a spot reserved for the Provost. You got a parking ticket.” He squinted. “Actually, it looks like you have *two* parking tickets. Was your inspection expired or something?”

Crap. “Umm...no. I keep an extra ticket in the glove compartment and stick it on my windshield when I'm forced to park illegally.”

His brows shot up. “Inventive.”

“Obviously it doesn't always work.”

“Obviously.”

“They need more parking. When you're late, it's impossible to find a spot.”

He studied me. “Lateness is a frequent occurrence for you, I take it?”

“Unfortunately, it is.”

“Then I should clarify something I said earlier.”

“Oh, no, that's not necessary. I won't be late for your class.”

He took a step closer and leaned in. “I'm glad to hear that, Ms. Martin. But that's not what needs clarification.”

I swallowed. *God, he smells good.*

“Earlier I told you I didn't bite students.” He smiled, and I felt the wickedness from it shoot down to some interesting places. “I don't. But I make no promises about not biting feisty TAs.”

Some girls had dads who cleaned their shotguns when boys came to pick their daughters up at the house. I had Charlie.

Even though the City of New York had banned smoking in eating establishments at least ten years earlier, Charlie still lit up behind the bar. Filterless Benson & Hedges. Who was going to tell a burly ex-cop otherwise?

“So who’s this man you’re meeting tonight?” He pulled out the bat he kept behind the bar and placed it on top. “I’m gonna leave this right here for when he comes in.”

I laughed as I lifted my drink tray. “I’m good, Charlie. He’s a thirty-two-year-old accountant from the Upper East Side.”

“Don’t let that fool you. Looks can be deceiving. Salt looks a hell of a lot like sugar, sweetheart.”

I wasn’t even sure why I was attempting to date now. Ever since things ended with Davis eight months ago, I’d been on a self-imposed dating hiatus. I didn’t have the time or energy to put into a relationship. Not to mention I didn’t have a great track record with men, in general. I’d mostly done it to cheer up Ava. Last winter, she and her boyfriend of seven years broke up on her twenty-fifth birthday. They’d been together since their senior year in high school. After months of watching her pout, I finally talked her into signing up for one of those dating websites. I’d signed up in solidarity, too, although I never really had intentions of going out with anyone. Great job I’d done—the dating website was where she met married Owen. With friends like me to cheer her up, she’d be on Prozac in no time.

I delivered the drinks to my table and took an order from table eight, even though my shift was over. Basically, I was stalling to avoid going to change and get ready for my date. Table service at O’Leary’s ended any time we felt

like it after eight, and Charlie's motto was '*There's a burger joint down the street. Don't let the door hit you on the ass on the way out*', for anyone who didn't like it.

After I changed out of my uniform, I washed up in the bathroom, swiped some mascara on my lashes, glossed my full lips, and looked in the mirror. I was lucky I had my mother's naturally clear porcelain skin, so I never had to wear much makeup. I considered highlighting my green eyes with some black liner, but then changed my mind. *Good enough*, I thought. Which was probably not the effort I should have been putting into a first date.

After our initial email exchange, Mason had seemed nice enough that I continued to chat with him over the last few weeks. He checked all the boxes of the right guy for me to go out with: Gainfully employed—check. Polite—check. Over thirty, but not knocking on forty's door—check. Didn't use phrases like *fo-shizzle* and *my bad* in our message exchanges—check. Nice looking. Well groomed. Check, check. I should have been more excited. It had been a long time since Davis—time to move on.

I noticed him before he noticed me. I'd gone to the stock room to grab a few bottles of tequila for Charlie and saw Mason looking around. He looked like his pictures, so that was a plus. Maybe a little thinner than I'd expected, but nothing drastic enough to surprise me. He was medium height, medium build, and handsome, but not quite the type of looks you felt in your belly. Mason was also wearing a blue shirt. Which reminded me of Professor West last night. Oddly, *that* made me feel a little fire in my belly.

"I make no promises about not biting feisty TAs."

I shook my head to physically shake some sense into my brain and took a deep breath before heading to meet Mason.

You know that feeling you get when you think you're going to taste one thing and it turns out to be another? Maybe water and soda? It's not that you don't like either of them, but you were prepared for something tasteless and non-carbonated and instead you get unexpected fizz—a lot of fizz.

Mason was fizz when I expected tap water. Perhaps it was *accountant* that had led me to preconceived notions that he would be a certain way in person. But he was way more confident and forward than I expected.

“You're really gorgeous. Not that I thought otherwise from your profile picture, but you only had a head shot. I guess I didn't expect Megan Fox to continue from the neck down.”

“Thank you...I think.” While it was a compliment, I didn't like the way he eyed me. We had gone to dinner a few doors down and then come back to O'Leary's for a drink. His eyes roamed my body as he sipped his fourth Jack and Coke—which was another red flag—three hard liquor drinks during dinner on a first date? Each one made him bolder in a way I liked less and less.

“You said you were a hundred-percent Italian, right?”

“No. I have a little German in me, too.”

He leaned in, putting one hand on my knee. “How'd you like a little more German in you tonight?”

Ugh. I was just about to tell the idiot he'd be playing with himself tonight, when Charlie interrupted. *With the bat.* He tossed it on the bar right between us, causing Mason to jump back.

“Everything okay over here?” My girl doesn't look too happy.”

I didn't want to cause a scene. Just wanted my bad date to be over.

“That's your father?” Mason asked.

I ignored him and spoke to Charlie. “Everything's fine here. We were going to call it a night anyway.”

Mason misunderstood. After he gulped back the remnants of his drink, he stood. “My place or yours?”

“You’re going to yours. I’m going to mine.”

He reached for me, and I stepped back. “Go home, Mason. Before you go home with Charlie’s bat up your ass.”

Realizing he wasn’t getting laid, Mason paid the tab and took off. I smiled at Charlie after he was gone. “Did you double the price of Jack and Coke?”

“Asshole surcharge.”

I laughed. Not wanting to walk out right after Mason, I sat at the bar with Charlie for a while.

“Dating sucks,” I huffed. “No wonder I don’t do it that often.”

“I’m glad dating wasn’t what it is today back in my day. I’d never have met my Audrey.”

Charlie’s wife had been gone at least ten years—heart attack in her early fifties.

“How did you two meet anyway?”

“The old-fashioned way, in the grocery store.”

“That’s sweet. Did your carts crash into each other like in the movies?”

“Something like that. Audrey was in the fruit and vegetable aisle picking out some eggplant, and she put her things in the wrong cart. She was halfway down the aisle before she realized. When she went back to find her cart, she noticed the cart she’d taken had a handwritten grocery list in it.

“She’d taken your cart?”

“Yep. She handed the list back and said, ‘I took the wrong cart. Wouldn’t want you to forget some of the important items on your list’.”

“What was on your list?”

Charlie shrugged. “It said ‘cheese and other shit’.”

I furrowed my brow. “Literally? It said *cheese and other shit*? Not a list of the other shit?”

“I only cared about remembering the cheese. I like a slice of cheddar at night before I go to bed. The *other shit* covered the rest and wasn’t as important.” Charlie stared into space. “Anyway, Audrey smiled at me, and my heart did this weird double pump that it had never done before. Thought I was having a heart attack. Had to sit down right there next to the eggplants to catch my breath. Turned out it wasn’t just cheese and shit I picked up in the supermarket that day.”

“Maybe I should try the supermarket. I don’t think online dating is for me.”

“I never tried it, but seems dumb. Causes you to make this mental checklist of what you’re looking for in a mate and then try to find people who can check all the boxes. But the reality is, doesn’t matter which boxes are checked. When you meet the right person, your heart will let you know.” He winked. “And other parts of your body.”

A collection of black musical notes, including eighth, quarter, and half notes, as well as a treble clef and a sharp symbol, arranged in a cluster. The notes have a slight glow or shadow effect.

Chapter 3

Rachel

I wasn't late. I was *really* freakin' late.

I also needed a shower, a mechanic, a bottle of wine, and quite possibly a new job—not necessarily in that order. And to think, I'd been running a half hour early just four blocks from the college. Plenty of time to find a parking spot and still walk in fifteen minutes before I was supposed to meet him, showing Professor Punctuality that I could be on time. But then...a blowout. A loud *boom* followed by a long *whoosh*. I tried to ignore it and kept on driving, but eventually the repeated flopping and tug of my car to the right made me pull over.

It sucked. But I had time, and my ex-roommate, ex-whatever he was for a little while, Davis, had taught me how to change a tire. All was good...at first. I whipped out my jack, lifted the car like a pro, and went to work on the flat. Everything was moving along nicely until I got to the very last lug nut. The damn thing was stuck. *Really stuck*. At one point, since the lug nut was at the three o'clock position, I had the wrench on it and used my foot to try to bear down—it still wouldn't budge. Then I had the bright idea that maybe I should put *all* of my weight on it. So I jumped up on to the long handle of the lug-nut wrench, hoping the sudden force would pry the sucker loose. But instead, the wrench slipped off and somehow snapped back to smack me right in the

shin.

Now I was twenty minutes late, my leg was killing me, and I'd just limped to school in ninety-degree heat, smelling like tire grease. My only hope was that maybe Professor West had also gotten a flat and was late himself. It was a long shot, but I had to hold on to something in order to keep from having a total breakdown as I rushed through the hallways.

Arriving at the lecture hall, I peeked in before opening the door. Of course, Professor West was sitting at his desk.

I took a deep breath and went inside to face the wrath.

"Before you say anything—I was a half hour early. I swear."

He'd been writing in a planner, and when his head came up, I saw he was wearing glasses for the first time. *Damn. They make him even sexier.* Was I insane for even finding his scowl kind of hot?

"And what happened today, Ms. Martin? Did you get distracted somewhere between parking illegally a half hour ago and finding my classroom? Stop to play in the dirt, perhaps?"

"What?"

He looked me up and down. "You have dirt all over your face and clothes."

My hand rose to my face, where I began to rub at my cheek. "Oh. This isn't dirt. It's grease."

"That makes it much better."

"I got a flat tire on the way over here." I had no idea where the dirt was on my face, but I was nervous and rubbed at random spots all over as I spoke. "The lug nut was stuck, and I couldn't get it off. I tried to—"

"Ms. Martin," he interrupted. "Stop doing that."

"But it's true. I really tried to get here early. I built in all this extra time and then boom—a flat tire. It wasn't my fault this time."

“I wasn’t referring to your elaborate story. Stop rubbing your face. Look at your hands.”

I examined my palms. *Shit*. They were full of grease. “Did I get it all over my face.”

He pulled some napkins from inside his desk, stood, and walked to me. “Your face is covered in grease. Why don’t you go to the ladies’ room and wash up.”

I nodded. Turning, I took a few steps toward the door and then thought of something. “You’ll be here when I get back?”

Professor West smiled. “Yes, Rachel. I’ll be here waiting. It seems to be our thing.”

After I scrubbed the grease from my hands and face, I considered trying to wash the big spot from my shirt, but it was no use. So far I’d met my new boss three times. The first time I told him off, the second time I interrupted his class wearing a shirt stained with coffee, and the third time I made him wait almost a half hour and walked in covered in grease, looking like a disaster. It just kept getting better and better.

When I arrived back at the classroom, Professor West was already packed up.

“I’m sorry. Do you have a class now?”

“No. But it’s going to start to get dark soon so we better get going.”

Dark? “Ummm...okay. Can we reschedule? Maybe I can come before class tomorrow, and we can quickly go over what you’d like me to do?”

“No. We’ll do it tonight.” He put his hand on the small of my back, guiding me to start back up the stairs of the lecture hall with him. “You don’t have to work your other job, do you?”

“No. I took the evening off.”

“There aren’t any other classes in here tonight, so we can come back after

we're done."

"After we're done?"

"With your car. I'll get your spare on and follow you to the tire shop. Then we can come back and go over what we need to discuss."

"You're going to change my tire?"

"I'm not going to leave you stranded, Rachel."

"You don't have to do that, Professor West."

"Of course I do. And call me Caine."

Caine had some muscles to match that perfect face. He'd been wearing a white dress shirt, but removed it before starting to change my tire. Wearing only a thin, white undershirt, he worked the lug nut wrench while I fixated on the way his muscles bulged every time he flexed. He was able to dislodge the jammed lug nut, although it took a little elbow grease. He had the most incredible biceps, carved and tanned, with a vein that popped from the middle and ran all the way down to his forearms. If there was a such thing as arm porn, I was watching my very own channel. It felt wrong to look, but God, was I enjoying the view.

At one point, after he removed the tire, he lifted it to put into my trunk and his T-shirt rose, exposing two, deep-set indents that formed a V at the bottom of his chiseled abs. I had the strongest urge to reach out and touch his stomach, run my fingers through the thin trails of hair that ran down from his belly button and dipped into the black band of his underwear, which was slightly exposed.

He placed the deflated tire in my trunk and went to work installing the donut.

"You really should have a full-size spare," he said as he tightened the

new tire. “These little donuts aren’t safe. They throw the balance of the car off, and if you get into an accident driving on it, you’re more likely to flip.”

Every once in a while he looked up at me, and I almost got caught checking him out. I really needed to distract myself, so I went into the car and grabbed my phone to look up the nearest tire shop.

The sun was setting as he loaded the jack back into the trunk and slammed it shut. Even though it had cooled off a bit, it was still so humid. Caine was sweaty, and his T-shirt was definitely ruined.

“I think I owe you a T-shirt,” I said, eyeing the grease all over it.

He looked down. “As long as it’s ruined, might as well make good use of it.” Caine wiped both his greasy hands on his chest, streaking lines across the remaining white of his shirt. He then proceeded to reach back and tug the dirty T-shirt over his head.

Getting the full view of his incredible body, I think my jaw nearly reached the ground. I had no idea if he noticed my staring, because I was unable to lift my eyes from feasting on the sight. He used the shirt to wipe the sweat from his face and then cleaned off his hands some more. I was beginning to sweat myself, even though I hadn’t exerted an ounce of physical energy.

“Do you know where the nearest tire shop is?”

“Umm...it’s only about three blocks from here.”

“Give me a minute to throw my shirt back on and I’ll follow you.”

What a shame. “Okay. Thank you.”

I sat inside my car for a minute, glad for a chance to collect my thoughts before I had to drive. How long had it been since I’d had sex? Eight months? God, I probably should’ve done the deed with Mason last night just to satisfy my libido. A little show of abs and muscle, and my panties were wet. I felt like a horny seventeen year old.

By the time we dropped the car at Tire Express, it was almost seven-thirty, and they told me I'd have to pick it up in the morning. Caine stayed by my side the entire time and even dealt with picking out a tire that was affordable when the salesperson tried to sell me one that cost more than I earned in tips in a week at O'Leary's.

"I feel like a broken record," I said once we were settled inside Caine's car. "I'm either apologizing or thanking you."

"No problem. You still feel up to going over the curriculum and working on a game plan for the semester?" He looked at his watch. "It's getting late. I can drop you at home if you're tired."

"I'm a night owl. Mornings are my issue."

He nodded. "Okay, then."

Just before he started the car, my stomach let out the most horrific growl. It was a loud, rumbling, gurgly sound that echoed through the quiet car. There was no trying to pretend it didn't happen.

Caine grinned. "How about we work on our planning over something to eat?"

I was clearly starving. I'd planned to eat something before I left work, but then we got busy, and I didn't want to stop somewhere and chance being late. Today was just filled with great planning.

"I'd love that."

He started the car. "What are you in the mood for?"

"I'm easy. Whatever you want is fine with me."

"How about a burger? Do you eat meat?"

Thankfully it was dark enough to hide my blush. "Umm...yes. I eat meat." And apparently that's exactly what my body and brain were in the mood for.



Chapter 4

Rachel

“For the record, I wasn’t feeding you a line the first time I saw you. You do look familiar.” Caine sipped his beer.

The fact that he’d ordered a beer struck me as odd. I’d have taken him for something fancier—expensive wine or aged scotch, perhaps. Seeing him relaxed with a beer in his hand had me viewing the uptight professor in a whole different light. Or perhaps it was his abs that had adjusted my thinking.

“We’ve probably seen each other around campus,” I said. Although I was pretty sure I hadn’t seen him before. I’d remember a man who looked like him.

“Maybe.”

“Do you go to O’Leary’s often?” I asked.

“The other night was the first time I was ever there. Stopped on the way home from a friend’s who just moved in a few blocks away.”

“Well, basically, I’m either at O’Leary’s, on campus, or home sleeping, or studying. Not much time for anything else these days.” I pointed a mozzarella stick at him and smirked. “And that’s not due to change. According to *People* magazine, this is going to be a year of all work and no play.”

“Oh yeah? *People* magazine? Sounds like a solid source to set your

expectations for the future.”

“I think so. I did answer five questions to get that prophecy, so it’s pretty reliable. One wrong answer and I could have been doomed for a year of adventure or soothing self discovery.”

Caine chuckled. “Well, try to squeeze in a little playtime. You know the old saying—too much work and no play can make life dull.”

“I’m good with dull. I’ve retired from being exciting.”

“Retired from excitement? How old are you? Twenty-two, twenty-three?”

“Twenty-five.” I shrugged. “I got my adventure quota in during my teen years, which were out of control. I’m playing catch-up with my adult life. Busy is good. Adulting is good.”

Caine scratched his chin. “Out of control, huh? Like what?”

“No way, Professor. I’ve made enough bad impressions on you to last a while. I’ll save some of those stories for after I’ve shown you how smart and talented I am.”

Caine smiled. It was the first unrestrained smile he’d let slip past his guard. Leaning back into his seat, he slung one arm casually over the back of the booth. “Alright. Then tell me about you and music. I’ll get to hear a little bit about your smarts and talent, and it’ll help me plan which lessons you should teach.”

“What would you like to know?”

“Why music?”

“You mean, why did I pick music for a major?”

“No. You obviously picked the major because you love music. But why do you love music?”

“That’s a really broad question and kind of hard to capture in a few sentences.”

“Give it a shot. There’s no wrong or right answer.”

“Okay.” I thought for a few long moments. “Because music expresses all the things people can’t say, but are impossible to keep quiet.”

He didn’t immediately respond. “Sing or play an instrument?” he asked after letting it sink in.

I smiled. Having been a music major for undergraduate, I knew my answer always confused people. “Neither. I can hold a tune, but I don’t sing exceptionally well, and there isn’t a particular instrument I excel at, like most music majors.”

Basically, eighty-five percent of all music majors either sang or played guitar or piano. The remaining fifteen percent were the random drummers or saxophonists.

“Can’t say I hear that often.”

“I know. I learned to play a few instruments decently during my undergraduate work, but I don’t want to be a musician or a rock star. My master’s degree will be in musical therapy.”

The waitress came and delivered plates with giant burgers. I’d hoped it would transition some of the attention away from me, but Caine must have been busy piecing the little bits I’d already shared together.

“I’m guessing whatever music helped you express that couldn’t be said might be the same thing that caused you to have those out-of-control years.”

“Am I that transparent, or are you that good at reading people?”

His eyes studied mine. “Neither. Let’s just say I can relate well.”

I nodded. “What about you? Did you want to be a rock star?”

“Something like that.”

I grinned before shoving the burger into my mouth. “Wow. Thanks for sharing. You’re an open book.”

Caine chuckled. “Are you always such a wiseass?”

“Are you always so vague and dodgy when asked a direct question?”

He stared at me while he chewed and swallowed. “Alright. I wanted to be a rock star when I was younger. Is that a straightforward enough answer for you?”

I grinned. “Do you sing or play an instrument?”

“I played the drums.”

“Play or played?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“Does that bother you?”

He chuckled. “And there’s another one. Eat your burger, Ms. Martin.”

After that, we ate in relative quiet. But it was a comfortable kind of quiet. Caine cleared his plate, and I was still picking at my French fries when his cell phone rang. Looking at the name on the screen, he excused himself, saying he needed to take the call, and he left the table to speak in private. We weren’t on a date or anything, but it made me wonder if he was married and didn’t want his wife to know he was with someone. Cheater Owen was still fresh in my head.

When he came back, Caine apologized. “Sorry about that.”

“No problem.” Yet for some completely unwarranted reason, I was annoyed. “I’m done eating. We can get started. I’ve taken up enough of your time.”

Once the busboy cleared the table, Caine took a folder out of his bag, and we began to go through the syllabus. We did some rough lesson planning for my first lectures and talked about meeting after the next class to finish going through the rest of the planning we needed to do. I’d be sitting in on three of his five classes and teaching one of my own. Caine asked about my work schedule and scheduled the extra-help sessions I would hold around my hours at O’Leary’s, which was thoughtful. When we were done, he ordered a coffee.

“So, what rumors have you heard about me?” he asked, leaning back in the booth.

“Do you really want to know?”

“I’m sure I’ve heard most of them. But let’s lay them on the table, and I’ll tell you if they’re true or not.”

“Okay. Well, for starters I heard you were a stickler for punctuality. I guess I don’t really need to ask if that one’s true.”

“I guess not.” He smiled. “Anything else?”

“You fired your last TA because she wouldn’t grade hard enough.”

He nodded. “That’s true, too. Although you’re missing part of the story. She wasn’t grading *her boyfriend* hard enough. Unless she was grading the things he wanted to do to her...because those were pretty well thought out. I’d know since that’s what I found he was writing on his tests. No actual music answers, yet he was getting all As.”

“Oh.”

“Anything else?”

I have no idea why, but I decided to embellish the last rumor to satisfy my own curiosity. “You’re married and you almost got fired for sleeping with your students.”

The look on his face told me I’d hit a sore spot. Caine’s jaw clenched, and his full lips thinned as they drew into a line. “Not married and stopped sleeping with my students after the first year.”

I crinkled my nose. “So you used to sleep with your students?”

“I was young and stupid. The first year I taught, I spent almost all of my time on campus. It was the only place I met people.”

“Ever hear of match.com?”

“Of course, wiseass. But people are rarely what they seem online.”

I scoffed. “Tell me about it.”

Caine raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like you know from experience.”

“Just last night in fact.”

“And...”

“And he only had one thing on his mind.”

“Sex?”

I nodded. “Men can be such assholes. No offense.”

That damn lip twitched again. “No offense taken. Unless of course you’re calling me an asshole—clearly it wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Do you spend weeks talking to a woman and telling her you’re looking for a relationship and then show up on the first date wanting nothing but sex?”

Caine’s gaze shifted between my eyes. “I’m not looking for a relationship. But I’m upfront about that to try and avoid any expectations. Although I can tell you that even putting it out there from the get go—women don’t always hear what I’m telling them. They hear what they want to hear.” He paused. “Guess you could say women can be assholes, too. *No offense.*”

I laughed. “None taken.”

His eyes roamed my face. “Can I offer you some advice?”

“Sure.”

“You’re beautiful. Any man who tells you he doesn’t have thoughts of having sex with you running through his brain the moment he meets you is full of shit. But a man who can’t tell that isn’t what you’re looking for isn’t paying attention. Chances are that translates into a lack of attention in the sack anyway, and he isn’t worth your time.”

He was absolutely right, and there would be time to analyze his theory later, but in that moment, I was wondering one thing...*is he thinking about having sex with me right now?*



Chapter 5

Rachel

Oral perception.

Okay, so maybe the class was Aural Perception. Whatever. My mind was definitely all over the place as I sat in the back, watching Professor West teach about how different people—philosophers, composers, medical professionals, teenagers—conceptualize the act of listening. I remembered taking the course in my first year of undergrad school. I wasn't sure if I had matured and could appreciate a lecture like this more at twenty-five than at barely twenty-one. At least now the particular professor lecturing was able to hold my rapt attention.

While I was busy listening, the beanie-wearing guy next to me was drawing nudes. He'd sketched a page of faceless bodies that were actually pretty amazing, even if they were sort of lewd and graphic. He shrugged when he caught me looking, smiled and whispered, "Gotta do something while this full-of-himself jerk drones on."

Caine wasn't a professor who sat at his desk to lecture. He wandered around the room and interacted with the students. "Listening can be broken down into categories: informative, appreciative, critical, relationship, perceptive, discriminative. The method and timing of delivery can affect what we hear. Tell me, where do you listen to music, how is it delivered, and who

was the last musician you listened to?”

A bunch of hands flew up. A woman in the front answered, “On the train, delivered from my iPhone, and Adele.”

A male student responded, “I work at Madison Square Garden, so I get a lot of live music delivered at work. Last jam was Maroon 5 warming up.”

The lecture hall had two sets of stairs, one on either side of the wide middle row of seats. I was sitting at the top, in an aisle seat next to the left staircase. Caine walked up a few steps at a time, taking responses from different students as he went.

A few rows ahead of me, a guy with a long beard said, “In the truck. I work for UPS and listen through an aux cord. Last night was an old Slayer album.”

A woman on the opposite side of the stairs said, “At work. It’s piped in at the doctor’s office where I work as a receptionist. And it’s the same instrumental music over and over.”

“Seems like most people are getting their music delivered while traveling or at work. Anyone listen while doing anything else?” Caine walked up a few more stairs and stopped two below where I was seated. It gave me the perfect excuse to look at him, without overtly appearing to check him out. He spoke to another nearby student as I ogled.

Today he wore a dark suit vest buttoned over a white, textured dress shirt, sans tie. I wasn’t exactly a fashionista, but I knew expensive clothing when I saw it, and Caine shelled out more for his dress shirts than I did for most of my complete outfits. He had a rich elegance about him, even though he’d paired the shirt and vest with a pair of jeans and black chucks. His skin was naturally sun-kissed, so I was reasonably certain he was European in descent—perhaps Greek or Italian. I couldn’t quite place which, but whatever it was, it produced one hell of a chiseled man. His nose was straight and masculine,

and from a profile view was as damn close to perfect as I'd ever seen. From the side, his dark lashes were magnificent. Any woman would pay a small fortune for the lushness that framed those chocolate-colored eyes. His jaw line was peppered with fresh stubble, and I found myself wondering what that might feel like against my skin. I was lost in that thought when I realized he was now looking right at me. He squinted, and I saw a hint of amusement in his eyes, even though he didn't smile.

When he took another step up, I tried to seem nonchalant, as if I hadn't been worshipping his ancestors, and looked forward—only to realize I was now perfectly aligned to stare at his crotch. I attempted to find somewhere else to put my eyes, but—was that...was that something in his pocket...or...? By the outline, I was pretty sure it wasn't something. Or actually it *was* something—something damn impressive.

Caine twisted at the waist to call on a woman on the other side of the stairs, and his jeans pulled more snugly, confirming exactly what I was looking at. Figures the gorgeous man also had a big dick. I turned my head, needing to look away from his thick bulge, and beanie artist gave me a flirty smile. I smiled back...right before Caine called on him.

Beanie artist was the first student the professor called on who hadn't volunteered by holding up his hand. Maybe he'd caught what the guy was doing and decided to bring him back into the fold of the class.

"What about you?" Caine's voice was curt. "What was the last song you listened to, and how was it delivered?"

The guy smirked. "Some Pharrell, delivered from my Bose speakers in my bedroom while I was getting it on."

The class snickered.

"Thank you, Mr...."

Caine held out his hand to invite the man to fill in the blank, and he did.

“Ludwig.”

Caine nodded and turned to head back to the front of the class. “All the examples today are appreciative listening. Before the next class, I want each of you to download Jason Derulo’s ‘Trumpets’.” Listen to it using whatever method you last appreciatively listened to music—with your headset on, while commuting on the train, in the truck while you’re working delivering packages, or, in Mr. Ludwig’s case, listening on his Bose at home while masturbating.”

The class cracked up.

“When you’re done, I want you to answer the questions on this page.” Caine began to hand out papers for the students in the first row to pass back. “This isn’t a test of any kind, so your answers should be honest. Don’t read the questions on the paper until after you’ve listened to the song once. Otherwise, your brain will be searching for the answers as you listen instead of truly appreciatively listening. In our next class, we’re going to compare the results you get with the results you’ll get while doing other types of listening.”

A few minutes later, the hour and a half class was over, and students piled out the door. I waited until the room had emptied and went down the stairs to the front to talk to Caine.

“On time and no stains on your clothing,” he said as he packed his laptop without looking up. “Impressive.”

“I’ve always considered fourth impressions the most important, you know.” I smiled.

Caine zipped his bag. While I’d thought our conversation was playful, apparently I was wrong. His tone was stern, and he leveled me with a look that matched. “You shouldn’t fraternize with students.”

“Fraternize?”

“Whatever you want to call it.”

“I don’t understand.”

He huffed. “Fuck. You shouldn’t fuck the students. Is that clearer, Rachel?”

“Well, yes, it’s clear what you meant now. But I’m not sure what would give you the impression I was screwing a student. I don’t sleep with college guys.”

“Does Mr. Ludwig know that?”

I had a feeling that’s what this was about. “You don’t need to worry about me giving anyone a preferential grade like your last TA. I promise.”

Caine held my gaze for a few seconds, possibly assessing my sincerity, then gave me a curt nod. “So, which princess is it?”

I furrowed my brows. Then I realized he must’ve caught the quiz I was doing in the back of *In Style* magazine before class began—*Which Disney Princess are you?* I’d tossed it on top of my book bag on the floor once class began.

“Jasmine from Aladdin.” I smiled.

“They get it right?”

“I like to think so. Jasmine is logical and skeptical.”

“You know those things are a bunch of crap, right?”

“God, I hope so. Last month I took one in *Men’s Health* called *How healthy are your testicles?*, and it wasn’t looking very good for me.”

Caine’s lip twitched. “Wiseass. You ready to finish going through the syllabus?”

“I have about an hour before I have to get to work.”

He lifted his bag from the desk. “Everything go okay with picking up your car?”

“Actually...no.”

“What happened?”

“When they took off the tire, they found my ball joints were bad—whatever they are. They’re replacing those, too, today.”

“You need a ride to work?”

“I can take the bus. There’s one right on campus that drops off two blocks from O’Leary’s.”

“I was going to suggest grabbing a bite while we finish up planning. I have a department meeting tonight and need to eat before then. Why don’t we grab a bite at O’Leary’s? Then you’ll already be at work when it’s time to start your shift.”

“That would be great. And I’ll treat.” I grinned. “Since our food will be free and all.”



“Looks like someone went to the supermarket?” Charlie looked over my shoulder at Caine standing behind me.

“Umm...no. This is Professor Caine West. I’m his teaching assistant at the music conservatory. Caine, this is Charlie. He owns O’Leary’s.”

Caine reached out his hand. “Nice to meet you, Charlie.”

Charlie shook. “You got a record, Professor?”

“A record?”

“Yeah. I don’t like my girl hanging out with trouble.”

I piped in. “Charlie—he’s my *professor*. I don’t think an interrogation is necessary.”

Charlie shot me a look. “Fine. But I’ll be keeping my eye on you.”

Caine didn’t seem bothered in the slightest by Charlie’s threat. If anything, he seemed amused. “Good to hear.”

Finally releasing their handshake, Charlie lightened up a bit. “What can I

get you, Professor?”

“I’ll take whatever beer you have on tap. I was in here the other night. A friend of mine just moved in around the corner and said you made the best wings. But the kitchen had already closed for the night, so I didn’t get to try them. How about an order of wings?”

Charlie was old school. Two things made him like a man: A firm handshake and complimenting his wife’s wings. His face lit up proudly. “That’s my Audrey’s own secret recipe on those wings. Two orders coming right up. By the way, if you’re ever here after the kitchen closes, just let someone know you’re a friend of Charlie’s. My crew is pretty friendly.”

“Yes, they are. Rachel was very welcoming when we first met.” He glanced over at me with a wicked gleam in his eye. “I should have asked her to make me a batch. I’m sure she would have been happy to.”

None the wiser, Charlie poured Caine a beer and me a Diet Coke, and then headed to the kitchen to make our wings himself. It was that in-between time of the afternoon where the day crowd had gone home, but the evening crowd hadn’t started to trickle in yet, so there were only a few regulars sitting at the bar—most of whom were retired cops.

“Cute. Very cute, Professor.”

“I thought so.”

Caine and I went to sit at a quiet table in the corner where there was room for us to spread out and work while we ate. Since I was teaching the next lesson, he talked about what he wanted the students to take away from the assignment he’d given them today.

“The locked closet in the corner of the classroom has two hundred pair of Bose noise-cancelling headphones. Teach them about how appreciative listening can become critical listening just by changing the mode of delivery. Have them listen to the song I assigned again in the same place—on the train,

or at work—only cutting out the background noise. Then have them answer the same questions I gave out today. At least half the class will notice things they didn't the first time. The trumpets are synthesized."

"They are?"

"It's a good lesson on understanding the method of delivery and leads perfectly into the upcoming lessons on synthesized music."

"Wow. Okay." I furrowed my brow. "So, you let the students take home two hundred pair of Bose headphones? The professor didn't do that when I took the class a few years back. The college has certainly upgraded from the crappy headphones they used to give out in music-recording class."

"They're mine, personally. Not the college's."

I did the math. That was at least five thousand dollars for one lesson. "What if you don't get them back?"

"It's never been an issue."

I smirked. "Because all the students are afraid of you."

"Unlike the smartass TA," Caine muttered.

Charlie had his hands full with trays of wings, so he used his ass to push open the door that led from the kitchen. I slipped out of the booth to grab them from him.

"You should have whistled for me like you usually do. You shouldn't be carrying trays with your back."

"I didn't want to interrupt your date."

"It's not a date."

He looked over at Caine and shrugged. "Looks like a date to me."

"It's not," I said flatly. "We're working on lesson plans for class."

"Whatever you say," Charlie trailed off as he headed back to the bar.

I set the trays down at our table and noticed Caine's beer mug was empty. "Want another beer?"

“If you’re joining me.”

“I don’t drink.”

Caine’s brows furrowed, but then an understanding crossed his face, and I realized what he’d thought.

“I’m not an alcoholic, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Okay.”

I really didn’t want to elaborate, but he was waiting for me to speak again.

“I grew up around alcoholism. At one point, I found myself drinking a little too much when my life was spinning out of control. I didn’t check myself into rehab or anything—I’m not a formal friend of Bill with a lifetime membership card or fancy sobriety chips—but I try to limit my drinking to celebrations and special occasions.”

The reason I didn’t normally elaborate was because people looked at me with sympathy in their eyes when I made such a statement. *Oh. She had a bad childhood.* Oddly, that wasn’t what I found on Caine’s face. His seemed to have admiration for what I’d just said, and I wasn’t sure what to do with that. It made me uncomfortable.

“So...I’ll grab you another beer, and I’ll have an O’Doul’s to join you.”

He smiled warmly. “Sounds good.”

When I returned to the table, I redirected the conversation back to work. “I was thinking—when it’s time to collect the Bose headphones from the class, I’m not touching Mr. Ludwig’s set. They need to be disinfected first.”

Caine’s beer was at his lips. “He was drawing you today, you know.”

“Drawing me? He was sketching headless women with great bodies.”

He sipped his beer. “And your point?”

“He wasn’t drawing me.”

Caine narrowed his eyes, and I got the feeling he was weighing whether

or not to say whatever was on his mind. Apparently, he decided to go for it.

“You have two freckles on the left side of your neck.”

My hand flew to my neck. He was absolutely right, but my hair was covering them. “What are you talking about?”

“You have a tendency to push your hair to one side—the right side. I noticed them the other day when we were in my car.”

“Okay...”

Caine caught my eyes. “The sketches your friend was drawing. They had necks, but no heads.”

“Yes. I noticed them. They weren’t exactly appropriate to be drawing during class. But he’s a really good artist.”

“Yes, he pays attention to detail. All of the women had one thing in common.”

My eyes widened. “No.”

Caine nodded. “Two freckles on the left side of the neck. He was sketching you.”

“But he’s never seen me naked.”

“He has an imagination.” Caine’s eyes dipped down for a glance at my cleavage. They gleamed with wickedness when they returned to meet mine. “Pretty damn good one, I’d say.”

That caused a flutter in my belly that quickly traveled south.

Oh, God.

I tried to shake it off with a joke. “And this is why I don’t date frat boys. Needless to say, I won’t be collecting beanie boy’s headphones or sitting next to him anymore.”

“Good call.” Caine smiled. “Stick to men.”

He was right. Although I was starting to question whether my sticking to men meant getting stuck on one in particular.



Chapter 6

Rachel

It was that time of the month. Not the dreaded time, but the time I actually looked forward to. Davis’s monthly texts came in like clockwork. I looked down at my phone.

Davis: *Next Wednesday 7pm? Miss you.*

On the first Wednesday of every month, my three old college roommates and I got together for dinner. Davis had been one of the roommates for the last two years of college. We’d had a thing for a short period—but the timing wasn’t right for him.

I typed back.

Rachel: *Can’t wait.*

Just as I hit send, Ava walked in. She worked the early-evening shift waiting tables, which meant I moved to behind the bar, and Charlie went home.

“Hey, Rach.”

“Hey. Davis just texted. He’s going to be at dinner next week.”

Ava wiggled her brows. “It’s about time. He’s missed the last three. Maybe you can liquor him up and break that dry spell finally.”

“Shut up.”

Ava was the only person who knew about me and Davis. I threw the

towel I'd been using to wipe the bar down at her. "I should never have told you."

"Told me?" she said, then proceeded to caress her torso with her hands as she groaned, "Oh, Davis. *Oh, Davis.*"

I laughed. "God, I can't stand you."

While Ava went to change for her shift, I thought about my old roommate. Davis wasn't the typical college student—not by any means. He was southern, full of *yes, ma'am* and *no, ma'am* polite manners, and had spent eight years in the military before coming to Brooklyn to study business. When he'd first moved in, he was also going through a divorce, having married his high school sweetheart at eighteen in a romantic gesture before leaving for his first tour in Iraq. As Davis told the story, their marriage had seemed to work for a long time. He'd occasionally visit and sent her home his paychecks. It stopped working when he left the military and his wife realized it was difficult to sleep around without getting caught when her husband wasn't halfway around the world.

Over the two years we lived together, Davis had become one of my best friends—until the night we celebrated his graduation. We both had too much to drink. One thing led to another, and before the night was over...*Oh, Davis.*

Even though I'd never honestly thought of him in that way before, the next day I was like, *Huh. Great guy. Nice looking. Giving in bed.* Suddenly I saw him in a new light.

It lasted a little over a month. While I'd been growing into the idea of coupledness, Davis apparently was not. He ended things, saying it was too soon after his divorce to be in a new relationship, especially with someone he already cared deeply about. I understood—well, sort of. Shortly thereafter, when our lease was up, we parted as friends...with promises to take some time and maybe explore things in the future. Between his years in the military

and being married, he'd earned his freedom.

Although my dating hiatus since then could have had something to do with hoping his promise to explore things in the future might come to fruition, after eight months, I was finally taking the hint.

My phone buzzed with another text.

Davis: *What? No miss you back?*

Smiling, my fingers hovered over the keys as I tried to decide what to text. Ava emerged from the ladies' room in her server polo and ponytail. She tied an apron around her waist as she spoke.

"I almost forgot. You're never going to believe what I watched today."

"What?"

"Come on, guess."

"Okay. Porn. You watched porn."

"Nope," she smirked.

"You finally finished your *Walking Dead* marathon?"

"Nope."

"I'm going to need a little hint here. You're giving me nothing to go on."

"Okay." She tapped her nails on the bar deep in thought, then grinned from ear to ear. "It rhymes with *undress her best*."

I laughed. "I think you've lost your mind."

A couple I'd seated a little while ago at table two motioned they were ready to order. I lifted my chin to my crazy friend and pointed with my cell phone.

"It rhymes with *cable glue*."

She repeated what I'd just said out loud a few times. "Cable glue, cable glue, cable glue..." Then her eyes lit up. "Table two!"

I took an ordering pad and pen from the box under the bar and slid them over to her. "Go take the order, crazy lady."

I was still staring down at Davis's text, trying to figure out my response, when I figured out her riddle. Decoding it, I suddenly lost interest in my phone and tucked it under the bar where I kept it while I was working.

Ava took the order from table two and dropped it in the kitchen before returning to where I was pouring a beer.

"Undress her best—Professor West?" I asked.

"Very good! Although his name wasn't Caine West in what I was watching. It was Able Arsen."

"What are you talking about?"

"I was in a TA meeting today, and I met a guy who used to be the TA for Dr. Anderson."

"The music department chair?"

"That's the one. By the way, the TA's name is Norman—really bad name for a guy in his twenties, but he's cute. He asked me to get drinks with him and a bunch of other TAs this Friday, so you're going with me."

"Okay..." I was glad to see Ava had found something to cheer herself up with after the way she'd been feeling about Owen. Although I still didn't make the connection to how this guy related to Caine or who the hell Able Arsen was. "But what does this have to do with Professor West?"

"Dr. Anderson told him Professor West used to be in a band. Had a contract with a major music label, too." She pulled out her phone and began to swipe. Landing on what she was looking for, she pushed some keys and turned the phone to face me. "Meet Able Arsen."

The video was grainy, and the sound quality was horrible—probably shot on a first-generation flip phone. All I could make out was four guys playing onstage at a distance.

"Keep watching," Ava said.

Eventually, toward the end of the video, the person recording zoomed in

on the drummer, who was also singing. His head was down as he banged away on the drums, bobbing along to the beat. There was something so sexy about the assertive way he gripped the sticks and the way his muscles flexed with each wail of the drum pad—what stamina must be required to move like that for hours on end.

The little flutter in my belly confirmed it, even before the musician looked up. But when that face met the camera, my breath caught.

Professor West had been just as gorgeous as a teenager as he was now. Only back then, he'd had that whole bad-boy-musician thing going on. Now, if I didn't know him and had to guess, I would have taken him for a jazz musician or maybe even classical of some kind. Somehow, sexy bad boy had grown into a sexy maturity.

When the song ended, Caine lifted his head and gave the crowd a crooked smile. His shoulder-length hair was wet from the workout, and he tossed a stick in the air, catching it with the other. Then he used his free hand to reach back over his head and tug off his sweaty shirt. The girls went crazy at his eight-pack abs. Rock star, Beatles-type crazy.

Wow.

That smile.

That body.

Just wow.

There were apparently many layers of Caine West, and I'd barely scratched the surface.



By the time I got home that night, it was after two in the morning. My feet were killing me, and all I wanted to do was soak in a tub and get some sleep. For a change, I didn't have to be at school or work until the afternoon. The

tub was warm, and I let the water from the faucet sluice over my feet as I settled back to relax.

Although my brain had ideas other than relaxing. The minute I shut my eyes, a vision of a young Caine West up on stage infiltrated my thoughts. I'd forwarded myself the videos and watched them more times than I cared to admit between serving drinks tonight.

Giving in, I reached up for my phone and allowed myself one more replay. Finally in private instead of being caught by a smirking Ava as I tried to discreetly look down at my phone, I searched the grainy face for Caine's mannerisms. There were a few I recognized—the way his lip twitched and he shook his head when women started to scream his name while he played his solo. The way he walked around the stage like he owned it. Today his arena was a classroom, but the confidence he strutted with was the same. Yet it was his arms that really nailed it home. Each time he banged on the drum, the vein that ran from his bicep to his forearm bulged. I'd never thought a vein could be so sexy.

After I finished watching, the tub was nearing full so I used my toes to turn off the water. I knew I wouldn't be able to relax enough to fall asleep tonight if I didn't satisfy my curiosity, so I Googled Caine's old stage name.

Able Arsen.

I was shocked when thousands of hits came back. Scrolling through like a fiend, I found picture after picture of Caine. He wasn't the front man for the band, but apparently the media adored him—and who could blame them? I noticed the same girl in quite a few photos. She had long, dark hair and was thin—almost too thin. The hollow of her cheeks made her beautiful, high cheekbones jut out just a little too much. In most of the photos, she wore sunglasses and seemed to shun the attention of the camera. There were various pictures of her with the band, some with Caine's arm around her in an

almost protective way. She was definitely younger than him—seventeen or eighteen, at best—and I couldn't quite tell if she was his girlfriend or perhaps a little sister.

When I sorted the photos and articles into date order, with the oldest ones first, I realized the pictures seemed to have stopped abruptly nine years ago. Three or four pages down in the search results, there was an article about the death of the lead singer, Liam Marshal. Able Arsen had disappeared after that.

What happened to you, Able Arsen?

Better yet, how did you wind up *Professor Caine West*?



Chapter 7

Caine *Fifteen years ago*

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.” Looking up at the cross in the tiny, dimly lit room, I inhaled, sucking deep until the red ember tip burned through to the end of the rolling paper, heating my thumb and forefinger.

“You can’t ask forgiveness for shit when you’re in the middle of sinning again. You’re supposed to be repentful, dickwad.”

“Show some respect with your language. We’re in a church, for Christ’s sake.”

Liam laughed from the other side of the dark booth. “Yeah, right. You just smoked a fatty in a confessional, and it’s my language that’s disrespectful.”

He had a point. And since my half-baked brain was transitioning nicely into full-on mellow mode, I ditched out the tiny remnant of my smoke on the floor and slipped it into my pocket while it was still warm.

“I’m outta here,” Liam said.

“We’re supposed to work until noon.”

“Screw that shit. Tell Father Frank I went home to spank one out if he looks for me.” The sliding wooden window we’d been talking through, the one that separated the two sides of the confessional and covered the

confidentiality screen, slammed shut. The door followed right behind as Liam took off.

There was still a half hour until I could go sign out with Father Frank, so I settled in, leaning my back against the cushioned red fabric, hoping to catch a few z's. The chair was pretty damn comfortable on the priest's side, must have been because they got stuck listening to other people's bullshit for hours every Saturday afternoon. I had no idea how these guys spent their entire lives in this place. Just being here for the last few Saturdays had been enough to freak me out.

Three weeks ago, my mother caught Liam and me ditching school again. It was our senior year, my mom was normally pretty cool, and parents expected a few cuts. That wasn't what sent God-fearing Grace West off the deep end. It wasn't even finding a half-naked and fully-stoned Emily Willis on her knees about to give me a blowjob in the yard that had freaked Mom out. Nope. What had gotten me involuntarily signed up for a month of cleaning St. Killian's on Saturday mornings was my music. Both of my parents hated that I had no intention of going to college or becoming part of the upstanding, family-owned investment firm that bore the West name.

So, I was sentenced to community service for wanting to play my drums and sing. After Father Frank's long talk with my mother, he also took every chance to remind Liam and me that playing music was no way for a man to make a living. Thank God, I only had one more week left here.

I'd just started to zone out with my eyes shut when the confessional door squeaked open. I had assumed it was Liam again.

"Sin again so soon, loser?" I said.

It sure as hell wasn't Liam who responded. The voice was tiny and shook with nerves as she spoke. "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."

Shit.

A little girl was on the other side and had assumed I was a priest. From the sound of her voice, I figured she couldn't have been older than ten or eleven. *What the hell could she have to confess?*

I probably should have opened the door and walked out before she started to let me in on her darkest secrets. No, not probably. I *definitely* should have walked out. But...maybe it was the good weed. Maybe it was the sound of her shaky little voice that had me curious. Maybe I was just fucked up in the head. But instead of literally opening the door, I opened a figurative one instead. One that I had no idea would change my life forever when I opened my mouth.

“Go on,” I told her. “Tell me your sins.”



Chapter 8

Rachel

Caine had slipped in halfway through the class.

Suddenly I could understand why he found lateness distracting. For the last twenty minutes, *I'd* been distracted by the man sitting in the seat I'd sat in during the last class. Next to him, Mr. Ludwig, the beanie-wearing artist of nudes, looked as nervous as I felt. Although his nervousness probably had more to do with the fact that the professor had just quietly slipped the notebook he'd been drawing in again today from his desk, and it was now closed and sitting in Caine's bag.

I tried not to look up to where they were sitting, yet I could feel Caine's eyes watching me. How is it that I had two hundred pairs of eyes focused on me, and I only sensed two?

I cleared my throat. "Since we have a few minutes before the end of class, I'm going to hand out the headphones we spoke about earlier." I went to the supply closet in the corner of the classroom and pulled out a box. Handing it to the first row, I asked the student in the corner to take one and pass the box down as I delivered a full box to each row. Caine got up and quietly grabbed a few boxes to help me distribute to the rows at the back of the lecture hall before taking his seat again. As I distributed, I reminded the class of the exercise that built on Professor's West first assignment, and then I gave them

one of my own.

“Along with the exercise we already discussed, I’d like you all to do a second listening assignment. We all have songs that remind us of good times in our early teens. Pick out the one that has the strongest memory for you. Tonight, when you’re alone at home, I want you to shut the blinds, turn off all of the lights, and get the room as dark as you can. Then lie flat on your back somewhere comfortable, preferably in your bed, and listen to the song that holds those memories for you using the Bose headphones. Listen to it twice. That’s it. Nice and simple. We’ll use what you hear in an upcoming class.”

After the class had emptied, Caine walked to the front. “Nice job.”

“Thank you. I didn’t think you’d be sitting in. It kind of threw me when you walked in late.” I smirked. “I don’t like lateness. I find it disrupts my class.”

Caine raised a brow. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

I packed my laptop into my bag. “Mr. Ludwig didn’t look happy to see you.”

“Mr. Ludwig is lucky he’s still sitting in my class at all.”

Caine helped me collect the leftover headphones from each row, and then we consolidated the stragglers to make one box of headphones and nested the empty boxes inside each other.

“So, what’s your song?” he asked.

My brows drew down. “Hmmm?”

“The assignment you gave. What’s the song that reminds you of your childhood?” What immediately came to mind was an old Lynyrd Skynyrd song, “Devil in a Bottle,” but that was a little more honesty than I could handle.

“I don’t know. Probably anything from Maroon 5.” Since I was a crappy

liar, I avoided his eyes. But when I glanced up at him, I caught him doing that squinting thing. “What?” I asked.

“You’re full of shit.”

“What are you talking about?” I attempted to play dumb. Unfortunately, I felt my cheeks heat under his stare.

“There’s a song you thought of right away. And it wasn’t a damn Maroon 5 song.” He scratched at his chin. “I bet there’s more than one, too.”

Rather than continue to lie, I decided to turn the table. “What’s your song, Professor Know-It-All?”

He held my eyes. “‘Going, Going, Gone’.”

“Bob Dylan?”

“That’s the one.”

Hmm... Off the top of my head, I couldn’t think of the words, but I knew it was a heavy and heartfelt song. I’d definitely be listening to that later on tonight with my borrowed Bose headphones. No better way to hone my critical-listening skills than trying to figure out the mystery of Caine West. Since he’d shared, I felt compelled to give him something. “‘Hurt’.”

He nodded. “The original Johnny Cash or Nine Inch Nails?”

I smiled. “Johnny. Always. He was my mom’s favorite.”

There was a tension between us as we looked at each other. Every time we were together I’d felt it. Each time it was a little different than the last, but the tension was always there—a crackle in the air. Today’s wasn’t so much sexual in nature as it was a feeling of understanding and acceptance. We’d both have depressing titles in our lives as narrated by song. Which reminded me...

“I heard another rumor about you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Well, actually, it was a rumor, but I know it to be true now. So I’m not

sure it's a rumor anymore."

"You've figured out the rumors about me being an arrogant asshole are true, huh?" Caine teased. "That wasn't a hard one."

"Actually, this one was more along the lines of you being a closet rock star signed to a label."

I knew the second the words came out of my mouth that I'd made a mistake. Caine's face, which had been warm and playful, morphed into cold and serious. I'd crossed a line and overstepped somewhere he didn't want me. He was more than a little pissed off.

"Keep out of my personal life, Rachel."

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

"You should get to your other job. It might be the only one you have soon." With that, he grabbed his leather bag and was up the stairs and out of the classroom before I could even shut my big mouth, which had been hanging open.

He punctuated his exit with a slam of the classroom door that left the walls shaking in his wake.

"You sure everything is okay?"

It was the third time Charlie had asked. The first time was when I dropped a full tray of drinks on the floor. Two of the glasses shattered, and I was so dazed cleaning it up that I sliced open my finger. The second time, I was lost in my head and over poured a beer from the tap. Now he was getting ready to leave, and his face was etched with concern.

"I'm fine, Charlie. Just a little tired," I lied. "I stayed up working on my thesis, and I have a bit of a headache. But I'm fine. I'm sorry about earlier."

"I could give two shits about the glasses as long as you're okay." He

looked me in the eyes. “You’re sure? I can stay and you could take off.”

I smiled. “I’m good. But thank you.”

Wednesday night was the slowest night of the week anyway. It was just Al and me tonight, an old retired cop friend of Charlie’s who worked the bar a few nights a week. I was glad Ava wasn’t working so I wouldn’t be grilled about my mood. All evening, my emotions had jumped back and forth between feeling bad that I’d pried into Caine’s life and feeling pissed that he’d been such an asshole when I mentioned his past.

There were only a few customers in the small, open dining area that adjoined the bar, which left me ample time to overanalyze what had transpired between me and Caine this afternoon. Clearly I’d ventured into territory where I wasn’t welcome, but it didn’t feel like it was because of our pseudo employee-employer relationship. He led the way poking into my personal life, so it wasn’t as if having a personal-ish relationship was out of bounds for him. This felt more like I’d touched a nerve than pushed the boundaries too far. He’d said, “Keep out of my personal life,” yet for reasons that didn’t make any sense, I was certain he meant *Keep out of this area of my personal life*.

But that wasn’t what was bugging me. Don’t get me wrong, I felt bad that I’d upset him. I would have felt bad for intruding on anyone’s life in an area where they didn’t want a flashlight shined. What was confusing was the degree to which it bothered me. I was attracted to Caine on a physical level, that I couldn’t deny—who wouldn’t be? But him being so curt and upset made me realize my attraction to him was more than physical. I was crushing on my damn professor. Since that first day after class, I’d been drawn to him on another level.

Just before nine, I came out of the ladies’ room and checked on my one remaining couple who lingered at their table having coffee. Out of my

peripheral vision, I spotted someone who had seated himself at one of the pub tables and went over to make sure he knew the kitchen was already closed for the day. I was shocked to find it was Caine sitting alone at the table.

“Professor? What are you doing here?”

His eyes answered for him. There was trouble lurking in the background. “Can you sit for a few minutes?”

“Ummm...sure. Let me just drop off the bill at my last table, and I’ll let Al know they’ll bring it up to him when they’re ready.”

Caine nodded. “Thank you.”

When I returned, there was already a Diet Coke on my side of the table and a beer in front of Caine. Untying my apron, I sat down and waited for him to speak.

“I want to apologize for this afternoon,” he said.

“I should be the one to apologize. I shouldn’t have been poking around in your personal life.”

“That’s true.” He smiled. “But I was wrong for the way I reacted.”

I shook my head. “If there’s anyone who should know there are things in people’s pasts they might not want brought up, it’s me.”

Caine nodded. He rubbed one finger around the top of his beer bottle. “I listened to some Johnny Cash tonight.”

“You did?”

He held my eyes. “I think we both have parts of our lives we’d rather not shake for fear of waking them up.”

That described perfectly the way I felt about my past. For the most part, I’d moved on and didn’t think about it on a daily basis. But it was always with me, and I worked hard to keep it locked away.

“Yes. I’m sorry. I really wasn’t thinking. I’m sure there’s a reason you don’t mention your history in your classes.”

Caine drank his beer, watching me over the rim. When he set it down, he asked, “How did you find out?”

I didn’t want to get anyone in trouble. “A friend of a friend.”

He nodded.

I thought it was best to come clean all the way. I took a deep breath before confessing. “And I might have Googled you. Well, not you. Adam’s other son.”

Caine shook his head, but there was a sad smile on his face. “I needed a haircut.”

“You were in style. I liked it. You had the whole sexy-bad-boy thing going on.”

“I’ll keep that in mind next time I go to the barber.”

“Can I just ask you one thing?”

“Will it help put this shit to bed?”

I smiled. “It will.”

“What’s your question?”

“The last article I read said you’d signed a record deal. But I couldn’t find an album. What happened?”

Caine was quiet for a while. His thumb rubbed at the label of his beer bottle when he spoke. “The lifestyle was tough. Partying, staying up all night, sleeping away half the day. It made me lose track of reality and my priorities.” He looked up at me. “After we signed with the label, we missed honoring the deadlines a few times. Album kept getting pushed back. Then I lost someone close to me.”

“I’m sorry.”

He nodded. “I took some time off. My parents pushed me to go back to college. I needed something to focus on. They wanted me to study finance and work in the family business. We settled on a degree in music because I

couldn't imagine not having it be a big part of my life. Later realized I was good at teaching musical composition, so kept going until I finished my doctorate." He lifted the beer bottle and tilted it to me before bringing it to his lips. "And here I am."

"And here you are." I smiled. "Thank you for sharing that with me."

The moment was interrupted when Al yelled from the bar. "You're all closed out, Rachel."

I turned and waved. "Thanks, Al."

"You're done for the night?" Caine asked.

"Yep. Do you want me to get you another beer?"

"No, thanks. I should get going."

I was disappointed, even after a long day of teaching and working a full shift on my feet.

After I said goodnight to Al, Caine walked me to my car. He opened the door so I could get in and held on to the top.

"By the way, Professor Clarence was the topic of my faculty meeting today."

We'd never spoken about it, and I wasn't sure if he knew I'd been his teaching assistant last year.

"He was such a good person. I worked for him last year."

"I heard that. Your name was mentioned, actually, along with another student's. You both had him as faculty advisor for your thesis."

I nodded. "He helped me pick my topic. It was a subject near to his heart."

"You haven't found a faculty member to replace him as your advisor yet?"

"No. Not yet. I need to get on that."

"I'll take you on, if you want."

The surprises kept coming tonight. “You will?”

“Think about it.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Caine shut my door and waited for me to start the car. As I pulled away from the curb, I waved one last time and thought to myself, *I have a new advisor.*



Chapter 9

Caine *Fifteen years ago*

What the fuck am I thinking?

I sat waiting in the quiet confessional, not even stoned this week. It was almost one o'clock, and Liam was long gone—like I should've been. We'd finished our last day of volunteering an hour ago and yet...here I was, waiting for a little girl who had enough trouble at home and sure as shit didn't need my ass pretending to be a priest to add to her problems.

But I couldn't not show up.

I had no idea why I'd told the little girl to come back this week to begin with.

Actually, that's a crock of shit. The reason had played over and over in my mind every night before I went to bed. I couldn't get her little voice out of my head.

Sometimes he falls asleep on the couch with a cigarette in his hand, and I think about not putting it out and letting the house go on fire. That was her confession.

I wasn't even positive if thinking about letting someone hurt himself was a sin. But I wasn't going to let this poor little girl feel guilty over wanting someone who I suspected wasn't a good guy to get hurt. Fuck that shit.

I also needed to know what the asshole was doing to make an innocent little girl have those types of thoughts. She should've been thinking about ponies and unicorns, not her house catching on fire. My mind automatically thought the worst.

I was just about to give up—and light up on the way home to clear my head of the shit running through it—when the door creaked open on the other side.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned,” she whispered.

“Didn't we talk about this last week? You aren't sinning by thinking bad thoughts. You'd have to act on them to sin.”

Of course, that wasn't true necessarily—the Catholic Church had some screwy rules—but it was the only thing I could do to take some of the weight off her shoulders right now.

“Alright.”

I knew from last week that she was skittish on sharing. I'd need to gain her trust if she was going to let me in on whatever was going on at home. So, I started her talking about the first thing I could think of.

“How was school this week? Do you like your teacher?”

“It was okay. I don't mind my teacher so much, but Tommy, who sits next to me, is gross. He always has his hand down his pants.”

Somehow I managed not to laugh. *Don't we all.* “You should keep away from him. He sounds like trouble.”

“He always smiles at me.”

“Yeah. He's no good. What grade are you in?”

“Fourth.”

I'd guessed right. She had to be about ten.

“Did you tell your mother about him?”

She was quiet for a long time before responding. “My mother died last

year.”

Shit. I’d been afraid there was no woman in the picture, for some reason. “I’m very sorry to hear that.” I paused then added, “She’s in Heaven now. It’s a nice place.”

“Does the pain stop when you die?”

“Was your mom sick?”

I saw the outline of her head through the square-latticed screen opening and knew she was nodding.

“She’s not in pain anymore.”

“Is Yoda there, too?”

I furrowed my brows. “The little green guy from *Star Wars*?”

She giggled. The sound was better than music. “No. Yoda was my dog. He had ears that stuck out of his head weird. He died, too.”

“Oh. Yeah, Yoda is in Heaven with your mom. They’re hanging out.”

“That’s good.”

“Is it just you and your dad now?”

“He’s not my dad.” She answered that question really damn quick. *Too quick.*

“Who do you live with?”

“My stepfather. He doesn’t like me very much, most of the time. But sometimes he likes my sister.”

“You have a sister? Is it just the two of you?”

“Yes.”

“Is your sister older?”

“She’s fifteen.”

I had a gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach. “How do you know he doesn’t like you very much? And what makes you say he likes your sister sometimes?”

She was quiet. “I should go. Benny is going to come home from work soon. He gets mad easy.”

“Benny? Is that your stepfather?”

“Yes.”

I wanted to know more, but I definitely didn’t want to be the cause of her getting in trouble.

“Come back next week. Okay?”

“Okay.”



Chapter 10

Rachel

On Friday afternoon, I took more time than usual getting ready. I'd always liked school. It gave me things to focus on when I was feeling unsteady. But these days, it definitely wasn't my studies that I looked forward to.

Caine's office door was open when I dropped by unannounced. We made eye contact, and he used the hand not holding the cell to his ear to point to a chair opposite him in front of his desk. I listened to one side of his conversation while I looked around his office.

"Yes. I'll be there."

He listened and then rolled his eyes. "I would prefer you didn't do that."

There was a woman on the other end of the phone. I could hear the pitch of her voice even if I couldn't make out her words. I tried to act like I wasn't paying attention, checking out the art on his walls and the books on his shelf, but I was definitely listening.

"Ellen Werman and I are not going to be a couple no matter what table you seat her at."

Pause.

"Because I have a penis, and Ellen doesn't care for them, Mother."

Pause.

"Okay. I have to go now. Someone just came into my office. I'll see you

soon.”

After he hung up, Caine let out a deep breath and tossed his phone on the desk.

“Is it just *your* penis Ellen doesn’t like, or penises, in general?”

He smirked. “Ellen has been out since eighth grade. My mother is the only person on the planet who still doesn’t get it. She’s my father’s business partner’s daughter. We’re good friends, but my mother’s had her heart set on us getting married for the last thirty-three years. She’s called me four times to talk about the seating chart at some charity event my parents host every year, and it’s not for two months. I should have just told her I couldn’t wait to sit next to Ellen and left it at that.” His phone started to buzz again, and he swiped to ignore it. “Do you have an extra-help session this afternoon? I thought that was on Thursdays.”

“It is. I just wanted to come by and tell you, if the offer is still open, I’d really appreciate if you would take over as my thesis advisor.”

Caine leaned back in his chair. “It’s about time. I was starting to think you were going to turn me down.”

More like I didn’t want to look desperate. “Well,” I teased. “I did have to consider my other offers.”

“Is that so? Guess I should consider myself lucky then.”

I grinned. “Guess so.”

“Why don’t you email me what you’ve done so far. I’ll take a look at it, and we can sit down and go over it one day next week.”

“Okay.” I dug my iPhone out of my purse. “What’s your email?”

He slid his phone over to me on the desk. “Put your number in. I’ll text you my contact information to save.”

After we exchanged details, I caught the time on my phone. “I better run.”

Caine eyed me suspiciously. "Date?"

"No. They're having a TA get-together tonight, and I told Ava I'd go with her."

He nodded. "Have fun. Be safe."

The next morning, I'd just gotten out of the shower when my phone buzzed, indicating a new text. I finished towel-drying my hair and grabbed my glasses. I was surprised to find it was from Caine. It was the first text we'd ever exchanged, and my body stirred as I read it.

Caine: *Do you still visit Umberto on Sundays?*

Even though I'd emailed him my thesis-in-progress last night before going out, I hadn't expected him to read it so soon. It made me excited and nervous at the same time. I was proud of my work with Umberto, but my rough draft contained a lot of personal thoughts and notes. Having Caine read it made me feel vulnerable.

Rachel: *Yes, every Sunday.*

Caine: *I'd like to join you, see the study you've been working on first hand.*

My pulse increased. *Get a hold of yourself, Rachel.* It's Professor West working on a thesis with a graduate student, not a sexy man asking you on a date. He didn't even find it proper for me to fraternize with undergraduate students. Yet any contact from him made me feel like an excited teenager whose phone finally rang after hours of waiting for the cute boy to call. *God, I'm pathetic.*

Rachel: *That would be great. You're welcome any time.*

The dots jumped around as I waited for his response.

Caine: *How about tomorrow?*

Rachel: *Sure. I usually try to arrive at ten so I don't interrupt his daily activities.*

Caine: *Try to arrive at ten...is that code for somewhere between ten and noon?*

Maybe. I grinned down at my phone.

Rachel: *Lucky for me, Umberto isn't such a stickler for punctuality.*

Caine: *I'll pick you up at nine-thirty.*

Rachel: *At my apartment?*

Caine: *Unless that's a problem. If you prefer to take two cars, I can meet you there.*

Rachel: *No. One car is great. I'd like that.*

I gave Caine my address and then got dressed and ready for work. Though the day seemed to drag on forever, the smile I wore didn't leave my face at all.

I wasn't sure of the proper protocol for your boss picking you up at home. Did I go outside at nine-thirty or wait for him to ring the bell and invite him up? The answer was decided for me at twenty after nine when my buzzer sounded, and I wasn't finished getting ready yet.

I pressed the intercom. "Caine?"

"Yes."

"Third floor. I'll buzz you up."

I hit the button that unlocked the main door to my building and opened the door to my apartment. When Caine stepped off the elevator, I took a deep breath to try to hide my reaction to his appearance. He was dressed more casually than I'd ever seen, but even in a simple, fitted navy polo and jeans, he still managed to look sexy as hell. I realized it wasn't the clothes he wore,

but the way he wore them that seemed to work for me. He had a quiet confidence and casual elegance that I found extremely attractive. The stubble he tended to sport by mid afternoon was clean-shaven, and even though I really liked the scruff, his tanned skin and the strong lines of his jaw were just as hot.

He looked at my wet hair. "I can see you're ready on time, as usual."

"You're early."

Checking his watch, he raised a brow. "It's nine twenty-four. You're going to be ready in six minutes?"

I opened the door and stepped aside, rolling my eyes. "Just come in."

Caine grinned and stepped inside. Of course, the man always smelled amazing, too. I wasn't sure if it was aftershave or cologne, but he had a masculine scent that was distinct and woody. It sparked a desire I hadn't felt in a really long time, and for a second, I considered sticking my nose in a can of coffee beans to stop the assault on my body. *That* would have been interesting to explain my way out of.

My apartment wasn't very big, but it was clean and decorated in a shabby chic way that I loved. Caine looked around, taking in the crazy different patterns all over the place. Each chair at my small kitchen table was different. Two of the walls in the living room were painted deep red and lined with art or photos framed in matte black, while the other walls were nude and stark.

After a minute, he nodded.

"What?"

"This fits you." His tone didn't indicate whether that was a good thing or bad.

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know. It just feels like you should live here."

"Because it's a little crazy?"

His lip twitched. “Maybe.”

My hands went to my hips. “What exactly does your apartment look like?”

Still surveying everything around him, he seemed to give my question some thought. “It looks like anyone could live in the place. Lots of white, black, and stainless steel. I’ve lived in my house for five years and never realized it says nothing about me until I walked in here.”

Hmm. No idea what to make of that. “I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

Caine smiled. “You should. It was meant that way.”

I had been just about to get dressed when the bell rang, and I completely forgot what I was wearing until Caine’s eyes reminded me. He wasn’t leering or anything, but I watched as his eyes did a sweep up and down my body, and I felt exactly where they lingered. The sheer T-shirt I was wearing left little to the imagination, and my nipples had hardened as he stepped off the elevator. Watching him check me out, I could feel them saluting through the fabric.

“Okay...I’ll...uh...go finish getting ready. There’s coffee brewed in the kitchen, if you want.”

I disappeared into my bedroom. The outfit I’d planned on wearing seemed suddenly not good enough for Caine West to appreciate, and I wound up changing three times before I even started to dry my hair and swipe on some makeup. When I was finally ready, it was close to ten o’clock. I thought I’d find Caine tapping his foot, but instead he still seemed intrigued by my apartment. I found him studying the framed pictures on the wall.

“I’m so sorry. I lost track of time.”

“It’s fine. I helped myself to two cups of coffee.”

“Oh, good.”

As I dumped my thesis files and notes into an old leather tote, I noticed

Caine had stopped in front of a framed black and white photo.

“Is this your mother?”

I’d looked at it so often that I knew every nuance in the photo, even without looking. She was sitting on a swing in the yard of the house I grew up in, a white daisy tucked behind her ear. Her smile sparkled so wide, I sometimes used it to brighten my day.

“Yes.”

“She’s beautiful.”

“Thank you. She was.”

He turned to me and studied my face. “You look just like her.”

“Cancer,” I blurted out.

I had no idea what possessed me to say it. To this day, I don’t think I’ve spoken about her to anyone but my sister. I’ve been friends with Ava since we started undergraduate school five years ago, she was my roommate for years, and she has no idea what my mother died from. It wasn’t a secret; I just kept a lot of things bottled up.

I stared at the photo. “Ovarian.”

Caine put his hand on my back and gently rubbed. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” I cleared my throat and pointed to a different picture. “This is my Aunt Rose and Uncle Nate—my mom’s sister and her husband. They raised me and my sister after...well, they raised us as their own after Mom died. My father wasn’t in the picture from the time I was an infant.” Even though I’d opened the bottle voluntarily, I wanted to cork it. “You ready? They serve lunch at twelve-thirty, and I don’t like to interrupt Umberto’s routine.”

“Just waiting on you. *As usual.*”

“Do you need to be back at any specific time? Sometimes I take a break and write my notes while he has lunch and does an activity or two. Then I go

back and finish up.”

“Nope. I’m yours for the entire day.”

I liked the sound of that.



Chapter 11

Rachel

Caine drove a stick shift, a little old Porsche that had been meticulously maintained. I don't know anything about cars, but I suspected it was a classic and had more value than a new one. It seemed to fit him—expensive, yet sexy and understated.

I'd never been so happy to be stuck in traffic. Caine had to constantly change gears, and something about the way his large hand gripped the shifter just worked for me. Not to mention his forearm...and that damn vein. God help me. I was still finding a vein attractive.

Caine noticed me watching him. “Do you know how to drive a manual?”

“No. I tried once, and I hurt my nose.”

His brows drew down. “You hurt your nose?”

“I kept stalling, and the car would jerk. On the fifth or sixth time, I was letting off the clutch and starting to move, and then the damn tires screeched to an abrupt halt, and I lurched forward and hit the steering wheel. I thought I broke my nose.”

Caine chuckled. “I think you might be a little too tightly wound to drive a stick.”

“Me? You're more tightly wound than I am.”

He side-glanced at me. “Did you forget how we first met?”

“That was different. I thought you hurt my friend.”

“So rather than determine if I was the person you thought I was, you jumped down my throat. You’re wound tight.”

My first reaction was to argue the point with him, which I realized would only prove his conclusion further. “Maybe you’re *a little* right.”

“Just a little.”

“You know, that’s how I became interested in musical therapy. Growing up I learned to use music to relax.”

“Did you have music on when you tried to drive the stick shift?”

I thought back. “You know what? I didn’t. I was nervous and didn’t want to be distracted, so I turned off the radio.”

“Maybe you should have left it on.”

“Hmmm...I never thought of that. Maybe you should let me drive yours and see if that works.”

Caine laughed. “I like my clutch too much.”

The drive to Umberto’s in New Jersey was normally about forty-five minutes on Sunday mornings, but today it was more like an hour and a half. The GW Bridge was closed except for one lane, and we crawled to cross. Once traffic opened up on the other side, we started to talk about my research.

“Tell me about Umberto.”

“Well, you read the basics in my summary, I’m sure. He’s seventy-three, late stage or stage six Alzheimer’s, has spent his entire life living in the home he grew up in—even had his medical practice in the house. He was a general practitioner who still made house calls up until ten years ago. He’s been married to Lydia for fifty-one years, and she visits him every single day. They have one son who lives on the West Coast and comes to see them a few times a year. Most days Umberto doesn’t remember Lydia anymore. He went

through a two-year period of depression and found some happiness with a fellow patient, Carol. Sometimes Umberto and Carol sit and hold hands while Lydia visits him. I've never seen the kind of love his wife has for him. The man she spent her entire life with thinks he's in love with another woman, and she's happy for him. It's the most selfless thing I've experienced. She wants him to truly be happy, even if he finds that happiness with someone else."

"Wow."

"Yeah. It's something beautiful in an otherwise tragic disease."

"And the music he's responding to, it's in Italian?"

"Yes. When I first started to visit the center, I was working with a larger group, trying to find a few candidates to study individually. Umberto didn't have much interest, even though his wife has control of his medical decisions and had signed him up for the study. I'd interviewed the families to learn about some music from the individual patients' histories, and each week we'd play music and do exercises to see if I could get a response. Umberto had never reacted to anything one way or the other. He seemed to enjoy music, but neither his wedding song nor anything from other memorable times in his life sparked any type of special interest."

"So what made you try Italian music?"

"It was just a whim, really. The week before, I'd heard Umberto respond to something the nurse asked him in Italian. I hadn't even known he spoke it fluently. Apparently he slipped into speaking it every once in a while. So the next week, when I came, I thought I'd try an opera. People tend to really respond to the music at a show, so I figured, why not play one?"

"And Umberto responded?"

I clutched my chest. "He started to sob. It was heartbreaking. But it was the first reaction at all I'd gotten from him with music—negative or positive.

That day was the most lucid he'd been in years. He started to tell old stories about his mother that his wife didn't even remember. I wasn't sure if it was the opera itself or the music that brought back a memory."

"What do you have planned for today?"

I'd been alternating weeks between English and Italian music. This was actually an English week, but I'd decided to change things up a bit. Maybe a little part of me wanted to show off for the sexy professor.

"*Le Nozze di Figaro.*"

"Ah. Mozart."

"You're an opera fan?" I asked.

"I'm a music fan. Doesn't matter what kind. I actually saw *Figaro's Wedding* in undergraduate school—Composition Two. The whole class went as part of the course."

"I've never been to an opera." We approached the turn to Regency Village, the assisted-living community where Umberto lived, so I pointed up ahead. "Make your next left. You can't really see it until you're almost past it. It sneaks up on you because it's hidden behind those trees."

After we pulled into the parking lot, I started to get a bit nervous. I'd worked on my thesis for over a year. What if Caine found my research flawed or didn't believe it was the music that brought Umberto's memories back to the forefront? While he always enjoyed listening, not every session brought the same reaction.

Caine killed the engine and turned to face me with one arm casually slung over the wheel. "I've read your research. Your arguments are strong. You're going to do fine."

I hadn't mentioned my nerves out loud. He must have read the confusion on my face.

His eyes pointed down to my wrist. "You play with your watch when

you're nervous."

I'd been fidgeting with my watch. I immediately stopped. "When else did I mess with my watch that you noticed it?"

"The first day of class after it emptied out and you had to come down the stairs to talk to me." We stared into each other's eyes. "Earlier in your apartment, when I noticed you weren't wearing a bra."

Embarrassed, I looked around the car to avoid his stare. To my surprise, when my eyes returned to his, he was focused on my lips. Which caused me to jump from one nervous habit to another.

I bit my lower lip as the sleeping butterflies in my belly woke to a flutter.

Caine cleared his throat, but his voice was still gravelly. "You have nothing to be nervous about. Now come on, I'm looking forward to watching you kick ass."



Umberto was with his ladies, Lydia and Carol. He was smiling and laughing as we walked to their table in the visitor's lounge.

I whispered who was who to Caine as we approached. "His wife's across and his girlfriend is next to him."

Caine whispered back. "Umberto's got some racket going on."

I elbowed him in the abs to *shh*.

"Hi, Umberto."

"Hi."

Every week was like starting all over. One thing I'd learned is that Umberto was good at pretending he knew who people were.

"Did Max go?" he asked.

"Umm. Yes." I whispered to Caine. "Max was his dog—a black lab. For some reason, he frequently asks people if Max went to the bathroom. He

thinks we were out walking him or something.”

I turned to the ladies. “Hi, Lydia. Hi, Carol.”

Lydia stood and kissed my cheek. We’d become good friends over the last year. I was just about to introduce Caine when Carol took it upon herself.

“Who’s the handsome fella? You a new doctor here?”

I laughed. “This is Caine West, Carol. He’s a music professor at Brooklyn College, where I’m a graduate student.”

Caine delivered a dazzling smile as he extended his hand. “It’s very nice to meet you, Carol.”

We joined the three of them as they chatted about the movie that had been shown last night. Carol’s Alzheimer’s was less advanced than Umberto’s, so she tended to remember more.

She put her hand on Umberto’s arm. “*The Hunt for Red October*. Remember, honey? It had that Sean Connery in it.”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah.”

I was certain Umberto didn’t recollect anything about the movie.

Throughout our conversation, Caine was mostly quiet, just observing. I caught his eyes moving back and forth between Lydia’s face and where Carol’s hand touched Umberto a few times. I’d grown used to the unusual trio, but it was definitely something interesting to watch the first time. A woman who didn’t want to claw another woman’s eyes out when she caught her touching the man she loved—a man she had spent fifty-one years being faithful to. Caine was definitely watching for a reaction. But the only one he’d see from Lydia was contentment. She’d come to terms with whatever allowed her husband to feel some happiness.

Eventually, the nurse came to collect Carol for an activity. Lydia had insisted we never begin therapy while Carol was present. She didn’t want her husband to have a memory that made him reach for her and upset Carol.

There was a special place in Heaven for Lydia someday.

After Umberto hugged Carol goodbye, he sat back down with us, but seemed agitated.

Lydia reached across the table and covered her husband's hand. "Umberto, Rachel is going to play you some music. Do you remember that Rachel plays you music sometimes?"

"Oh, yeah. Yeah."

That was Umberto's way of saying, *I have no idea, but I'm not telling you that.*

She squeezed. "Rachel's going to put some headphones on you. Okay?"

"Yeah. Sure."

I placed a set of wireless headphones over Umberto's ears while Lydia dug into her purse and took out a small case of earbuds she'd started to carry. It wasn't necessary for her to listen, but she liked to keep in tune with her husband. Realizing for the first time that I hadn't brought an extra set of wireless buds, I offered to share mine with Caine. It wasn't necessarily a hardship having to inch up directly next to him so we could each listen through one bud.

I started the music, and Umberto immediately closed his eyes. Within seconds, the tension etched in his face seemed to flee. I glanced over at Caine, who was watching Umberto, and he nodded his head and smiled. At some point during the song, Umberto reached out and took his wife's hand. It was such a small gesture, but those tiny moments of recognition made a world of difference to a family dealing with advanced Alzheimer's.

We played two songs, and then I removed the headset from Umberto's head.

"How are you feeling today, Umberto?"

"Good. Good." I wasn't sure if he felt any different than before, but the

agitation from ten minutes earlier was gone.

Lydia tried to build on the effect of the music. “Umberto? Do you remember when Francesca used to play this song?”

“Sure.” He nodded. Then he pursed all five of his fingers together in the universal Italian grandmother hand language and said, “*Belle parole non pascon I gatti.*”

Lydia laughed. She looked to me. “It means *Fine words don’t feed cats.* My mother-in-law, Francesca, used to say it all the time. I never really understood what it meant.”

We stayed for a few hours, even breaking for lunch and then coming back afterward. But that was the extent of Umberto’s brief burst of memories that day. A second round of music in the afternoon didn’t bring back any specific recollections, but I hoped the music had something to do with the smiles everyone wore.

Lydia looked at her watch. “Umberto, it’s almost time for mass. Do you want to get washed up before the service?”

“Okay.”

She turned to Caine and me. “Would you like to join us?”

Even though I was definitely not a Sunday mass person, I’d joined them on a few occasions to observe Umberto’s reactions to the music.

“I think we’re going to head out,” I told her. “It’s getting late.”

As we were saying our goodbyes, Umberto looked to Caine. “You going to take Max out now?”

Caine went along with it. “Yeah. I’ll take good care of Max.”

After the nurse took Umberto back to his room to get ready, Lydia walked us to the lobby. “Somehow I don’t get offended that my husband has fallen in love with another woman and doesn’t remember me, but every time he remembers Max, I can’t help but be insulted.” She laughed, but seemed

only half kidding. “So, I hope our Rachel scored an A today. The musical therapy really seems to be working.”

I smiled. “It’s not like that. Professor West doesn’t give me a grade. He sort of oversees the research I’m doing and the writing of my paper.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, I hope you were impressed.”

Caine looked at me with warmth in his eyes. “I was. Very.”

Lydia gave me a hug. “See you next week?”

“I’ll be here.”

“Will I be seeing you again, Professor?”

“If Rachel will have me.”

Umm. Are we talking literally or figuratively here?

Back in the car on the drive home, I could tell something was on Caine’s mind. He was quieter than usual.

“Did you want to go to mass? I didn’t even think to ask you before I declined, and I’ve monopolized your entire Sunday.”

Caine glanced at me and back to the road. “Haven’t gone to church in fifteen years. Wouldn’t step back inside if you paid me.”



Chapter 12

Caine *Fifteen years ago*

What the hell is she doing?

I ducked behind a wide marble column to watch. I was later than usual because Liam had been screwing around at band practice, and we all lost track of time trying to learn a new song he'd written while drunk last night. Half of what he'd chicken-scratched down on a brown paper bag was smeared and unreadable. But the other half was pretty damn good. So we riffed and riffed, trying to get the jackass to remember the words he'd written.

I normally showed up at twelve-thirty and set myself up in the confessional to wait. My little friend generally wandered in sometime before one. But today I was late, and she was early. At least I thought she was early. I hadn't really ever seen her clearly enough to be positive it was her. For all I knew, I could be hiding from some other random little girl who'd wandered into church on Saturday afternoon.

The old wooden confessional was dark to begin with, and the latticed grate that separated us made it even more difficult to make out any detail other than her ponytail. I knew she had dark hair and was tiny—just like the little girl currently peeking into the priest's side of the confessional. I

watched curiously from a distance as she looked around and then opened the door. She stepped inside for a half a second and then darted back out and into the parishioner's side—the sinner's side.

Five minutes passed, and she hadn't opened the door back up, so when the coast was clear, I made my way over and slipped inside for my priestly duty. The booth looked as it normally did, except for two coins on the floor. I figured maybe she was trying to get a peek at the priest.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.”

It had to have been at least six weeks now we'd been doing this, yet every time she said those words, I felt an ache in my chest. She was carrying too much baggage for a kid. Lately, we didn't even talk about the sins she thought she was committing. She just showed up and we shot the shit for a half hour or so. I got the feeling I was the only adult she trusted. Which was pretty fucking ironic considering I wasn't even really an adult yet, and I'd been lying to her since the first minute she stepped into the booth.

“How was your week?”

“I got in trouble at school.”

I smiled to myself. “Oh yeah? What did you do?”

“It was also a sin.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Well, you know the boy who sits next to me that I told you about? Tommy?”

“The one who always has his hand down his pants?”

“That's him. He made me say a bad word, and I got detention. We both got detention.”

“How did he make you say a bad word?”

“We were reviewing shapes in class for some state test. The teacher drew a diamond on the board and asked what shape it was. We'd learned rhombus

a few years earlier, but when she called on me to answer, I forgot the word. The teacher gave me a hint to try and help me. She said it started with an R. I got excited because I thought I remembered, and I yelled out the wrong R word.”

“What did you yell?”

“I yelled *rectum*.”

I had to stifle my laugh. “Do you know what that means?”

“I do now. Tommy explained it to me by yelling that I was an A-hole.” She paused. “He said the whole word, too.”

I tried to provide some priestly guidance. “Your mistake was honest. It sounds more like Tommy is the one who sinned by using the bad word intentionally. Not you.”

“Well...I used it, too.”

“Oh?”

“At recess, some of the kids were still making fun of me, calling me an A-hole lover. So I told the kids I learned the word *rectum* from Tommy... because when he has his hands down his pants he sometimes sticks his thumb up his rectum during class. Only I didn’t use the word *rectum* when I said it.”

What I wanted to say was *Atta girl*, but instead I stuck to my priestly ways. “You’ll say three Hail Marys for using the bad word. But, between us, it sounds like Tommy’s a jerk and deserved it.”

My little lamb giggled.

“Anything else?”

Last week she hadn’t mentioned home, and I was anxious to find out how things were going. The only thing I’d been able to draw out of her, other than her own admission that she had bad thoughts about her stepfather, was that he drank too much and yelled.

“How are things at home?” I prompted. “Did anything happen to make

you have bad thoughts?”

“I wore the headphones you gave me.” Two weeks ago, she’d told me she got scared when her stepfather yelled at night. She had trouble falling asleep sometimes. I’d suggested she put on headphones and listen to her favorite song to drown out the sound. But she didn’t own headphones. So last week I put my extra set in the booth before she arrived and told her to take them home. I explained how shutting her eyes and singing quietly along with the music would help ease her into sleep.

“Did it help?”

“Yes. I fell asleep after the fourth time.”

I was probably delusional, but I felt like I was helping this kid in some screwed-up way. “That’s good.”

“I told my sister to try it, but she said she couldn’t.”

“Does she not have headphones?”

She didn’t respond for a few minutes. I’d begun to learn that her silence often spoke louder than her voice did.

“She has headphones. She got them for Christmas the year before our mom died. They were in her stocking.”

That feeling of dread hit the pit of my stomach. “So why does your sister think she can’t wear them? Does she not like music?”

“She has to listen for Benny.”

“What does that mean?”

“Sometimes when he’s drinking and mad, he comes into her room at night.”



Chapter 13

Rachel

“Are you hungry?”

I’d debated asking the question in my head for the last five minutes. Even though I’d spent all day with Caine, I wasn’t ready for it to end. But I wanted my suggestion to have dinner to come off casual. He’d asked me to grab a bite to eat before, yet for some reason when it was me doing the asking, I felt like I was asking him out on a date.

Caine glanced over and then back to the road. He was quiet, and I got the feeling he was debating the appropriateness of our situation before answering. I was surprised when he said, “Starving. What did you have in mind?”

“I’m easy. There’s a Greek restaurant a few blocks from my place that’s good. Or there’s Chinese on Grand Street. Or we could go to O’Leary’s and then it’ll be my treat again.” I smirked at that last part.

“How about Greek, and my treat this time?”

“Sounds good. Take a left on Elwyn Street. It’s up on the right if we can find parking—Greek Delight.”

Inside the restaurant, the hostess sat us in a quiet booth in the back and brought us hummus and pita chips to snack on while we looked at the menu. I knew what I wanted, but Caine took out glasses from his pocket to read the

menu. Those *really* worked on him, although I couldn't help myself.

"How old are you that you need reading glasses?"

He looked up over the rim of his studious Burberry frames. "You wear glasses. Why does my needing reading glasses mean I'm old?"

"I have an astigmatism. I've needed them to read since I was in a training bra."

Caine's eyes dropped to my cleavage before returning to the menu. He grumbled something I didn't catch. When I continued to stare at him, he took his glasses off and looked up at me. "What?"

"You didn't answer my question. How old are you?"

"Old enough to be your professor."

I dipped a piece of pita in the hummus and popped it in my mouth. "So, what? About sixty then?"

"I'm thirty-two, wiseass. Are you happy?"

I smiled. "I am, actually."

Caine slipped his glasses back on and returned to the menu.

I leaned in. "You don't look a day over thirty-one."

He shook his head and continued reading, but I caught the corner of his lip twitch.

Why did I love that lip twitch? It felt like a little reward of some sort. I seriously needed my head examined when it came to this man.

After he seemed to have decided, he leaned back in the booth. "You're doing a great job with your research."

"Thank you."

"It's one hell of an interesting dynamic going on there."

I remembered how awkward I'd felt sitting with the trio the first time. "I know. It was weird at the beginning, but I've gotten used to it now. Lydia is a pretty amazing person, isn't she?"

“She is. Not sure I could do what she’s doing.”

“What do you mean?”

“Watch my wife sit there with another man and smile.”

“True love is selfless. She wants the best for him, even if that doesn’t include her anymore.”

The waitress brought our drinks and took our order. Caine had ordered a Greek beer, and I’d ordered my usual diet soda. I had to look away when his lips wrapped around the bottle. I was way too attracted to him to hide it very well.

“You sound like an expert on the subject. I take it you’ve been in love like that?” he asked.

“Not with a man.”

Caine’s brows jumped, and I realized what that must’ve sounded like—what he thought.

“I meant...I felt that way about my mother. Not that I’m a lesbian or anything. I like men. Not that I have anything against lesbians. I just prefer... you know...men when it comes to sex. Not that I have much of a sex life at the moment.” I was definitely babbling.

Caine chuckled. “You’re fucking adorable when you get embarrassed.”

I drank my cold soda to occupy my mouth and hopefully keep my skin from turning noticeably pink. “Anyway, when my mother was really sick, I wanted her to die so she wouldn’t be in pain anymore. I was going to be without a mother, but I didn’t care. I just wanted her to be at peace. That’s what Lydia and Umberto remind me of.” I set my glass down on the table. “How about you? Ever been in love like that?”

Caine shook his head. “Not sure I’m capable of selfless. Spent most of my life on the -ish side of self, rather than the -less.”

“No girlfriends?”

“Plenty of those. None that I wasn’t a selfish bastard with.”

I stared at him. “That’ll change when you meet the right woman.”

He brought the beer bottle to his lips. “Maybe. Or maybe I’m just destined for a life of selfish screwing. I could think of worse things.”

I couldn’t see Caine as selfish—he’d changed my tire after I told him off and interrupted his class. And I couldn’t imagine he wasn’t attentive in bed. He was so observant that it was often distracting, not to mention how intense he could be. Then there was the musician thing...skilled hands and good rhythm. No. There was no way Caine West was selfish in bed. Of *that* I was certain.

He squinted. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“What do you mean?”

“You got quiet after I said there were worse things in life than selfish screwing.”

And there was the observant thing again. He paid attention to women. Men who paid attention were good in bed.

“I was just thinking about what you said. You don’t seem selfish to me.”

“We’re not in that kind of a relationship.”

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “But you seem too attentive to be selfish in that way, too.”

A look of understanding crossed Caine’s handsome face, as if he’d just realized what I was thinking. He leaned in to me with a wicked grin that made my heart palpitate.

“I didn’t mean I was selfish in bed.” His eyes dropped to my neck and slowly rose to focus on my mouth—which parted for his gaze. “A woman’s needs always come before my own. And I enjoy every minute of taking care of those needs.” His eyes returned to mine, and he leaned in even closer. “She comes before me...multiple times.”

I swallowed. My whole body reacted, and Caine knew it. He leaned back with a cocky smile and a gleam in his eyes.

When I finally attempted to speak, my hoarse voice croaked. “Then what are you selfish about?”

“The stuff that comes after we get out of bed. The relationship part.”

“Oh.”

“Not everyone has the ability to be Lydia.”

“I’m not sure I agree. I think we all have the ability to be Lydia. It’s a choice not to try and find your Umberto. And usually there’s a reason for that choice.”

The muscle in Caine’s jaw ticked, but he stayed silent. Luckily our food came shortly after that. Caine had ordered a falafel, and I’d ordered a gyro. We dug in and gave our full attention to eating, for the moment.

In no time, my meal had turned into a big mess. The pita had torn, and half of my gyro was leaking out. I didn’t realize, but white tzatziki sauce had dripped down the back of my hand.

“You have some sauce...” Caine pointed.

Still holding the gyro, I turned my wrist to look. The sauce had trailed down my hand, past my wrist, and was making its way steadily down my arm, about to drip onto my shirt. If I put down the disaster of a gyro, there was no way I’d be able to pick it back up without it falling apart. So, I licked a line from my arm up over my wrist to my finger, cleaning the mess in one long stroke. Not very ladylike, but it was better than wearing it on my nice shirt.

When I looked up, Caine was staring at me. “Christ. Are you *trying* to get me fired?”

“What?”

His eyes moved back and forth between mine. “You really have no

goddamn clue, do you?”

“I don’t understand.”

Caine looked down at his food, shaking his head. “Just finish eating. We should go.”

The ride back to my apartment was awkward. Neither of us said a word. Honestly, I had no idea what to say. I’d realized Caine’s comments had to mean he was turned on by my inadvertent lick show, but it was also a reminder that I needed to stop fantasizing about something that was never going to happen.

When we arrived at my apartment building, Caine double parked and turned off the ignition. “I’m going to walk you up.”

“You don’t have to do that. I’m fine.”

“I’m not leaving you at the curb.” He opened his door, effectively closing the discussion.

“Okay then,” I mumbled to myself.

The awkwardness continued as we rode the elevator up to my apartment. I fumbled for my keys in front of my door. “Thank you again for taking me on and coming with me today.”

“Of course. I’d do it for any student.”

Another reminder. One that hurt.

I unlocked the door and opened it. “Would you like to come in? I could make you some coffee or something?” I really wasn’t propositioning him to come in for the proverbial night cap. It just seemed like the polite thing to say.

Caine was quiet for a very long moment. “I think it’s best we don’t spend time together outside of class anymore. Your research is solid, and I think we have the semester schedule planned out well enough. If you need to discuss your thesis, the department secretary has access to my calendar and can set

up an appointment.”

Maybe we had gotten a little too friendly, but... “Did I do something to upset you?”

“No.” He lifted his chin toward the inside of my apartment. “Lock up behind you.”

I took a quick shower, changed into an old concert T-shirt to sleep, and climbed into bed feeling confused and sad. My feelings for Caine had grown despite the fact that I knew it was stupid to fall for a man who had no interest in a relationship, even if he hadn't been my professor. I tried to fall asleep, but it was no use.

Plucking my phone from the charger, I thought I might type my notes from today into an email to add to my research later. But when I powered my cell on, it opened to my last text from Davis. I'd completely forgotten to respond to his comment regarding me not texting that I missed him, too.

Even though the timing was off for us, Davis never gave me mixed signals. He didn't play hot and cold. He owned up to his feelings and was honest with me. I sighed and texted back.

Rachel: *I miss you, too.*



Chapter 14

Rachel

Caine had successfully avoided me for four days.

Until today. There would be no way to avoid seeing me unless he skipped the once-per-semester, mandatory faculty meeting TAs were required to attend, as well as professors.

I was sitting alone in the back of the large conference room with a seat open next to me—not that I was saving it for anyone in particular. Caine hadn't shown up yet. Each time someone walked in, my eyes darted to the door. The music department chair had taken his place at the front of the room, readying to begin, when Caine finally showed up.

Stopping in the doorway, his eyes scanned the room, falling on me before quickly looking anywhere else. He couldn't have taken a seat farther away from me.

I was surprised his hair didn't catch fire during the forty-five minute meeting with the way my eyes were burning into the back of his head. After it was over, I stayed in my seat to see if he would walk back out the door without a single word.

Caine stood and glanced over at me, but was quickly joined by a woman who walked over to greet him with a big smile. She wore a bright pink suit that screamed for attention, but aside from that, she was actually rather pretty

—though I hated to admit that. I'd seen her around the halls and knew she was an adjunct professor, although I didn't know her name.

Professor Pink was also the complete opposite of me—she had unnaturally blonde, Marilyn Monroe-type hair, stood only a few inches shorter than Caine, and her suit, even being a tacky color, was definitely designer. She was very touchy-feely with Professor West, and there was a definite familiarity in the way she rested her hands on his arms as they spoke. After the second or third time she tossed her hair back and laughed, I was done watching. Standing up, I headed for the door but got stuck behind two professors who were talking while they walked and moving as slow as shit.

Caine and Professor Pink were a few people ahead of me in line to exit the room, and he made a point not to look in my direction. When his hand went to the small of her back to usher her out the door, I realized I was a total idiot. Obviously the mighty professor didn't have an issue with fraternization—unless it was with me.

Screw him. I couldn't believe how full of shit he was.

As soon as I was out of the conference room, I bolted down the hall. My legs couldn't get me off campus fast enough. I was annoyed for thinking it was possible Caine was interested in me but held back because I was his assistant. Even more so, I was pissed at him for pretending that was the case. I hadn't been imagining the signals he gave the other night at dinner.

I'd nearly made it out of the building when I abruptly stopped, causing a student to crash right into me.

“What the hell?” he barked.

“Sorry.”

I started walking again. I should get the hell out of this building, but I knew myself—certain things ate at me. If I didn't get this off my chest, I was going to be miserable all day. I needed to go give Caine a piece of my mind.

Screw it.

Turning around, I crashed into the same student again.

“Seriously?” he said.

“Jeez. You’ll live. Don’t walk so close behind people!”

I took off for Caine’s office. I might lose my job for telling him off, but at least I would be able to sleep tonight. So what if I was proving his point that I was *tightly wound*?

The door to Caine’s office was cracked open. I paused to collect my thoughts for a moment, then reached for the door handle. *Screw knocking.* But a woman’s voice stopped me from busting in. Her laughter hit my skin, sparking a fire that burned its way up to my cheeks. I hadn’t heard Professor Pink’s voice earlier, yet somehow I was certain it was her.

“Remember that little Italian place?” the woman said. “The one with the fireplace in the back?”

“Giordano’s.”

“Yes, that’s the one. We should go there again sometime. The dessert cart looked incredible.” She paused. “Although we didn’t make it to dessert that night, did we?”

I’d heard enough. I didn’t stay for Caine’s response. I couldn’t. As pissed off as I was when I’d marched my ass to his office, hearing him with another woman had turned that into hurt and embarrassed—something I preferred not to let others see. So, I prescribed myself my own therapy and instead of barging into his office, I popped my earbuds in and headed home.



I had zero desire to go out to our monthly friends’ dinner tonight. I preferred to stay at home and wallow in self-pity. But when I attempted to cancel, Ava guilted me into showing up. So, I forced myself to get ready. *Screw it.* If I

didn't feel good, I might as well look good. Plus, blow-drying my hair was oddly therapeutic for me. I found the constant, repetitive brushing and smoothing very calming.

Needless to say, my thick, naturally curly hair was pin straight by the time I was done—I'd needed a lot of calming. Since I'd taken the time to make my locks look good, I went all out with a full face of makeup and even put on a cute outfit and high-heeled sandals.

Davis's expression told me he, at least, appreciated the extra effort when I arrived at O'Leary's. Tonight it was only me, him, and Ava since our other former roommate was away with her new boyfriend on a cruise. Once the three of us sat down, I was glad I'd come. I really did enjoy my time with these guys. We laughed as we caught up, mostly at the crazy stories Ava told. But then just a half hour into our night, Sal, the new waiter, came over and said he was sick and needed to leave. He asked if one of us could call Charlie to come in and take over his shift.

Since there were only a few hours until the kitchen closed anyway, Ava and I both volunteered to cover for him. Plus, his complexion was slightly green, and I was pretty sure he wouldn't make it hanging around until Charlie drove in from Queens.

"You look too nice to work tonight," Ava said, pointing to my feet. "And those are not waitressing shoes. I got this. There aren't many tables left, so you two hang out, and I'll come join you in between serving."

Although Davis and I had ended things in a good way, we really hadn't hung out just the two of us since whatever we had ended and he'd moved out. Since I was dressed up, and awkwardness set in as soon as Ava left, it felt sort of like a first date.

"So..." Davis said. "This feels weird."

I laughed. "I know. Why? It shouldn't. It's just us. We've hung out a

million times.”

Davis shot me a sheepish look. “Because you look really hot tonight.”

“Are you saying I didn’t look really hot when we lived together and I rolled out of bed every morning?” I’d said it joking around, but Davis’s answer was serious.

“Actually, I think you look beautiful all the time.”

I blushed. “Such a southern charmer.”

Davis and Ava had ordered a bottle of wine, and he lifted it to refill his glass, then held the bottle over my empty one. “Have one with me?”

I hesitated, thinking back to the last time we’d had drinks together—I’d wound up in Davis’s room.

With a devious grin that told me he was thinking the exact same thing, he filled my glass...to the brim and said, “Just one.”



The wine definitely helped. Now that the bottle was empty, the strain between Davis and me was gone. We’d gorged on pasta and wine and caught up on the last few months. Things were feeling back to normal.

“How are Umberto and Lydia?” he asked.

It was just like him to remember their names because they were important to me. He was always very thoughtful and attentive.

“They’re doing really well. Still the happy threesome.”

“And your thesis?”

“Good. Caine seemed happy with my progress. Although who knows.” I finished off my glass of wine. “He could hate it tomorrow.”

“Caine?”

“My new thesis advisor.”

Davis nodded.

“He’s kind of a giant ass,” I added. *Not that he’d asked.*

“When are you finished?”

“Another few months and I’ll be done with my thesis and graduating.”

“Then what?”

“I’m not sure yet. My minor was elementary education, so I was thinking of applying to some local school districts that have musical therapy programs for autistic children.”

Davis smiled. “That suits you. I could definitely see you doing that.”

I sipped my wine. I was now on glass two and already feeling a buzz. “What about you? Are you happy here in New York? Do you think you’ll stay forever?”

“Maybe.”

I wasn’t sure if I’d imagined it, but I could have sworn his eyes had dropped to my lips.

“What about you? Are you happy? Seeing anyone?”

My good mood took a nose dive. I wasn’t seeing anyone, but that didn’t mean I was happy about it. I’d managed to forget about Caine for the sum total of an hour tonight.

I sighed. “No. I’m single. You?”

Davis must’ve taken my downturn of spirit as a general statement about my single status.

“Not seeing anyone. But I’d like to be.”

Yeah. Me, too.

I sipped more wine. “Oh yeah? Tell me about the lucky girl.”

Davis grinned. “She’s short, kind of quirky, beautiful, smart.”

I rested my head on my hands. “Sounds perfect. Does she have a brother for me?”

Instead of answering, Davis reached over the table and took my hand in

his. "I've really missed you."

"I've missed you, too."

"Have dinner with me this weekend? Just me and you."

Huh?

Seeing the confusion on my face, Davis continued. "I wasn't ready to date last year. I didn't want to jump into something with you when my head wasn't screwed on straight. I'm in a better place now."

The wine must've totally gotten to me. I seriously hadn't realized he was talking about asking *me* out. I'd waited for this for almost a year, yet now I felt unsure. Luckily, Ava came to my rescue. She scooted into the booth next to me, playfully bumping my hip with hers, and took over the conversation. I was grateful for the reprieve.

After another hour of sitting around and talking, we decided to move to the pub tables in the bar area since the dining room was empty.

Davis looked at his watch. "I have to be at the airport at five a.m. for work, so I'm going to take off."

The three of us made plans for next month's dinner, and he gave Ava a hug goodbye before turning to me. Only he didn't let go after my hug. Instead, he took both of my hands in his.

"Think about it. Okay?"

I had no idea what to say, so I simply nodded and smiled. Then he was gone.

The minute he was out the door, Ava turned to me. "What the hell was that all about?"

"He wants to take me out on a date."

"And how do you feel about that?"

"I have no idea. I'm so confused right now."

"You know what will make things clearer?" She smiled.

“What?”

“Let’s get stinking drunk.”



Chapter 15

Rachel

“He has the most amazing ass.”

Well, that’s what I intended to say, but what actually came out of my mouth was, “He has lemony lass.”

Luckily, Ava had joined me in my binge, so my slur sounded perfectly fine to her.

“Who are we talking about? Davis or the professor.”

I sighed. “The professor. Davis’s is nice, but I never had the urge to bite it.”

Ava quirked a brow. “You want to bite the pompous professor’s ass?”

“I do. Is that strange?”

She smirked and lifted her drink to her lips. “Not at all. Well, the biting part isn’t strange. I like a little biting during sex myself, but biting his ass when you’re not sleeping with him might be a little strange. Especially if you do it during a class while he’s lecturing.”

“He’s just so frustrating. So infuriating.”

“So maybe you should give Davis another chance?”

I sucked back the remaining contents of my third drink and held the empty glass up, dangling it between my thumb and pointer. “Time for a refill, waitress.”

Ava laughed. “I was done an hour ago...but I’ll get your refill because I’m not sure you could make it the ten feet to the bar.” She stood and took the glass from my hand. “You’re cut off after this one, though.”

While Ava was behind the bar, I dug my phone out of my purse. I had no idea why, but I wanted to scroll through Davis’s Facebook account. I remembered he’d posted a few pictures with the same woman a few months back, and I wondered if he’d dated her since things ended with us.

When my phone illuminated, I was surprised to find I’d missed two texts from Caine.

Caine: *Could you possibly cover my afternoon class tomorrow at three?*

A few minutes later, another text came in.

Caine: *Sorry about the last-minute notice. Something important came up.*

What a jerk.

Of course, he wasn’t really a jerk. He was just not interested in me the same way I was him and didn’t want to lead me on, so that made him a jerk in my drunken, emotional head. I should have turned off my phone and ignored him, responded to my boss when I was in the right frame of mind, but the alcohol had other ideas. I typed back.

Rachel: *Sure. I’ll do your job so you and Professor Pink can go back to your office and do whatever it is you do...again.*

I watched the dots start to jump around, then stop, then start again.

Caine: *What are you talking about?*

I rolled my eyes.

Rachel: *Your ass isn’t that great anyway.*

In that moment, the text made complete sense to me.

Caine typed back immediately.

Caine: *Excuse me?*

I snorted. Loud. *What a jerk.* And then, my texting went downhill.

Rachel: *I bet she doesn't come late.*

I was holding my phone, but I'd been expecting a text, so I jumped in my seat and dropped it on the table when the damn thing started to ring. Caine's name was flashing, and that just pissed me off even more.

I swiped to answer. "What?"

"Rachel?"

"That's me, your lowly TA."

Something dawned on me, and I thought it was a pretty clever pun. In fact, I was damn proud of myself for coming up with something so witty.

"I'm your lowly TA, who has great T&A, only you're too full of yourself to notice."

"Have you been drinking?"

"Have you?"

"No, Rachel, I haven't been drinking."

"Well, you don't know what you're missing. Because after the first one, everything that's been jumbled in your brain becomes so clear."

Ava returned with our drinks to find me on the phone. "Who are you talking to?"

I did a half-assed job of covering the receiver. "It's Professor Tight Buns."

Ava's eyes flared wide and then she shut them briefly. When she reopened them, she took the phone from my hand.

"Hi, Professor Tight...umm...Professor West. This is Rachel's friend, Ava."

She paused to listen.

"Yes. She's fine. I'll take care of her."

Another pause.

“Yes, I’m sure. We’re at O’Leary’s, and I’ll take her home in a cab and make sure she gets inside safely.”

After she swiped to end the call, she put the phone in her purse. “I’m keeping this so you don’t do anything else stupid.”

“What? All I did was answer the phone. It’s not my fault he’s a big, fat jerk.”

“Please tell me you didn’t call him that.”

“I don’t remember.”

Ava let me ramble on for another forty minutes as I sipped my drink. Either I’d grown accustomed to the foul-tasting liquor, or the last Tanqueray and tonic tasted more like tonic than Tanqueray. Since I was still able to speak, I was guessing it was the latter. Ava had watered down my drink.

“So what are you going to do about Davis?”

“I don’t know. He’s a great guy. He really is.”

Ava’s eyes turned to saucers.

“What? Don’t look so shocked. He’s a nice guy. And God knows I haven’t had sex in forever.”

“Oh no. Professor West.”

“Well, obviously I’d rather have sex with him. But maybe that’s all it is. Maybe I’m just really sexually frustrated, and my attraction to Caine is only physical.”

“No, Rachel. Professor West.” She motioned to the other side of the bar. “He came for you.”

Unfortunately, I was lost in my little alcohol-marinated brain and not paying attention. I hadn’t even realized she was actually pointing to something...or *someone*. In fact, I thought we were still having the same conversation.

“He’d better come for me. It may have been almost a year, but I think I still know how to use my vagina.” I paused. “Do you think my vagina is re-virginized from not having sex for so long?”

I brought my drink to my lips and closed my eyes as I tipped my head back to finish it. When I opened them, I thought I was dreaming. In fact, I was certain of it. I blinked a few times to snap myself out of it.

Caine did that stupid sexy lip twitch thing as he stood next to our table. “Still here.”

Ava was a traitor. Caine asked her if he could have a few minutes alone with me, and I’d said no at the same exact time she said yes. She’d shot me a warning look before promptly slipping from our table to make room for Caine.

“What are you doing here?” I scowled.

“Making sure I’m the only man you talk to about *coming* while you’re in this intoxicated state.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “Davis wants me.”

The muscle in Caine’s jaw ticked. “That’s nice. Who’s Davis?”

“My ex. Well...sort of. We had dinner tonight. He wants me back.”

“So that’s what this is about?”

“Well, it’s not about you,” I lied.

“Really? He sat back with an arrogant smirk. “Because it sounded on the phone like it was about me. Well, about Professor Tight Buns anyway.”

There was at least one good thing about alcohol; it kept me from flushing when I should have been embarrassed. In fact, it kept me from even realizing I should have been embarrassed.

“So what? You have a tight ass. That doesn’t make you the be-all and

end-all. I have a pretty nice ass myself. Only you're too much of a jackass to notice it."

Caine rubbed at his lip with his thumb. "Is that what you think?"

"That you're a jackass? Yes."

He leaned forward. "I meant you think I haven't noticed your *pretty nice ass*."

His voice had grown husky, and I felt the guttural sound of it between my legs. I swallowed and shifted in my seat, staring at him. He took it as license to continue speaking when I kept quiet.

"You have a tiny little waist. When you wear jeans, there's a gap in the back. When you lean over, I can see your G-string. You like to match it with your shirt. Wednesday you wore a blue shirt and had on a baby blue G-string. The day you taught class and were giving out headphones, you bent over nicely to distribute them to each row. It's why I got up to help you with the boxes. You didn't think I was being chivalrous, did you? That day, you had on a thin white blouse and a lacy white thong. I *really* liked the white lace."

My mouth was hanging open.

Caine leaned in a little closer. "So you're wrong if you think I haven't noticed your pretty nice ass. For two reasons: First, it's not a *pretty nice* ass. It's a fucking spectacular ass. And second, I've noticed it. Every damn day since you walked out of that bar bathroom. In fact, I watched it sway from side to side until you were out of sight that night—even though you'd just told me off."

"I had no idea."

"Clearly."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"What should I have said, Rachel? You're my teaching assistant, and I'm your thesis advisor. Plus, even if that weren't the case, I actually like you."

You're not a casual fuck I'd stop calling when I was done with you."

That was harsh. I didn't want to think of Caine in that way. But then I remembered the faculty meeting. "Like Professor Pink?"

His brows drew together. "You mean Ginger Ashby? Professor Ashby who was wearing a pink suit today? What about her?"

"You two seemed cozy."

Caine looked away. "We're not sleeping together, if that's what you're asking."

If they weren't currently sleeping together, I knew they had a history. I could tell by the way she touched him, the way she looked up and batted her fake eyelashes.

"But you did sleep with her?"

"It was a long time ago. I don't make the same mistake twice."

I wasn't sure if he was referring to the professor specifically or sleeping with someone at work, in general—not that it mattered.

Ava came back to the table to check on me. "Everything okay, Rach?"

My smile was sad. "Everything's fine."

She put my phone on the table. "Your phone was ringing." Ava looked at Caine. "I put it in my purse so she wouldn't regret something she said to you. Guess that worked well." Caine smiled, and she turned her attention back to me. "I'll be at the bar if you need me."

The moment Ava walked away, my phone began to ring. Davis's name flashed on the screen. Caine saw it and looked up at me. "You need to get that?"

It stopped ringing, but when I scrolled, I saw Davis had texted, too. He wanted to make sure I got home safe.

"I'll just send him a quick text to let him know I'm okay."

I felt Caine's eyes on me as I typed.

When I was done, he said, “You want to talk about it?”

I wanted to see if I could get a rise out of the composed professor. “We used to have sex. Then we stopped. Now he wants to start again. Oh, and he wants to take me to dinner, too.”

The clench in Caine’s jaw was clear. “And how do you feel about that?”

“I don’t know. I’m confused, I guess.”

“About what?”

“He’s a great guy. When we broke up, I was upset at first. But then I sort of got over it. At least I think I did. I didn’t sit around and pine for him anyway. I feel like I would have if he was the right guy. You know?”

Caine looked into my eyes. “I think the right person would be difficult to move past, yes.”

“But maybe I haven’t actually moved past him yet. I haven’t...you know...since we broke up.”

“Had sex?”

“Yes.”

Caine’s eyes sparkled. “Hence the re-virginized vagina?”

Even in my drunken-ish state, I couldn’t believe I was having this conversation. “You heard that?”

He nodded with a sly grin. “How long ago did you split up?”

“Close to nine months.”

“So you haven’t had sex in almost nine months?”

I sighed. “Maybe I should just pick someone up in a bar and do it. Then it’ll be easier to decide if it’s Davis I miss or just the sex.”

The pupils in Caine’s eyes dilated to the point where there was more black than brown iris. “That’s not a good idea.”

“Why? You’ve never picked someone up and brought them home just to satisfy your needs?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Well, then why is it okay for you to do it, but not me?”

“Because I don’t do it to try to solve a problem.” His voice turned stern. “Fucking someone won’t help you decide if you want to be with another man. Trust me on that one, Rachel.”

“Sounds like you’re speaking from experience.”

Caine looked away. “I’m going to grab a beer. You want a soda?”

“I’ll have another Tanqueray and tonic.”

“I think you’ve had enough.”

I huffed. “Fine. I’ll take a Diet Coke.”

We sat around and talked for another hour after Caine returned with our drinks. I had sobered up some, but still felt more daring than usual.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Will it stop you if I say no?”

I smiled. “Probably not.”

“If you weren’t my professor...and I wasn’t looking for my Umberto...” I trailed off, but the rest of the sentence didn’t even need to be said.

Caine brought the beer he’d been nursing to his lips and stared at me over the top while he finished it off. He set the empty bottle on the table and cleared his throat before leaning in. Then he curled one finger, motioning for me to come closer. I leaned in, and our noses were no more than a few inches apart.

“If I weren’t your professor and you weren’t a nice girl, your re-virginized pussy would be sore as hell right now.”



Chapter 16

Rachel

I didn't feel half bad when my alarm went off. My eyes opened, and I braced myself for a pounding headache and nausea, expecting a hangover. Instead, I was tired, but the typical aftereffects didn't seem to hit me. After drinking a full glass of water without stopping to take a breath, I decided to climb back into bed for another fifteen minutes.

Caine had insisted on driving me home. Half way, he'd stopped and run into a twenty-four-hour convenience store, coming out with a brown paper bag that he'd handed me before leaving me at my apartment door.

"Take everything inside. It doesn't work unless you finish it all," he'd said.

The bag had two bottles of water, a banana, and a single packet of Motrin. Since he'd gone to the trouble of picking it all up, I followed his orders.

Unplugging my iPhone from the charger on the nightstand, I keyed in my password and decided to text him.

Rachel: *No hangover. Thank you. You're a miracle worker. Where were you when I was eighteen?*

Caine responded right away.

Caine: *You're welcome. Glad you're feeling better today.*

I was feeling better. The brash brushoff Caine had left me with last week

had really been bothering me. Seeing him had helped. Don't get me wrong, I was more confused than ever—especially with what Davis sprung on me last night—but I no longer felt off balance, at least.

Rachel: *I owe you one. For everything. For showing up to make sure I was okay, for talking to me about Davis, taking me home and giving me your secret recipe for a hangover-free morning. Actually...maybe I owe you two. LOL*

Caine: *We'll call it one, and we're even. But can I cash that one in today, if you're feeling up to it?*

I'd forgotten Caine had asked me to cover his class this afternoon. I was working the day shift, but Charlie wouldn't mind if I left a little early. Late afternoon was always dead anyway.

Rachel: *I can cover your class. Sorry, I forgot that was what started my drunken rampage last night.*

Caine: *Thank you.*

Things between Caine and me had changed last night. Our attraction was out in the open now, so I figured cheeky was okay.

Rachel: *I'm not covering for you to have a nooner, am I?*

I visualized Caine's lip twitching as he shook his head.

Caine: *I do have a date with two pretty girls. But one is two and a half and the other is four, and they usually cry when they see me.*

Rachel: ?

Caine: *Sister's kids. She's having a biopsy this afternoon and needs me to watch her little monsters.*

Rachel: *Oh. I'm sorry. I was just joking. I hope everything is okay. I'll cover the class no problem.*

Caine: *Thank you.*

After class was over, I sat in Caine's chair for a while, waiting for the students to empty out. Sitting in his spot at the front of his room somehow made me feel closer to him. Since I was thinking about the sexy professor, I figured I'd send him a text to see how he was making out babysitting. The thought of Caine wrangling two little girls made me smirk. I wondered if he changed diapers—I'd guess he'd have to in order to watch two girls under four.

Rachel: *Class was good. I think they like me better than you. ;)*

Caine: *That's good. You might be taking over my job when my sister kills me.*

That didn't sound like things were going well.

Rachel: *What happened?*

Caine: *I forgot Lizzy had a nut allergy. We're in the emergency room.*



I was pretty surprised that Caine had taken me up on my offer to come give him a hand at the hospital—until I got there. I'd lied and said I was family to get into the back treatment area, and I spotted Caine in a little open-curtained examination area on the other side of the nurse's station, looking uncharacteristically freaked out. He had what I assumed was the two year old dangling from one hip while she cried at the top of her lungs. The older girl was sprawled out on a stretcher, blowing up a latex glove like a balloon.

As I got closer, I got a better look at the little girl. *What the?* What the heck was she wearing? It looked like a backwards T-shirt and a strange diaper of some sort.

"Hi," I said.

Caine was definitely relieved to see me. “Hey. Thanks for coming.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Lizzy is going to be okay. It’s just a rash, luckily. They gave her some Benadryl, and the doc wants to keep an eye on her for a while.”

I smiled at the little girl on his hip, and she quieted her screaming to check me out. “Hi, there. You must be Lizzy.”

I’d assumed the older girl lying in the bed was the patient, but the niece Caine was holding had a rash on her face and neck.

The sweet little girl nodded while her bottom lip quivered. She had a crazy head full of red ringlet curls. I reached out and fingered one. “I love your curls. They remind me of Merida. Do you know who Merida is?”

She nodded.

“I bet you’re brave just like the Disney princess.”

I pushed a long curl that was plastered to her wet cheek back off her face. The bracelets on my wrist jingled and caught her attention.

“You like those?”

She nodded again.

“I’m Rachel—a friend of your Uncle Caine’s. You want to wear one?”

Her eyes lit up, and she nodded again, only faster this time.

I slipped two of the bracelets from my wrist and held them out. She smiled and let me put them on her. It was then that I got a closer look at what the poor thing was wearing.

“Ummm...Caine? Why is her diaper *duct taped*?”

“I couldn’t get the damn thing to stay on.”

I held back my laugh as best as I could. The poised picture of perfection was so out of his element and frazzled.

Extending my arms, I smiled warmly at Lizzy. “Can I hold you? Maybe I can fix your diaper and put your shirt on the right way.”

Caine's brow furrowed as he looked at his niece. It was obviously news to him that her shirt wasn't on right. Lizzy was apprehensive, but eventually she leaned toward me, and I took her from her uncle's arms.

"Do you have a diaper bag?"

"No. I flew out the door so fast, I didn't even think about diapers." He looked at his niece's bare legs. "Or pants, apparently."

I smiled. "That's okay. I'm sure the nurse can give us one."

The other little girl sat up from the stretcher and was looking at me.

Caine did the introduction. "This is Alley. She's no help getting a diaper to stay on either."

Lizzy and I visited the nurse's station, and one of the aides was nice enough to go up to the pediatric unit and get us a few diapers and a small package of wipes. She also grabbed us kid-size pajama pants. After I straightened Lizzy out in the bathroom, I went back to Caine and Alley.

"All fixed." Lizzy was smiling now. "And I think her rash has started to fade already."

Caine examined his niece. "You're right." He raked his fingers through his hair. "Thank Christ. The last thing my sister needed today was to come home to one of her kids in the hospital. She had thyroid cancer at twenty and had her thyroid removed. Last week she found a swollen lymph node under her arm. Doctor doesn't think it's anything, but she's freaked out anyway. They're doing a biopsy as a precaution."

"Wow. I'm sorry to hear that. I hope everything turns out okay."

Caine nodded. "Thank you."

A doctor stopped by to check on Lizzy, who was still in my arms. He pulled the curtain along the track on the ceiling and converted the open nook to a private treatment room. "How's the little princess doing here?"

Caine answered. "It looks like the rash is starting to fade a little."

“Let’s take a look.” He examined Lizzy’s face, belly, legs, and arms. “The Benadryl is kicking in. Let me just examine her one more time, in maybe a half hour, and then we can send you on your way. She’s going to be getting sleepy from the medicine pretty quick.” Before he walked out of the curtained area, he added, “Or not. Sometimes Benadryl can have the opposite effect on kids.”

Less than an hour later, we were discharged with a handful of papers. I walked Caine to his car and helped him strap the girls into their car seats.

“My sister insisted I take these things in case I had to go somewhere in an emergency. I told her she was nuts, I wasn’t planning on driving anywhere, but she stuck them in my car anyway.”

“Sounds like your sister made the right call.”

Caine grumbled. “She’ll lord that over me until we’re eighty, too.”

After the girls were strapped in, Alley asked if I could come back to her Uncle Caine’s to play with her. I’d started to say I couldn’t when Caine interrupted.

“I make a mean macaroni and cheese, if you’re hungry. You sure I can’t persuade you? We might have another diaper incident, and I’m almost out of duct tape. I may need to resort to Krazy Glue.”

I smiled. I was tempted, but when Caine’s face turned serious and he looked me in the eyes and said, “Please?” there was no way I could say no.

“I’ll follow you.”

His face lit up, and my damn heart started to race in response.

Calm down in there. He isn’t inviting you to a romantic dinner. He only wants you to help with his nieces. Put on a diaper, not take off your clothes.

The entire drive to Caine’s house, I tried to reason with my heart. Talk it down from the perch of excitement his invitation had pushed it out onto. But there was no reasoning with it. My head knew the truth, yet my heart didn’t

really seem to give a shit.



Chapter 17

Rachel

A gigantic black lab ran full-speed to greet me and almost bowled me over. I kneeled to say hello. “Hi, big guy. You’re so cute. What’s your name?”

Caine answered. “That’s Murphy.” He attempted a stern voice. “Down, boy.” The dog completely ignored him and attempted to burrow into my body.

I scratched behind Murphy’s ears while he went crazy sniffing me. “He listens to you well.”

“That’s your fault. He’s never going to listen with the way you smell.”

“The way I smell?” I wasn’t quite sure how to take that.

“A dog’s sense of smell is 1,000 times greater than a human’s.”

“And what, exactly, do I smell like?”

Caine walked over to where the dog was still mauling me and gave his collar a firm tug. “Come on, Murph. Give her a break, buddy.”

Eventually, the dog backed off enough for me to stand. Caine leaned in and took an exaggerated whiff of my neck with his eyes closed. “Summer. You always smell like summer.” Then he stepped back and winked. “My favorite season.”

And there went my damn pulse again. The talk I’d given myself in the car on the way over went out the window. Caine chuckled, probably at the

expression on my face.

“Come on in. I’ll give Murph a treat to distract him from how good you smell.”

I followed Caine and quickly forgot everything else once I got a look at his place.

Totally not what I expected.

Caine’s apartment was incredible. I’d assumed it would be nice, but not *this* nice. The girls had run down the hall to get a video they wanted to watch the minute we walked in, and I looked around in awe. His living room was bigger than my entire apartment. Not to mention, he had a foyer. *A foyer in Manhattan?* That entryway alone had to be worth five hundred bucks a month. Caine noticed my expression. “My great grandfather started an investment company. Every subsequent generation of the West family grew the fortune he’d made by another zero. Except me. But I did inherit twenty-five percent of the company from my grandfather. It pays slightly better dividends than a teacher’s salary.”

“Uhh...slightly? I’d say. You have a view of the damn park.” I walked to the wall of glass. “This place is amazing.”

When I turned back, Caine was standing in the kitchen, which was open to the living room, and staring at me.

“Thank you for coming today,” he said.

“I owed you one, remember?”

“You would have come whether you owed me one, or I owed you ten.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because that’s the kind of person you are.”

The girls came running back to the living room with a backpack. They jumped up and down. “Can we play tea?” they asked us.

“I guess she’s having that opposite effect from the Benadryl,” Caine

grumbled.

“Sure. I love tea,” I said.

Alley unzipped the backpack, lifted it by the bottom, and dumped the entire contents onto Caine’s couch. It looked like she had enough ceramic teacups and saucers for a party of twenty.

The girls started to set the coffee table, and I walked to Caine’s stainless steel kitchen. “Do you have herbal tea?”

“I think so.”

It was amusing to see him sit on the floor and sip tea out of a little cup. Watching the way the girls interacted with him, I could tell he spent a fair amount of time with them, even if he was inept at changing a diaper.

“I take it this isn’t your first time playing tea?”

“I’m forced to play it twice a month when I go to my sister’s for dinner.”

“Do the girls live here in the city?”

“No. They live up in Chappaqua. That’s where I grew up. My sister stayed there to be near my mom.”

“I lived in Westchester growing up, too. Pleasantville.”

“You go to Pleasantville High School?”

“Umm...no. I moved to the city long before I got to high school.”

During our two cups of tea, I loved watching Caine jump at the commands of a four year old. “*Lift your pinky when you hold your teacup, Uncle Caine. You’re slurping. The spoon goes on the saucer, not the table.*”

Finally, it seemed the girls had mellowed out a bit. Lizzy was actually yawning.

“You tired, Lizzy?” Caine asked.

She yawned again in response.

He stood and lifted the sleepy girl into his arms. “Come on. How about you lie down, and I’ll put the TV on for you?”

“Can I sleep in your bed?”

“Sure. Come on.” Lizzy leaned from Caine’s arms, reaching out to me. “Can you come put me to sleep, too, Rachel?”

I looked to Caine, and he shrugged. “Sure, let’s make it a party.”

Of course he was being sarcastic, but the girls didn’t catch it and were excited anyway. The four of us walked down the hall to his bedroom.

An unexpected blush rose on my cheeks as we entered the room. Caine’s bed was huge, definitely a king size. The four-post, carved-mahogany frame made it look even larger. It was also extremely high off the ground. The masculine feel of it really seemed to fit him. I could easily imagine him sleeping naked in it. Face down. With that tight ass I wanted to bite so badly peeking out from underneath a sheet.

I hadn’t even realized I’d stopped in the doorway of the room, lost in my thoughts as I stared at the bed, until Caine spoke.

“You can come in. I won’t bite.”

Bite. That did it. That’s all it took for the light blush on my face to heat to what I’m sure was a lovely shade of crimson. Caine took one look at me and a wicked grin beamed from his handsome face. He set Lizzy down, helped Alley up onto the bed, and walked back to the door, where I was still standing, twisting my watch back and forth on my wrist.

His hot breath tickled my neck as he whispered, “I know what you’re thinking.”

My entire body tingled from only his breath touching my skin. I could only imagine what would happen if his hands were on me. *Oh, God. Now I’m thinking of him, in that bed, with his hands on me.* I swallowed and took a deep breath, only to find Caine’s scent still lingering as he walked back to the bed. Why couldn’t he at least smell bad?

He fiddled with the TV in his bedroom, connecting wires to a DVR.

“I take it you don’t watch movies in bed very often?”

“Pretty much the only time this thing turns on is when these two are here.”

Conversation about TV and little girls was good—I was starting to feel calmer.

“I can’t fall asleep without watching TV for a while,” I told him. “I guess you’re one of those people who falls asleep the second your head hits the pillow?”

Caine finished hooking up the wires, and the screen illuminated with the preview of some Disney movie.

Again, he walked back to me. “I didn’t say that. There are *other things* to do before you fall asleep at night that I prefer over television.”

I must’ve looked like a deer in the headlights, because Caine chuckled. “Relax, I’m just screwing with you. You looked uncomfortable, so I thought I’d help you out and make it worse.”

“I’m going to go clean up the tea mess.” I waved to the girls from the door and backed out of the room.

Five minutes later, Caine returned to the living room. I’d just finished washing the tea set and was drying the little dishes before packing them back into the girls’ backpack.

“They’re really sweet girls,” I said.

“Luckily they take after their uncle and not their mom.”

I laughed. “Yeah, right.”

Caine took the dishtowel from my hand. “What, you don’t think I’m sweet?”

“That’s definitely not a word I’d use to describe you.”

“Oh yeah?” He dried a tiny saucer and handed it to me to pack up. “And what word would you use?”

“I don’t know. *Enigma*, maybe?”

Caine thought about it for a moment. “Not sure I can argue with that one.”

After we finished packing up the tea set, we heard a phone buzzing.

“Is that mine or yours?” I asked.

“Mine’s in my pocket. Must be yours.”

I walked to the couch and dug for my cell in my purse, but it stopped making noise before I got to it. Reading Davis’s name on the screen, I sighed audibly.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah.”

Caine waited for more.

“It was Davis. He texted me earlier, and I forgot to text him back.”

He nodded. “You make a decision on that?”

“No.”

“Want my help?”

My brows lifted. “You’re going to help me decide if I should give my ex another shot?”

“Sure. Why not? Tell me about him.”

“What do you want to know?”

“What’s he do? How old is he? Ever married? The basics.”

“Okay. Well, he’s twenty-nine, divorced, and a regional sales manager for a nuclear medicine durable equipment company.”

Caine deadpanned, “Sounds like a dick. You shouldn’t give it another shot.”

“What? Why?”

He held up three fingers on one hand and began to tick them off as he spoke. “Three reasons: One, he’s twenty-nine and divorced. Something’s

wrong there. Bad track record. Two, salesman. That right there is a red flag. He sells crap for a living. It's only a matter of time before he's selling you a line of crap, too. And three, name's Davis." He shrugged. "It's a stupid name."

I stared at him incredulously. Feeling the need to defend my previous choices, I reminded him how ironic his assessment was. "One, you're thirty-two and don't have serious relationships. That right there says more than making a mistake when you're young and marrying your high school sweetheart. Two, you're a musician. Everyone knows musicians are notorious playboys. I'd venture to say the cheater ratio is double for a musician over a salesperson. And three, have you read the Bible? Cain wasn't exactly the good son."

Caine nodded. "Exactly. So I know the type. You should keep away from him."

I'd apparently misunderstood his point.

"I think you're a little insane. You don't know Davis's *type* just from his age and occupation. He's a great guy. He works hard, wants to have a family some day, calls his mother every Sunday. He even has a romantic side—took me on a picnic in the park once."

Caine scoffed. "That's not romantic. He sounds like a wimp."

My hands went to my hips. "What are you talking about? Of course that's romantic. What's your idea of romance, if you're such an expert."

Caine walked from the kitchen to the couch where I was standing. He stepped into my personal space, and I refused to move. When he leaned down, putting us eye to eye, our noses were practically touching.

"I don't do romance," he said. "I prefer fucking like animals to picnics in the park."

God, why was he being such a jerk?

More importantly, why did I like it so much? Goosebumps prickled all over my skin and a shiver ran through my body, causing a tingle between my legs. Not to mention, my nipples had grown so swollen I was going to need to step back in a minute if he didn't give me some room. And while he'd turned me on, he'd also pissed me off. I rolled with the latter.

"Maybe that's why you're still single."

Caine's eyes narrowed. "If everything about this guy is so great, what's taking you so long to answer his question?"

He had a point. It should have been a no-brainer. But if I was being honest with myself, the reason had nothing to do with how great Davis was or wasn't. The only thing keeping me from giving the man another chance is that he wasn't Caine.

I felt defeated. "You're right. There's really no reason not to have dinner with him tomorrow night. Who knows, maybe the spark will light again. I'll never know until I try."

Caine retreated with a stiff, blank mask. It didn't matter that we had chemistry like I'd never experienced or more in common than most happily married couples. He wasn't interested in me. The more I got to know him, the more I realized the professor-student thing was just an excuse. Caine West was not a man who'd let anything get in his way if he really wanted something.

With a little distance back between us, my thoughts were clearer. "I should go."

He was silent as I tucked my cell into the side pocket of my purse and took out my keys before slinging it over my shoulder. He didn't move when I brushed past him but then grabbed my elbow to stop me.

"I'm the last person who should be giving relationship advice. But if it's not there, you can't force it. No different than when it is there and you try to

make it not be.”

Again, I wanted to read something more into his comment than he'd meant. I needed to stop doing that. “Thanks, Caine.”

He nodded, looking sad and resigned to stay that way. “Thank you for covering my class today and coming to my rescue tonight.”

“Of course. That seems to be our thing. We rescue each other.”



Chapter 18

Caine
Fifteen years ago

A little thing like her shouldn't be out riding a bicycle all by herself.

I'd waited outside the church this week, on the little bench hidden in front of the statue of Mary—most likely so people could pray in peace, not stalk ten-year-old girls. If anyone caught wind of the crazy shit I was up to on Saturdays, they'd probably think I was a goddamn child molester.

My little friend locked up her bike on the other side of the church and looked around to see if anyone was watching before running inside. I ducked but wasn't sure if she saw me or not. I wasn't even sure what the hell I was looking for—but at least I knew how she got here and that she came alone.

I waited a few minutes before going inside, figuring I'd let her settle in on her side of the booth. But when I slipped into the church, I found her kneeling in a pew near the confessional. Her head was bowed to her steeped hands.

She must have felt someone watching her, because after a minute her head came up and she looked around. Luckily she looked the other way before turning in my direction, giving me a chance to pull my head back behind the column. *What the fuck am I even doing?* I was hiding from a little girl I was reasonably sure lived in some sort of an abusive home and pretending to be a priest so I could what...*rescue her?*

Finding the coast was clear, the little girl got up from the pew and went to the confessional. Just like last week, she opened the priest side instead of the parishioner side. Although this time, she didn't go in. Partially blocked by the door she was holding open, I couldn't make out exactly what she was doing. But from the way her body folded at the waist and her arm came up and then right back down, I thought she might have tossed something inside. Then she opened the other door and disappeared inside.

What the hell was she up to?

Curious, I headed straight for the booth, only to find it just like each of the last six weeks I'd sat inside. There was the red velvet chair, the makeshift wooden pew with its worn-leather kneeling bench, a gold cross on the wall... and that was about it. Then I noticed a small coin sitting directly behind the front leg of the chair. I'd almost missed it. Leaning down, I picked it up. She spoke before I could even take my seat.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."

I flipped the dulled copper penny over and over between my thumb and pointer as we got started. "Tell me your sins."



Her mood was melancholy this week. She didn't have any funny stories to share about Tommy, and even though she'd been on the other side for a solid twenty minutes, she hadn't actually said much at all.

"How was school this week?"

"I didn't go for three days."

"Why not? Were you sick?"

"No."

"Then why didn't you go to school?"

"Is it a sin to skip school?"

“Not really. But you should go. Education is really important.” Apparently today I was channeling my mother instead of a priest. “And you can get in trouble for not going. Do you know what truancy is?”

“No.”

“It’s when you’re absent from school illegally.”

“So something can be illegal but not a sin?”

What was she getting at? “Well, breaking the law set by the state of New York is different than breaking God’s law. Why were you absent from school?”

“Because I was waiting for my sister.”

“Where was she that you were waiting for her?”

“I don’t know. She ran away last week. But before she left, she told me she’d come back and get me once she found a new place for us to live.”

“So you skipped school?”

“I pretended to go in the morning and then I came back to the house after Benny left. I didn’t want to miss her if she came back for me while I was at school.”

“Do you know why your sister ran away?”

She was quiet for a long time. Then she finally said, “I think it was because of Benny.”

That sounded like the fucking understatement of the year. “Did Benny go looking for your sister?”

“No. He yells a lot about her after he gets home from work. But then he falls asleep on the couch that smells like him.”

“You need to go to school. Talk to a teacher. Tell them what’s going on at home.”

“No. I don’t want to get my sister in trouble.”

“You won’t.”

“I don’t know...”

I was thinking it was time I went to the police. But what would I say? *Hi. I’m a fake priest, and you need to look for a guy named Benny and a skinny little girl who rides a blue bicycle?*

“What’s your name?”

She was quiet again. “I have to go.”

“Wait!” I’d been flipping the penny around the entire time we were talking and suddenly stopped. “Did you drop some change on the floor?”

Her voice was low and almost melodic. “Find a penny, pick it up, and all day long you’ll have good luck.” Then the door creaked open and closed behind her.

With whatever shit was going on in this little girl’s life, she was sneaking in to drop coins on the floor for the priest to find and have good luck. *Unbelievable.*



Chapter 19

Rachel

I agreed to have dinner with Davis in spite of the glum feeling I'd been walking around with for a few days. Or, maybe I hadn't done it *in spite* of myself, but more like *to spite* someone else. Because I made sure *that someone* knew I had plans for this evening. I'd blown my naturally curly hair straight, slipped on a sexy, little summer dress, and laced-up, high-heeled sandals that tied with ribbons wrapping up my legs. The ensemble made my legs look long and the skirt look extra short. *Perfect.*

The additional effort getting ready was worth the response. Caine had trouble keeping his eyes off me during the entire class. I'd chosen to sit in the front row today, an end seat, so I could casually dangle my legs. The way his eyes heated, I could feel their caress on my skin. But by the end of class, I realized I was getting hot and bothered by one man before my date with another. It was disrespectful to Davis, even if he had no idea.

So, when class was over, I decided not to stick around and chat with Caine like I normally did. There was no rule that the TA had to stay after class unless she was teaching an extra-help session. I'd made it about three steps up toward the exit when Caine's voice stopped me.

"Ms. Martin, can I see you for a minute, please?"

I couldn't very well ignore him. Taking a deep breath, I turned around

and headed back down to the front of the lecture hall. A few students were lingering to turn in papers that had been due last class. I waited dutifully off to the side. Caine spoke briefly with each student and then began to pack away the papers in his bag, ignoring me while he did so.

Eventually, I grew impatient. “Did you want to speak to me?”

He looked up and watched the last of the students as they exited the classroom. Once the door closed, he finally acknowledged me.

“What are you doing?”

I acted innocent, pretending I was oblivious. “I’m standing here waiting for you to tell me what you wanted to talk to me about. Isn’t that obvious?”

Caine frowned. “You know what I mean, Rachel.”

“I don’t think I do.”

His response was not verbal. Instead, his eyes started at my feet and raked up my body. It was a slow, intense, heated gaze that made me want to squirm. But I didn’t. Somehow I managed to stand tall and even pulled my shoulders back so my breasts were more prominent. When his eyes finally made their way up to mine, I returned his stare, not giving an inch. I was pretty damn proud of myself.

“You can’t come to class dressed like that.”

I looked down. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“It’s distracting for the male students.”

I arched a brow. “For the male students?”

He folded his arms across his chest. “Is there an echo in here?”

My hands went to my hips in full *don’t screw with me* mode. “There is nothing wrong with what I’m wearing. It’s a sundress and sandals. I’m not even showing any cleavage.”

Caine’s eyes dropped to my chest. I might not have been showing any cleavage, but the dress was thin, and I felt my pebbled nipples protruding.

“I can see the outline of your nipples.”

“It’s cold in here.” My initial reaction was to want to cover myself, but...*fuck him*. I thrust my chest forward a little more. “You know what? *Your* pants were so snug a few weeks ago, I could see *your* outline. Why is that okay, but seeing my outline isn’t?”

Caine’s eyes rose to mine. His voice was hoarse. “You were staring at the outline of my cock?”

“It was right in front of my face. I couldn’t help but look.”

He took a step closer, his nostrils flaring. “Did you like what you saw, Ms. Martin?”

I have no idea where it was coming from, but I wanted to keep dangling a red cape in front of the raging bull. Rather than reply, I ran my tongue across my top lip. *Slowly*. His eyes followed in pursuit.

The way his chest was heaving up and down, I thought he might blow. It made me feel fearless and empowered. *You don’t want to be with me? Good. But here’s what you’re missing, Professor West.*

“Don’t ask for something you don’t want, Rachel. I’m warning you.” He took a step closer, invading my private space.

His pupils were dilated, and he looked angry as hell, but there was something lurking just beneath his dark gaze—desire.

I tilted my head coyly and leaned in. “Who says I don’t want it? I’ve seen the outline.”

Caine’s jaw flexed while I waited with my heart hammering inside my chest. I held my breath as he reached for me, the blood swirling around inside my ears so loudly I couldn’t even hear my own gasp as his hand gripped my hip.

I braced for it...waiting for a string of frustrated curses I would have sworn were coming, waiting for his mouth to crash down on mine.

But instead, it wasn't Caine's voice I heard.

"Professor West?"

Oddly, I'd heard the door creak open at the top of the lecture hall, it just didn't register in my brain until a few seconds later when reality smacked me in the head.

Caine stepped back. He walked to his desk and cleared his throat. "Ginger—Professor Ashby. Can I help you with something?"

She looked back and forth between us. "I was hoping I could speak to you in private—about a student. But if I've come at a bad time?" She pointed to the door that was now behind her. "I can come back later."

"No. It's fine." He looked at me sternly. "Ms. Martin and I are finished."

For a moment I was still in shock from the rapid change of events. But that didn't take long to morph into anger. I looked at him with disgust and spoke under my breath so Professor Pink wouldn't be able to hear me.

"Are you *serious*?"

He lifted his bag. The desire so openly on display just two minutes ago had been quickly shuttered over. He spoke under his breath. "We're done here, Rachel."

The bastard had dismissed me already. *Well, screw you, Caine West.*

I walked up the stairs with Caine a safe distance behind me as we made our way to Professor Pink—only today she had on an aqua suit. Apparently *Ginger* liked color. My guess was she liked to stand out in a sea of black-wearing New York women.

As I reached the top of the stairs, she smiled at me. "I love your sandals. But must be tough walking through campus in those heels."

I offered a broad, phony smile in return. "Thank you. But I only had the one class today. I wore them for my date." I turned to Caine, spread my lips wide, and gave him a chance to check out my teeth. "See you Friday,

Professor West. I don't want to keep Davis waiting."

I didn't give him the satisfaction of a second glance before I was out the door.

A decorative graphic featuring various musical symbols including a treble clef, a bass clef, a musical staff with notes, and a sharp sign, all rendered in a stylized, overlapping manner.

Chapter 20

Rachel

My mood was effectively ruined. *Screw you, Caine West, I'm going to have a good time with Davis even if it physically hurts.* I took a few minutes in the car to settle myself before going into the restaurant. Looking up at the sign, I realized Davis had picked a place we'd been to together during our short period as a couple. Roberto's had incredible food and was romantic, with an olden-days type of feel. I wondered if he'd picked a spot with those memories on purpose.

Inside, I looked around and spotted him sitting at a table in the back corner. It was exactly where we'd sat the last time we were here. If there was any doubt that Davis was trying to rekindle the mood we'd once experienced, the table he'd arrived early to secure confirmed his intentions. It was actually sort of sweet of him to put so much thought into where we had dinner. That was Davis—sweet and thoughtful. He was the polar opposite of Caine's bitter and thoughtless.

I had no idea why I was even comparing the two men. It didn't feel fair to Davis, even though he'd win in pretty much any category I could scribble down on paper and analyze. The problem was, Caine made me feel something that couldn't be categorized—something I couldn't even really describe. And for a reason I didn't quite understand, that stupid feeling

trumped all of the awesomeness of Davis.

But this afternoon had been a real eye-opener. I'd practically thrown myself at a man who was attracted to me physically, but hated that he was. No good could come of tempting a man to act who had no interest in anything more than sex and would also immediately regret giving in to his temptation.

I sighed and vowed to enjoy my evening and focus on the man sitting across from me.

As I approached the table, Davis' smile brought back all the good times we'd had over the years. He stood as I approached and pulled me into a giant hug. It felt so good. His arms wrapped tight around my waist as he buried his face in my hair and inhaled deeply.

"I missed you," he said. "You always smell so good."

I didn't realize how much I'd missed being held. Yes, I missed the sexual gratification of being with a man...but being held and feeling wanted felt pretty damn amazing. Down deep, I knew I was needy after Caine's rejection, but I buried that and allowed myself to enjoy Davis holding me anyway. He took a long time before he released me, and when he did, he stepped back, holding my hands so he could look at me.

"Wow. You look incredible, Rach."

"Thank you."

We sat, and Davis just kept staring.

A nervous giggle snuck out. "You're staring at me like I have two heads."

His eyes had such a tenderness as he smiled. "I was just thinking... remember that picture we took at my graduation? The one where I had on the gown and you were wearing my cap crooked with a goofy smile?"

"I think so."

"Well, I printed it out, and I have it on my dresser, and..." He trailed off.

“What?”

“Nothing. I don’t want to scare you off before the appetizers even come.”

I laughed. “Don’t be silly. What were you going to say?”

Davis looked me in the eyes. “I was going to say sometimes I wake up and look at it, but it doesn’t hold a candle to seeing you in person.” His eyes flickered to my lips. “I miss your goofy grin. That’s all.”

There was so much warmth in his gaze. It seemed to be contagious because I felt my insides turn a little mushy. Why had I thought tonight was a bad idea? In that moment, I couldn’t think of a single reason.

The waitress interrupted to take our drink order. Davis ordered his usual Tanqueray and tonic, and he looked to me. “Diet Coke?”

I was feeling rebellious tonight. “I’ll have a Tanqueray and tonic, too.”

Once the waitress disappeared, Davis lifted a brow. He knew my stance on drinking. He also had to remember that the one night we drank too much together, we wound up in bed.

“Is tonight a special occasion?”

“I think it is. We haven’t seen each other in a while.”

“It’s been way too long.”

By the time I finished half of my drink, my shoulders had dropped, and the muscles in my neck were a lot looser. We’d started to settle into the old Davis-and-Rachel comfortableness. I gave him an update about my classes, and he asked how my sister was. Never liking to talk about myself too much, I steered the conversation back to him.

“So what’s new with you? How’s your job?”

“Good. Got a little promotion—a bigger territory.”

“Wow. Congratulations. I knew you’d do great. Do you get a big fancy corner office now?”

“Nah, I spend three-quarters of my time on the road. But they did give me

a better car allowance, so I got myself a fun new car to enjoy while I'm doing all that driving."

"What did you get?"

"The Audi A4. It's a manual transmission. Makes for a fun drive on long hauls with hills."

My brain was being unfair. It immediately conjured up the memory of Caine driving his little car—the way his hand gripped that gear shifter. Such an odd thing to have gotten me all hot and bothered, even odder that I shifted in my seat remembering it.

I sipped my drink. "You'll have to take me for a ride sometime."

"I'd like that. You can even take it for a spin, if you want."

"Thank you," I scoffed. "Caine wouldn't let me drive his car. Thought I'd ruin his precious clutch."

"Caine?"

"Professor West. My thesis advisor."

Davis seemed contemplative for a few seconds and then nodded. "That's right. You mentioned him the other night at O'Leary's. You still working six days a week over there?"

"Actually, not the last few weeks. Between teaching and student extra-help sessions, faculty meetings, and writing lesson plans, I've had to cut down a bit."

Over dinner, we chatted away like long-lost friends. Davis was good company, and our familiarity gave me a sense of comfort—*Davis* had always given me a sense of comfort. When our conversation came to a lull, I could see he was thinking. It looked like he was debating saying something.

"Spit it out," I said.

He chuckled. "You could always tell when something was on my mind."

"What's going on? Is everything okay?"

He stopped eating and put down his fork. “You said you weren’t seeing anyone?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Is there a reason for that?”

“Other than that I barely have time to breathe and most of the men at O’Leary’s are sixty-year-old retired cops, no. Not really.”

“Have you dated anyone since...you know...we were together?”

“Does one guy who was a total jerk and Charlie almost hit with a baseball bat count?”

We laughed, but Davis remained serious. “I went out with a woman for a while—Stacey. We had a lot in common and got along great.”

I felt a pang of jealousy. “Are you still together?”

“No. We broke up.”

“What happened?”

Davis looked away for a few seconds, then returned to meet my gaze. “She wasn’t you.”

I opened my mouth to respond three times, but each time I shut it, realizing I wasn’t sure what to say. Davis caught my bewildered expression and seemed amused.

“You don’t have to say anything. In fact, don’t. Let me just finish, if that’s okay?”

“Okay...” I managed to get a word out—a single one, but it counted.

“First of all, this wasn’t how I planned to talk to you about this. My plan was to have dinner tonight, charm you into remembering how great things were between us, and then take you out a few more times before I laid it all out there.”

“I’d say you went off script.”

“Yeah...sorry about that. I got a little jealous and stepped on the gas.”

“Jealous. About what?”

“Nothing. It was stupid.”

“Tell me.”

“You mentioned that professor a few times at dinner the other night, and then when you mentioned being in his car a little while ago, I visualized you... My mind just started to race a bit. I thought maybe you were seeing him or something.”

I scoffed in denial. “Definitely not.” Although the emphatic tone in my voice made even me not believe it. Obstinate denial is often the loudest confession. But Davis didn’t seem to notice.

“Anyway, my plan was, after I got you to remember how good we were together, I would tell you I’ve never stopped thinking about you.” He paused, looking up at me with a shy and vulnerable expression. “I’ve tried to move on, but every person I start to date—no matter how great they are—has one flaw I can’t seem to move past. They’re not you.”

Wow. Just. Wow. I was caught so off guard by his seriousness. I was also a bit confused.

“I don’t understand, though. When we stopped seeing each other, you said you weren’t ready for a relationship. I completely understood that because of everything you’d just come out of. You needed time and space. Yet you started dating someone not long after that. So you didn’t really need time? You just needed time not with me?”

Davis ran his fingers over his short hair. It was slightly longer than a military cut, but still neat and cropped close to his head. Again I thought of Caine. He’d frequently dragged his fingers through his thick, unruly hair when I’d done my best to frustrate him.

“You’re sort of right. I needed time not with you—because I didn’t know how to do slow. I could see a future with you, and that scared the shit out of

me because I was just climbing out of a relationship I'd seen as my future at one time. When I dated Stacey for those few months, I couldn't see things long-term—didn't see a future—so I felt comfortable with her.”

“So you stayed with a woman for a few months because you couldn't see a future with her. But walked away from one after only a few weeks because you *could* see a future?”

Davis's laugh was mocking. “Pretty stupid. I know.”

It actually wasn't. It sounded like a protective mechanism. If you know you can't stop yourself from eating the whole cake, you don't buy it at the store.

“It's not stupid. I get it. Our timing was just off.”

When Davis and I stopped seeing each other, I was upset—even though the logical part of me understood he was right. But I'd always believed he was honest with me, that he needed his freedom. I figured if it was meant to be, it was meant to be, and someday we'd find our way back to each other. And here we were.

That someday had come.

I hadn't had any relationship to speak of, so it should be easy to pick up where we left off.

Only...

It didn't feel easy.

But did love always come easy? Look at Umberto and Lydia...

“Say something.”

My thoughts were so jumbled inside my head, I hadn't realized I'd been quiet for a few minutes.

“I have no idea what to say.”

“Well, then I might as well finish and lay all my cards out on the table.”

“Finish?”

He chuckled. “Don’t worry. There’s not much more.” Davis reached for my hand. “I’ve made some big mistakes in my life, but the biggest mistake I’ve ever made was walking away from you. I know this might seem like it’s coming out of nowhere, but I promise you it’s not. Not one single day has gone by that you weren’t in my thoughts. I just finally owned up to the truth.”

Everything he said was exactly what I wanted to hear...almost nine months ago. Only now I wasn’t sure Davis had ever been the right person for me. If he was, why hadn’t I been more devastated when it ended? Why was I able to let go? My mind kept returning to Lydia and Umberto. She wouldn’t even let go now—when he doesn’t remember who she is and thinks he’s in love with another woman.

But maybe not pining my days away with thoughts of Davis was my defense mechanism. Maybe I’d buried my feelings so as not to get hurt—who knows. I just felt overwhelmed and confused.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You’ve mentioned that,” he teased with a boyish smile. “How about saying you’ll at least give it some thought? Don’t say no. Not yet, at least. Take some time.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?” His eyes widened. “You mean you’ll think about it.”

“Yes. But I can’t really think straight right now. Between the drink and everything you just said, I’m not in the right frame of mind to respond anyway.”

“That’s better than a no. I’ll take it.”

Somehow we managed to get back to regular conversation and enjoy the rest of our...date? Were we even on a date? I’d called it that to Professor Pink, but just in an attempt to rile up Caine. What were Davis and I doing, actually? I hadn’t really thought of this as a *date* date—I was simply meeting

him for dinner.

Although it definitely felt like a date toward the end of the evening.

When dinner was over, I was glad I'd driven to meet him at the restaurant instead of letting him pick me up like he'd suggested. It saved us from the awkward moment where I'd have felt rude for not inviting him up, but wary about what it might look like if I did invite him up. However, even though it prevented *that* awkward moment, it didn't make the one that came when he walked me to my car any easier.

Davis took both my hands. "Can I give you a call in a few days? Maybe we can make a plan to meet up for coffee or something?"

I smiled. "Sure. I'd like that."

He leaned in slowly, almost as if he wanted to give me a chance to move before he entered my space, and brushed his lips softly across mine. "Night, Rach."

In a fog from the last two hours, I got into my car, and Davis closed the door. He waited for me to start it before walking to his. I needed a few minutes before I drove, so I fished my phone from my purse and checked for missed calls and text messages as my engine idled. The first thing that popped up was a text from Caine. It must've come in during dinner.

Caine: *Don't do something stupid to get even with me.*

What nerve! The man seriously thought the world revolved around him. The fog I'd been in suddenly lifted, and my anger from earlier was back, clear as day. I typed in a frenzy.

Rachel: *Screw you. Not everything is about you.*

The dots immediately started jumping around.

Caine: *This is.*

A hundred scathing responses ran through my head. But then I noticed Davis waiting for me to go before leaving the restaurant parking lot himself.

God, I'm such an ass. Tossing my phone into my purse, I forced a smile and gave Davis another wave before putting my car in drive.

The restaurant was about twenty minutes from my apartment. I was on schedule to make it in about five when I had to jam on my brakes and narrowly averted smashing into the back of a Honda stopped at a stop sign. I was so angry, so unfocused, I hadn't seen the big, red reflective sign or the two tons of steel yielding to the law.

Between my emotions getting the best of me and the adrenaline that kicked in after a near-accident, my heart was palpitating like mad in my chest. I had to pull over for fear my next close call wouldn't just be close.

Of course, since I was stopped on the side of the road, I pulled my phone out of my purse.

Dumb move.

I should have just caught my breath, calmed down, and driven myself home at a normal speed. Instead, when I swiped, I found both a missed call and a text from Caine. There was no voicemail, but the text read '*We need to talk*'.

I was furious. Not only did he think everything was about him, he thought he could issue commands. *We need to talk.*

You know what? He was right. We did need to talk. But I was going to be the one doing all the talking, and it was going to happen on *my terms*.

My tires screeched as I pulled away from the curb and hung a U-turn to head toward Manhattan. That talk he wanted was going to happen now.



Chapter 21

Rachel

If you looked up *unstable* in the dictionary, I'm pretty sure my picture would be there.

In the span of five or six hours, I'd been aroused during a heated argument where I goaded Caine into touching me, angry and deflated when he dismissed me as if he hadn't been right there with me, and then confused yet flattered when Davis told me he wanted to get back together. Then, the minute dinner was over and Caine started barking at me over texts again, I rounded the circle back to angry.

Now it was almost eleven o'clock at night, and I was parked two buildings away from Caine's apartment. Suddenly all the angry nerve I'd harnessed on the drive over had disappeared, and I debated why I'd even come. Talk about emotionally unstable.

Why was I here? To tell off Caine, give him a piece of my mind for his hot-and-cold dismissive behavior. Sure, I wanted to tell him off. But I knew that's not what I really wanted. Sitting in the still-warm car, I took out my phone and swiped to re-read Caine's texts.

Don't do something stupid to get even with me.

He wasn't off base. My choices today—getting dressed up hours before dinner to go to class, showing up in something sexy, even deciding to go to

dinner with Davis alone in the first place—they all had to do with Caine... and most of them *were* stupid.

I let out an exaggerated, heavy sigh. This visit was a bad idea. I tapped my forehead against the steering wheel a few times, mock knocking some sense into my brain. All of this emotional instability had taken its toll at once, and I was tired. *Really tired*. Taking one final look up at Caine's building, I started my car and headed back home to Brooklyn.

Finding a parking spot in my neighborhood after eight o'clock was next to impossible. I was too tired to search and decided to head directly over to the overpriced parking garage five blocks away rather than get aggravated circling for an hour. I'd had my fill of aggravation for today.

By the time I reached my block, I was cursing my high heels, along with the city's maintenance department for the crappy, broken sidewalks I had to walk on. I almost tripped three times. Finally arriving at my building, I winced up every step of the tall stairs. I grumbled to myself as I opened the outer door to the vestibule, finding it unlocked once again. Anyone could wander inside.

I jumped when I stepped in and found a man standing there. Instinctively, I started to scream.

Caine looked just as freaked out as I was. He held up his hands. "Rachel, it's just me."

I clutched at my chest. "What the hell are you doing? Trying to scare the living shit out of me?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. But the door was open, so I let myself in. I was just about to leave since you didn't answer the buzzer."

My heart hammered in my chest. This was the absolute day from hell.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to speak to you.”

My fright easily transformed into anger. “That’s right. *We need to talk.* You barked that to me in a text earlier.” I stretched the truth. “While I was saying goodnight to my date.”

Caine’s jaw flexed. “I’m glad you at least came home.”

I wanted to hurt him the way he’d hurt me. “Yes. I prefer a *quick fuck* and then to come home and sleep in my own bed.”

He spoke between gritted teeth. “Let’s go upstairs and talk, Rachel. I don’t want to have this conversation in the lobby of your building.”

“What conversation? I get it, Caine. You’re not interested. Well, your dick might be, but you’re not.”

He glared at me. “Five minutes. Can we please go upstairs and talk like adults?”

I glared right back. “Fine.”

The air crackled in the small elevator as we rode up to the third floor. I sensed Caine’s eyes on me, but refused to look anywhere but forward. When the elevator dinged on level three, it was reminiscent of a bell to start the next round of boxing. *Round nine, coming up.*

My apartment was small, but it suddenly felt like a shoebox. I dropped my purse in the kitchen and was about to relieve my throbbing feet from their torturous high heels when I thought better of it. I needed to stand taller, as close to eye to eye as I could come with Caine.

The tension grew each second as neither of us uttered a word. Finally, it was Caine who cracked under the pressure.

“I didn’t want you to make a mistake you’d regret because of the way we left things. But since I’m too late, maybe I should go.”

“You’re such an asshole!” I shouted.

Caine glared at me. His jaw was clenched so tight, I thought it possible he might crack a tooth. Seeing him pissed off made me feel stronger, fueled me. I was like a drug addict, and each burst of his anger was my fix. I wanted more.

“The world does not revolve around you. There are plenty of reasons to sleep with Davis that have nothing to do with you being an asshole. Let’s see...” I counted with my fingers. “One, he’s honest with himself. He doesn’t make up excuses to avoid the truth. Two, he admits when he’s wrong. Like tonight when he told me how much he misses me and wants me back.”

Caine’s nostrils were flaring, so I thought I’d help the explosion along.

“Three, he’s good in bed. Attentive and generous. You know, now that I think about it, there’s probably a relationship between being honest with yourself and your feelings and being a *good fuck*.”

Caine stood still, though I caught his fist clenching and unclenching by his side as he maintained control. The man was so frustrating and unbreakable. Infuriated, I went toward the kitchen to get something to drink. When he didn’t move out of my way, I brushed past him intentionally.

“Move, asshole.”

My breath caught as he grabbed my elbow from behind and spun me around. “You think honesty and being a good fuck go hand in hand? Here’s one that will cement you being right in calling me an asshole. You’re standing here telling me how you fucked another man, and all I can think about is how much would you hate me tomorrow if I showed you what it was like to be *really fucked*. Not nicely fucked. Pushed up against the wall and fucked while I suck on your skin hard enough to leave marks—so the next time you take your clothes off to get back at me, the asshole knows I’ve been there.”

Caine used his grip on my elbow to pull me against his chest. We were

eye to eye.

My voice shook when I spoke. “I didn’t sleep with Davis to get back at you.”

“Then why did you fuck him, Rachel?”

This was a moment of truth. Keeping my eyes on his, I swallowed my pride and whispered, “I didn’t sleep with him. I just said that to piss you off.”

His eyes darkened to almost black. We stared at each other for a long time, letting everything sink in, and then his grip on me released. At first, I thought he was rejecting me again. Then I saw his hand at his belt buckle.

“Turn around. Bend over, and put your hands against the wall.”

I looked at him in question, too at a loss for words to make a sound.

He lifted his chin toward the wall a few feet behind me. “The wall.” His buckle unfastened, he tugged his belt, and it made a sharp *whooshing* sound as he pulled it through all of the loops in one smooth motion. “Hold on tight.”

It felt like I was having an out-of-body experience as I turned and walked to the wall. I could see myself bending and splaying my fingers wide as if I were floating somewhere above, watching it all unfold in slow motion. I felt the warmth of Caine’s body behind me before he spoke.

“This little dress...” The fabric barely covered my ass in this position, but he lifted the skirt until it was up over my bent waist, exposing my entire ass. “You wanted to taunt me with this little fucking dress, didn’t you?”

I didn’t think he actually expected an answer—wasn’t sure I was capable of one either. But I was wrong.

“Didn’t you? Say it. Tell me you wanted to taunt me.”

I nodded. “Yes. I wore it for you.”

His hand connected with my ass with a loud smack. He’d slapped me. *Hard.*

“That’s for being evil when I was trying to be so good.”

Oh, God. I felt a surge of wetness between my legs and gasped. He leaned over, covering my body with his, and pushed my hair to one side to kiss the back of my neck. I could feel his arousal at my ass, even through the jeans he still wore. His hot breath sent a shiver through my body.

“You liked that, didn’t you? I’ll remember that.”

Then suddenly he straightened, and cool air hit my body. His fingers slipped under my G-string, and he dragged it down my legs until he was kneeling with the material at my feet. “Spread wider.”

He dipped down and came up with his mouth directly between my legs. I whimpered and hoped my knees didn’t give way as he buried his entire face in my pussy. It wasn’t gentle. It was desperate and rough. He sucked hard on my clit and lapped at my arousal like I was his last meal and he was starving. I felt my orgasm build faster than it’d ever happened before, and I thought I might not be able to maintain my balance.

“So fucking sweet...” Caine groaned. “*So fucking wet for me.*” He pushed two fingers inside, and my eyes rolled into the back of my head.

I moaned. “Caine.”

He pushed in and out. “So fucking tight.”

“*Caine.*” My cries grew desperate. “*God, Caine.*”

He answered by standing and leaning over me again. The hand that wasn’t inside me pulled my face to the side, and his mouth crushed to mine. His fingers never stopping, his tongue joined in unison. It was all so fast—too much. His hard-on pushed against the hot spot his hand had left on my ass, his fingers moved inside of me, his mouth, his tongue, his smell—all of it. My orgasm hit me violently, a series of whimpers swallowed by Caine as he kept going and going until I could barely breathe.

We both panted wildly, him still bent over me. Every breath tickled the goosebumps that had formed under the sheen of sweat on my skin.

“You okay?” he asked.

I answered with a goofy smile. “Oh my God, yes. Never better.”

He chuckled. “You want to finish against the wall or in your bed?”

“Finish? I thought I already did.”

“No, Feisty.” He stood and scooped me into his arms. “You’re just getting started.”

If that was the truth, I was a little scared, because what already happened had totally kicked my ass. He must’ve read my mind.

Caine kissed my lips as he cradled me in his arms. “Bed. We’ll give your legs a rest.”

I liked that choice. Leaning my head against his chest I let him know. “I can definitely use a rest.”

“I said your legs were getting a rest—not the rest of you.”



Chapter 22

Rachel

I leaned up on my elbows, enjoying the show.

Caine caught me watching and smirked. “You know, you could help me out a little and undress yourself while I’m getting undressed.”

“But I’m enjoying myself just fine watching you.”

He shook his head and continued to unbutton his shirt. His jeans were unfastened and had slipped down a bit on his narrow waist. My eyes were glued to the deeply carved V on display as he finished and tossed his shirt to the floor.

“You should teach with no shirt on.”

“I’m sure administration would like that.”

“They’d like the increase in enrollment from all the women who would transfer from colleges with ugly, old professors.”

“Is that so?” Caine’s lip twitched, and his hand went to the zipper of his pants. He tugged them down and stepped out. My eyes dropped to his boxer briefs—or rather to the thick bulge on full display. I knew he was watching me, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away.

Since I was enjoying the show so much, Caine must’ve decided to really give me one. His hand wrapped around his thick arousal, and he stroked up and down through his underwear.

“If I’m going to teach shirtless, I might as well leave off the pants, too.”
He squeezed, and when I looked up at him, our eyes met.

I swallowed. “I think just no shirt would be better.”

“Oh yeah. Why is that?”

I licked my lips. “Because that’s *mine*.”

Caine’s wicked smile said he liked that comment. He hooked two fingers into either side of his boxers and bent to step out of his underwear. His thick cock bobbed high onto his stomach.

“*Jesus Christ*.” I thought I’d only thought it, but apparently I said it out loud.

Using his teeth and one hand, Caine opened a condom I hadn’t noticed he was holding onto and sheathed his length before raising one knee to climb onto the bed.

“Don’t worry. We’ll go slow. That re-virginized pussy will be sore tomorrow, but only from multiple rounds, not from me taking you too fast. Now, let’s get you out of this dress.”

Caine took the hem of my dress and pulled it up over my head. With my underwear long gone, I was left in only my bra and shoes. Reaching around, he unhooked the clasp with one hand. Tomorrow I’d probably obsess over the fact that he had more experience removing a bra than I did, but right now I was only grateful he didn’t waste any time fumbling.

He leaned back to take me in. “You’re beautiful.” He cupped one of my breasts, stroking the nipple with his callused thumb. “These tits. They’ve been making me insane for weeks. I can’t tell you how many times I lost track lecturing when I looked over at you and saw them poking through your shirt.”

His mouth lowered to my breast, and he lashed it with his tongue before sucking my nipple deep into his hot mouth. He looked up at me as he licked

and nibbled, our eyes locked while he took in exactly what caused different reactions. Caine's intense attentiveness was finally making me squirm for much more enjoyable reasons.

Cool air hit my hardened nipples as his mouth moved up to my neck. He sucked on the sensitive skin below my ear while my hands explored his body. When he bit down on my earlobe at the same time he pinched my excruciatingly hardened nipple, I dug my nails into his back.

Caine groaned. "We'll get to that later. Once I've broken you in, we'll explore how rough you like it. I bet you'll like your hair pulled while you're on all fours with a red ass and my cock filling this sweet little pussy." Caine's hand lowered, and he ran two fingers over my slick center before dipping them inside. "Soaked. You like the thought of that, don't you?"

When I didn't answer, couldn't answer, Caine crooked his fingers inside me and rubbed a spot I knew could set me off. Since I was incapable of replying verbally anymore, I reached down between us and wrapped my hand around the length of him, giving a good, hard squeeze. After a few pumps, Caine shifted fully on top of me and took my mouth. His tongue flicked against my lips, instructing me to open, then slipped inside to find mine. I was completely lost in the kiss, feeling it everywhere on my body. There was a hunger to it I'd never experienced before. I had no restraint. I wanted to give him everything he was about to take and more.

Caine lifted a bit, enough so he could look down at me, but our bodies were still touching. Our eyes locked as he rubbed the length of him up and down my entrance, coating himself with my wetness. Then he began to push inside. Just a few inches at first, before pulling almost all the way back out and repeating it slowly. Each thrust went a little deeper, stretched me a little wider.

When he finally gripped my hips and bore down, filling me completely,

my eyes fluttered closed. It felt so good to be completely overwhelmed by this man. I'd been fighting it since the day we met, and giving in was such an emotional relief.

“Open your eyes, Rachel.” Caine wiped a stray hair from my face and whispered, “I didn't think you could be any more beautiful to look at. But your face with me inside of you is...I have no words...”

Reaching down, he cupped a hand behind my thigh, prompting me to bend my leg at the knee and allow him to sink even deeper inside me.

“Caine...” My body began to tremble.

“I know...”

He took his time, but the intensity just kept building. Each thrust went deeper as we began to move in unison, rocking back and forth. I felt him inside me in so many ways.

I moaned through my orgasm, struggling to keep my eyes open but wanting to share how good he made me feel. When I'd started to come down, Caine sped up, driving into me faster and harder as if he were chasing my release with his own. I loved the way he said my name over and over as he climaxed inside of me. It was more therapeutic than any music had ever been for me.

We held each other as Caine continued to move in and out of me for a long time after—lazy, unhurried strokes as we caught our breath and shared easy smiles. Eventually, though, he had to stop to deal with the condom. When he lifted from the bed to go into the bathroom, a chill rushed over my damp skin.

I hoped it wasn't a sign that once the heat was over, things with Caine would be getting cold again.



Chapter 23

Rachel

Caine surprised me by returning to the bed with a warm facecloth and gently washing me up. No man had ever been so tender in aftercare with me. The way he took the cloth to my sensitive skin was so intimate and thoughtful, it made my shoulders—which had tensed when he’d gotten up—relax again.

“Good?” His voice was low and soft.

“Yes. Thank you.”

He disappeared back into the bathroom, and I heard the sink run for a few minutes. Then he emerged again. He was quiet as he picked up his clothes, slipping on his boxers and then jeans. Perhaps I’d relaxed a bit too prematurely.

“What are you doing?” I tried not to sound too snarky, but didn’t quite hit the mark.

He was looking down, zippering, and stopped to look up at me. “Getting dressed.”

“I can see that. But is there a reason you’re running out the door so fast?”

Caine’s brows furrowed. I realized he hadn’t even given any thought to what he was doing. He was on autopilot.

“This is what you do every time after...you’re with a woman, isn’t it?”

His jaw flexed. “It’s late.”

“Whatever. Go.”

I looked away, not wanting to let him see the disappointment I knew was impossible to hide on my face. The rustle of clothing pissed me off more and more each second. Five minutes ago he’d been so sweet and tender, and now it was back to Professor Asshole.

I couldn’t help myself. I was, after all, feisty. “You’re really an asshole, you know that?”

Caine froze, buttoning his shirt. “I believe you’ve told me that before, so yes, I’m aware I’m really an asshole. What I’m surprised about, though, is that you don’t seem to be as aware of it as I am, yet you’re the one who likes to remind me of my asshole status.”

The man could get me so damn angry. It was like a switch flipped inside of me and I turned into some psycho bitch I didn’t recognize.

“Are you going to leave cash on the end table?”

His eyes blazed. He was silent as he glared at me. I braced, waiting for the response I saw coming.

“I don’t think you’re a whore, Rachel. In fact, I think you’re just the opposite—a nice girl. That’s the problem.”

“What are you talking about?”

Caine finally looked me straight in the eyes to answer. “When things end, or better yet, when I fuck things up, I’m going to hurt you.”

“You don’t know that.”

He scoffed. “Yes, I do, Rachel.”

Deep down, a part of me knew he was right. But I couldn’t let him see that. “You’re so full of yourself, you’ve already decided you’re going to break my heart. Did you ever stop to think maybe it’s *me* who will break *your* heart someday? Maybe I’m just using you for your body.”

Caine’s brows rose. I was completely full of shit, of course, but he didn’t

need to know that. All he needed to do was *stay*. I wasn't ready for him to leave me. Not tonight...not yet.

When his eyes dropped to my breasts, I was reminded that the one thing Caine couldn't deny was his attraction to me. So, I'd have to capitalize on that until I could figure out the rest. Reaching up, I cupped my breasts and gave them a good squeeze. Unbridled lust flared in Caine's eyes, and the control in the room shifted. If sex was the way I could get that right now, so be it.

Moving one hand down my body as seductively as I could, I shut my eyes and reached between my legs. When I opened them and saw the way Caine was looking at me, I knew I'd won this round—even if it was only a small battle in what I guessed was going to be a long war.

“Is that a problem?” I asked. “If I use you for your body?”

He answered by unbuttoning the shirt he'd just put on. “Not at all.”

While he was making quick work of his clothes, I knelt on the bed. He was fully aroused again, even though he'd come less than fifteen minutes ago. In fact, it seemed even bigger now. If I hadn't been so turned on, I might've been a little scared of that thing.

Caine was watching me, so I went for it—gave him actions to go with my bold words. Turning to face the headboard, I got up on all-fours and looked back over my shoulder at him. My voice was hoarse. “I believe you said something about my hair and wanting me on all-fours?”



It was two in the morning by the time we'd finished rounds two and three. Or was it three and four, since technically round one had started in the living room earlier? Either way, I learned something about Caine this evening—his fight to keep me out was weakened when he was physically exhausted.

Considering the method for getting him physically exhausted was pretty damn spectacular, I'd say the discovery was a pleasurable one.

My head nuzzled his bare chest while he stroked my hair in the dark. When he spoke, his voice was low. "How did you get that scar on your back?"

"Fell out of a tree when I was a kid and took some branches with me on the way down." I'd told the same story for so long whenever anyone noticed my jagged, three-inch scar, I almost felt like it was true.

"Ouch."

"It wasn't so bad. It healed fast. How about you? Do you have any scars?"

"No visible ones," Caine said. "Although the invisible scars are the hardest to heal."

I understood that sentiment more than he knew. I placed a soft kiss on his chest, right above his heart. After that, we were both quiet for a while, and I wondered if he was thinking about his scars.

"Do you mind if I stay tonight?" Caine broke our silence. "I think you sucked the strength out of me. *Literally* on that last round."

I giggled. *When was the last time I giggled?* "Of course not. I want you to stay."

He squeezed my shoulder in response.

A few minutes passed, and I thought he might have drifted off, so I whispered, "Are you sleeping?"

"No."

"Can I ask you something, then?"

I wasn't looking at him, but knew he was smiling when he spoke. "Would it stop you if I said no?"

"Don't you miss this?"

“What?”

“This...snuggling with a warm body and companionship.”

Caine was quiet for a moment. “That’s not an easy question to answer, Rachel.”

“How come? Isn’t it just yes or no?”

“Very few things in life are that simple.”

“I think you make things more difficult than they need to be.”

He sighed. “I spent a year on academic probation for giving in to wanting a warm body. You’re my TA, and I’m your thesis advisor. I’ve never had a relationship that didn’t end badly. There is no simple yes or no.”

It hurt to be reminded that I wasn’t the first dip Caine had taken in the academic pool. I was quiet, and he must have sensed that I was feeling needy.

He kissed the top of my head. “I’ve never spent the night with anyone from the college.” He paused. “And before you jump to any incorrect conclusions, I’m *never* too tired to get up and go home. Even now.”

I took that as a victory, however small. “Okay... When was the last time you—”

Caine interrupted, snuggling me closer in his arms. “And *this warm body* feels really good. Now get some sleep. You can interrogate me more while you make me breakfast in the morning.”

A few minutes later, Caine’s breathing slowed as he drifted off to sleep. I kissed his chest and shut my eyes to follow him to dreamland. I smiled and thought to myself, *I can’t wait for breakfast.*



My eyes fluttered open, and I immediately reached over to the other side of the bed. Instead of finding Caine, I was met with only a cold sheet. My stomach sank. Stretching for my phone on the nightstand, I squinted at the

time and was shocked to find I'd slept until almost eleven-thirty. The last time I'd slept that late...well, I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept that late. No wonder Caine was gone.

Yawning, I dragged myself to the bathroom to wash up and brush my teeth. I was still completely naked, and when I looked in the mirror and saw my wild hair and the faint red marks on my neck from Caine's incessant sucking, I couldn't help but smile. *God, did I have memories.* And not just etched into my brain—muscles I hadn't even realized I had ached, and between my legs was swollen and sore. Yet I felt better than I had in a long time. I actually *liked* the crazy way I looked, and I didn't bother to fix it, feeling some sort of odd connection to Caine through my disheveled appearance.

Grabbing the first thing I reached in my drawer filled with lazy wear, I slipped on a vintage Rolling Stones T-shirt and headed to the kitchen for some much-needed coffee. I halted in place upon finding Caine at my stove. His back was to me, and he didn't seem to have heard me, so I stood in the doorway watching him, half stunned at what I was seeing and half shocked at finding he was even still here.

Caine was...*dancing*? Well, not technically dancing, I guess. But he was definitely swaying to the beat of something as he flipped pancakes in one pan and rolled the sausage around in the other. *Yum.* And the food smelled pretty good, too.

I continued watching quietly, utterly amused at seeing Caine so disarmed.

"You want some coffee while you stand there?" he asked without turning around.

I jumped and then smiled. "I didn't think you knew I was here."

"I know." He went to the cabinet, pulled down a mug, and poured me a cup of coffee. It seemed Caine and my kitchen had gotten acquainted while I

slept. “Do you take cream and sugar?”

“One Equal and half and half.”

Caine finished making my coffee, and for some reason, I stayed in the doorway of the kitchen. He brought me the mug and kissed the tip of my nose before handing it to me. “Morning, sleepyhead.”

“How long have you been up?”

“About an hour.”

“I didn’t know you were still here. Why didn’t you wake me?”

Caine returned to the stove. “Figured you were tired after last night.”

I smiled and brought the coffee to my lips. “I am. I feel like I got beat up.”

Plating pancakes and a few sausages, he set breakfast on the table. “Sit.”

“You’re really bossy, you know? Borderline rude. I’m not a dog. Sit. Stand.”

Caine walked back to where I was still leaning against the doorway and put one hand on either side of my head on the wall.

“You didn’t seem to mind it last night.”

“That’s different.”

“No, it’s not.”

He dropped his head, chuckling. “How about we have breakfast without a fight?”

“Fine. I’ll sit. But only because it smells really good and not because you barked at me.”

He shook his head. “Whatever it takes, Feisty.”

As soon as the fork hit my mouth, I realized I was starving. I woofed an entire pancake in a few bites.

“Hungry?” Caine raised a brow.

“Shut up. So what did you do while I was sleeping?”

“Listened to music on my phone, checked out the pictures on your wall some more.”

I pointed my fork at him. “You were snooping? Wouldn’t have taken you for a snooper.”

“I didn’t go through your drawers. I looked at pictures hung on the wall. I don’t think that’s the same as snooping.”

“Snooper.” I smiled like an idiot.

We ate in silence for a while. I smiled too much, and Caine looked like he was trying to hide that he was a little terrified of my enthusiasm over breakfast. But it was so much more than I’d expected from him after how things started off last night.

While I was rinsing the plates, my cell phone rang. It was plugged into the charger on the kitchen counter, and Caine and I caught the name flashing at the same time. *Davis*.

Caine’s eyes flickered up to mine. Ignoring it, I went back to finishing the dishes.

“Not going to get that?”

“I’ll talk to him later.”

While I wiped down the table, Caine went back to the living room wall with another cup of coffee. I joined him when I was done. He stood in front of a picture that had been taken just about a year ago. It was of my three roommates and me the week before we all moved out and went our separate ways. Our couch was six feet long, made of two, three-foot cushions, but the four of us were all sitting squished on one. There were a lot of smiles in that photo.

“Who’s this with you and Ava?”

“That’s Beth and Davis. Beth is the one with the cleavage.”

“I gathered that much.”

Caine sipped his coffee. After a moment, he turned and faced me. “Why didn’t you sleep with him?”

“We just had dinner. He wanted to talk.”

“But he wants to sleep with you?”

“He wants to give dating another try, yes.”

Caine sipped again, studying me over the brim of the mug. “And what do you want?”

You, you idiot. I want you. I knew he was skittish enough about what had happened last night, so I treaded cautiously, trying to make light of the subject. “I wouldn’t mind some more of what I had last night.”

Caine slipped his hand under the hem of my T-shirt and discovered I had nothing on underneath. He grabbed a handful of my ass and squeezed. “You’ve had nothing on under here since you got up?”

“Nope.”

He took the coffee I was holding out of my hands and walked to the kitchen, leaving both our mugs on the table. Returning to me, he leaned down and lifted me up and over his shoulder, fireman style. I squealed, but loved every minute of it. Especially what came after...

It was the middle of the afternoon before Caine made mention of leaving. I had to work at O’Leary’s at five, and we’d just taken a shower together. He dressed while I was in the bathroom doing my usual routine. Still wearing just a towel, I leaned into the bathroom mirror to rub moisturizer into my skin. Caine came up behind me and watched in silence. We exchanged smiles and looks, but for the most part, neither of us said anything. He just watched as I finished with my face moisturizer, rubbed a different one into my legs and arms, then brushed my wet hair.

Eventually he spoke. “Ever hear a song for the first time and you don’t know the words, but the music is really familiar?”

“Sure. Like ‘All Summer Long’ by Kid Rock where he uses parts from ‘Sweet Home Alabama’ and ‘Werewolves of London’?”

“No. An all-original song that you hear for the first time, but you know the music anyway?”

I turned to face him. “I guess. I mean, all songs have commonality to them. A riff, a chord, a lick, a common register or timbre. Our brain seems to index all those little things so we hear something and have that familiar feeling, yet we can’t figure out where it came from. Why?”

“You’re that song. I don’t know any of the words, but the tune is so damn familiar.”

I understood what he meant. I’d felt a connection from the first time we met, too. I didn’t want to scare him, but whatever was between us had always felt bigger than me—bigger than us.

Teasing, I wrapped my arms around his neck. “Well, my body probably reminds you of some supermodel. I’m guessing the one that football player is married to.”

Caine smiled. “You mean Tom Brady?”

“That’s the one. My body? Dead ringer for his wife. And my heart, probably a little Mother Teresa.”

“Is that so?”

“Mmm-hmmm.”

He leaned down and placed a soft kiss on my lips. “That must be it. I gotta run, Mother Teresa, and you need to get to work. I’ll see you tomorrow in class. I’ll be the one at the front of the room, ignoring you and trying not to stare at your rack.”

“Okay.” I pushed up on my tippy toes and kissed him this time. “And I’ll be the one you’ll know has no panties on.”

A collection of black and white musical symbols including a treble clef, a bass clef, a sharp sign, a flat sign, and various musical notes and stems, arranged in a cluster.

Chapter 24

Caine *Fifteen years ago*

She didn't show up last week. It should have made me happy that after eight weeks of sneaking off to church, I finally had my Saturday back. But it didn't. It made me anxious, and the goddamned week dragged.

I looked up at the cross above the church and grumbled to myself before going inside. *Sorry about the goddamned, big guy.*

The church was empty as usual, and I had a song to learn, so I went to my regular spot to take a load off rather than stalking outside. Liam had been on one of his drunk-songwriting binges again. But after the last fiasco where he could only remember half of a kick-ass song, we'd all chipped in and bought him a portable digital recorder. The thing was smaller than a phone and could record twenty hours of music with the press of a button. It worked great. When he showed up hungover at practice this morning after his typical Friday night drinking and songwriting session, he couldn't remember shit. But all we had to do was upload.

We were grateful Liam had remembered to turn the damn thing on. Only, unfortunately for us—and for him—he didn't remember to turn it off all night. We were definitely going to find a way to sample some of his midnight jerking-off grunts on a track in the future.

I sat in the dark confessional for almost a half hour with my earbuds in. Even though she hadn't shown, at least I'd learned the lyrics Liam had come up with. When I was done, I sank down into the red velvety plush seat, closed my eyes, and put on some Bob Dylan. The sound of "Blowin' in the Wind" blocked out everything else around me—including the sound of the door creaking open on the other side.

I wasn't sure how long she'd been there when I finally opened my eyes and noticed her. Pulling a bud from my ear, I slipped from priest mode and let my sixteen-year-old self show. "Hey. I didn't think you were going to come."

The music blared from my dangling earbud.

"What are you listening to?" she asked.

I couldn't very well tell her I'd been listening to Dylan. That wasn't very priestly. "Some new hymns."

"It sounds like Bob Dylan."

I grinned. The kid knew Dylan. No wonder I liked her so much. I lowered my voice. "Shh. Let's not let the other priests in on our little secret."

I couldn't see her, but I knew she was smiling. "Okay."

"Speaking of secrets, what do you have for me today? Have you been a good little lamb?"

"My sister came back home."

"To get you?"

"No. She got in trouble, and the police brought her home."

Good. The police needed to be at that house. "What happened?"

"She was staying at her friend's father's hunting cabin up north. She drank all his liquor one night and wandered out to find a store and got lost. The police brought her home after she threw up all over the back of their car."

“Did they talk to your parents?”

“They talked to Benny. I listened through my bedroom door. He lied to the police, told them she drinks all the time and runs away with boys. That she’d been that way for a while.”

Shit. “They didn’t ask any other questions?”

“Not really. There were two of them, and one knew Benny from the garage.”

“The garage?”

“Where Benny works.”

“Benny fixes cars? He’s a mechanic?”

“Yes.”

“How is your sister now?”

“She’s sad.”

“Why didn’t you come last week?”

“I couldn’t leave my sister alone. Benny was really mad at her after the police brought her home. He was drinking and yelling a lot for days.”

“Did he hurt her?”

“I think so.”

This wasn’t a game anymore. “You need to tell me. Did he or didn’t he?”

She was quiet for a long time. I’d decided that if she took off, either I was following her home or the two of us were going to finally meet face to face. The fact that I’d violated this poor little girl’s trust didn’t even matter. She could hate me and run away from the church for all I cared, so long as she was safe.

I pushed with a stern tone. “Talk to me. *Did he or didn’t he* hurt your sister?”

“She won’t tell me. But I saw him come out of her room in the morning, and she told me I had to lock my door at night, that he’d promised he

wouldn't bother me if she was nice to him from now on."

Fuck. Fuck. FUCK! "We need to go to the police. I'll go with you."

"I need to go home now." I could see through the lattice that she had stood.

"Wait!" I yelled.

She stilled. "Why did you come today if you don't want my help?"

"Because it feels safe here with you."

"You trust me?"

"Yes."

"Then I need you to do something for me."

"Okay."

"Get your sister and come back here."

"I can't. Benny's going to be home soon."

"Then tomorrow. It's Sunday. What do you usually do on Sunday?"

"Benny usually goes to work in the morning. My sister and I play music. We're not allowed to play it when he's home."

"When he leaves for work, come here. I want to speak to you and your sister. Together."

She was quiet for a while. When she finally did speak, her voice wasn't convincing. "Okay."

"You'll come? And bring your sister?"

"I'll try."

I waited until I heard the door to the confessional and then the church open and close. It would probably take a few minutes to unlock her bike, and I knew the direction she came from.

The last thing I wanted to do was scare her when I followed her home. But if she didn't show tomorrow, I needed to know where I was going.



Chapter 25

Rachel

Mind-blowing sex had after effects. It was not even nine o'clock, barely halfway through my shift, and I was dragging my ass. Even that thought, though, made me smile to myself. *I'm dragging my ass.* The ass that Caine had his hands all over last night...and this morning.

Ava caught me daydreaming. "Oh my God. You had sex with Davis."

"What are you talking about?"

She tossed her tray on the bar next to some random guy who was immediately interested in our conversation. "I can see it in your face. You're normally all..." She waved at her face while she scrunched it up to look like she might be in pain. "...uptight looking. Now you're not." She slapped the back of her hand against the guy drinking his beer and asked his opinion. "Am I right? She definitely got laid."

The guy examined my face carefully.

"Please ignore her." I walked down to the other end of the bar where no patrons were sitting. Ava followed and took a seat on an empty bar stool.

Getting back to work, I wiped down the counter, attempting to ignore her, but she just kept staring at me with a goofy smile.

Sighing, I stopped. "What?"

"You're really not going to tell me anything?"

“It’s not what you think.”

“So something *did* happen with Davis. Spill it!”

“Davis and I went to dinner last night.”

“I knew something happened. You have that look on your face like you’re in love or lust.”

I hoped it was the latter that gave me butterflies in my stomach every time I thought of Caine West, because I was certain the former was not a good idea. Ava took my starry-eyed, glazed-over face to mean the latter.

“Sex looks good on you.”

Luckily a couple walked in and wanted to be seated, providing a temporary reprieve from Ava’s grilling. Even though she had a big mouth, I knew she’d never tell any of my secrets—that wasn’t what kept me from telling her the truth. As silly as it sounded, I just wanted to keep what had happened between Caine and me to myself. I wasn’t ready to overanalyze what was going on. I chose to remain in my own private, ignorant bliss for as long as I could.

That wouldn’t be very long, though.

Around nine o’clock, I was shaking up a Cosmo in a silver shaker, not paying attention, when Ava’s voice surprised me. She spoke in that sing-songy way that most girls grow out of around the time they ditch their training bras.

“Hiiii,” she lilted. “I wonder what brings you here tonight?”

I looked up to find Davis at the end of the bar, shrugging out of his jacket. Guilt smacked me in the face. *Damn it.* Why hadn’t I responded to his texts this afternoon? He waved, and I motioned that I’d be a few minutes. There was nothing keeping me from walking down there, so I had to create some reasons. I filled a customer’s beer and chatted with him for as long as I could, then offered to close out a tab for a guy who wasn’t nearly ready to leave.

That was the extent of my customers, so I was almost out of stalls when I saw Ava coming toward the bar. Hopefully she had a drink order.

“Go take a break. I’ll cover for you.” She winked. “And I don’t have any reason to come into the stock room at all, if you happen to want some privacy.”

Guilt fueled my panic. As I glanced down the bar, Davis smiled, none the wiser that my armpits were damp, and I felt slightly nauseous.

“Actually, can you help me with something in the kitchen?”

Ava’s brows furrowed. “Sure.”

“I’ll meet you back there in a minute. Let me just get Davis a drink.”

“Okay. But you’re acting strange.”

“Just go.”

“Fine.”

I took a deep breath and walked down to the end of the bar. Forcing a smile, I said, “Hey. This is a surprise. I didn’t know you were coming.”

“A good surprise, I hope.”

Ummm. “Of course. I just need to take care of something in the back. What can I get you to drink? You want the usual?”

“That sounds good. Thanks.”

Somehow I managed to mix Davis’s Tanqueray and tonic without spilling it and serve it with a smile. “Be back in a bit.”

Ava was waiting in the kitchen. “What’s going on? You looked like you were on cloud nine ten minutes ago, and now you’re miserable since Davis showed up? I take it you weren’t expecting him.”

I paced back and forth. “No, I wasn’t.”

“What’s bothering you? Did you not have a great time last night?”

“No, I did.”

“Okay...”

I rubbed my forehead. “Davis and I went to dinner. We had a nice time, but I was confused, so I called it an early night and went home.”

“That’s it? I could have sworn I was looking at post-coital haze before.”

“You were.”

“What am I missing?”

I stopped my pacing and looked at my friend. “I slept with Caine after dinner last night.”

“What? Caine...as in Professor West?”

I nodded.

“I’m confused. I thought you had dinner with Davis?”

“I did. And then I went home. Earlier in the day Caine and I had an argument at school...sort of. When I got home from my date with Davis, Caine was waiting for me. He wanted to talk. We had another argument and —”

Ava grinned. “Pissed-off sex is the best. Fuck me like you hate me.”

“What am I going to say to Davis now?”

“He doesn’t know anything happened other than you went home and went to bed after dinner, right?”

“I guess.”

“So just pretend it didn’t happen.”

Obviously she’d never had sex with Caine. Pretending it didn’t happen was like trying to eat only one Pringle out of a full can. “I’m a terrible liar.”

“So don’t lie. If he tries to talk about anything between the two of you, just say you’re at work and would rather not talk here. Postpone having the conversation until you’re ready. And even then, if you only want to be friends with Davis, you don’t need to tell him anything else.”

I took a deep breath. “You’re right. I’m acting like an idiot. I feel guilty, and that’s what this is all about.”

“You have nothing to feel guilty about. You’re a grown woman who’s single. Did you make any commitment to Davis during dinner?”

“No. I told him I needed to think about things.”

“So.” She put her hands on my shoulders to calm me. “You’re fine. You didn’t do anything wrong. Take a minute or two, and then go back out there and act like a woman who didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Okay.”

“You good?”

“I think so.”

Ava went back out to the bar while I took a minute more to compose myself. She was absolutely right. I had nothing to feel guilty over, and Davis had no idea what had happened last night. *I can do this*. Keeping Caine out of my mind for a little while wasn’t so tough.

I took a deep breath and swung open the door, feeling much calmer.

Until...

I looked over where Davis was sitting and saw a man sitting next to him. That man was *Caine*.



Ava saw me standing frozen in the doorway and walked over. Her eyes were wide. “Did you know either of them was coming?”

“Nope. Guess both decided to surprise me. *Fuck*. What the hell am I going to do?”

“Okay. Let’s think about this. You still haven’t done anything wrong. Although clearly you’re going to act like a weirdo when you go over there.”

“Clearly.”

“Does Davis know who Caine is?”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t think so.”

“How about Caine?”

“He knows who Davis is from the picture on the wall in my apartment. I’m assuming he’ll recognize him, if he hasn’t already.”

“Okay. I have a plan.”

“Thank God.”

“You’re going to have to go over there and act like nothing’s wrong.”

“That’s your plan? What kind of a plan is that?”

“The only one you have. Go back behind the bar and say hello, and then I’ll stick close if I need to intervene.”

My eyes flicked over to where the two men sat at the same moment Caine looked over at me. His face was unreadable. My stomach felt sick. I wanted to go behind the bar, grab a bottle of *anything*, chug it, and retreat out the back door.

Ava smirked, knowing what I was thinking. “We can have a drink when it’s over. Just rip the Band-Aid off and go over there. It might not be so bad.”

She handed me a ticket with a drink order. “Table three wants some fru-fru drink. It will keep you busy back there for a few minutes anyway.”

Swearing under my breath, I took the ticket. “Stay close.”

Ava smiled. “I will. I can’t wait to watch the show.”

I wagged my finger at her. “This is all your fault, you know.”

“My fault?”

“If you knew blue from brown, I wouldn’t have told off the wrong guy that night. Caine and I might not have gotten off to the rocky start we did, and we might have kept things professional.”

Ava hooked her arm with mine. “You’re welcome then. Let’s go.”

Behind the bar, I busied myself making Ava’s drink order at the opposite end from where Davis and Caine were sitting. I avoided looking over as long as I could, but eventually curiosity won out and I found both of them

watching me mix the drink.

I waved nervously and shook the drink in the shaker for way too long. Then I wiped down the counter and asked the only other two patrons if I could get them anything else. With nothing left to do and four eyes on me, I had no choice but to face the inevitable.

I took a deep breath and headed to the other end of the bar. Since I'd already said hello to Davis, I looked to Caine first. "Hey. I didn't know you were stopping in."

He glanced sidelong at Davis and then stared me down. "Yes. Apparently I should have called ahead for a reservation."

Shit.

Davis, oblivious to Caine's identity and the meaning of his comment, laughed. "Yeah, this place is an old man's bar. It's empty at night. I only come for the pretty bartender."

The muscle in Caine's jaw flexed.

I pointed to Davis's empty glass. "Would you like another?"

"Sure." He pointed to Caine. "And I'll buy my friend here one, too."

Caine stared at me. "No, thanks. On second thought, I'm going to call it a night." He stood abruptly, and the legs of the stool screeched on the floor as he pushed it back out of his way. "Get home safe, Rachel."

And just like that, Caine was gone.

"What's up with that guy? I take it he's a regular?"

I took Davis's glass from the bar. "He stops in once in a while. Let me get you that refill."

Ava met me at the other end of the bar. "What the hell happened?"

"Nothing. Caine left."

"Because of something Davis said?"

"No. He just left."

“So he just left you to spend the evening with a guy he knows you had a relationship with once and who wants to try it a second time?”

I knew she didn't intend for it to be hurtful, but she was right, and the truth stung. That was exactly what had transpired. Caine had bowed out. He wasn't in it for a fight. He wasn't in it for anything other than what we'd had—sex. Anything else I'd built up in my head was just wishful thinking.



Chapter 26

Rachel

I had no right to be angry.

Although not having a right to feel a certain way and actually controlling how I felt were two different things. I tried in earnest to disguise my bitterness after class the next day. As usual, I'd waited for the room to empty before going down to speak to Caine. I'd held an extra-help session before class, and he liked to keep the sign-in sheet to see who was making an effort. I handed it to him.

"You were late."

"No, I wasn't. I got here right on time."

"I was referring to the extra-help session."

The session hadn't even been held in a building Caine taught in. And I was barely late.

"I was literally two minutes late. And you're checking up on me?"

He stared at me. "I don't like lateness. Maybe you should plan to start the sessions later if you have to work late or whatever."

It was the *or whatever* that let me see past the blank mask he wore.

I squinted. "Were you looking for me this morning for a reason or just checking up on me?"

"Just be on time, Rachel."

“Answer my question.”

Caine had turned away from me as he packed up his bag, but he stopped to look at me. His eyes were dark. “Not here. I can tell this conversation is not going to be one I should have in my classroom.”

“Fine. Then where would you like to have it?”

He lifted his bag off his desk. “I prefer not to at all.”

I folded my arms across my chest and raised my voice. “So you’re done with me, then? Is that what you’re trying to tell me? Because I prefer direct. If we’re done fucking, you can just say so.”

We had a mini stare off, and I knew I was pushing his tolerance to the max. I also didn’t give a flying shit.

“Seven o’clock,” he said. “I’ll come by your place after my last class.”

“I work day shift until eight tonight. I’ll come to your place after.”

I had no idea what had possessed me to say that. Why would I want to drive from Manhattan back to Brooklyn upset in the middle of the night? But my emotions felt so uncontrollable, I’d grasped for anything to have some semblance of control.

“Fine. But I’ll pick you up. I don’t want you driving at night tired.”

Surprisingly, the rest of the day flew by. O’Leary’s was busy, and working with Charlie rather than Ava meant I didn’t have to talk about my life all day long. A little before seven, I was in the rear of the adjoining dining room talking to a couple who were regulars when my attention was diverted. I spotted Caine walking in. My heart started to race.

I was fooling myself trying to pretend I wasn’t going to be hurt when he reminded me what we’d had was purely sex. All the logic in the world couldn’t stop my heart from falling.

After I checked in on my tables and let the last straggling customers know they’d need to settle up at the bar, I went over to Caine. Charlie was standing

nearby.

“You remember Caine, Charlie, right?”

Charlie extended his hand. “The Professor. West, right?”

Caine shook. “That’s right.”

“Got a middle name?”

Caine’s brows furrowed, but he answered anyway. “I do. Maxwell—my father’s name. Why?”

Charlie eyed me. “No reason. Just like to know who my girl is spending time with.”

I rolled my eyes. “Ignore Charlie. He was a cop for twenty years. Everyone’s a suspect until they’re proven innocent. I’m going to go change. I’ll be right back.”

The car ride to Caine’s was quiet and awkward. Since the way he handled the stick shift stirred me in places I didn’t want to be stirred, I spent most of the time looking out the window. When we arrived at Caine’s building, he came around to open my door, but I was already halfway out. He frowned and took my elbow to help steady me as I lifted from the tiny, low car. More silence ensued on the elevator up to his apartment. It wasn’t until we were inside that either of us spoke.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

“I’ll take a water.” I kneeled to greet Murphy, who seemed to sense the tension between us and actually listened when Caine snapped at him.

“Down, boy.”

Caine brought me a bottle of water and himself a glass of red wine. Again, I was staring out the window. I’d had the entire day to think about what I was going to say, but since the time had come, all my pent-up anger and frustration had disappeared. I was just sad and felt defeated and tired.

I sighed and continued to stare off into the city lights. “I didn’t invite

Davis to come to O’Leary’s. We didn’t have plans or anything.”

“I know.”

My eyes moved to Caine in the reflection. He stood behind me. “How do you know?”

“Because you wouldn’t do that. You’re not the type of woman who hops out of bed with one man in the morning and goes out with another.”

I turned to face him. He didn’t back up or give me any room. “So why did you leave, if you knew that?”

He looked me straight in the eyes. “Because you’re better off with him than me.”

My slumped shoulders squared. “You have no say in who I’m with. You can’t just pass me off to someone else when you’re done.”

“That’s not what I’m saying, Rachel.”

“You know what? *Screw you.*”

“Rachel—”

His tone was a warning. But I was the one who should’ve been warning him. Because suddenly, I was infuriated. My frustration had morphed into anger. It pissed me the hell off that he was standing there so calm. It wasn’t fair that he wasn’t upset. I *needed* him to be hurt like I was.

“Don’t Rachel me! You’re right. I am better off with Davis. At least he’s honest with me about how he feels. And he was pretty good in bed, too.”

Caine’s jaw clenched. “Are you done?”

“No, I’m not done. I’m just getting started. I think I’ll fuck beanie boy, too. Maybe he can draw some better nudes after seeing the real thing up close and personal.”

His voice was tight. “Now are you done? Because if you’d shut the fuck up for a minute, I’d like to get a word in edgewise.”

My eyes widened. “Did you just tell me to shut the fuck up?”

Caine's head lowered so we were eye to eye. He spoke through gritted teeth. "I don't want to hear about you fucking other men. So, yes, shut the fuck up for a minute already."

"I will not. I can—"

Caine cut me off with a growl and then...his mouth crushed to mine. My gasp of shock was swallowed up by his kiss. His hands came up to cup my cheeks, and he growled again as he tilted my head to where he wanted it, deepening the kiss. My gut reaction was to fight, push away from his grip and run in the opposite direction. But that thought fled the second his tongue scooped inside and found mine. Instead, I kissed him back with all the pent-up anger inside me.

My arms wrapped around his neck, and I tugged at his hair as I clung to him. Caine gripped my thighs, lifting me off the ground as he backed me against the cold glass window. He guided my legs around his waist and groaned when he pressed between them. The sound made everything else disappear.

There was no yelling.

There was no telling me I was better off with another man.

There was only me and him—and this kiss.

This kiss.

Us.

We couldn't get close enough. Our limbs entangled, his hard body keeping mine in place. We were hungry for each other. I had no fight left in me. My head was spinning, and I was unable to form a coherent thought when our wild kiss finally broke.

Caine was panting, his voice hoarse. "Can you keep quiet for just a minute now?"

I managed to nod.

“Good.” His grip on me tightened, but he pulled back enough to look in my eyes. “I said you were better off with him than me. But you didn’t let me finish.”

I held my breath, waiting to hear the rest.

Caine looked away in thought. “I left last night, thinking it was the right thing to do. I’ve never had a relationship longer than a few months, and I fuck up everything good around me.”

“But you don’t—”

Caine covered my lips with two fingers, silencing me. He closed his eyes and shook his head. Opening them, he chuckled. “God, you really never shut the fuck up.” Then he leaned his forehead against mine. “Let me finish.”

I nodded.

“You might be better off with him than me, but I’m a selfish bastard. And I’m selfish enough to not walk away when I should and to ask you to be with me until I fuck it up so badly that you run the other way.”

Looking into his eyes, I realized he believed every word he was saying. For whatever reason, he thought he wasn’t worthy of a chance—that things would inevitably end badly. A gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach warned me I was going to get hurt, but I tamped it down.

“Will you tell me why you think you’re going to fuck things up?”

“It’s just history, Rachel.”

“So we’ll learn from it. But I can’t do that if I don’t know what there is to avoid.”

Caine looked back and forth between my eyes. “You’ll tell that douchebag you’re not interested?”

My brows drew. “Douchebag?”

“Your roomie. Davis.”

I didn’t bother to tell him I’d already planned on telling Davis I wasn’t

interested. Let him think it was his victory. “Yes.”

“Fine. We’ll talk later.”

Of course, I immediately started to protest. “Later? Why can’t—”

Caine silenced me with a kiss. Again.

Later works.

I listened to Caine’s heartbeat as my head rested on his chest.

“In high school, I had a girlfriend for a few months. I cheated on her.”

His voice was low, and I had to move my ear away from his heart to be able to hear. Turning my head, I rested my chin atop my hands. The room was dark, although my eyes had adjusted enough to see him as he spoke. We were both naked, and I was feeling pretty content.

“You were young.”

“With her twenty-two-year-old sister.”

“How old were you?”

“Seventeen.”

“Well, that still sounds like you were young. She was older and should have known better.”

“My first year of college, I met Abby. We’d been dating for about five months when I decided to take a semester off and go on tour with my band. We were opening for a band that wasn’t much bigger than us, but we thought we were going to be rock stars. That was my first experience with groupies. I didn’t technically cheat on her, I guess. After seven weeks on the road, I called her and said we should see other people. She thought I was just lonely, so a few nights later, she flew out to Seattle to surprise me and see our show. She caught a show alright, but it was backstage and involved me and two women.”

I wrinkled my nose. “You had a threesome?”

“I hadn’t even known Abby was there. Apparently when she walked in, one of the girls invited her to join us, but I was too busy to notice.”

“That’s kind of gross.”

“Abby got pissed, drank too much, and apparently fell walking up a flight of concrete stairs at her hotel. She rolled her ankle and broke her nose on the way down. Spent the night in the ER, and her parents had to fly out and get her the next morning. I didn’t even know she’d been in town until the following week.”

“That’s horrible. Although I’m not sure that was even your fault. It sounds like you tried to do the right thing by breaking it off with her.”

“Even if I try to do the right thing, I wind up fucking things up.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

Caine was quiet for a long time. When he spoke again, his voice was pained. “My best friend Liam and I started our band when we were twelve. He was a pretty incredible songwriter. The only problem was, he did his best work wasted.”

“I’ve read that Dylan wrote most of his best work on heroin.”

“Yeah. Sex, drugs, and rock and roll. It’s not just a tagline to sell T-shirts. The year things really started to take off for our band, so did Liam’s drug hobby. At first he drank a few Red Bulls to stay up and play or write songs—eventually the Red Bulls turned into Adderall because it’s easier to take a pill, and we were playing gigs near college campuses, and students take that shit like it’s M&Ms. But the Adderall keeps you up for twenty-four hours, and you need to crash, so you take another pill to help you come down.”

“Are you talking about Liam or about you?”

“I dabbled, but nothing like Liam. At the time, I didn’t see it as clearly as I see it now. I guess I thought it was the norm. Me and the other guys didn’t

even know how bad things were for a while. Then one night, we tried to wake him for a gig, and we couldn't get him up. When the hospital pumped his stomach, there were so many drugs in there—and not just pills—it was a miracle he'd survived. I had no idea the Adderall had turned into coke and meth.”

“Oh, God. I'm sorry.”

“Liam went to rehab the first time, and we went back to Red Bulls for a while after that. But it never lasted long. He'd build back up to out of control, and we'd drop him off at rehab. We got a recording contract offer during his last stint in rehab. I should've known it was too much for him to handle. Part of our deal was that we had to bring five new songs. That's a lot of pressure on someone who's just getting out of rehab.”

I already knew one of his band members died from an overdose. I didn't want him to have to say it.

“I read about your friend when I Googled you after we first met. I'm so sorry.”

Caine was quiet for a long time. He shut his eyes, and when they opened, I could see them glistening, even in the dark.

I stroked his cheek. “You can't control someone with addiction.”

“No. But I didn't have to pile on the stress. We shouldn't have taken the deal and put that on Liam.”

“Was Liam happy about the deal?”

“We all were. We were twenty-one with a record deal from a major label.”

“What happened wasn't your fault. Addicts look for reasons to justify what they're doing. If it wasn't that, it would have been something else.”

Caine sighed. “I don't have a good track record, Rachel. Even when I try to do the right thing, I fuck it up somehow. I haven't told you about even half

the bad choices I've made. About Liam's girlfriend, who was too damn young to be on the road with a band, but I let it happen anyway. About when I was sixteen and met this girl—"

I'd heard enough. Just like he'd done to me earlier, I silenced him by pressing two fingers to his lips. "Shut the fuck up, Caine."

He smiled through his sadness. "You wanted me to talk to you."

I climbed up his body and straddled his hips. I'd been holding the sheet around me and let it fall to my sides. "Thank you for sharing with me."

He gripped my waist and surprised me by lifting me up to my knees. Reaching down, he grabbed his cock and held it up, positioning it at my opening. "I'm not done sharing yet."



Chapter 27

Rachel

Things between Caine and me changed last night. The struggle that had been ever-present in his demeanor toward me seemed to have ended. The dawn of a new day brought a lighter—even happy—version of Caine.

After kicking him out of the shower so parts other than my breasts and between my legs could get cleaned, I took a few minutes to reflect on everything that had transpired. The pulsating stream of water massaged my neck as I closed my eyes.

Caine had opened up to me. He carried around a lot of guilt and weight on his shoulders, much of it seemingly unearned. Yet I hadn't shared much of my past with him. I didn't know if I'd ever be ready to talk about some of it.

After I dragged myself from the shower, I rummaged in Caine's closet to find a T-shirt. His walk-in was bigger than my kitchen. Grabbing an old, worn Brooklyn College shirt, I pulled it on and ran my fingers through my wet hair.

I found Caine sitting at the dining room table with a pile of papers and his laptop open. He was wearing those glasses I loved so much on him and looked up to watch me walk down the hall.

“What?”

“My T-shirt. It looks better on you.”

When I reached the table, he immediately slipped a hand underneath it and grabbed my ass.

I wagged my finger at him. “Uh-uh-uh, Professor. Looks like you have work to do.”

“My TA should be grading these papers.”

“You didn’t ask. I would have.”

He pulled me down onto his lap and buried his face in my hair. “Why don’t you grade them now? I’ll finger you while you read through the essay on the art of rhythm.”

“You’re so crass.”

He looked up at me. “What’s crass? Fingering you? You like my fingers inside of you. And my tongue. And my cock. I wish I had more parts to put in there. I’d never come out.”

I shoved at his chest and laughed. “I’m starving. You need to feed me.”

“What? That’s what I was trying to do. Warm you up to feed you.”

“How about you make us something to eat, and I’ll finish grading?”

“Deal. I fucking hate grading papers.”

I finished marking the tests while Caine whipped us up some breakfast. Pancakes with a side of sausage.

“This is really good. But it’s the same thing you made at my house.” I pointed my fork at him. “Do you only know how to cook pancakes?”

“No, wiseass. I know how to cook a lot of different things. I just don’t do it often because it’s easier to grab something on the way home.”

“I’m not that great with meals, but I can make a hell of a cake and pastry.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Rose, my aunt who raised us, was a pastry chef. She liked to try to bond with me and my sister by baking together all the time when we first moved

in.”

Caine seemed contemplative. “Did your aunt and uncle have kids of their own?”

“No. Rose couldn’t have kids. They were actually foster parents for a long time. After they adopted my sister and me, they stopped taking in fosters. They had their hands full enough with me and Riley.”

“You’ve mentioned that you had some wild years. I would’ve liked to see that.”

“No, you wouldn’t. We put poor Rose through hell. Teenage girls are bad enough without an excuse to raise hell. I was no angel, but my sister was downright awful.”

Finishing my breakfast gave me the perfect excuse to get up and try to change the subject. I wasn’t a good liar, and it was only a matter of time before Caine would stumble onto a question I wasn’t ready to answer. I took our plates to the sink and decided to wash them by hand rather than load the dishwasher.

Caine came up behind me and kissed my shoulder. “Do you have to work tomorrow night?”

“No. I work evening tonight and day tomorrow.”

“I want to take you somewhere tomorrow night.”

“Where?”

“It’s a surprise.”

I smiled. “Okay.”

“Get dressed up.”

Finishing the last dish, I turned off the water and turned to face him. “How dressed up?”

“As much as you want to be.”

I couldn’t remember the last time anything had felt so right. Caine read

my goofy smile. “What?”

“This feels...right.”

His eyes searched mine. “It does. As much as I fought it, and it’s against every rule at work, nothing’s felt this right in a long time. Maybe I couldn’t get you out of my head because you’re supposed to be there.”

We spent the next few hours being lazy, snuggled up on the couch watching old *Law & Order* reruns. I hated for the day to end, but eventually I had to ask Caine to drive me home so I could get ready for work. We dressed in his bedroom together.

I made the bed while he changed into jeans and a polo and brushed his teeth. There was a half-empty box of condoms tossed aside on the nightstand.

The master bathroom door was open so I yelled, “Where do you keep these?”

“What?”

“The condoms.”

“Nightstand. But you can leave ’em out if you want. We’ll be finishing those off soon.”

I smiled as I opened the drawer and went to place the box inside, but a small, silver-framed photo caught my eye instead. Nosy, I picked it up to examine it. It was a picture of Caine’s old band. He was probably in his early twenties and was arm in arm with another guy about the same age. The rest of the band hovered in the background.

Caine appeared and caught me with it in my hot little hands. “I’m sorry. When I opened the drawer, I saw it. I couldn’t help myself. You were so sexy.”

The bed dipped as he sat down next to me. “Were?”

I was relieved he didn’t seem upset at my snooping. Knocking shoulders with him, I teased, “Well, now you’re old and mature, so you’re more

handsome than sexy.”

He took the photo from my hand. “Is that so?”

I watched him look down at it, rubbing his finger across the photo. “Me and Liam and the band.”

“You all look so happy. Why do you keep it in the drawer?”

“I don’t know. I guess it’s not easy to see some days.”

I knew the feeling. When I first decorated my apartment, I had days when I passed by the photo of my mother and it made me sad. But eventually I got used to seeing it, and over time, I started to smile at her each morning.

“It gets easier if you leave it out. When you tuck it away, you’re burying it, and it never heals.”

Caine looked at me and nodded in silence. Then he shut the nightstand drawer and set the small photo up on the end table. “You ready?”

I held back on showing him how giddy it made that he took my advice. The first few times he looked at it would probably be rough, but maybe it was time. Plus, I was hoping I’d be around to help him feel better as he slipped into bed each night.

Grabbing my purse in the living room, I rummaged through to find my cell as Caine slipped on his shoes. There were some loose coins on the bottom next to my phone, which gave me an idea—something I hadn’t done in a long time.

“Hang on,” I said. “I forgot something in the bedroom.”

Walking back to the end table, I took one last look at the old photo of Caine and Liam before closing my eyes and making a little wish. Then I tossed the two copper pennies in my hand on the floor for Caine to find later.

Find a penny, pick it up, and all day long you’ll have good luck.

Satisfied, I smiled and turned around to head back to the living room. Not expecting to see Caine filling the doorway, I jumped at finding him there. My

hand clenched at my chest. “You scared me.”

Caine’s eyes flicked to the floor to look at the pennies and then came back to roam my face. “What the hell did you just do?”



Chapter 28

Caine

What the fuck?

I'd been pacing since I returned from dropping Rachel at her apartment. She'd known something was off, known I was full of shit when I said I had the start of a migraine coming on. I don't even get migraines, yet I was pretty sure the pounding in my head was leading in that direction.

It couldn't be a coincidence.

Could it be a fucking coincidence?

I dragged my hands through my hair. *Think, West, think. What the hell was that little girl's father's last name?*

Then I remembered the file in my desk drawer. Or maybe it was in the cabinet in the office where I kept old band crap. I was certain I'd kept a copy of the police report. God knows why I'd saved it when my parents had paid a fortune to have the incident expunged and make sure my records were sealed.

I ripped my files apart looking for it. By the time I came across the faded yellow page, my office looked like it'd been ransacked.

Victim's name: Benny Nelson

Nelson. I'd thought for sure finding out would make me relieved it wasn't Rachel's last name, but instead it only raised new questions.

The little girl's mother had died the year before. That would've made her

around nine or ten when she lost her. Same timeline as Rachel losing her mother.

Fuck.

That feeling. That goddamned feeling I'd had since the day I met her. I knew her from somewhere, but could never put my finger on it. What was it that made me feel that way? I never really saw the little girl close up—only a flash of a ten-year-old face across the span of a church and through lattice work more than fifteen years ago. Nothing was clear.

Fuck.

Rachel had said she was raised by her aunt. She'd never mentioned a stepfather. Then again, if my stepfather was an abusive child molester, it wouldn't exactly be conversation to bring up during a date.

Bypassing the wine, I grabbed the scotch from the liquor cabinet and poured myself a double. It burned as it slid down my throat, but it felt good, like I should be on fire at the moment.

I knocked back another gulp.

Rachel had said she'd grown up a town away from me. *Pleasantville is a small, blue bicycle ride away from St. Killian's.*

Another gulp.

The little girl had an older sister.

Rachel has an older sister.

Teen years where she spiraled out of control—living with that fucker Nelson would definitely make anyone turn to shit trying to forget.

I tossed back the rest of the glass and stared out the window, trying to bring the picture of the little girl to the forefront of my mind. But it was so long ago and so distant.

Finally feeling the liquor seep into my blood, I collapsed on the couch and rested my head on the arm to stare up at the ceiling.

How the fuck was I going to find out? I needed to know.

It wasn't like I could come straight out and ask her. *Say, did you befriend a priest as a child? A man you trusted with all your secrets?*

Yeah. That was me. A stoned sixteen year old who got his kicks listening to a little girl talk about her shitty home life.

By the way, were you molested as a child? Or was that just your sister?

Fuck!

FUUUUUCK!

I hurled my empty glass at the window. Luckily, it bounced off of a wood panel and only the glass shattered, not my floor-to-ceiling windows.

I closed my eyes and let my head spin some more.

How do I find out?

How do I find out?



Chapter 29

Rachel

I felt like Cinderella.

Unsure of how to dress, I'd bugged Caine until he told me where we were going. I'd never been to an opera and thought it was sweet of him to want to take me, knowing how much it meant because of my research with Umberto.

I didn't have anything fancy enough to wear, so I'd borrowed from Ava—a simple black dress that crisscrossed in the front and wrapped around my neck. The plunging neckline revealed a lot more than I'd normally show off, and I was glad she'd had the foresight to send me home with double-sided tape, as well as the dress.

Promptly at six, the buzzer sounded, and surprisingly, I was just about ready. While I waited for Caine to ride the elevator up, I went into the bathroom to finish lining my lips. *In for a pound*, I thought as I painted my mouth with a bright red lipstick I also never wore.

I'd left my apartment door cracked open after Caine buzzed, and he knocked before entering.

"Rachel?"

"I'll be out in a second!"

"Take your time."

While that was a normal person's response, I'd expected a comment

about my always being late. The last two days, Caine had seemed off his game. He wasn't as sarcastic as usual, and his texts weren't even pervy. It had only been forty-eight hours since he'd dropped me off after our spectacular night together, but I missed the intimacy we'd shared already.

Stealing one last look in the mirror, I liked what I saw and took a deep breath before going out to greet Caine. I was nervous tonight—outside of my comfort zone and all dressed up to go to an opera.

I found my date in his usual spot at my wall of framed photos.

“What do you think?” I did the whole girly-twirly thing—also out of character for me.

The expression on Caine's face when he turned was priceless. His jaw went slack, and he had to clear his throat to speak. “You look gorgeous.”

“Thanks. You don't look so bad yourself.” He wore a dark, slim-cut, three-piece suit that looked like it could have been made for him. Seeing the way it hugged his broad shoulders and biceps, I realized it probably had been. *Pure class*. It was all in the way he wore the suit, and the effect it had on me was probably similar to what lingerie does for a man. Suddenly I was warm in my sleeveless dress with barely any material up top.

Caine stood in place, his eyes sweeping over my body, and waited for me to walk to him. With my five-inch stilettos, I didn't have to press up on my toes to greet him for a change.

“I like you in a formal suit. It does things to my girly parts.”

He smirked. “Oh yeah? We could stay home, and I'll leave it on while *I* do things to your girly parts—with my tongue.”

God, forget peanut butter and jelly. There is no better combination than a dirty mouth and sexy suit. Caine gripped the back of my neck and kissed me roughly, not caring that he smeared my lipstick all over the place.

I swooned a little when he whispered, “I love the dress, but I can't wait to

take it off of you later.”

I felt myself beaming. Who knew I could beam? “I just need to change my purse, and I’ll be ready in a minute.”

In my bedroom, I fixed my lipstick, applying a fresh layer to my kiss-swollen lips, before grabbing a tiny, black, beaded clutch from the closet and tossing in the essentials.

“Ready?”

“You don’t have any pictures on the wall of you when you were little.”

That’s because there weren’t a lot of good times I want to remember.

“There aren’t very many.” I shrugged. “You know, second child and all.”

Caine looked at me. “Do you have one? I’d like to see what you looked like when you were little.”

“My sister has most of them. But I can probably dig a few up.”

He nodded.

Outside, I was surprised to find he hadn’t driven. He’d hired a town car to take us, and when we approached, a driver hopped out and opened the back door. I really felt like Cinderella then.

“A car? You went all out. But I’ll let you in on a little secret—you were already going to get lucky tonight. You didn’t have to impress me.”

Caine smiled, but it felt sort of off. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but he just didn’t seem like himself. Our conversations were normal; any person looking in from the outside would see nothing but a couple on their way to a great night out. Yet, I had a pensive feeling for some reason.

On the way to the Met, we talked about school and work. I chalked my uneasiness up to nerves, or maybe things changing a little now that we weren’t fighting our togetherness. Maybe it was just a new feeling of being settled. I wasn’t sure.

Inside the theatre, we had a half hour before the show was to start, so we

went to the lobby bar and ordered drinks. I ordered my usual diet soda, and Caine ordered a double scotch.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes. Fine. Why do you ask?”

I shrugged. “No reason.”

After he polished off the first scotch, he went back for a second. Just because I generally refrained from drinking didn't mean I frowned upon others partaking. Yet, once again, the two doubles and Caine's quietness while we waited seemed a bit off.

When the lights flickered, the usher showed us to our seats. Looking around the theatre, I told myself again that I probably just felt like a fish out of water. Although I liked the music, the thought of going to an actual opera had always felt pretentious. The place was a designer emporium—I smirked, thinking there wouldn't be any bootleg T-shirts sold outside afterward like the last show I went to.

Caine must have noticed me eyeing the people around us. He leaned in. “If I take off my jacket and lay it across your lap, I can probably finger you and get you to sing along during the opening scene.”

The woman taking her seat on the other side of Caine looked his way, so I shot him a warning glare and whispered, “Shhh. Keep your voice down.”

He smirked, and when the lights went down at the start of the show, he stood and took off his jacket, giving me a wink. To be safe, I clasped my hand with his when he sat back down.

Music filled the air almost immediately, and it gripped me, catching me off guard. It sucked me in from the first note and didn't spit me out until the very end. It overpowered my senses—the orchestra, amplified voices, the beauty of the theatre and costumes. I'd expected to enjoy the experience, but I hadn't expected to be moved to tears.

I was speechless when it was over. We walked to the waiting town car hand in hand.

Caine squeezed my fingers when we were inside. “So, what did you think?”

“I think it was the most magical thing I’ve ever experienced.”

He rubbed his thumb on the top of my hand. “The first time is definitely something else.”

“Thank you for taking me. I’m glad I got to experience that with you.”

Caine smiled. “What did you like best?”

“Honestly, I don’t know how to explain it. It made me feel something I’ve never really experienced. Consumed with emotions—like I couldn’t feel or see anything else.”

His eyes were tender. “I know the feeling.”

I’d felt Caine watching me instead of the show at times, but I was too invested to peel my own eyes from the stage.

“As odd as it might sound, I think what I experienced was love in some form. At least the feeling that being in love gives you—that all-consuming and full feeling, you know?”

“I thought you said you’d never been in love.”

It was in that moment that it hit me. I was figuring it out because I was falling for Caine. Just like the opera, he’d overwhelmed me since the day I met him. It was an inexplicable connection, although I was afraid to admit my realization out loud.

I shrugged. “I’ve read about it.”

Caine’s lip did that little twitch thing I hadn’t seen in a while. “You’ve read about it, huh?”

It felt like he could see through me, so I changed the subject and rounded back to his original question about what I liked best.

“I think my favorite scene was the one where the mother dies. That’s kind of morbid, isn’t it?”

“What did you like about it?”

“The way her husband sang afterward. There was so much pain and emotion in his voice that I just knew he would never find another love in his life.” I covered my heart with my hand, feeling choked up just thinking about that scene. “It reminded me of Umberto and Lydia—the devotion she has for him. At least they had more than fifty years together, but this guy was so young, and the love of his life was gone. It was heartbreaking, but beautiful.”

Caine nodded and seemed to ponder my comment as he stared out the window into traffic. When his gaze returned to mine, his face was serious. “Did your mother never remarry after your father? You’ve never mentioned a stepfather in the picture before you were adopted.”

“No.” The lie came out before I even gave it a thought. “I had no stepfather.” After I said it, I felt badly for not being honest with him.

But that didn’t last very long because Caine surprised me by reaching over, hoisting my butt out of the seat next to him, and setting me down on his lap. It wasn’t a very ladylike position, considering the elegant dress I was wearing, but I didn’t care. His serious mood had been replaced by playfulness. He smiled wide, and it made my belly flutter.

Locking his arms around my back to hold me in place, he said, “You know what we’re going to do to celebrate?”

I laughed. “What are we even celebrating?”

“Us. We’re going to celebrate us.”

The reason didn’t matter, only the look on Caine’s face.

“That sounds good to me. How are we going to celebrate?”

“Headphone sex.”

“I have no idea what that is, but it came out of your mouth and had the

word sex in it, so I'm game."

Caine bent his head back in laughter. "That's my girl."



Chapter 30

Rachel

It had definitely been my nerves. After a playful car ride back to my apartment, things took a more serious turn as we entered my bedroom. Caine stopped me at the foot of the bed. Standing behind me, his fingers caressed up and down my bare arms.

His hot breath tickled my neck as he whispered in my ear. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

“Close your eyes.”

I followed his instructions without hesitation. His hands left my arms, and I felt him moving behind me, but he stayed with his front to my back. A loud *whooshing* sound made me gasp. He’d yanked his tie from around his neck. Then I felt the silk on my cheek.

“I’m going to deprive you of your senses so you can focus on nothing but what I’m doing to you.”

I barely heard my own voice, my words stuck in my throat. “Okay.”

Caine covered my eyes with his tie, securing it in place like a blindfold. I didn’t even bother to try to open my eyes—I was too eager to feel what he wanted me to feel.

“You good?” he whispered.

I nodded.

He slowly unzipped the back of my dress. I wasn't sure if it was the anticipation or if my hearing was actually heightened because I was blindfolded, but the sound of my zipper slowly coming down had my entire body on fire. My nipples swelled, and every nerve ending seemed to come alive—I could feel my own skin.

Caine took his time sliding the dress down my body, using the silky material to caress my curves as he prompted me to step out. Cool air assaulted my skin when he stepped away, leaving me standing alone in nothing but lingerie and stilettos. I heard rustling in the room, but had no idea what he was doing. When his warmth returned behind me, his fingers dug into my hips and pulled me flush against him. He'd removed his shirt, and I could feel his hard chest against my back. Through his pants, the thick length of his cock pushed against my ass. He kissed his way up my neck until he reached my ear.

“You're so beautiful. I can't wait to be inside of you. I want to take you bare—nothing between us tonight. Is that okay?”

My answer was half yes, half moan.

“I'm going to cover your ears now. You good?”

I nodded again. I would have agreed to anything at that point. My body was vibrating with need. Caine slipped something over my ears. He'd taken my noise-reduction headphones from the nightstand table. His voice was muffled when he spoke.

“I've connected you to my playlist. I'll start the music low so you can get used to it and increase the volume slowly.”

After a bluesy instrumental began, Caine removed my bra and panties. He then removed the rest of his clothing and stood behind me, his warm cock sandwiched between his abdomen and the top of my ass. He lifted one side of

the earphones and the music that had been playing was replaced by his raspy voice.

“Shoes stay on.”

He guided me to the bed and spread me out on my back. Once I was settled, he raised the music’s volume. Unable to see or hear him, I let out a loud gasp when he began sucking my nipple. My back arched off the bed at the erotic feeling of being touched without warning, of succumbing to his will without question. Instead of feeling captive because I was unable to see or hear, I had the opposite feeling—one of total and complete freedom.

The anticipation of what he might do next was unlike anything I’d ever experienced. Each pinch, lick, stroke, and caress of my body made me that much more desperate for him. I was panting with need, even though I couldn’t hear myself.

Caine raised the volume to the music again just as another instrumental started. It was a slow, building piece where the sound and intensity grew, and his actions seemed to mimic that ascent. He took my mouth in a passionate kiss, stealing my breath with the depth of feeling it ignited inside my chest. I was consumed inside and out—the deprivation of everything around me leaving nothing to focus on but him and the way he made me feel.

He broke the kiss on a pant, his body pulling away from mine as I felt him lift up. I couldn’t see him, but I was certain he was kneeling over me, taking in my body. I pictured his eyes dilated, nostrils flaring, and desire burning on his beautiful face. Laying spread eagle, blind to everything around me, should have made me feel vulnerable, but instead I felt empowered.

I reached up, knowing he was there even though I couldn’t see him, and pulled him gently down to me. Caine’s lips brushed over mine as he covered my body with his. Underneath his weight, I opened my legs as wide as I could, inviting him inside. I felt his groan vibrate on my skin as he moved his

erection up and down through the wetness between my legs. Then suddenly, the volume in my headphones rose, and Caine pushed inside of me.

The music blared.

The only thing I could see was blackness.

But God, could I feel.

It was the most decadent, erotic, beautiful feeling in the world as Caine eased inside. So many emotions overwhelmed me. My eyes welled up as the music hit its crescendo and Caine buried himself deep—filling me in so many ways.

I'd been on the edge of glory for so long, it didn't take long for the throb inside of me to start. His thrusts were hard, driving in and out with powerful movements that brushed my clit on each downward glide. My world began to splinter as I headed toward climax, everything and anything falling away as my sole focus became the two of us—this moment.

I moaned loudly as it hit me, uttering Caine's name over and over as I rode the wave blindly. Our hips gyrated in unison, somehow moving to the music encasing us. I thought I'd peaked at the top of the roller coaster, but apparently I hadn't. Caine gave one last deep thrust, and I felt the heat from his release spill into me—which set me off riding a whole new wave I hadn't seen on the horizon.

I was utterly spent by the time we stopped rocking back and forth. My body felt spineless, as if I would collapse in a puddle on the floor if I tried to stand. Caine untied the blindfold first and then slipped the headphones from my ears.

He waited for me to speak, but it wasn't easy. Every ounce of energy had been drained from my body.

“That was crazy,” I finally managed to croak out.

Caine's lip twitched—which I still loved for some inexplicable reason.

He wiped my damp hair from my face. “Yeah.”

“I’ve never...” I didn’t know how to explain what I’d just experienced. “It’s never...that was.”

Caine smiled warmly. “Yeah. Me too.”

I laughed. “Is it always like that...with headphones and blindfolded?”

“I have no idea.”

My brows drew down. “You’ve never done that before?”

“Nope.”

My jaw dropped. “So how are you so damn good at it, then?”

He chuckled. “I’m not. It’s us.”

“Us?”

“Together. It just works. I felt it the first night we met. Just didn’t want to accept it.”

He was right. The connection between us had been there from our first meeting—a spark we could step on and try to extinguish or blow on to fan the flame.

“Do you accept it now?”

He brushed my lips with his and whispered against them. “I never really had a choice, Feisty.”



The sound of a cell phone ringing jarred me from a deep sleep.

“Shit.” I propped myself up on my elbows and was met with a stream of light directly in my eyes. I squinted my dismay at the open blinds allowing the sun to blare through and reached to my end table for my cell.

Missed call flashed on the screen by the time I grabbed it. I checked the call log, looked at the time, and turned to Caine, lying on his stomach.

“Caine?” I whispered.

His eyes pressed closed more tightly. “Mmm?”

“It’s almost ten o’clock. You have class in an hour.”

“No, I don’t. My TA is teaching today for me.”

I smiled. “Your TA was not on the schedule to teach today and has to be at her other job at noon.”

He groaned. “My TA sucks.”

Grabbing my waist, he pulled me back down to the bed and hovered over me. His erection nudged at my leg.

“You’re—”

“Hard.”

“Yes, that.”

“It’s morning, and I just woke up with you naked next to me. My body wants to greet you properly.”

“We don’t have time. It will take you at least thirty minutes to shower and get to class.”

His mouth went to my neck. “I’ll be a little late.”

My eyes widened. “Late? You? Professor Punctuality can’t be late.”

Caine’s hand slid down my body, his thumb finding my clit and beginning to massage. “I can be late. It’s my students and TA who can’t.”

“That’s hypocritical of you,” I said, though I’d already lost my fight to his fingers.

He stopped massaging and flashed a knowing smirk. “You’re right. I should get going.”

I grabbed his wrist. “No way, Professor. Just get the job done quickly.”

Fifteen minutes later, Caine had given us both orgasms and was already out of the shower. I was enjoying the sight of him gathering his clothes while wearing nothing but a towel when my phone rang.

“It’s my sister again. She called this morning and woke us up.”

“Tell her I said thank you.”

I smiled and answered. “Hey.”

“Hey,” she said. “I was beginning to think I might have to send a search party out for you. I haven’t heard from you in so long.”

“Sorry. I’ve been busy—between O’Leary’s, school, and my new TA assignment—time is flying by this semester.”

“How’s the ogre working out?”

“Ogre?”

“The new professor you told me about?”

I’d forgotten that the last time I spoke to Riley was my first day as Caine’s TA. I looked up and caught his eye as he buttoned his shirt. “Turns out he’s not so bad after all.”

Caine’s brows raised.

“Oh good. I’m glad it’s working out,” she said. “You didn’t forget about dinner tonight, did you?”

I had totally forgotten. “How could I forget our monthly dinner?”

I shook my head, letting Caine know I was lying, and he chuckled as he tucked in his dress shirt.

“I work until seven today. I should be there about seven-thirty.”

“Okay.”

“Alright. See you later. I need to jump in the shower so I’m not late to work.” I was just about to hang up when I made a spur-of-the-moment decision. “Wait. Would it be okay if I brought someone?”

“You’re seeing someone and I don’t know about it?”

“It’s new.”

“Of course.” I heard the excitement in her voice. “I can wait to meet him.”

“I’m not sure if he can make it or not. I’ll text you in a bit. Okay?”

“Sure.”

Caine finished dressing and grabbed his phone. He’d called an Uber after he got out of the shower.

“Car’s almost here,” he announced. “I gotta go.”

I was still sitting on the bed, naked on top with a sheet draped around my waist. He walked over and rubbed his knuckles against my nipple as he leaned down to kiss me.

“I’ll pick you up at work at seven.”

“You’ll go with me to my sister’s?”

“I assumed from your conversation you want me to.”

“I do.”

“Then I’ll see you at seven.”

I smiled long after he was gone. He had no idea how much it meant that he’d agreed to come along without any prodding. It felt like we’d broken through to a new place together, and I couldn’t wait to walk on the other side.



Chapter 31

Caine

I could get used to that smile greeting me. Rachel waved from the table she was helping when I arrived at O’Leary’s a few minutes early. It had been less than twelve hours since I’d been inside her, and yet I felt my body react to seeing her.

Charlie greeted me at the bar. He shook my hand with a firm grip meant to get my attention. “She’s floatin’ around this place. I take it that’s because of whatever the two of you got going on?”

“If you’re asking if we’re seeing each other, the answer is yes.”

“You ain’t married, are you?” He narrowed his eyes.

“No, I’m not married.”

“You do drugs?”

“No drugs.”

“Got a record?”

I was basically being interrogated by a cop—no reason to share something that happened years ago and no one had access to anymore.

“No record.”

Charlie spread his pointer and middle finger into a V and pointed to his eyes, then to me. “I got my eyes on you.”

Rachel appeared next to me. “Charlie, what are you doing?”

He grabbed a glass from a full crate and started to stack them behind the bar. He'd been in my face, but with Rachel he was kowtowing.

"Just talking with the good professor."

She squinted. "Just talking, huh? Not interrogating?"

Charlie looked me square in the eye. "We were just talking about the Yankees. Third baseman got injured when he was trying to steal home. Should have stayed at third until he got the all clear from his coach. *Right, Professor?*"

Rachel rightly looked suspicious.

"Sure, Charlie," I said.

I wasn't sure if she believed Charlie's shit or chose to ignore it. Either way, I was glad she had someone looking out for her.

"Table three is almost ready to close out," she told Charlie. "I told them to bring their check up to you." She looked at her watch. "Ava's not here yet. You want me to wait? Table five ordered appetizers and hasn't put in their dinner order yet."

"I got it. You two kids take off."

"You sure?"

Charlie thumbed toward the door. "Go on. Get outta here. I don't want people to see your professor friend here and think the place is changing over to yuppies."

I laughed. "'Night, Charlie."

Rachel's sister lived in Queens, and traffic was still heavy from the evening commute home. She was quieter than usual as we inched our way up the parkway.

"Busy at work today?"

"No. It was actually kind of slow."

More quiet as she stared off out the window.

“Something bothering you?”

She shifted in her seat. “There’s something I should tell you about my sister.”

“Alright.”

“She’s a drug addict. Well, she’s in recovery. But I suppose that still makes her a drug addict, because once an addict, always an addict. It’s the same thing as an alcoholic, right? You still call yourself an alcoholic even if you haven’t had a drink for five years. Is there actually a time when you stop referring to yourself that way? Like maybe those chips they give out—one might signify that you’re sober? Do all of those chips mean different things? I thought they were timeline accomplishments—like one for a month, and another for a year? But maybe—”

She hadn’t taken a breath yet. Run-on sentences were one of her tells when she was nervous. I interrupted, “Rachel?”

“What?”

“You’re babbling. I don’t care if your sister is an addict. I wouldn’t even care if your sister wasn’t in recovery. I’m not going to judge her. I’m coming to dinner because you wanted me to come. Do you still want me to join you?”

“Yes.”

I reached over and took her hand, bringing it to cover the gear shifter beneath my own. “Okay then.”

From my peripheral vision, I saw her shoulders relax a bit. She looked out the window, seeming lost in thought, and then turned to me.

“She lost custody of her son because of her addiction.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“She only gets to see him twice a week—supervised visitation. Her ex-husband left her a few years ago and took her son with him.”

“Her son? It’s not her ex-husband’s child.”

“No. It’s a long story. But she had Adam when she was young.”

I squeezed her hand beneath mine. “Shit happens, Rach. Addiction is tough.” God knows I knew that first hand after Liam.

“I know. I just wanted to tell you that.”

“Thank you for sharing with me.”

Even though I meant it when I said I had no judgment of her sister—I had definitely visualized her as something different. I’d expected an addict to open the door for us when we arrived—thin and unkempt, in a small apartment, maybe bad teeth. But the woman who greeted us was nothing like that. She was an older version of Rachel. Healthy and smiling, she welcomed me into her home with a hug.

“It’s so nice to meet you. My sister’s told me absolutely nothing about you.”

Rachel laughed. “Ignore her. She tends to be a wiseass.”

“So you two have a lot in common then, along with your looks.”

Riley shut the door behind us, grinning from ear to ear. “I like him already.”

The apartment’s entrance led into the kitchen, so we stood around talking for a while as Riley checked on the dinner she had in the oven. It had been hot as hell in class today, so I’d guzzled a few extra bottles of water while lecturing and needed to relieve myself.

“Excuse me, I need to use the restroom.”

Riley was stirring a pot at the stove and pointed down the hall. “Sure. Through the living room, down the hall, first door on the left. I basically live in a railroad car, so you can’t miss it.”

I noticed a wall full of frames, similar to what Rachel had in her apartment, but didn’t stop to look before going to the bathroom. On the way

back, I noticed most of the pictures were of the same little blond boy at various stages of growing up. Assuming it was Riley's son, Adam, I didn't want to stop and call attention to it, in case speaking about him was difficult.

I'd almost made it past the picture-lined hall when a small photo caught my eye. It was of two little girls standing in the grass—the younger girl was probably three or four, and the older was maybe eight or nine, but it was definitely Rachel and her sister.

I stopped and zoomed in on the younger girl. The photo was old and grainy, but something about it set off an alarm inside of me. My posture straightened as I stared.

“She always insisted on making her own ponytail. It was always crooked, but she was adamant that she had to do it herself.” Riley joined me at the wall of photos and handed me a glass. “It's iced tea.”

I took it without moving my eyes. There was something so familiar about the picture. Of course, it would be familiar to me considering Rachel hadn't changed all that much—but it was more than that. My eyes darted all over the wall.

“Do you have other pictures of the two of you?”

Rachel joined us. “You asked to see a picture of me when I was little the other day.” She bumped my shoulder playfully. “If Riley is going to show you embarrassing pictures, I better get to see some pictures of you when you were little.”

I think I nodded, but I couldn't be sure. My mind was still too focused on Rachel's little face in the picture. After a minute, Riley returned with an album.

“Come on, I'll show you how chunky my sister was when she was a baby. Our mom used to like to take pictures of her naked while she gave her a bath in the sink. Rachel had dimples, but not on her face.”

The three of us sat down together on the couch, a sister on either side of me, and Riley began to flip through an old photo album. She pointed to a photo, which I assumed was Riley holding a newborn Rachel. “I hated her when Mom brought her home. She stole all my attention.”

Rachel chided, “My mother told her to keep small objects away from me because I could choke, and she used to flick pennies at the bassinet.”

“I did not.” Riley turned to me and winked. “It was quarters. Those were too big for her to really choke on anyway.”

I attempted to seem interested, but something gnawed at me. I knew what it was, but figured it was my imagination running wild. Still, I couldn’t seem to let it go. Riley flipped through most of the album—in almost all of the pictures Rachel was very young.

“There aren’t too many pictures of us after Rachel was about five or six. That’s when our mom got sick.”

“Rachel told me. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Riley nodded. “Thank you. The two years after she died, before we moved in with the Martins, weren’t good times we wanted to capture in photos anyway.”

“I didn’t realize you hadn’t moved in with your aunt and uncle right away after your mother died. Did you live in foster care or something?”

Rachel and Riley looked at each other. There was a silent exchange before Rachel spoke.

“No. We lived with our stepfather after Mom died.”

I looked at Rachel. “I thought you said your mother didn’t remarry.”

Riley looked between the two of us and closed the photo album. “We both like to pretend he never existed.” She stood. “I’m going to check my sauce.”

After Riley was gone, Rachel took my hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to

lie to you. It's just...my sister's right. It's easier to pretend there was no Benny." She spoke softly. "He wasn't a nice guy."

Benny.

Fucking Benny.

The name hit me like a blow to the gut.

I wasn't sure I was going to make it through dinner. I kept sneaking looks at Rachel, and every time I did, I saw the little girl from the confessional. It was goddamn clear as day now, even though I hadn't seen it at all before. Suddenly I couldn't get the one clear look at her I'd stolen across the length of the church all those years ago out of my head. Whenever I looked at her, I was staring right into her sweet little ten-year-old face.

Willing myself to snap out of the fog, I finally noticed Rachel looking at me with concern. Abruptly, I pulled back from the table and stood.

"Excuse me for a moment."

I went back to the bathroom and stared at my reflection in the mirror. Beads of sweat had formed on my forehead and top lip. I'd never had a panic attack, but I was sure this was exactly what one felt like. My heart ricocheted against the wall of my chest, and the simple act of breathing was an effort. I bent over the sink and focused on inhaling and exhaling for a few minutes before splashing water on my face.

I wasn't sure how long I'd been locked in the bathroom, but when I emerged, Rachel waited for me in the hall.

"Are you okay?" Her hand went to my clammy forehead. "You don't look so good."

"Actually, I'm not. I don't feel so well. It started in class today, and I thought it was the heat, but it must be some sort of a virus."

"Oh, I'm sorry. What can I do? Do you want some ginger ale or a cool rag? Maybe you should lie down on the couch for a while."

“I’m okay. But I think I should go.”

“Oh. Okay. I understand. Let me just tell Riley, and I’ll grab my purse.”

“No,” I said, probably a little too quickly.

“No?”

“You should stay. I don’t want to ruin your evening. Is your sister able to drive you home?”

“I guess so...”

“I’m sorry. I’ll see you tomorrow in class, alright?”

“Yes, okay.”

While her words said everything was fine, Rachel’s face conveyed a whole different story. I wasn’t sure she was even buying my sick act, but I needed to get the hell out of here.

After a quick apology and goodbye to Riley, I was out the door. Feeling off-kilter, I questioned whether it was a good idea to get behind the wheel. When I arrived home, I realized it had definitely been a bad idea. I didn’t remember driving from Rachel’s sister’s place to mine.

I poured myself a stiff drink and paced back and forth for a while, remembering the last time I’d seen the little girl from the church—the day I’d followed her home. After everything that happened, my parents had sprung into action to protect me—calling in favors from everyone and anyone, local politicians and police. So much of what went down that day was a blur by now—except one thing. I’d lied to the little girl I now knew as Rachel for months, instead of doing what I could to get her out of that hell as soon as possible.

A decorative graphic featuring various musical symbols including a treble clef, a bass clef, a sharp sign, a double bar line, and several musical notes of different shapes and sizes, all rendered in a stylized, overlapping manner.

Chapter 32

Rachel

After ten minutes, the class was getting antsy. I texted Caine, then decided I'd better start the lecture or the students would begin leaving any minute. There was an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. He still hadn't responded to the text I'd sent last night when I got home from my sister's—even though I could see he'd read it.

I lectured for a while and then took a break to play the class a few pieces we would analyze. As the music filled the room, I checked my phone from behind the podium. *Nothing*. Yet the text about class had also been read.

At first, I'd been concerned that Caine had gotten much sicker, maybe had even gone to the hospital or something. But if he was able to read my texts, why wouldn't he be able to respond?

After about an hour of the ninety-minute lecture, I was so distracted, I cut the class early. Caine wouldn't be happy about it, but that wasn't my immediate concern. Anxious, I dialed his number before the classroom had even emptied. It rang once and went to voicemail.

When a cell is turned off, it goes immediately to voicemail. When someone is unable to answer it, it rings a bunch of times before dropping to voicemail. But when it goes to voicemail after one ring, the recipient is hitting ignore. *What the hell?*

I left a message. “Caine, it’s Rachel. I’m worried about you. You haven’t responded to my texts and didn’t show up for class. Can you please let me know everything is okay so I don’t start calling emergency rooms like a crazy person?”

I wanted to drive over to his apartment and check on him, but I had to be at work in an hour, and there wasn’t enough time to get there and back. Tuesday was also the only day I worked alone. I opened for Charlie because he did his grocery shopping and went to visit his wife’s grave every week like clockwork. No way was I going to interrupt that because my boyfriend wasn’t answering my calls.

Is he even my boyfriend? The entire drive to O’Leary’s, I found myself debating anything and everything to do with Caine. One little hiccup and my mind was a frenzy of paranoid observations. By the time I parked, I’d come full circle. The man wasn’t avoiding me—he simply didn’t feel well. Unfortunately, when I checked my phone, that theory was obliterated.

Caine: *Feeling better. Thank you for covering class.*

That’s it? No damn explanation? The knot I’d had in my stomach all morning wrenched into anger. I deserved more than that. Tossing my phone into my bag, I unlocked the front door at O’Leary’s and sprang into my opening ritual on autopilot. I flicked the lights on, turned the oven on in the back, unloaded the dishwasher, and brought out the first crate of glasses to stock behind the bar before counting out the register. Promptly at twelve, I turned on the open sign. Then I checked my phone again. *Nothing.*

The hours dragged by after that. Ava popped in at four—an hour before her shift started—to visit me, and I was ripe for a verbal explosion. She took a seat at the bar. There was just one other patron at the other end, a retired cop friend of Charlie’s who didn’t say much and only required a beer an hour.

“So you *are* still alive?” she said. “I figured maybe you’d been fucked to death by the angry professor.”

Ava took one look at my face and hers fell. “Oh no. What happened? That asshole screwed you over? Is he married, because I’ll seriously go ballistic on his ass.”

I sighed. “No, it’s nothing like that.”

“Then what is it?”

“I wish I knew.”

I then proceeded to verbal vomit on my poor friend, telling her all the details of the last few days. Well, not all the details—the incredible sex parts I kept to myself—but I told her everything that might be relevant.

“Do you think he got cold feet because you took him to Riley’s? Some men have ridiculous *meet the family* fears—they think that’s the last step before you drag them down the aisle.”

“I suppose it could be...although I don’t think that’s it. He never hesitated or showed any concern about going with me, and the first ten minutes or so after we arrived, he was fine.”

“What happened between the time you arrived and when he said he wasn’t feeling well and bolted?”

“Nothing, really. I’ve replayed it over and over in my head. We were sitting down in the living room looking at photo albums.”

I stared into space as I visualized the three of us—me, Riley, and Caine—sitting on the couch. Photos. Pigtailed. Mom dying. *Benny*. It figured something would go wrong at the mere mention of that man. Then it dawned on me. Could Caine possibly be pissed because I’d lied about not having a stepfather? It was so insignificant; I couldn’t imagine that was it.

“*Family* photo albums? He bolted because he felt pressure.”

“But I didn’t pressure him. He had *asked* to see a picture of me when I

was little.”

“Doesn’t matter.” She shrugged. “He’s a commitment-phobe.”

“I really don’t think that’s it.”

“Well, then maybe he was really sick? Maybe he went into your sister’s bathroom, got a bad case of the shits, and didn’t want to clog the toilet.”

I scrunched up my nose. “Do you really need to describe it like that?”

Ava shrugged. “Do you want me to justify him running out so you can pretend he doesn’t have commitment issues or not?”

Honestly, all I wanted was to get rid of this unsettled feeling. If Caine did have commitment issues and a visit to my sister gave him cold feet, I could deal with that. All I needed was honesty.



Chapter 33

Caine
Fifteen years ago

This was the fourth stop she'd made to pick flowers on the side of the road on her ride home. Her life sounded like a clusterfuck of bad shit, yet she spotted the beauty in the middle of weeds and tall grass.

I stayed at least two blocks back, and she hadn't seemed to notice me at all. Which reminded me, I also needed to have a heart to heart with my little lamb about being aware of her surroundings. Any psychopath could be tailing her.

Well...

It had to be a good two miles before she finally pulled into a driveway. The house was actually pretty nice. I'd envisioned a run-down trailer down at the end of a long dirt road, with sheets hung to conceal the windows and heavy brush camouflaging any sign of life—probably three or four rusted-out, non-functional cars on the lawn. But the driveway she pulled into was paved and led to a small but well-maintained Cape Cod-style house. The grass was mowed, open curtains framed the windows, and neighbors were outside nearby, going about their business. The single car in the driveway was a few years old and had one of those Jesus fish symbols on the back. *Nothing* like I'd expected.

I watched as the little girl disappeared around the side of the house and came back to the front door without her bike a minute later. Without hesitation, she walked inside.

I stayed there looking around for a good half hour after that. For the first time, I questioned whether maybe she was making things up. She could've had a vivid imagination. The seed of doubt was planted, but my gut told me she wasn't telling a tall tale. I took one last look at the ordinary house and turned to head back home. At least I wouldn't have to wait much to find out—so long as she showed with her sister tomorrow.

I waited six hours. At a little after one in the afternoon, I gave in to the fact that she wasn't coming this morning. Before I'd followed her home yesterday, I'd had zero doubt something was going on. But now, after seeing an ordinary-looking house in a normal neighborhood, doubt had crept in. Then again, Ted Bundy looked pretty fucking normal, too. I groaned and stood from the back pew where I'd listened to three masses this morning as I watched the door. I had no idea what I was going to do, but I knew where I was heading.

Four blocks from her house, I realized I needed gas. Since I also needed to figure out a game plan, I made a pit stop at a full-service station with a mini mart and headed inside to pay the attendant. My hand was on the door handle when, from the corner of my eye, I saw something that caught my attention. Parked on the side of the station was a car that looked damn familiar—the same make and model as the one parked in the little girl's driveway yesterday.

Benny is a damn mechanic.

I walked over and took a look at the back of the car. Sure enough, there

was the Jesus fish symbol. Looking over at the mini mart, I saw a two-bay garage attached to it. One of the doors was closed, but the other was open about two feet. The lights were also definitely on.

I lingered inside the mini mart, pretending to read the back of a bag of chips while the two customers finished paying. When it was just me and the woman working the register, I took a can of soda and a Snickers bar to the register.

“Is the auto shop still open? My car has some rattling I’d like to get checked out.”

She looked up at the clock. “Closed at noon today. But I think Benny’s still inside.”

My body tensed. “Thanks. Is there an office or something?”

The cashier waved toward a door at the back. “Go right through that door. He’s probably in one of the bays.”

My breathing became deeper with each step as I headed into the dim garage. There was a screwdriver sitting on the top of a red tool chest. I picked it up and shoved it into the back pocket of my jeans.

“Hello?” The garage held four cars, but there didn’t appear to be anyone inside.

A man poked his head out from underneath the hood of one of the cars the next bay over and nearly scared the shit out of me.

“What can I do you for?”

I stared at him. I had no plan.

He pulled a towel from his pocket and started to wipe his hands as he took a step toward me. “We’re closed. I need to be getting home to my girls. There’s a station about a mile north of here, if you got car problems.”

His girls.

“You Benny?”

“I am. Who’s asking?”

I needed a stick to poke the bear. A light bulb lit in my head. “I’m a friend of your daughter’s.”

Suddenly I had his attention. His entire demeanor changed. He stopped wiping his hands and looked me square in the eyes. “My daughter’s not allowed to have any boy friends.”

“Why is that?”

His face contorted with anger. “Because she’s a little slut.”

We had been standing on either side of a car, but he started to walk around it toward me.

“You sniffing around my daughter? Let me give you a little advice. You want a nice girl. That one...she’s no good. Fifteen years old and nothing but trouble already.”

“Keep away from them both.”

Benny looked momentarily taken aback. He paused his advance toward me. A slow, evil smile spread across his face. It gave me chills. I was staring into the face of a monster.

“You think you know something? Why don’t you go on and spit it out.”

“You like little girls. You sneak into the older girl’s room at night and threaten her to keep quiet or you’ll do the same thing to her little sister. Keep away from them both, or I’ll go to the police.”

He narrowed his eyes, searching, as he seemed to piece together a puzzle. Seeing the full picture for the first time, a sardonic smile grew on his lips. His tone matched the evil of his face.

“You got something to do with them packing a bag, planning to run away, don’t you?”

I said nothing.

He took a step closer. “They won’t be running anywhere after last night.

Taught them a lesson, just like I'm going to teach you." Benny reached into his overalls pocket and pulled out a small remote. Staring at me, he aimed it at the partially open garage door, and it started to come down. I followed his eyes as they locked on a tray full of tools within his reach. Everything after that seemed to happen in slow motion.

He reached for a wrench.

I pulled the screwdriver from my back pocket.

I was scared shitless, until he spoke again.

"Get your own damn pussy."



Chapter 34

Caine

“What are you looking at?”

Murphy rested his head on my lap, his big brown eyes staring up at me. I scratched his favorite spot behind his ears, and he let out a big sigh.

“Jesus. Your breath stinks, buddy.” At least I thought it was Murphy’s. It was possible it was actually my own.

I shut my laptop and took off my glasses to rub my eyes. How the fuck was I going to tell her? I’d been cooped up in my apartment for two days, hadn’t showered, barely ate, and felt completely defeated. Rachel must’ve taken the hint that I was blowing her off since she hadn’t texted me since yesterday.

I realized just how crazy about her I was when I debated never telling her for the hundredth time. It wouldn’t be such a difficult decision if there weren’t so much to lose. And I’d definitely lose her. How could she ever trust me after she found out we’d known each other fifteen years ago? That I’d lied to her for months? That I’d taken something she held so sacred—a priest she trusted—and manipulated her through a screen each and every week.

If I told her, I was going to lose her. Hell, I wouldn’t trust anyone who pulled that kind of shit.

But if I didn’t tell her, everything we had and everything to come would

be based on even more lies.

I'd been selfishly trying to justify never telling her. Telling myself I'd be hurting her twice by coming clean. I knew she cared about me. I'd be reopening old wounds I doubted she wanted to revisit. Why not let sleeping dogs lie?

There was one thing I couldn't get past—I didn't want to be another man who let her down. She deserved better than that. *Fuck*. She deserved someone better than *me*. I tugged at my hair as I raked my hands through.

Tell her the truth and lose her—while hurting her in the process.

Lie to her face and try to move on with that lie always between us.

Even though I'd wasted two days debating the issue, deep down I knew there was no real fucking choice. I couldn't keep lying to her.

The only consolation was that once she hated me, it would be easier for her to move on. At least it would be easier for one of us. And my prolonging things was only being selfish.

I reached for my phone just as it illuminated. We hadn't had contact in more than twenty-four hours, so the timing of her text was impeccable.

Rachel: How about some chicken soup? I could stop over after work tonight.

I stared at my phone for a while, hesitating. It was one thing to live on death row, but another to have your execution date set. Before I could grow a pair of balls to answer, a second text came in.

Rachel: I get off work at eight.

I didn't want her driving at night while she was angry or upset. It was time I grew some balls.

Caine: I'll come to your place about nine.

After a shower, I decided to take Murphy for a long walk to clear my head and kill some time. We'd made it a block and a half when a thought crossed my mind.

"What do you say to an afternoon road trip?"

Murphy wagged his tail, so I took that as a yes. If I stayed cooped up in my apartment anymore, I was going to lose it. I needed to get out and clear my head. Might as well make the day a good one for someone...

An hour later, we were walking into the main building at Regency Village. I'd called ahead to make sure it was okay to stop by, and the nurse had said she'd let Lydia and Umberto know I was coming. Lydia was waiting in the reception area. Her eyes lit up when she saw me and Murphy.

She bent to pet him. "He looks just like our Max."

"This is Murphy. I figured Umberto might like a visit."

"You have no idea. This is going to make his day—probably his year. No matter where his head is, he never forgets that damn dog." Lydia looked around. "Is Rachel with you?"

"No, just me. I was in the area so I thought we'd stop by," I lied.

"That's so sweet of you, Professor West."

"Call me Caine, please."

"Caine it is." She smiled and nodded as she stood from petting Murphy. "Umberto is taking a nap right now. He should be up soon. Would it be alright if we took a walk? It might seem odd, but I'd love to hold the leash and walk around the property. My husband and I used to take a walk with Max every night after dinner, right before we had our tea and cookies."

"Of course." I offered Lydia the leash and my arm. She took both, and we headed outside for a stroll under the blue skies.

"So tell me, Caine. Are you married?"

"No, not married."

“Handsome young man like you with such a sweet dog, women must be falling at your feet.”

I’d never been the type of person to talk about a woman I was seeing—not even in college when the other guys couldn’t keep their mouths shut. But what the hell.

“There’s a lady in my life, but I did something stupid and screwed it up.”

“Oh? I’m sorry to hear that. Do you want to talk about it? I have more than fifty years of marriage experience. Maybe I can help you fix things.”

“It’s not something that can be fixed so easily.”

Lydia was quiet for a long time. “Do you love this lady?”

I’d been avoiding figuring out the answer to that question. But lying to Lydia was harder than lying to myself for some reason. I nodded.

“I think I might. I have no idea when it happened, though.”

She smiled. “That’s how it happens. You just turn around one day and it hits you right in the face as if it’s been there all along and you were too blind to see it. That’s the thing about true love—we never see the beginning or the end.”

Great. No end in sight. Just what I need to hear before Rachel dumps my ass.

Lydia must’ve noticed my dejected face. She squeezed my arm. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. It’s all going to work out. When you’re in love, mistakes can be fixed.”

“I’m not sure some mistakes are fixable.”

“Have you told her about whatever it is that you’ve done wrong?”

I shook my head.

“We all make mistakes. Life doesn’t come with instructions. Someone who loves you will forgive you for them. But when you hide them or lie about them, they’re no longer mistakes—they’re decisions.”

“To be honest, I’ve been avoiding her for a few days, knowing that when I come clean, she’s going to get hurt.”

“Well, unfortunately, the truth does hurt sometimes. Another woman makes my husband happy now after more than fifty years of marriage. It’s not always easy. But in the long run, it’s better to hurt someone with the truth than make them happy with lies. Because she can make the decision to move on with the truth. Lies keep you stuck in place.”

Lydia wasn’t kidding that she’d learned a thing or two in her fifty-plus years of marriage. The window of doubt about telling Rachel the truth finally slammed shut. I reached over and squeezed Lydia’s hand. “Umberto’s a very lucky man.”

The look on Umberto’s face when he saw Murphy might have been one of the best things I’d ever witnessed in my life—although I mentally kicked myself in the ass that I hadn’t come with Rachel. She would have loved to see this. I would have loved to watch the smile on her face.

Umberto’s other lady was nowhere in sight today. With Lydia crouched down at his side, Umberto smiled and laughed as he scratched Murphy’s head. My unfaithful four-legged friend lapped up all the new attention. I stood back and took a moment to watch the three of them. Then I gave them some privacy. At least one decision I made was a good one today.



I spent the hour driving home from visiting with Umberto and Lydia thinking about tonight. Then I dropped off Murphy, took a shower, and practiced what I was going to say—how I was going to explain what I’d done without sounding like a total asshole.

I’d even convinced myself I could pull it off, until I arrived at her building and couldn’t think of one way to even begin such a conversation. It

was as if I'd just found out who she was all over again. Everything I'd thought about, the words I'd carefully considered, seemed to escape me as I stood outside my car and looked up at her window.

It was an unusually warm fall night with a nice breeze, so her third-floor window was open. Her bedroom light was on, her shade pulled almost all the way down, and I couldn't bring myself to do anything but stand in place and stare. My heart almost stopped when her silhouette appeared. She was in profile, looking away from where I was standing. At first she didn't move, just stared off into space, but then I saw one hand reach for her wrist, and she started to play with her watch.

Yeah, I'm nervous, too, Feisty. I'm sorry I've made you feel this way the last few days.

I needed to get this shit over with for both our sakes. Taking a deep breath, I finally headed toward her building. The elevator was slow to arrive and even slower to crawl to the third floor. By the time I stepped off, I had perspiration beading on my forehead. Walking to her door was excruciatingly difficult.

I knocked and waited with my hands in my pockets, staring down at my shoes. Under my breath, I said a little prayer—the irony of that not escaping me.

Rachel opened the door, and I immediately felt a kick to my gut. She looked more beautiful than ever in a green sundress with thin straps that showed off her beautiful, long neck. Her wild, dark hair was down and pushed to one side, and I had the strongest urge to lean in and devour that neck. Unlike her normal, understated makeup, tonight her face was all done up. A bright red, glossy lipstick coated her plump lips, and her lashes were thick and dark, which matched the dark liner that made her almond-shaped eyes look even larger. I was sad that I might not get to brush my lips against

hers one last time.

I raised my gaze to meet hers, and my heart beat out of control. *I've fallen in love with her.* In that moment, I wanted nothing more than to tell her. But I didn't want the first time I said those words to be muddied by the conversation we were about to have. I only hoped I'd get to say them one day.

“Hello, Rachel.”



Chapter 35

Rachel

“Hi.”

Caine was staring at me funny—as if he wasn’t really seeing me, even though he looked straight at my face.

“Caine?”

He blinked a few times. “Sorry. You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.” I stepped aside for him to enter, noting that he hadn’t leaned in for a kiss. I tried to brush it off, but it elevated my already jittery feeling to full-blown panic.

Caine came inside, and things became even more awkward—worse than a bad blind date. I was standing in a room where this man had recently cooked breakfast for me, yet he felt like a complete stranger.

“How are you feeling?” I attempted to make some conversation.

“Better. Thank you. I’m sorry for the way I rushed out of your sister’s apartment and left her to make sure you got home.”

“It’s fine. I understand. You weren’t feeling well.”

Caine nodded and dug his hands into his pockets. After another minute of awkward silence, he cleared his throat.

“Listen, Rachel, we need to talk.”

“Okay. Why don’t we sit down? Can I get you something to drink?”

“No, thanks. I’m good.”

He followed me into the living room. I sat on one end of the couch, which left plenty of open space for him to join me. But he chose to sit on the adjacent chair.

Caine looked at his feet, then dragged a hand through his hair. Though he could totally pull off the disheveled look, I got the feeling he’d been doing that a lot the last few days, and it had nothing to do with styling. He blew out a loud breath before starting to speak.

“I can’t start a relationship with lies.”

Oh, God. My little lie about Benny had been niggling in the back of my mind ever since I’d talked to Ava about what was going on with Caine. I felt sick. But I refused to let that horrible man take anything else from me.

“I’m sorry about lying. It’s just...it’s not easy for me to talk about.”

Caine attempted to speak, but I cut him off, going into my usual nervous ramble.

“I said I didn’t have a stepfather because I wish I hadn’t had one. I try to pretend he never existed. He wasn’t a nice guy. He was abusive...to me and my sister once my mother died.”

Caine’s jaw flexed. “He abused *you*?”

I nodded and looked down. “It wasn’t the same for me and my sister. He...” Even after fifteen years, I could barely say the words. “...he sexually abused my sister. But I was too young.”

“So he didn’t touch you?”

I shook my head. “Not the same way he touched my sister.”

A look of relief crossed Caine’s face. “Thank God.”

“But as long as we’re being honest, I told you another small lie. The scar on my back isn’t from falling out of a tree when I was a kid. It’s from my stepfather. The night before the police removed us, he came home earlier than

we'd expected. Riley was packing because we were planning on finally going to get help the next morning. Benny ransacked my room and found the bag I'd packed. He lost his mind and started kicking us with his steel-tip boots. That's what left the scar on my back."

I'd been too stubborn for a lot of years to allow myself to cry about everything that happened. But the memories from that night were still vivid when I talked about them. I could see my sister sneaking into my room after Benny had passed out to do wound care on me. My tears felt cool, running down my warm face.

"My sister taped it closed, but it probably needed a dozen stitches."

Caine came to kneel at my feet. I leaned my head into him, burying my face in his shoulder to hide my emotions.

"I'm so sorry, Rach. I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

Once the faucet was open, I couldn't stop the water from coming. Caine holding me made me feel safe for the first time in a long time—safe to cry. And so I did. I cried and I cried, allowing myself to let it out. I didn't know where it was all coming from, but the cry turned into an ugly sob—one that had me gasping for breath. Caine sat and held me quietly, stroking my hair and saying he was sorry over and over. When I finally calmed down, I sat up to find him with tears welling in his own eyes.

"I'm sorry for falling apart like that. I've never told anyone about that night, except the social worker who took us the next day. I've never even said my sister was sexually abused out loud." I looked Caine in the eyes. "That's why I lied to you and said my mother never remarried. It's easier to pretend she never did and those years never happened."

Caine looked so sad. His voice was full of hesitation. "You went to a social worker the next day, after he did that to you?"

"Actually, she came to us. Benny got into a fight at the garage the next

day, so the police came to find us with a social worker.”

“A fight?”

“Yeah. He had a lot of rage. I wish it had happened sooner for my sister’s sake. We were both so afraid to tell anyone. But the social worker knew something wasn’t right when she showed up. Benny was put in the hospital, and we were taken to stay with my aunt. Eventually, my sister told the social worker what was going on, and Benny was arrested while he was still in the hospital. A month later, he died of a heart attack while in custody.” I shrugged. “And life just moved on. Our aunt adopted us, and we never looked back.”

“I’m so sorry, Rachel.”

I half laughed-half sniffled. “Stop saying that. It’s not your fault. I just wanted to explain why I lied because I know you were upset about it. And now I’d like to go back to pretending Benny never existed. Can we do that?”

Caine looked like he was going to argue. His mouth opened to speak, then closed, then opened again. But eventually he nodded.

After a trip to the bathroom to wash the streaked makeup from my face, I felt like a weight had lifted off my shoulders. Unfortunately, I couldn’t say the same about Caine. While unloading and a good cry had lightened my mood, it seemed I’d passed that heaviness to him. We decided to turn on the TV and relax by watching a movie, but each time I glanced over at him, he seemed lost in thought.

When the movie ended, I thought things might return to normal in the bedroom. Although when I mentioned being tired and ready to go to bed, Caine surprised me by saying he needed to sleep at his own place because he had an early meeting.

That unsettled feeling I’d had was back as I walked him to the door. “Are we okay, Caine?” I hated to ask, hated to sound needy, but I’d already had

two sleepless nights and knew I would be up again if he left without us talking.

Caine cupped my cheeks. “You’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met. Never forget that, Rachel.” He brushed his lips with mine and said goodnight.

I leaned my head against the closed door after he was gone. While the sentiment was sweet, especially given everything we’d talked about, why did it feel like Caine was saying goodbye?



Chapter 36

Caine

I didn't have the heart to tell her after she'd broken down—at least that's what I told myself. I was keeping it from her for her own good, not because I was a selfish prick with no balls.

But after a week of being half in and half out, I realized I was doing the same thing to her that I'd done when she was a kid—stringing her along, week by week, and not taking any action because I was unsure of myself.

Only back then I was a confused teenage boy, and now I was supposed to be a man. I sure as hell wasn't acting like much of one. I'd avoided Rachel almost every night this week, except in class when I had no choice but to face her. She knew something was off.

“What's going on with you?” my sister asked as she took my plate. She'd had another doctor's appointment this afternoon, so I'd been babysitting. Evelyn must've been pretty desperate to use me again, considering I almost killed one of her kids last time.

“Nothing much.”

She went into the kitchen and put my plate in the sink before returning for her interrogation. “Bullshit. I can tell when something's wrong.”

“How?”

My sister leveled me with a stare. “For starters, you're still here.”

Normally when I ask you to babysit, you dart out the door the minute I get back, as if having a family is contagious or something.”

I guess she had a point. I tried to play it off as nothing. “I was hungry, that’s all.” I shrugged.

She scrutinized me. “Where’s the woman you had here with you last time? The girls talked about her for a week. Rachel, wasn’t it?”

“How would I know?”

“Don’t give me that crap. Your face changed as soon as I said her name.”

“You’re imagining things.”

“Really?” She leaned in. “Rachel.” Her voice grew louder. “Rachel. Rachel. Rachel.”

“I think you should add a shrink to that list of doctors you’re visiting.” I stood and began to clear the rest of the table to put some space between the bulldog and me.

My nieces had already disappeared with a box of elbow macaroni and Elmer’s glue, and they were unusually quiet as they stuck food to construction paper in the living room. Where were the little motor-mouths when you needed them to interrupt a conversation?

My sister and I cleaned up from dinner, and surprisingly, she was quiet. I should have realized she was busy reloading.

Pushing the dishwasher closed, she turned and leaned against it, cornering me in the kitchen as I put away the last of the plates.

“What did you do?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Either she dumped you, or you did something wrong. I can tell. You’re moping around. And since you generally get fired up when someone screws you over, I’m going to go out on a limb and guess that *you* screwed something up.”

Damn. She's good. I sighed. "I got myself into a mess."

"You want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"Okay. So how do you get yourself out of this mess?"

"Without hurting her, I can't."

"Did you cheat on her?"

"It's nothing like that. "

Evelyn contemplated me for a minute. "Listen, little brother, you carry around a lot of baggage for things you think are your fault that aren't. You take responsibility. Are you sure you actually did something that bad?"

My sister was always biased when it came to me. When I didn't respond, she shook her head and continued. "You're a good man. Whatever's going on, I know you'll make the right choice. I can't imagine you ever caring about someone and intentionally hurting them."

My sister was right about one thing. I never intended to hurt Rachel. Or Liam, for that matter. But I'd made a lot of bad choices over the years, and other people suffered the consequences. I'd missed doing the right thing for Liam—didn't see that the pressure was too much, that the band and the label contract were more than he could handle until it was too late. With Rachel, I should have told someone what I suspected the day she walked into that confessional. But instead I lied to an innocent girl, pretending to be a priest for months. She had scars left by my mistakes. I'd done enough damage to her.



I hated that her eyes brightened when I asked her to go for a cup of coffee after class the next day.

"So, according to *Cosmo*, I like you," she announced.

We'd ordered two coffees and sat at a quiet table in the back of the coffee shop. Rachel was attempting to act like nothing was wrong, but I heard the shake in her voice and noted the way she twisted her watch back and forth.

"More quizzes?"

"Yep. Question nine was iffy," she teased. "It asked if I'd still be physically attracted to you if you gained sixty pounds, went bald, and suddenly became unemployed. My pen was hovering over a certain answer, but then I remembered you like to blindfold me anyway." She smiled and *fuck, it hurt.*

When I didn't respond, Rachel thought I was offended.

"I'm teasing, you know," she said.

I nodded and cleared my throat. It felt like my balls were stuck in there as I attempted to get out the words I needed to say.

"Listen, Rachel...I can't do this anymore."

Her smile wilted. She knew what I was saying, yet still found a way to cling to hope.

"What? Hang out on campus? No one thinks it's odd. I see TAs and professors together all the time."

"I didn't mean spend time on campus. I meant spend time at all. We can't see each other anymore."

"Why? I don't understand?"

I'd decided after talking to my sister last night that there was no use in telling her anything about the church, about us fifteen years ago. Why hurt her by dredging up more shit when I didn't have to?

"You're my student. What happened between us shouldn't have ever started."

Sadness transformed into anger on her face. "That's bullshit. You don't care about that. And besides, the semester is halfway over."

“I’m sorry.” I looked down because it was too hard to lie to her beautiful face. “It should have never happened.”

“*Screw you.*”

“I’ll stay on as your thesis advisor. This is my fault and shouldn’t affect you in any way.”

“It shouldn’t affect me?”

“Rachel...”

She stood. “You know what, Caine? For a long time I felt unworthy of love, *ashamed* of things that happened in my life, *regretting* my choices. It wasn’t until the last few weeks that I started to realize I’m *not* my past. I don’t ever want to be someone’s regret. So go fuck yourself.”

On instinct, I grabbed her arm as she brushed past me. Tears filled her eyes, and I knew she wanted to leave before I saw them, didn’t want me to see her upset. God, I wanted to rewind and erase everything I’d just said. But instead, I released her arm and let her go. It was the best thing I could do for her, even if it didn’t feel that way in the moment.

I couldn’t turn around and watch her walk out. Squeezing my eyes shut, I listened to the sound of her footsteps become more and more distant until I couldn’t hear her at all anymore.

Rachel was right about one thing—she was my regret. Just not in the way she thought. I’d always regret letting her go.



Chapter 37

Rachel

Out of habit, I began to walk to the seat I'd occupied since the beginning of the semester. But then I stopped. *Screw this.* There was no reason to subject myself to a front-and-center view of the mighty professor. I'd do my job, attend the classes I was required to sit in on, teach the extra-help sessions, grade papers—all of it. But I didn't have to sit where he'd told me he preferred I sit. Not anymore.

Looking around the room, I smirked, seeing an open seat next to Mr. Ludwig. Let him have a close-up view of my body so he can sketch—someone might as well appreciate it.

It was almost seventy-five degrees today, but my seatmate still had his wool beanie on.

“Hey.” He smiled at me. “Professor Stick Up His Ass let you off lockdown? I thought I was going to have to move up to the front just to get to ask you to go for coffee after class one day.”

“Did you need help with something? You haven't come to any of my extra-help sessions.”

Beanie boy smiled. He was cute, in a college frat boy, dimpled kind of way. “Nope. Don't need extra help. Just need coffee with you.”

I felt a presence behind me. Seeing the flirt's eyes lift from my breasts to

over my shoulder and his cheeky expression disappear, I knew who it was.

I kept ignoring him, hoping he would take the hint. *No such luck.*

“Rachel.” Caine cleared his throat. “Can I see you after class, please?”

I closed my eyes. I wanted to respond with ‘*Go screw yourself*’, but I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of that much emotion. Nor was I going to let myself turn into one of the rumors I’d heard about Professor West before I even met him.

Plastering on my best imitation smile, I turned to face him, offering a fantastic view of my pearly whites. “Of course, Professor.”

I was adamant about showing him I was fine. But what I saw when I looked up erased my fake smile. Caine looked awful. His bright eyes were bloodshot, his naturally warm-colored skin looked cold, and his appearance was disheveled—not the intentionally stylish kind. No, Caine looked like he’d either been on a bender that ended a few hours ago, or he was sick as a dog and dragged his unhealthy ass out of bed for the first time in days to show up to class.

Even though I was pissed at him, I hoped it was the latter.

Caine nodded and his eyes moved to the student next to me. I caught the slight tick in his jaw as he glared at Mr. Ludwig a few heartbeats longer than normal. My emotions were clearly all over the place, because it pissed me off that he felt he had the right to give anyone a hard time for flirting with me. I owed him nothing.

For the next ninety minutes, I avoided looking at Caine, preferring to pretend to take notes while my mind wandered. When class was finally over, I waited in my seat until the last of the students were piling out and then walked down to the front of the room. I stood ten feet away from Caine, feeling terribly awkward. He was packing up his bag.

“I thought it might be best if we talked in my office.”

“I’m fine here.”

Caine looked up at me. “I’d like privacy.”

“I’d like a lot of things, but I don’t seem to get them all, now do I?”

He nodded. “Fine. Can we at least sit?” He held out his hand to direct me to the front row. Begrudgingly, I went.

I was acting like an insolent teenager, but I refused to look at him. He waited, assuming I would eventually stop playing with my phone and give him my full attention. But he assumed wrong. After a few minutes, he took the hint and began to speak anyway.

“I got an email from the dean about your request to change your thesis advisor.”

“And?”

“That’s not necessary. You’re almost done, and if you don’t want to spend time with me, we can handle most of it over email.”

I finally looked up at him. “I don’t want your opinions on my work. And I don’t want to rehearse my thesis defense with you. I don’t want to defend anything to you.”

Caine reached out to touch my arm. “Rachel.”

I pulled back. “Don’t touch me.”

He held both hands up. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

I scoffed. “It’s a little late for that, isn’t it?”

He took a deep breath and blew out a loud stream of air. “Let me start over. We’re able to be professional to each other during class, so why create all the extra work for yourself by requesting a new thesis advisor? Most professors will want to put their own touches on your work, and you’ll wind up with rewrites for months.”

“I guess you prefer to put your *touch* on my work in a different way.”

From his tone, I could tell Caine was losing his patience. Which is exactly

what I wanted. I wanted to piss him off...wanted to get a rise out of him in some way. Our ending had been too anticlimactic. It made me feel like I'd never been worth his energy. And that just sucked.

"I'm trying to be professional, Rachel."

My spine straightened. "So am I, Professor. If it was my choice, I wouldn't be your TA *or* have you as my thesis advisor. I could request a new thesis advisor without raising suspicion since we hadn't worked together that long and you weren't my original advisor. But I couldn't come up with a reason to be removed as your TA without raising suspicion. I thought telling them we were *fucking* before and *now we're not* might not be the most professional way to handle things."

Caine raked his fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry for hurting you, Rachel. I don't know how to fix things and make us go back to friends."

"We were never friends, Caine. And as far as fixing things, it takes two to make any relationship work. We can't fix anything, because only one of us knows what was broken." My voice softened. "I still don't understand what was broken."

The crack in my voice on the last few words brought Caine's eyes to mine. I wanted to stare him down, shoot angry daggers at him, but when I looked deep into his eyes, all I saw was hurt.

In a moment of weakness, I allowed my heart to show. "What happened, Caine? Why did you cut me off? We were fine one day and then the next..."

Instead of looking away like he'd been doing lately, Caine allowed me in for the briefest of moments. Our gaze locked, and I saw inside of him—the man I'd met was still in there, down deep. I'd started to think I'd imagined who he was since it had all disappeared so quickly.

"You're an amazing woman, Rachel. You deserve better."

One minute I was vulnerable and soft, and the next I was impervious and

hard. I stood abruptly, losing my equilibrium and almost losing my footing before I steadied myself. “You don’t get to tell me what I deserve. I get to choose what I want.”

Caine stood and grabbed my elbow as I went to turn. The loud clank of the heavy classroom door opening echoed through the empty lecture hall. Voices followed behind it as students began to filter in for the next class. I waited, curious to see how important keeping me in place would be to him.

It hurt all over again when he just let go.

“Think about it, Rachel. Don’t cause yourself extra work just because you’re mad at me.”

Even though the students were at the top of the hall, I leaned in to make sure no one could hear. I might have also done it for effect.

“Go fuck yourself, Professor,” I whispered in his ear.

“Talk to me.” Charlie leaned his elbows on the bar. He was done for the day, but still hanging around. I’d suspected he was waiting until the last afternoon stragglers called it a day.

The dryer cycle of our dishwasher had stopped working a year ago. Charlie had no intention of fixing it. Oddly, that worked for me—especially today, since I found the motion of wiping down glasses soothing. I pulled a dripping soda glass from the crate I was working on and shoved the dishtowel inside.

“What would you like to talk about? Current events? Music?”

“Don’t give me that, missy. You know what I’m asking.”

I smiled at Charlie, completely aware of what he was asking. “I’m not sure I do.”

“You’ve been moping around here for a week. What’s going on? Boy

trouble?”

Charlie was tough on the outside, but had an ooey-gooey soft center. It was one of my favorite things about him.

“Everything’s fine, Charlie. Just a busy week is all.”

He shook his head. “You’re full of shit. Twenty-eight years on the job. I know when someone’s full of shit.”

I was about to deny it when I thought of something. “How can you tell when someone’s full of shit? I mean, what are the telltale signs?”

“There’s body language that can give you an idea on most people, if you pay attention.”

“Like what?”

“Well, there are the obvious ones—the person won’t look you in the eyes, they get fidgety, they touch their mouth or face. Although most good liars know those signs and work to control them. There’re smaller things that are better indicators. For starters, their shoulders sometimes rise a bit. It’s because their breathing gets a bit shallow when they lie, and that’s the body’s natural reaction to the change in breaths. Some also stand rigid still. When people are talking, they have a natural sway to their body. But when they lie, they lose that natural comfort. Aside from that, there are hints in speech—like saying the same words or phrases repetitively. “I didn’t. I didn’t.”

“Interesting.”

“Who’s lying to you?”

I exaggerated raising my shoulders and repeated myself. “No one. No one.”

“Wiseass.”

Charlie cared about me, and I knew he wouldn’t pry too deep into things like Ava would, so I was honest with him. “The guy I was seeing broke things off. I get the feeling he’s not being truthful about why.” I sighed.

“Maybe I’m just looking for a reason that doesn’t exist because of my own ego. I don’t know.”

“We talking about that professor?”

“Yeah.”

“You want to know whether his heart’s still in it or not? You’re thinking there’s some crap in his head that doesn’t reconcile with what’s inside his chest?”

I nodded. “I guess so.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out if a man who’s running the other direction really loves you.”

“What’s that?”

Charlie looked me in the eyes. “Move on without him. A man comes to his senses really quick when he thinks you’re not waiting around for him anymore.”



Chapter 38

Caine

I was full of shit.

Only this time, I was lying to myself, too. The department chair had emailed to ask that I do a write up of my observations on Rachel's thesis project to pass around to the other professors to help solicit a new advisor. I'd been dragging my feet to give her a chance to reconsider, and now I was using it as a reason to see her—pretending I needed to turn it in fast when I had no intention of doing any such thing.

It was the mid-semester break, and six days of not seeing Rachel was about all I could take. If anyone got a hold of what I'd resorted to, they'd think I'd lost my mind—and they might be right, but I didn't give a fuck after six days.

This month's *Rolling Stone* magazine had one of those quizzes Rachel was obsessed with. I'd noticed it while thumbing through two weeks ago and put it aside so she could take it. Missing her this morning, I might have taken it myself.

What Your Music Says About Your Love Life asked a series of questions based on which songs you related to most. When I tallied up my score, the prediction it assigned to me about my future was, of course, completely inaccurate. Curious, I read the other predictions anyway. One hit home, only

I hadn't scored between a 52 and 68. That particular answer couldn't have been any more perfect for Rachel to read today if I had made the shit up myself. It read:

You've already met your destiny! Although you may not know it. You're an old soul who connects with people on a cosmic level. Trust can be an issue with you, and you often avoid relationships because you follow your head instead of your intuition, sometimes blindly. In love, sometimes you need to throw caution to the wind and jump in with both feet. You've known your soulmate for a long time, but only recently have realized it was meant to be. Stop fighting it and feed your soul.

The quiz was a series of fifteen questions. I retook it, only this time I answered as Rachel would. Drinking a scotch on the rocks, I rattled the ice around in the glass as I tallied up her answers. Her score would be somewhere between 40 and 43. *You've yet to meet your destiny!*

"Yeah. Not happening," I grumbled.

Sucking back the rest of the scotch, I figured she needed a boost of eighteen to twenty points in order to be safely ensconced where she was supposed to be. I picked the four questions where I was most certain of her answers and manually changed the point rating to increase it by five each.

"Much better. "

Jesus Christ, I've been thoroughly pussified.

I tossed the magazine on the table and scrubbed my hands over my face. What the fuck was I doing? I'd resorted to editing love quizzes and taking them as Rachel. I needed to *not* have a second drink, sober up, shower, put some clean clothes on, and go down to O'Leary's before I resorted to calling and hanging up on her just to hear her voice.

Growing some balls, that's exactly what I finally did.

I'd decided not to text her before showing up so she didn't have the

opportunity to tell me to email over the unimportant stuff I was pretending was important for her to take a look at. I drove to O'Leary's at almost the end of her shift. The thought of seeing her soon had me in a better mood than I'd been in for two weeks. I whistled along with the music on the car ride over.

Ava was behind the bar when I walked in. I remembered Rachel had said her friend's bartending abilities were limited to covering quick breaks and trips to the bathroom, so I figured she must be in the restroom or doing something in back.

I took a seat at the bar to wait, opting for the emptier side, opposite where Ava stood with her back to me while she talked to a patron. Still in my good mood, I tapped my fingers on the bar to the sound of Jack Johnson's "Better Together" playing overhead.

Unfortunately, my good mood came to a screeching halt when I glanced around the restaurant. Rachel was at a table, only she wasn't delivering food. My hands clenched into fists as I watched her sitting in a booth off in the corner with some guy. Their hands were intertwined in the middle of the table as they sat in what appeared to be deep conversation. I stared until the guy moved his head and I could get a clear look at his face. *Davis*.

What the fuck?

My first instinct was to walk over and find out what the hell was going on. I even stood and took a few steps. But then I saw something that made me freeze in place. Rachel bent her head back, laughing. Instantly I went from angry to an odd mix of feeling crushed and guilty. She was smiling again instead of looking like she was sad. Wasn't that what I'd wanted all along?

Conflicted, I watched from a distance until I was unable to take it any more. Then I turned around and quietly walked back out of the bar. I was angry, though I knew I had absolutely no right to be. And my anger was mixed heavily with regret.

It was my fault she was holding hands with another man. I'd walked away because I didn't deserve to have her, yet no one else was worthy of her either. There was no logic to my thoughts. Somehow, though, I was aware that no one would understand the decisions I'd made. So, I kept to myself, even though I needed to work out what I was going through out loud.

The entire break, I'd been cooped up in my apartment. My only daily activity, other than hitting the gym, was listening to music. If I didn't keep myself out for at least a few hours now, there was a good chance Rachel would be getting a mix tape. I was that pussified.

Left with nothing to do with myself, I decided to go for a drive. I'd let the road and my little car take me where they would. I didn't have to be at work until Monday. Getting out of the city for a night or two might be just what I needed. Pulling a U-turn, I headed for the bridge instead of the parkway that took me back to my apartment. I honestly had no particular destination in mind. So, I just drove. For hours. And when I arrived, I realized I was exactly where I needed to be.



The stairs had been replaced. Worn red brick was now white marble. Some of the bushes were new, and the little fence that surrounded the statue of the Virgin Mary hadn't been there before. But otherwise, St. Killian's looked exactly like the last time I'd walked through its doors fifteen years ago. I still remembered that visit. I'd snuck out of the house—having been punished after the shit that went down with Benny the week before. I knew she was gone. My parents had told me that much since I'd refused to even talk about anything that'd happened until I heard she was safe. But I didn't care. I needed to be here that Saturday in case somehow she came back to talk to me. I wanted to explain why I'd done what I'd done.

That afternoon, I sat in that dark booth for six straight hours. Of course she never did show up—she was long gone. I realized I'd have to live with the guilt of betraying her trust and hope she moved on.

The irony didn't escape me that I was here once again after seeing her *move on* today.

Inside, the church was empty. I had no idea why I'd come or what I was going to do when I got here. My eyes went right to the confessional, which was still there, but I wasn't about to go sit inside. Instead, I took a seat in the back pew and just looked around. It was peaceful tonight. The smell of musty incense warmed my senses. Closing my eyes, I took a few deep, cleansing breaths, spread my arms along the top of the pew, and bowed my head.

I stayed that way for an indeterminate amount of time, until the sounds of footsteps close by caused me to lift my head. An older priest came toward me. I hadn't even heard him until he was only a few pews away.

“Ha-ware-ya, son?”

It took me a minute to realize he had an Irish brogue and had just asked *how are you?*

I smiled. “I'm good. I hope it's okay to be in here.”

“No locks on these doors. We're very lucky. Very few churches can say that anymore. Great community here. You can come whenever you want.”

“Thank you.”

“Is there something you'd like to talk about?”

“I don't think so.”

“You sure? I'm known as a pretty good listener.”

“No offense, Father, but it's a woman—not sure that's your area of expertise.”

The priest smiled warmly and took a seat in the row in front of me. Turning to the side, he lifted a knee onto the seat and slung one arm over the

back of the pew to face me.

“I might be married to the Lord, but I got a mother and four sisters.” He held up four fingers. “*Four* sisters. None of the bunch ever shut the hell up, so I know a lot about women.”

I chuckled. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard a priest say hell unless he was referring to eternal damnation.”

He smiled. “It’s the new millennium, son. I have to keep up with the times. Even watch some of those *Real Housewives* shows when I go over to my sister Mary’s place. She’s addicted to that stuff.”

“That sounds like a penance.”

“Yeah, well, the Lord works in mysterious ways.”

“*That* I can wholeheartedly agree with.”

“So what brings you out this fine evening? Don’t think I’ve seen you around at any of the masses. Are you new to the area?”

“No, actually I grew up here. St. Killian’s was my church when I was a kid.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “You back in town visiting family, then?”

“No. Dad passed away years ago. Mom doesn’t live here anymore. I just...I was...” No use lying to a priest. “Thought I’d go for a drive to clear my head, and somehow I found myself here.”

“Sometimes the path is created for us, and we can only follow.”

“I suppose...”

“So tell me about your girl. What’s her name?”

“Rachel.”

He nodded. “From the book of Genesis.”

“If you say so.”

“What’s been going on with Rachel that has you lost?”

“It’s a long story, Father.”

“I’ve got nothing but time.”

“You won’t like it very much. I haven’t honored the church too well. Or priests for that matter.”

His smile was inviting and nonjudgmental, even after I’d warned him off. “We all make mistakes, son. Sometimes getting it off your chest helps.”

There was nothing to lose, except his respect. I already had none for myself. Maybe a real confession was a long time coming.

So, I took a deep breath. “Alright. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”



The priest took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “Well, that was a doozy indeed, son.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Let’s start at the beginning. What you did all those years ago...while it might’ve begun for the wrong reasons—you skipping out on working, hiding in the confessional—you came back even after you didn’t have to be here anymore.”

“Yeah.”

“Tell me, why did you keep coming back each week?”

“I knew something was off. The little girl...Rachel, I mean. She was scared. She seemed like she really needed someone to talk to about whatever was going on.”

“So you wanted to help her?”

“Yeah.” That was the truth. I had wanted to help. “But I didn’t go about it the right way. I should have told someone on day one, involved the police when I had my suspicions. Instead I played detective and got her hurt.”

The priest contemplated for a moment. “Why didn’t you go to an adult? There must have been a reason.”

“She was scared, skittish almost. I wasn’t sure what I suspected was right. I was afraid I’d scare her off and she’d trust no one after that.”

“Perhaps if you’d run off and informed the police after the first time you spoke to her, Rachel and her sister would’ve been too scared to admit the truth and denied anything was going on.”

I shook my head. “Maybe they would have told the truth and been taken out of that hell sooner.”

“Sometimes in life, pain is unavoidable, son. We do the best we can. It seems to me that you brought the situation to an end. Had you *not* come back that next week, it could have gone on for years. Many teenage boys wouldn’t have given up their Saturday afternoons to befriend a young girl.”

I raked my fingers through my hair. “I don’t know.”

“Do you believe in God, son?”

It had been a long time since I walked into church, but that didn’t change my faith. As miserable as I was, and as screwed up as my connection to the church was, I still believed in a higher power.

“I do.”

“That’s good. You need to heed the destiny He has chosen for you. And the only way to honor that is to accept it and embrace it with truth.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“There is no such thing as coincidence. Coincidence appears to be a remarkable concurrence of events that have no plausible connection. But there is always a connection. God is always the connection.”

I was skeptical. “So you think God put us both in that confessional at the same time?”

“I do.” He was steadfast in his answer. “And even more importantly, I believe God brought you back together again for a reason.”

“And what’s that reason?”

“That.” He pointed a finger at me. “Is for you to figure out. It appears He’s giving you a second chance. What you do with it is up to you.”

I shook my head. Maybe he was right. Maybe we were back together for me to come clean with Rachel, or maybe this second chance was about something more. But doing the right thing by her was fifteen years in the making.

“Thanks, Father.”

He reached over and extended a hand to me. “I’ll give you some space so you can do what you came here to do—think.”

We shook. “Thank you.”

He stepped out of the pew, took a few steps toward the altar, and then turned back to me. “Four Hail Marys, two Our Fathers, and an act of faith.” Seeing the look on my face, he explained. “Your penance. I don’t believe in just saying prayers to atone for your sins. Sometimes I give an act of virtue of some sort as part of your contrition—an act of charity, an act of hope... I’m going easy on the prayers for you, but I want the act of faith to be significant.”

I sat alone in the back of the church for almost another hour, thinking. Eventually I decided it was time to go. But as I headed out, I couldn’t resist taking a look, returning to the scene of the crime.

I smiled when the door to the old confessional creaked open just like it used to. The inside looked almost exactly the same, maybe a little more time-worn. Taking a seat in that chair where everything had started, I took a look around. The decor hadn’t changed much either. Only a simple gold cross hung on the wall. I stared at it for a while, then my head fell into my hands and my eyes closed.

So many questions swirled around. *Could there be some truth in that Rachel and her sister might have denied anything going on if I’d told*

someone right away? Could she forgive what I'd done and all the lies then and now? Even if she could, had Rachel already moved on? Is it better that she did? Seeing her earlier with Davis—the happy look on her face as she laughed—hurt like hell. I wanted to be the one to make her smile. Maybe that was my act of faith, part of my penance of sacrifice.

I didn't know what the hell I was supposed to do. It was possible I was more confused now than when I'd wandered in. *I know I've been a crap parishioner, but a sign might be nice.*

Feeling defeated, I opened my eyes and looked down at the worn carpet. A shiny penny stared at me, heads facing up. I laughed and reached down to pick it up. Even after all these years, I could still hear her little voice.

“Find a penny, pick it up, and all day long you'll have good luck.”

God, she was still with me. Even after all these years and everything we'd been through. How could I let her go?

And then it hit me.

I could let her go physically. But she'd be taking my heart with her. I needed to at least give her the truth and let her decide what to do with it.

Just like I'd done before when I sat in this seat, I flipped the copper penny over and over between my thumb and pointer. Closing it into my palm after a minute, I looked up at the cross.

“Thanks. I'm gonna need it.”



Chapter 39

Rachel

If he really cared, he would have done something about it.

That was tough to accept. Even though Caine had given me no reason to hang on to hope, I had been. But tonight I felt like whatever I'd been clinging to had finally snapped.

"It's killing me to see you like this," Ava said.

We'd just locked up O'Leary's at the end of the night. Since it had been slow, I'd done everything I needed to before we closed, except total out the register, which I was currently doing. I stopped counting and looked up at my friend.

"I'll be fine. It was just a rough night."

She took a seat at the bar. "Maybe you shouldn't have told Davis you weren't interested. He's a nice guy. Might help you to get over the fuckwad."

I smiled. Ava had been Team Caine right up until the moment I told her he'd broken things off. Now she had a wide assortment of names for him, none of which were Caine.

"I just don't understand why he showed up here tonight."

"Caine? I don't know. But he didn't look happy. He stared at the two of you sitting in that booth over there and didn't even hear me call his name. I thought for sure he was going to storm over and throw a punch."

Although that would have been upsetting, at least it would have shown me he cared. No man sees a woman he has feelings for and walks out. *Especially* the moment Caine had apparently walked in on. Finding out he'd stopped by O'Leary's and left when he saw me holding hands with Davis felt like it was finally the end. I'd been imagining seeing something still there in his eyes. But Charlie had been right—if you want to know whether a man's heart is still in it, show him you've moved on. I'd been seeing what I wanted to see instead of the truth.

“Well, he didn't. And that says more to me than anything.”

“Men suck.”

I finished counting out the register and put the money in the leather bag we used to store it in overnight in the safe.

“That about summarizes things.”

On the drive home, I gave myself a pep talk. I was over Caine West—I hadn't really fallen in love with him. It was just lust. My nine-month dry spell had me confusing the two. I needed to get out more, maybe date people my own age. This was for the best. Goodbye, Caine West. Tomorrow comes with or without you, so I don't need you to continue.

I prescribed my own musical therapy on the way home. Listening to Rachel Platten's “Fight Song” had me feeling that I was not only going to be fine, but was actually better off without Caine. *I'm pumped to be dumped*, I thought to myself, laughing.

I parked my car in the overpriced lot near my apartment and sighed audibly. Convincing my head was a heck of a lot easier than convincing my heart. And with those two at odds, my emotions were all over the place. I went from pumped to plummeted in the span of turning off the car and

walking five blocks home alone.

Lost in thought, I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings. My footsteps were sluggish, and an unexpected panic hit me as I turned the corner to my building. I looked over my shoulder, across the street, up and down the block—all the while feeling a strong wave of anxiety. That feeling grew as I walked faster toward home. It wasn't until I opened the outer door to my apartment building that the reason for my anxiety made itself known.

I jumped and screamed as I found someone standing in the vestibule. On instinct, I pulled back and punched as hard as I could, squeezing my eyes shut.

“Shit!” the intruder yelled.

Only...that voice. It wasn't an intruder at all.

“Caine! What the hell? You scared the shit out of me. Again!”

His hand went to his face where I'd just decked him. “I can see that. You're packing a pretty nice punch, Feisty.”

“I'm sorry. Are you okay?” My heart was beating out of my chest.

“Yeah, I'll be fine. Don't worry about it. I didn't mean to scare you. I was ringing the bell. I figured you'd be home by now since O'Leary's closed at midnight.”

“Are you sure you're okay?”

He moved his hand, and I could see his cheek already starting to turn red and swell.

Caine nodded. “I deserved it anyway.”

Once the rush of adrenaline began to wear off, I realized my hand hurt, a lot. Opening and closing it, I wondered if I might have broken something.

“You hurt my hand.”

Caine pulled his head back. “I hurt your hand? You punched me.”

“Yeah, but it's your fault for scaring the crap out of me. Again. What is it

with you waiting in here anyway?”

“Let me see your hand.”

I held it out. It wasn't cut or anything, but the knuckles on the middle and pointer fingers had started to swell. Caine took my hand in his and gently ran his thumb over my knuckles. A bolt of electricity shot through me that had nothing to do with the injury. I pulled my hand back quickly.

“That hurt?”

I lied. “Yeah.”

“We should put some ice on it.”

Hearing him say *we*, reminded me *he* shouldn't even be here in the first place.

“What are you doing here?”

Caine looked down, then up at me. His beauty kicked my pulse up again. He looked tired and stressed, and had a lump growing on his face where I'd punched him, yet he was still absolutely gorgeous. The kind of handsome that never grows old because each time you're amazed at the effect it has on you.

His voice was tender. “I need to talk to you. Please.”

“It's late.”

“It can't wait.”

When I hesitated before opening the door, he took that as a sign I might not be comfortable inviting him up.

“We could go get a cup of coffee or just take a walk, if you want.”

I dug into my purse for my keys. “No, it's fine. I want to change out of my work clothes anyway.”

The elevator ride was awkward. The doors were silver and reflected Caine looking at me. I kept my eyes trained up, watching each floor illuminate as if the car was dependent on me for movement. The damn thing moved at a snail's pace.

Inside my apartment, I went to the kitchen, dug a bag of frozen peas from the freezer, and handed them to Caine. “Your cheek is swelling.”

“It’s fine. Use that for your hand.”

I set the bag down on the kitchen counter and practically ran to my bedroom to change, needing to gather my thoughts. “I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

Twenty minutes ago, I’d been angry-singing “Fight Song” in the car, wishing the man a good riddance, and now I was getting my hopes up because he’d showed up at my door. I was pathetic. What was he doing here? Had he been drinking? He’d better not think he was showing up for a booty call. *Sex with Caine*. I cursed my libido for even considering it.

I changed into a pair of yoga pants and a tank top, brushed my hair, and washed up. I might have even spritzed on some perfume. (Don’t judge.) As I was about to walk back to the living room, I realized I wasn’t in the right frame of mind yet. Grabbing my iPhone, I opened my playlist and scrolled until I found something to change my mood back to pissed off. I stopped at Three Days Grace’s “I Hate Everything About You.”

That’ll do.

Lying back on my bed, I shut my eyes, popped in my earbuds, and reset myself. After, I felt stronger and ready to face Caine.

He was in his usual spot, looking at the photos on the wall when I finally emerged.

“Can I get you something to drink?” I walked past him and headed to the kitchen for a bottle of water, though I really could have used something stronger.

“No, thanks.”

Twisting off the cap, I took a long drink while his eyes followed my every move. “So what do you need to talk about?”

“Could we sit?”

Caine waited for me to take a seat. I was closer to the couch but intentionally sat in the chair across from it so we wouldn't wind up sitting too close. Tonight our roles were reversed. But I needed space to think straight when he was near.

After he sat, he clasped his hands together, rested his elbows on his knees, and dropped his head, staring down at his feet. I'd never seen Caine look so nervous. He was generally the epitome of composure. The longer the silence stretched between us, the more anxious I became.

After what was probably only two or three minutes, yet seemed like an eternity, Caine blew out a ragged breath. When he finally raised his head to look at me, his eyes were glassy and filled with pain. I wanted to reach out so badly, but I had to protect myself. Whatever was hurting him would soon be hurting me.

“I don't know where to start,” his voice was hoarse.

There's only one answer when a person looks as troubled as Caine did. “How about at the beginning?”

He nodded. “That's where I should have started weeks ago.” He searched my eyes. “I know you don't owe me anything, but can you promise me something?”

“What?”

“Hear me out until I finish.”

“Okay...”

Caine just kept shaking his head. “Do you remember the first night we met?”

“In the bar? Yes.”

“I said you looked familiar to me. You thought I was feeding you a line. At the time, I couldn't place it, but after finding out you went to Brooklyn

College, I chalked it up to having seen you around.”

I furrowed my brows. “Are you saying we met before?”

Caine nodded. His face was so solemn. “It was a long time ago.”

“Where did we meet?”

“In church.”

What the heck was he talking about? My head tilted to the side.

“Church?”

Caine dragged his fingers through his hair and stared at me. The look on his face was breaking my heart.

“Do you remember going to St. Killian’s to talk to a priest every Saturday?”

My eyes widened, and my body went still. “How do you know about that?”

He searched my eyes. “It wasn’t a priest. It was me.”



I think I was in shock. I didn’t understand what I was feeling. I wasn’t upset or angry—I just felt sort of...numb, like I was lost in a heavy fog and couldn’t figure out which way to go. My palms were clammy and legs heavy, even though I was sitting. A wave of lightheadedness mixed with nausea washed over me, and I held on to the sides of the chair.

“Rachel?”

I heard Caine say my name, but I wasn’t really listening.

“Rachel? Maybe you should lie down.”

That was probably what I should’ve done, considering how I felt, but I needed answers.

“When did you figure out it was me?”

Caine smiled sadly and reached into his pocket. When he pulled his hand

out, he opened his fist to show me a dozen or so pennies in his palm.

“I kept them all. I have no idea why. But I did. All these years.”

Confused, I took one from his hand. “These are...”

He nodded. “The ones you used to toss into the confessional so I’d have good luck.”

“You kept them?”

“Honestly, I knew I was doing something wrong even then, but after I realized you believed in good luck despite all the shit swirling around you, I couldn’t have walked away if I’d wanted to. I don’t know why I kept them, but when I saw you toss pennies on the floor of my bedroom a few weeks ago, it just clicked.”

“Why didn’t you tell me then, if you realized that day?”

“I wasn’t sure. I guess a part of me didn’t want to believe it was you, that *you’d* lived with that fucking monster. I needed to be positive. Tossing pennies could have just been an odd coincidence. So the next time the opportunity presented itself, I asked you if your mother had ever remarried.”

My face dropped. “And I said no.”

Caine nodded. “Then at your sister’s—”

“She mentioned Benny.”

He nodded again. “That’s not all. There’s more, Rachel.”

What else could he possibly be hiding? “More?”

“You know the fight Benny got into at the shop?”

“Yeah?”

“It wasn’t a customer. It was me. That Saturday after I’d told you to meet me the next morning, I followed you home, just in case you didn’t show up. Then when you didn’t show up at the church on Sunday, I was coming to check on you. A few blocks from your house, I stopped to get gas, and I saw the same car parked at the station that had been parked in your driveway the

day before. I stopped at the place he worked, completely by coincidence.”

“And what happened?”

“I told him to keep away from you and your sister. He said some horrible stuff, and then he came at me with a wrench.”

“He hurt you?”

“Couple of cuts and bruises, but I was fine.”

My head was spinning. “I don’t feel so good.”

“I’m so sorry, Rachel. For everything. For lying to you all those years ago. For not going to the police and getting help sooner. For getting you hurt. If I hadn’t told you to come meet me, that animal wouldn’t have caught you packing, and he…” The pain in Caine’s voice was agonizing. “He wouldn’t have hurt you. I’m so sorry.”

As much as it upset me to see Caine distraught, I needed to be alone. I needed some time to think. It was too much to take in at once.

Talking to that priest had been a lifetime ago. I couldn’t remember all the things I’d told him, but back then, I was lost. He was the only person who made me feel safe. Finding out none of it was real made me feel…confused, angry, *violated*.

But worst of all, I was ashamed. I’d always regretted hiding what was going on for so long, and I felt responsible for not stopping what my sister went through sooner.

“I need to lie down.” I felt Caine looking at me, but I couldn’t bear to meet his eyes. “You should go.”

He was quiet for a moment while I continued to look away. Then I heard him stand. His voice was a whisper.

“I’m sorry, Rachel. I’m so sorry.”

A collection of black and white musical symbols including a treble clef, a bass clef, a musical staff with notes, and various note heads and stems, arranged in a cluster.

Chapter 40

Rachel

I'd wanted to come back for so many years. But that part of my life was a locked box, and I'd been afraid to open it for fear of finding things inside I couldn't stuff back in. Yet over the last four days, since Caine had revealed so much, the call to come back here had gotten so strong I couldn't ignore it any more.

There was no service going on, but in the last ten minutes people had started to wander in and sit in the pews near the confessional. Perhaps, they were waiting for a session to start. I sat on the other side of the church, lost in my thoughts for the better part of an hour. My attention kept drifting over to the people going in and out of the confessional door—the sinners. A woman with a young child walked in and sat down. The little girl was probably about ten years old, not much older than I was when I'd started to come on Saturdays.

After an older gentleman exited the confessional, the woman leaned over and said something to the little girl before going inside for her turn. It reminded me of when I used to come with my mom before she got sick. I closed my eyes and saw Mom and me sitting in those pews twenty years ago.

“You know how when you have a stomachache or a fever and you go to the doctor?” she said as we waited for her turn to go into the weird room.

“Yeah.”

“Well, this is where you come when something is bothering you inside here.” Mom patted her chest.

“When my chest hurts? Like when Riley had pa-noma?”

Mom laughed. “Pneumonia and no. Not your chest. What’s inside of you that makes you feel a certain way.”

I crinkled up my nose. “What’s inside of me?”

“Your soul. It’s the thing you can’t name. It’s the truth of what makes you you.”

I laughed. “I don’t understand.”

Mom smiled. “You don’t have to right now. Just remember this is a place you can come to talk to God about anything.”

“What if He’s busy?”

She leaned over and kissed the top of my head. “Then one of His angels will be listening.”

I hadn’t even realized I was crying until a tear landed on my folded hands. Opening my eyes, I looked over to where the little girl was sitting, and the pews were all empty. She was gone, and so was her mother. They’d gone without my even noticing. The open confessional door caught my attention. Looking around, I realized I was the only person left in the church. My chest had a crushing sensation inside from the old memories of my mom.

“Well, this is where you come when something is bothering you inside here.”

“What’s inside of me?”

“It’s the truth of what makes you you.”

Before I could debate it, I’d stood and headed over to the confessional.

It was surreal to step inside after all these years. I might be twenty-five now, but it was a ten-year-old girl who took a seat. Nothing had changed. The

room looked the same as it had the last time I'd stepped inside. I could hear breathing on the other side of the confessional—the priest was waiting. And this time I'd seen him walk in. I knew it was actually a priest.

Eventually, after I debated walking out over and over, I took a deep breath and slid open the wooden window that covered the lattice screen.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been fifteen years since my last confession.”



Except for a few *go on and tell me more* comments, the priest had been relatively quiet. After a rocky start where I wasn't sure how to begin or what to say, I miraculously babbled on for the better part of half an hour. It was the most I'd ever spoken to anyone about my mother, my sister, my guilt, or the years of struggle over being ashamed for what I'd allowed to happen.

“What brought you here today? It sounds like you've been doing a lot of *tinking* of late.” *Thinking*—I thought I'd heard a brogue.

Even though I'd come here with confusion over Caine, we really hadn't spoken about him much. What was bothering me, I'd realized, had little to do with him and more to do with me.

“It's a really long story.”

“I've got nothing but time, my dear.”

I guess priests have heard it all, because after I finished my crazy story, he didn't sound even the slightest bit shocked.

“Is there anything else you'd like to confess today?”

“Well, it's been a really long time, so I'm sure I have a ton. I use bad language pretty frequently.”

The priest was quiet for a moment. “For your penance, I want you to say one Hail Mary and one Our Father and complete two acts of forgiveness.”

“Okay.”

I stood and looked at the lattice. The priest was facing the door, and I could only make out a vague profile.

“Thank you for listening, Father.”

I had one hand on the door when he stopped me. “Rachel?”

“Yes?”

“That first act of forgiveness should be easy. You haven’t done anything wrong. You need to forgive yourself.”

After I said my prayers, I returned to my car. It wasn’t until I was halfway home that something dawned on me. I hadn’t told him my name, yet the priest had called me Rachel.



On the way back, I did a lot of thinking. I decided to stop in at O’Leary’s and ask for a few days off. My head wasn’t in a good place, and I really needed to work on my thesis anyway. It was late afternoon, and the bar was quiet, with just a few ex-cop regulars hanging around with Charlie.

“Hey, Charlie. You have a minute?”

“Sure, sweetheart. You’re a heck of a lot more pleasant to look at than these two old guys.” He thumbed his finger at his buddies with a smile.

I took a seat at the other end of the bar, and Charlie filled a glass with Diet Coke before coming to talk to me.

“Would it be okay if I took a few days off? I can ask Ava to cover me.”

“Everything okay?”

“I just need to get caught up on some schoolwork.”

“Sure. Of course. And don’t worry about getting Ava to cover you. I’ll cover your shifts.”

“Thanks, Charlie. I really appreciate it.”

“Oh, by the way.” He walked to the register and lifted the money tray, removing an envelope from underneath. “Glad you and that professor broke up. I ran him. He’s got a record.”

“You ran him?”

He tossed the envelope on the counter. “Yeah. Told you I was going to check out the guys sniffing around you girls from now on. Guy’s got a record for assault. It’s old, and it was sealed because he was a juvie. But not too many criminals change their stripes.”

Rather than attempt to explain anything, I just said thank you. It was a fitting end to the day I’d had. When a few new patrons came in, Charlie went to make some wings, and I decided to open the envelope.

It was surreal to read a police report that involved Caine and Benny. The top half was all informational—name, date, location, time of incident. At the bottom of the page was a section labeled Narrative of Incident, and a paragraph had been written in an officer’s chicken-scratch handwriting:

On 8-3-02 at 15:35 hours, suspect committed an act of assault on an unrelated thirty-nine-year-old man. There were no witnesses to the attack, but when I arrived on the scene, the suspect was standing over the victim, who was unconscious. I observed cuts and blood on the suspect’s knuckles, consistent with the victim’s assault. Ambulance number 4631 was dispatched and arrived on the scene at 15:48 hours. The victim regained consciousness during the time the paramedics were treating him. The suspect admitted he had assaulted the victim but refused to give a statement other than requesting that police and social services be sent to 3361 Robbins Lane within the town of Pleasantville. Units were dispatched to the address to investigate. The suspect was searched and cuffed and placed into the back of the squad car while the scene was secured. He remained there until 16:50 when he was transported to the 33rd precinct for processing of charges on second-degree

assault.

While I'd already known everything I read, somehow seeing it all on paper hit me. Caine had put my sister and me before himself, making sure we got the attention we needed before even considering what might happen to him. He'd done the same thing again a few weeks ago—or, at least he thought he had—choosing to sacrifice his own happiness for mine when he'd broken things off to avoid dredging up the past.

I closed my eyes. The memory of my mom that had come back today as I sat in the church once again flooded my thoughts. She'd told me to come to the church if I ever needed to talk, and God would listen.

“What if He’s busy?”

She leaned over and kissed the top of my head. “Then one of His angels will be listening.”

Suddenly everything was clear. It wasn't Caine I needed to forgive. He'd never done anything but try to protect me. I needed to forgive myself in order to accept him into my heart. I could run the other way, but it was too late, he already had my heart.

Charlie must have noticed me in deep thought and mistook that for being upset.

“You okay?” He pointed to the ripped envelope on the bar and the papers I'd been reading.

“I am now. Thanks, Charlie.”



Chapter 41

Caine

Rachel's text was the last thing I expected. I read back through the ambiguous exchange from an hour ago.

Rachel: *Could we talk tomorrow after class?*

Caine: *Of course. Is everything okay?*

Rachel: *Yes. Everything is fine.*

Caine: *Do you want to discuss something related to school or your thesis?*

Rachel: *No.*

I knew she generally ran off to work on Tuesdays after class.

Caine: *Don't you have to work after class?*

Rachel: *No. I took a week off.*

There was no damn way I was going to get any sleep tonight. I was too anxious. Of course, my mind started to screw with me, imagining all sorts of shit—like why she'd taken a week off. I pictured her sitting on a plane, heading to some exotic destination with that Davis tool. Even though a chunk of time had passed since our last text, I picked up the phone in an attempt to find out something that might help me relax.

Caine: *Are you going somewhere?*

She typed back a few minutes later.

Rachel: *No. Not going anywhere.*

Further attempts to relax after that were just as futile. Eventually I grabbed my keys and decided tomorrow was way too long to wait to hear what Rachel had to say. I'd given her the space she'd asked for, but if she was finally ready to talk, I had a lot I needed to say, too.

After I got to her place, I realized it was pretty late. Not wanting to scare her by buzzing the door at almost eleven, I decided to text first.

Caine: *Are you awake?*

The dots started to jump around. That answered that question.

Rachel: *Yes.*

Caine: *Think we can do a little earlier than after class tomorrow?*

Rachel: *Sure. What time?*

Caine: *Right now.*

Rachel: *I think it's better if we speak in person.*

Caine: *Me too. I'm downstairs. Can I come up?*

My phone rang a minute later.

“Are you joking?”

I pressed her bell in response. “That’s me.”

After she buzzed me in, I waited in front of the elevator. The damn thing was too slow. Now that I was here and she'd let me in, I was desperate to see her. My heart beat unnaturally fast in my chest as I waited. Impatient, I looked around for a door leading to a stairwell. Once I found it, I flung it open to take the stairs two at a time.

Rachel's door opened just as I arrived on her floor. “You're really here.”

I couldn't tell whether she was happy or upset that I'd come without warning—her face was mostly just shock.

“I am.”

She stood in the doorway in a thin, cotton T-shirt and shorts. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and her face was wiped clean of makeup. I’d seen her looking beautiful all dressed up for an opera, but she was never more beautiful than in this moment.

“Can I come in?”

She stepped aside. “Sure. Of course.”

On the drive over, I’d decided that before she said whatever was on her mind—whether that be telling me off, telling me she was seeing someone else, telling me to fuck off, or even on the long shot that she’d be telling me she was willing to give me another chance—I was going to tell her how I felt about her. I was done keeping secrets from this woman.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

My mouth was parched from nerves and the race up the stairs. “Some water would be great. Thanks.”

While Rachel got me some water, I looked around the room, finding the wall of photos that always caught my attention. My eyes fixated on the photo of Rachel and her roommates. *Davis*, to be specific. I needed to know. So, when she brought me the water, I asked point blank without any preamble.

“Are you seeing Davis again?”

“No.”

“I saw you with him last week at O’Leary’s.”

“I know.”

“You saw me?”

“No. Ava saw you. Why didn’t you stay to talk to me if you came all the way there?”

I hung my head. “I was trying to do the right thing.”

“The right thing? What does that mean?”

“Let you be with someone better for you than me. Walk away.”

She seemed to contemplate that for a moment. “Why are you here now then?”

I sighed. “Because I’m a selfish asshole.”

“I don’t understand.”

I waited until she was looking in my eyes and decided to say what I should have said weeks ago. “I lied to you. I kept things from you. I got you hurt. I’m the reason you have a scar on your back. You have zero reasons to want to trust me or give me another chance, but I have to try.” I took a deep breath. “I have to try because I love you, Rachel. I’m so fucking desperately in love with you.”

She looked like she might cry. Dread knotted in the pit of my stomach.

“I don’t blame you for anything that happened, Caine. That’s not why I couldn’t see you for a while. I couldn’t see you because I couldn’t *look* at you. I’m so ashamed of everything that happened.”

“Ashamed? What are you talking about? You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

Rachel looked down. “I let things go on for a long time and didn’t tell anyone. I should have gone to the police. Or told a teacher. If I had been less afraid, maybe my sister wouldn’t have gotten things so badly. Maybe she wouldn’t have spent half her life in and out of rehab. I was the only one who could have done something about what was going on, and I didn’t.”

I placed my hand under Rachel’s chin and lifted, forcing her to look at me. My heart broke when I saw tears streaming down her face.

“You did nothing wrong. You have *nothing* to be ashamed of. *Nothing.*”

“I should have—“

“You should have been a ten-year-old girl who went out and rode her bike without a care in the world. That’s what you should have been doing.

The only person who did anything wrong to your sister was *Benny*. You were ten and scared and didn't even fully understand everything that was happening. And even then, you *did* try to tell someone. You told me. I was older. I should've known better and gotten help."

"You *did* help. If it weren't for you, I don't know how long it would have gone on."

"I should have stopped it sooner."

She shook her head. "The other day I was thinking about what made me go into that church to begin with, and I remembered a conversation I had with my mom. She told me to go there if something was ever bothering me inside. She said it was a place I could go to talk to God about anything. I was probably only about five when she told me that, so I took her advice very literally. I asked her what would happen if God was busy. And you know what she said?"

"What?"

"She told me if He was busy, one of His angels would listen."

I stared at her, mesmerized by how strong and smart she'd been even back then. "Your mom sounds like a really special person, very spiritual."

"She was. And she was also right, Caine. Don't you see that? God was busy, so He sent me an angel. My own guardian angel. God sent me you."

It didn't matter that I looked like a pussy, I started to cry.

Rachel placed her hand over my heart. "It's time we both let go of the past."

"I'm so sorry for everything, Rachel."

"There's nothing for you to be sorry for."

Leaning in, I cupped her beautiful face in my hands and kissed her with everything in me. Her cheeks were flushed when it broke.

"I almost forgot," she said.

“What?”

Rachel took a step back and lifted her T-shirt off of her body. She wasn't wearing a bra, and I couldn't hide the expression on my face.

“Hold that thought, Professor. I want to show you something else.”

She turned around and looked at me over her shoulder. On the bottom left side of her lower back was a big bandage.

“What happened?”

“Take the tape off. But do it gently because I'm still a little sore.”

As I began to peel back the tape, I realized the area she had covered was her scar from Benny fifteen years ago.

“Did something happen to your scar?”

She smiled. “It's not a scar. It's just a cut that healed. The real scars are the ones you can't see—those are the hardest to heal.”

Lifting the dressing, I had no words, seeing what she had done. I could no longer see the long scar that had marred her beautiful skin. It was covered by a tattoo of an angel.

“That's you,” she said. “I'd buried so much so I wouldn't have to deal with old emotions. Everything coming out now wasn't easy, but I finally feel like I'm on the other side of those memories. They'll always be there, but I can see them in the rearview mirror now instead of in front of me.”

I was so choked up, my voice croaked when I spoke. “It's beautiful. Just like you.”

“I can keep the bandage off now. The guy at the tattoo parlor told me to leave it on for up to eight hours. I just got it done today.”

Rachel turned back around to face me. Her tits were so damn full and perky, I couldn't help but be distracted by them.

“Caine?”

“Huh?” My eyes lifted back to meet hers.

She looked amused. “There’s just one problem.”

“What’s that?”

“I can’t lie on my back.”

“That’s not a problem, Feisty. I can think of a lot of ways to be inside you without you being on your back.”

I leaned down and scooped her into my arms. Cradling her, I walked to the bedroom.

“Tell me, do you want to ride me, be on all fours, bend over the footboard, or spoon fuck? Or maybe you’d just rather sit on my face?”

I set Rachel down on the edge of the bed, removed her shorts and panties, and began to shed my own clothes. When I got down to my boxer briefs, I hooked my fingers in the sides and looked at her as I pulled them down. My cock was painfully hard.

“What’s your pleasure, sweetheart? Which one are you in the mood for?”

Rachel licked her lips. “I have to pick just one?”

I stepped out of my boxers and stroked myself a few times. “No, babe, you’re picking the first position. We’re going to do them all. Tomorrow you’re going to be so sore, it will hurt when you sit down in class. And I’m going to watch you sit and know exactly why you’re squirming in your seat. Then I’m going to have a hard-on for the entire class. Pick one so we can start making you sore.”

“Ride you. I want to ride you.”

Her face was so sexy with that impish smile. I climbed up on the bed, settling my back against the headboard, and lifted her onto my thighs. I wanted to watch her face while she took my cock into her body.

“Are you wet?” I slipped my fingers between her legs and found her completely soaked.

She nodded.

Gripping my cock, I held it near the base. “Take it. Nice and slow. I want to watch it disappear inside your pussy.”

Rachel lifted onto her knees, placing her hands on my shoulders for balance, and hovered over the glistening crown of my cock. I had the strongest urge to thrust up and bury myself deep inside her, but I didn’t. She wanted to ride me, and I wanted to give her anything she wanted.

“Christ,” I groaned as she began to lower herself onto my cock. She was so tight and hot. I was captivated by the sight of her pussy sucking me inside. It had only been a few weeks since we were last together, but I was starving for her like it had been years.

She lifted up and down a few times, easing me farther and farther in until she was seated with me fully inside, her ass pressed against my balls. When she started to gyrate her hips, I pressed my thumb to her clit and rubbed small circles, while I grabbed hold of her ponytail with the other.

“Ride me, Feisty. Ride me *hard*.”

She moaned, so I yanked a little harder. With her head back, her magnificent tits were right at my eye level. I watched them bouncing up and down, taking my eyes off only long enough to lean forward and suck a nipple into my mouth—one and then the other. Rachel’s speed increased—bobbing up and down, lifting halfway off my cock and taking me back in with a rhythm that was so fucking perfect. Just fucking perfect.

Whimpering, she began to lose steam as her orgasm took hold. I grabbed her hips and took over where she’d left off, thrusting up into her from underneath while she met me with whatever she had left. The tight squeeze of her pussy and her moaning my name over and over as she came undone had me thrusting harder and harder until my name was barely a whisper from her lips. I swallowed every last one of those moans in a kiss. Then I buried myself as deep as I possibly could and came long and hard inside of her.

“I love you, Rachel Martin,” I mumbled against her lips.

“I love you, too, Caine West.”

We stayed like that for a long time, her sitting on my lap, me caressing her face.

I just couldn't get over the way things had turned out. I was awestruck by her beauty, inside and out—and by the way fate had brought us back together again.

“What? You're looking at me funny,” she said.

“It's just so crazy how many years this has been in the making, how we found our way back to each other.”

Rachel smiled and tilted her head. “You know you're the reason we met again, right?”

“I think Professor Clarence dying had something to do with it.”

“Maybe. But if it weren't for you, I might not have even discovered the power of music for therapy. All those years ago, you gave me your headphones and told me to listen to music—to concentrate on the words whenever I was upset. I listened, and it really helped. That's how I really got into music.”

I thought back. “I did give you headphones, didn't I?”

“You did. You know I wrote you a letter the morning everything happened. Well, not you, but fake-priest you.”

“Oh yeah? Did you get to bring it to the church?”

“No. I don't even know what happened to it. Got thrown out when we went to live with my aunt and uncle, I guess.”

“What did it say?”

“I don't remember exactly. But I know I thanked you for talking to me every week.”

“I went back on Saturdays for a month just in case you came back. It felt

like something was missing each time I went and you weren't there."

"There was. A little piece of your heart." She smiled. "I kept it and brought it back to you."

"No, you didn't, Rachel. You've always had my heart, and I don't ever want it back."



Epilogue

Rachel

“If you’re going to ban sex, you need to start wearing a bra around the house,” Caine grumbled as he leaned down and planted a chaste kiss on my lips. He also slipped his hand under my shirt and pinched my nipple. *Hard.*

“Oww.”

“You love it, and you know it.”

My fiancé was grumpy, but he was also right. I secretly loved that he was growing more irritable by the day since I’d cut him off almost two weeks ago.

My eyes softened as I looked up at him. “What time will you be back?”

“Probably not until six. I need to go over all the grading my shit-for-brains TA has done before turning the final grades in.”

Caine was extremely unhappy with the TA he’d been assigned this year. I smiled.

“Once you’ve had the best, everyone else seems inferior.”

“You were a good TA. But I might’ve been influenced because of your great T and A. Come to think of it, since you’re not even giving me T and A now, *you* should at least give me the TA and do my grading.”

“No can do, Professor. I have a full day ahead of me. I need to finish packing the last of my things here this morning. Your sister and I are taking

the girls to pick up their dresses and then out to lunch. After that, I have to go see Father McDonald to give him our readings and music choices. So you're going to need to take care of things yourself."

He pouted. "I've been taking care of myself for two weeks."

I stood from the chair where I'd been sipping my morning coffee and pushed up on my tippy toes as I wrapped my arms around Caine's neck.

"It's just two more days. Think how much more exciting it will be when we finally go to bed Saturday night after the reception is over. And the next time you make love to me, I'll be Mrs. Caine West."

His eyes softened. "I do like the sound of that. Although I only agreed to wait until after the wedding. I never said anything about after the reception."

"What did you think? We're going to have sex in the car on the drive from the church to the restaurant?"

"I was thinking we could do it in the confessional, right after the priest says you're stuck with me for the rest of your life."

"That's twisted on so many levels, even for you."

Caine laughed. "I gotta run or I'm going to be late starting the exam. So give me that mouth and kiss me properly to get me through another day of celibacy."

In one motion, he reached a hand around my back and squeezed my ass as he lifted me. My legs wrapped around his waist. His mouth melded to mine, the kiss hard and passionate. I moaned into his mouth as he backed me up to the wall and pinned me against it, using his hips so his hands could roam my body.

Yes, my soon-to-be husband definitely knew how to kiss me properly.

After he begrudgingly left my apartment without getting laid, I looked around at the sparse furnishings I had left to pack. Since we'd decided I was moving into Caine's place, we'd been taking stuff there over the last month.

Pretty much the only things left to box up were my wall of framed pictures, my books, and some personal things in the bathroom. I took on the books first and then moved to the wall.

I'd added some new pictures to my display over the last year: Caine and me at my graduation from grad school. I was facing the camera, smiling proudly about getting my degree, and Caine was looking at me with the same proud smile. Me and the crew from O'Leary's on my last night working there. Charlie had his arm draped around my shoulder. He'd been a hard sell on accepting that Caine wasn't a violent criminal. Ultimately, one night after Caine and I were back together, I'd told Charlie my entire story. After so many years of keeping everything pent up, it was odd to share it openly—but the more I talked about it, the farther back in the rearview mirror those ugly days went.

I missed working at O'Leary's, but I loved my new job as a musical therapist. I worked as an independent contractor for a school district, doing one-on-one therapy with autistic children. It was a job that felt more like a reward than a grind. Caine and I had dinner with Charlie every week at O'Leary's. He might not be my employer anymore, but he was the closest thing I'd had to a father figure since my uncle passed away. In fact, Charlie would be giving me away in two days. I suspected Caine would be getting a good eye-squint warning at the altar from him.

Even though my research was done and my thesis published, we still kept in touch with Lydia and Umberto. The first Sunday of every month, Caine and I brought Murphy to visit. I wasn't sure who got more from our visits—us or them.

I packed two boxes of framed photos, feeling sentimental as I folded the bubble wrap over each memory. The last one I packed was the photo of my mother on the swing in our yard. I brushed my fingers over her beautiful face

through the glass. *Thanks, Mom.* Without her advice to seek the church, I might never have met Caine.

The small slide-locks that kept the back of the frame on and the picture in place must have moved when I took the photo from the wall. As I reached for the bubble wrap, the cardboard back of the frame opened, and something fluttered to the ground. It was a folded-up piece of paper. Thinking it was probably a receipt or the sample picture that had come inside the frame, I picked it up and unfolded it.

I froze when I saw the handwriting on it.

Because it was my own.

It was less developed and messier than it was now, but it was mine. And I knew exactly what it was—the letter I’d written to the fake priest sixteen years ago. Until that moment, I hadn’t remembered putting it behind Mom’s picture. I steadied myself and took a deep breath before reading what I’d written.

Dear Father,

I’m sorry I didn’t get to meet you when I was supposed to. My stepfather found out we were going to run away and got really mad. He said if he ever caught the person who was going to help us, he’d hurt them. So I can’t come talk to you on Saturdays anymore, because I don’t want him to hurt you. But I wanted to say thank you. Thank you for the headphones and for telling me how to listen to music to make everything better. Thank you for listening to me even when I was too afraid to talk. But most of all, thank you for being my angel when God was too busy. I hope I get to see you again someday.

-Rachel

I stared down at the page. And I read the letter a second time. Then a third. Mom had sent me my angel. I had no doubt about that.

Two days later, I walked down the aisle to marry the love of my life. My new little nieces, Lizzy and Alley, were flower girls. They walked ahead of me, dropping rose petals. When they reached the altar, Alley looked back with a giant smile, and I nodded my head, indicating it was time to drop the other things I'd slipped into her basket. She looked up at her uncle, then tossed two pennies at his feet. They both landed face up.

Charlie walked me down the aisle to a folksy remake of an old Gene Clark song, "Full Circle." There were tears in Caine's eyes as I came to stand next to him at the altar. He took my hand as the song finished playing, and together we smiled and turned to look back at our confessional. Just as the lyrics said, we'd come full circle. We'd traveled different paths to get back to where we'd started, but finally we were finished. Now it was the first day of the rest of our lives, and I couldn't wait to start.

THE END

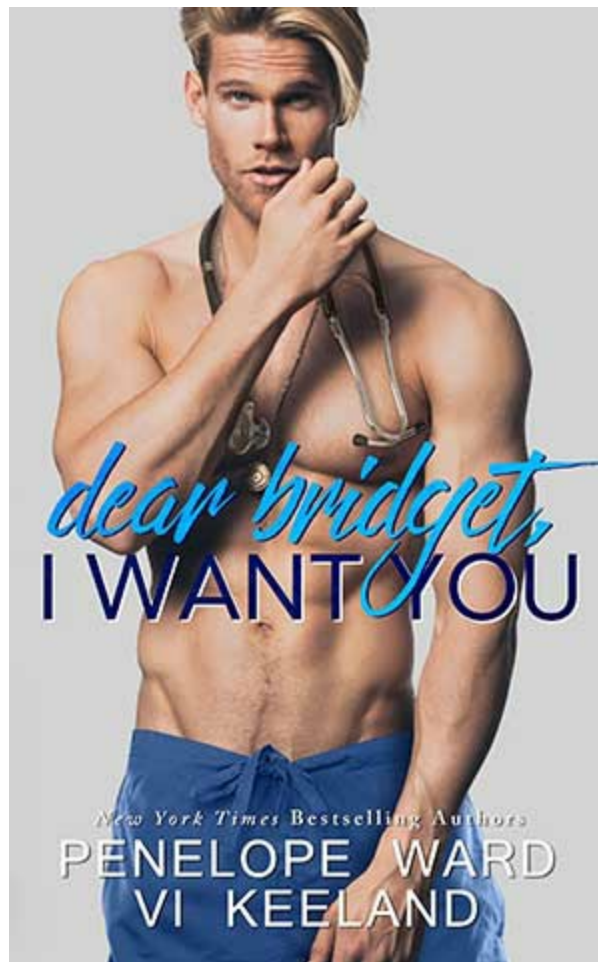
Dear Readers,

I hope you've enjoyed reading *Beautiful Mistake*!

My next novel, *Dear Bridget, I Want You*, will release on September 18, 2017, and is co-written with the amazing Penelope Ward. It's a sexy, standalone novel, and I'd love to give you an exclusive sneak peek!

Just click below to sign up for our mailing list, and you'll receive back an EXCLUSIVE look at Chapter 1 of *Dear Bridget, I Want You* – right now!

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As always, I owe enormous gratitude to my amazing readers. Thank you for allowing my world to become a part of your world. I'm honored that so many of you have been with me for multiple books and can only hope we have many more years together.

To Penelope – The journey wouldn't be the same without you traveling it right next to me. Thank you for putting up with all my craziness, especially while I wrote this one!

To Julie – Thank you for your unwavering friendship.

To Luna – Your support and friendship are a gift. I pen the story, but you bring it to life with your imagination. Thank you for all that you do, and I can't wait for October!

To Sommer – As always, you covered my words with beauty.

To my agent and friend, Kimberly Brower – I'm proud to call you both. I can't wait to see what the second half of 2017 brings!

To Elaine and Jessica – Thank you for all of your hard work in bringing this story to its full potential.

To Dani at Inkslinger – Thank you for organizing everything for *Beautiful Mistake!*

To all of the generous bloggers – Thank you so much for all of your support. I am blessed to have such wonderful partners to spread the love of books. Your enthusiasm is contagious and makes every release more exciting

than the last. Thank you for taking the time to read my work, write reviews, make videos, create teasers, and help launch so many books! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

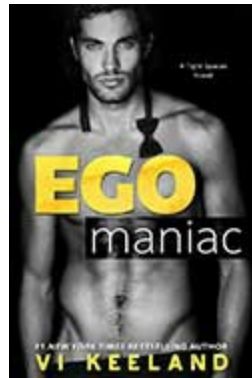
Much love

Vi

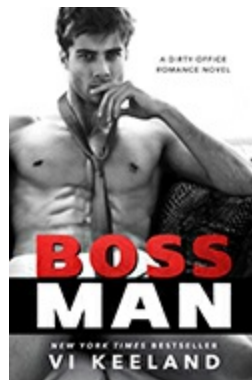


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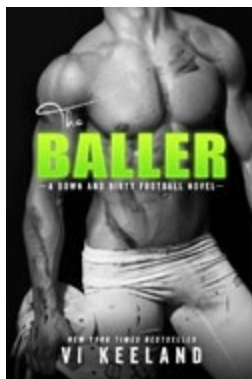
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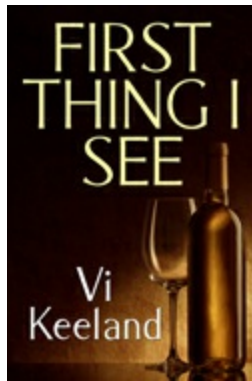
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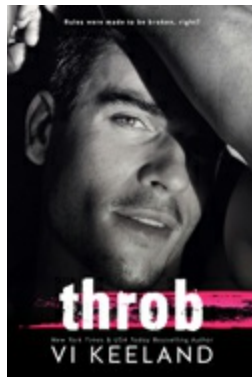


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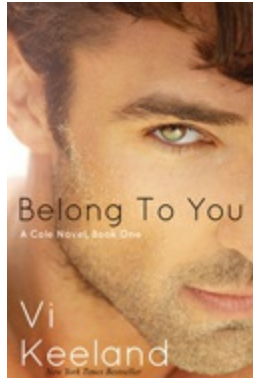


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